

ELIZABETH DEAR

STORM ON THE GATES

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE

HOLYWELL

1

ACADEMY



STORM THE GATES

A KNIGHT'S REVENGE

BOOK ONE

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This book is dedicated to everyone who loved the character Mave Fortune but thought it would be cooler if she had three boyfriends instead of one.

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SYNOPSIS

In Saint Gabriel City, there are the Four Families, and there are those who are owned by them.

The Spencers, the Hargraves, the Ferreros, and the Knights rule the City together with their exorbitant wealth and iron fists that no one dare challenge.

Each Family has an Heir, and they are raised together to one day assume control of their respective empires, trained to crush anyone who stands in their way under the heel of their unmeasurable power.

At least, there *were* Four Families, and there *were* four Heirs—until three of the Families banded together to murder the Knights in cold blood one fateful summer night.

Their daughter was only eleven years old.

And the other Heirs—three sons—were only twelve as they watched their best friend die on the floor of a soulless beige conference room next to her parents.

Seven years later, the remaining Heirs have taken their place at the ultra-exclusive Holywell Academy where the City's elite strive to earn a coveted place in the Families' kingdom by rubbing elbows with the exalted sons.

Only what Bennett Spencer, Noah Hargraves, and Zach Ferrero don't know—what the Families have failed to realize after all these years—is that Jolie Knight didn't die that night.

That little girl has been hiding just across the river, right under their noses.

That little girl is all grown up, and now she's the Academy's newest scholarship student.

That little girl is me, and I'm going to burn this City to the motherfucking ground.

*This is a New Adult, college-aged dark academy romance. It is the first book in a trilogy and does **end on a cliffhanger**. Our heroine will have multiple love interests, and she will not have to choose between them to get to her HEA at the end of the series. As always, this series is for the **18+** crowd and contains a whole boatload of foul language, very steamy scenes, and violent themes. If that sounds like your kind of adventure, then come on in.*

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THE MEMORIAL J. KNIGHT EMO PLAYLIST

Available on [Spotify](#).

Girl's Not Grey - AFI
Set Phasers to Stun - Taking Back Sunday
The Taste of Ink - The Used
Pretty Girl (The Way) - Sugarcult
A Favor House Atlantic - Coheed & Cambria
What It Is To Burn - Finch
Dancing's Not a Crime - Panic at the Disco
Thks fr th Mmrs - Fall Out Boy
Headfirst Slide Into Cooperstown on a Bad Bet - Fall Out Boy
The Boys of Summer - The Ataris
To the End - My Chemical Romance
Paralyzed - The Used
Top of the World - The All-American Rejects
99 Red Balloons - Goldfinger
The Science of Selling Yourself Short - Less Than Jake
Soundtrack to a Headrush - Emmanuel
Ruthless - Something Corporate
I Woke Up in a Car - Something Corporate
The Artist in the Ambulance - Thrive
Grand Theft Autumn/Where Is Your Boy - Fall Out Boy
Time to Dance - Panic at the Disco
Dear Maria, Count Me In - All Time Low
Give It Up - Midtown

Ohio Is For Lovers - Hawthorn Heights
The Quiet Things No One Ever Knows - Brand New

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hey there! Thank you for picking up this book. Just a few notes before we begin to make sure we're all on the same page and the reading experience is the best it can be for you, my Dear reader (get it?).

First, this is a **WhyChoose Romance**. Our leading lady will have three love interests, and she will have a happily ever after with *all* of them at the end of the series. If that's not your thing, no hard feelings. You can check out my [Blackstone Academy](#) series instead!

Second, this is Book 1 in a planned trilogy, which means it does **end on a cliffhanger**. I intend to release these books on a pretty tight schedule, so there should not be too much waiting!

Finally, while I would not consider this a true **dark** romance, I do want to make sure I cover all possible triggers just in case. If you're familiar with my Blackstone Academy series, this is going to be a bit darker—as in, people are actually going to die in this one.

The series will contain: violent themes, parental death, threats of sexual assault (but no actual sexual assault will occur, neither on page nor in the past history of any character), loads of foul language, and (eventually) explicit sex scenes including group sex—but hang on for a bit of a slow burn, y'all.

While those of you that know me from the Blackstone series know that I love to write M/M romance, in this series, our boys will only be with our heroine. Absolutely all sexual situations are consensual, and all participants are over the age of eighteen.

This is a contemporary series (i.e., no paranormal elements), but I still wanted it to have that fantastical feel where the setting is completely fictional and the rules are what those with too much power say they are. Liberties are taken with things like technology, corporate transactions, the limits of the human body, and other norms of the real world that do not exist in Saint Gabriel City.

Thank you again for picking up this book and giving it a try.

- *Elizabeth*

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PROLOGUE

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BENNETT - AGE 12



I stood tall in front of my bathroom mirror, practicing my posture and fidgeting with my shiny blue tie. I was no stranger to wearing a suit, but this one—my favorite in dark gray—was almost too small for me since I'd finally had a growth spurt.

I was now almost as tall as my father, and I hoped I'd soon shoot past him so that he couldn't look down at me anymore when he spoke to me.

The boy in my reflection stared back at me, his big green eyes solemn and his nervousness about whatever tonight was about clear on his face. I needed to get myself under control so that Father would see how serious I was about my role in this Family.

I needed him to see how ready I was to take on more responsibility and learn what it meant to be the Spencer Heir.

Father had announced at breakfast this morning that I was to join him tonight for a full formal meeting of the Families—my first time attending rather than being sent off to “play” with the other Heirs while our parents conducted Family business. Father hadn't looked up from his phone even once when he'd given me my marching orders over his usual black coffee and toast, and he hadn't elaborated. I was to be ready at ten o'clock sharp, and we'd be leaving Spencer Tower.

All I could manage was to mumble, “Yes, sir,” after swallowing the mouthful of eggs I'd been chewing when he'd addressed me out of nowhere. I knew better than to ask questions. If he'd wanted me to know more, he'd have told me more.

A sharp knock sounded at my bathroom door.

"Bennett! We're leaving."

I tightened my tie one last time, thankful that I'd decided to be ready fifteen minutes early just in case. "Coming!" I called.

Opening the door with a quick tug, I stepped into the dim hallway of our penthouse to find that my father had already disappeared and was probably waiting for me downstairs, impatient as always. I crept down the hall on quiet feet so as not to disturb my mother, even though I doubted a herd of bison could wake her if she'd already taken her pills.

I hurried down several flights of stairs and into the large open foyer of our penthouse, and I found my father waiting in front of the elevator doors, his cold brown eyes scrutinizing my every step as I approached him.

"Stand up straight," he barked before pushing the button to call the elevator. "Spencers do not slouch or cower in front of *anyone*."

I made a show of attempting to stand up straighter than I already was, my nerves making me rigid as a board. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Follow along, and do not speak unless spoken to for the rest of the evening. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

After the tense ride down the sixty-five floors of Spencer Tower, we piled into Father's usual sleek black town car idling at the curb and driven by Rick, the only man allowed to drive him anywhere.

The car moved slowly through the streets of the City, which were quiet this time of night on a Monday, and I immediately recognized the route toward Hargraves Tower—a quick four blocks north of our tower, headed away from the riverfront.

Rick dropped us at the front entrance, and I dutifully followed Father into the elevator. We exited on the twenty-fourth floor, finding ourselves in what looked like an unused office space—newly remodeled and waiting for the next Hargraves company to make its home there, I guessed.

Father ushered me into a large conference room containing nothing but plain beige carpet and several people all dressed for business and standing around the room.

I spotted my best friends, Zach and Noah, right away. I hurried over to where they were leaning up against the bare wall on the far side of the conference room. They had their suits on too, and neither of them looked thrilled to be here.

"Hey," I whispered as I took up my post next to Zach. "Do you guys know what this is about? Father told me nothing."

"Nope," Zach replied, popping the "p." "Mom sent Ramon to drag me away from my PS4, like, half an hour ago. He shoved me into this stupid monkey suit, and now I'm here, apparently doing real Heir shit." He yanked on his red tie and ran his hand through his wild black hair, which, apparently, his mother's bodyguard had not forced him to comb.

"Shh," I hissed, elbowing him in the ribs. "Don't let them hear you bitching. This is a big deal. They're finally going to start treating us like the Heirs if we're getting to attend a formal Family meeting."

"I don't know anything either," Noah added from Zach's other side with a quiet sigh. He had his light gray suit on, which still fit him like a glove since he was the last of us to hit a growth spurt.

Well, besides Jolie, but she was a year younger than we were and a girl—so she was supposed to be tiny.

Noah went on. "Dad sat me down earlier and just said that tonight I need to show that I am strong and committed to the Families. That tonight was important." He shoved his round wire-framed glasses higher on his nose with his finger before tossing the stray strands of his shaggy blond hair out of his face—classic Noah fidgets.

My nerves spiked at his words, but I was determined to prove that I had what it took to be the Spencer Heir, whatever happened tonight. I cast a wary look around the room, but I found nothing that would give me any sort of clue as to what the hell was going on.

My father stood in the center of the room, his features as cold and calculating as they usually were. He wore one of his expensive bespoke suits, and I wondered if he was wearing his guns under his jacket. His brown hair—the same chocolate shade as mine—was only just starting to turn gray at the temples. He'd celebrated his fortieth birthday a few months ago, and I remembered it well because the four of us had snuck downstairs and stolen two bottles of champagne from his fancy party before getting stupid drunk up in

my media room. We'd passed out in a pile of sleeping bags and woken up the next morning feeling like total shit.

Father spoke in hushed tones to Zach's mom, Andrea Ferrero, who listened to him with a scary smile plastered to her Botoxed and heavily made-up face. She wore a sharp pantsuit in blood red, and her spiky black high heels probably cost as much as my mom's car. She was a viper, and all of us were afraid of her, except for Zach, of course, because he was her beloved son.

Noah's dad, Peter, stood next to them, and he appeared to be half listening to whatever my father was saying to Andrea while also keeping a sharp eye on the door. He was the only one of the three of them who looked even a little bit uneasy, though he still managed to stand tall and proud, just like the others. He had ash-blond hair, just a bit different than Noah's golden blond, and his slim-fitting dark blue suit accentuated his skinny frame. He was the least scary of the three of them that were here—choosing mostly to parent Noah politely from a distance rather than exerting the oppressive control Zach and I were used to from our own parents.

"Where's Jolie and her dad?" Noah murmured as the three of us continued to stand there awkwardly. "I guess we're just waiting for them before the meeting starts?"

"If they tried to put her in a dress for this, she probably punched someone," Zach replied, chuckling.

That image had me smiling despite the heavy feeling of the room. As our best friend and the fourth and final Heir, Jolie spent way too much time with the three of us guys, so she was the least girly girl I knew. I hoped she got here soon—I always felt the most at ease when the four of us were together, and I knew the other two felt the same.

Jolie also had the luxury of parents who treated her like a normal kid instead of an unfeeling robot destined to rule an empire, so her dad may have actually told her what the purpose of this whole thing was. She might be able to tell us *something* when she finally got here.

Suddenly, the door to the conference room banged open, and three Enforcers wearing the Ferrero Family serpent crest on their black tactical uniforms marched into the room.

A shrill female voice cried, "Get your hands off my daughter, you pigs!"

I smothered a gasp when I registered that the Enforcers were dragging three people in with them, and they tossed them onto the floor at our parents' feet before retreating to stand at attention against the nearest wall, their guns now aimed straight at our *prisoners*.

"Oh my God." Noah's hushed cry was barely audible, and I felt Zach go rigid beside me.

I sucked in a few more harsh breaths and willed myself to remain still because underneath it all, I was *panicking*.

The struggling, bleeding, bound people now on their knees at James Spencer's, Andrea Ferrero's, and Peter Hargraves' feet were Jeffrey and Kerstin Knight.

The small, unmoving body lying in a heap next to her father, dark red blood staining her white-blond hair, was Jolie. I could tell she was wearing her favorite Fall Out Boy T-shirt and red polka-dot shorts—the same pajamas she'd worn to so many of our sleepovers in the last year.

They'd taken her from her bed and bashed her freaking head in!

I stared at her, fear like I'd never known seizing my entire body, and I willed her to breathe, move, show some signs of life, but I couldn't see anything behind her curtain of bloody white hair.

"What the hell is the meaning of this, James?" Mr. Knight spat at my father as he struggled against the zip-ties binding his hands in front of him and his feet behind him. "Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

"Fuck you, Andrea," Kerstin growled at Zach's mom through gritted teeth, her own white-blond hair matted with blood. "Call off your dogs before I stab you to death with those god-awful shoes."

Andrea just cackled. "Bring it on, bitch. I'm just glad I don't have to pretend to like you over brunch anymore."

"Enough!" Father barked like he was bringing this meeting to some kind of order. "That is entirely enough out of you both. I think you know why you've been brought here before us in this manner."

"I know nothing of the sort," Jeffrey bit out. "There is no reason that exists on this *earth* that would justify what you've done to my

family.”

My father just plowed on like he hadn’t heard Mr. Knight at all. “Everyone in this room understands how the Families work. How we coexist together and how we retain the immeasurable power that we have in this City. It is why we have ingrained it into our code that a betrayal of any of the Families by another is to be dealt with by the harshest of punishments.”

A betrayal? What the hell?

“Indeed,” Andrea continued. “You two thought you could hide what you were up to from the rest of us. Unfortunately, you thought wrong.”

“What in God’s name are you talking about?” Jeffrey roared. He tried to reach for Jolie’s still form, but Father pulled his gun from under his suit jacket and aimed it straight at Mr. Knight’s head, and he froze.

“You really don’t know, old friend?” Father asked, his voice dripping with disdain as he cocked his handgun. He leaned in, whispering words that I could only just make out from where I stood paralyzed against the wall. “You were going to *bury* us.”

Something must have clicked for Mr. Knight, because the wild outrage and confusion dropped from his face. Instead, a look of cold, bitter fury came over him, and it was as if he’d figured out exactly what was going on after all. “You’ll burn in hell for this, you despicable fucking sociopaths,” he seethed.

“You first,” Father said simply, and then he pulled the trigger.

“No!” Kerstin screamed as her husband’s head snapped to the side when the bullet hit him squarely in the temple, and he crumpled to the floor.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Zach cursed quietly next to me, his body trembling against mine where our shoulders brushed.

“Oh my God, oh my *God*,” Noah moaned again, the pain and fear clear in his shaky whisper.

“You know the code, Kerstin,” Andrea purred. “It’s over, honey.”

Kerstin tore her tear-filled eyes away from where her husband lay, the dark blood seeping from his head into the ugly carpet around him. “Fuck you, you evil bitch. Fuck every single one of you.”

Suddenly, she lunged for Father's gun, throwing herself in between him and Jolie. He was knocked off balance for a second by her flailing hands, but it only took that one second for Andrea to pull her tiny revolver from her snakeskin purse and fire a shot into Kerstin's head.

She fell, instantly dead, her body splayed in front of where Jolie still lay completely still.

Was my father going to shoot Jolie too? I sucked in more panicked breaths, desperately trying not to make a sound.

Noah's dad turned to us, a solemn look on his face like he was disappointed by the evening's events.

"You did well, boys," he said to us. "I know this was very hard to watch. Lord knows it was hard for me to hear that Jeffrey—one of my closest and oldest friends—had been so disloyal to us all. But it was important for you three to be here tonight to understand what it means for us to be the Families. We rule *together*, or we don't rule at all. Any deviation is wiped from the board. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," we all managed to croak in unison.

He gave us a bright smile, and it looked just like Noah's smile, except Noah could *never* smile at a time like this.

"Yes, excellent work, you three," Andrea cooed at us. "I know you'll make me so proud, Zachary."

He nodded, forcing out a smile for his mom.

"This is the beginning of your real education, boys," Father added, casting his cold gaze over the three of us. "You'll learn what it truly takes to be an Heir and one day control your Family's empire. We expect you to be ready." Then he turned to the Ferrero Enforcers, who hadn't moved a single muscle except to lower their weapons now that this horror show was ending. "Get rid of them," he barked, waving a dismissive hand at the Knights before turning away to confer with Peter and Andrea.

Zach, Noah, and I watched as the Enforcers dragged the dead bodies of Mr. and Mrs. Knight from the room. The last one hefted Jolie over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, her head dangling and her pale face turned toward where we stood like statues, and then he marched obediently behind the others toward the exit.

The last thing I saw before they disappeared was the fluttering open of Jolie's eyes, her striking aquamarine stare meeting mine for a fraction of a second and boring straight into my *soul*, before her lids fell shut again as she vanished out the door and out of our lives forever.

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CHAPTER ONE

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JOLIE - PRESENT DAY



The sun was just rising over the dark waters of the Obsidian River as I made my way through the familiar streets of Olde Town toward the Boathouse. It was already muggy even though it wasn't even six in the morning yet, the swampy heat of the late Mid-Atlantic summer lingering and doing nothing to improve my sour mood.

I sighed in annoyance at the trickle of sweat that dripped between my boobs, my black sports bra growing damp as I ambled along the old cobblestone streets. I passed by the blocks of colorful eighteenth-century homes, the ancient rowhouses a stark contrast to the expensive, modern cars smashed together along their curbs at weird angles because the rich were apparently much worse at parallel parking than those of us living on the Southside.

As my twenty-minute stroll came to an end, I reached the Boathouse—a two-story wooden monstrosity built on a pier on the banks of the Obsidian where it bordered Olde Town to the east. Its sloping roof jutted out several feet on either side of the building, creating a tall covered walkway along the sides of the pier. The navy-blue doors were open even though it was hot as shit out here, and its large, white-framed windows beamed in as much of the morning light as possible—which was good, since Bruce was a cheap ass who didn't turn the lights on as long as he could see six inches in front of his face.

"Hey, Bruce," I called as I breezed through the front doors.

He was in his usual spot at the front desk, bent over a newspaper like a senior citizen, his long gray hair pulled into a haphazard ponytail and his reading glasses on his head instead of his face where they would actually do something for him.

"Hey, Jojo," he replied, not taking his eyes off his crossword or whatever he was engrossed in. "Need you back by seven. I've got a middle-school crew starting at seven-thirty."

"Got it," I replied as I ducked into the hallway to commandeer a spare locker. I shoved my ratty backpack inside, hanging onto the earbuds that were already in my ears and my phone that I slid into the pocket of my rowing trou.

I headed for the back door, intent on grabbing my favorite scull from the rack at the dock, when Bruce called out to me again. "So, you're really leaving tomorrow?"

I paused, turning to find him frowning at me. His soft blue eyes were full of worry, and while I appreciated the fact that he was among the very small number of people on the planet that truly cared about me, I didn't need this shit right now.

The *doubt*.

"Yes," I replied, my tone firm as I met his blue eyes with mine—violet today with my current choice of colored contact lenses. "Max is helping me move into the Academy dorms tomorrow. I start classes on Monday."

He sighed, picking up on my prickliness without fail. Bruce had known me since I washed up onto his doorstep like a drowned rat when I was eleven, and I'd been working for him since I was fourteen. "I know this is what you need to do, Jojo. I wouldn't have given your name to the crew coach up there for the scholarship if I didn't have faith in your mission. I just.... I hope you're being careful, that's all."

"Of course I am," I said, deadly serious. "I've had years to prepare, Bruce. I am not going to fuck this up."

"Right. I believe you. I'll just.... I'll miss having you around here, though, you know? I'm getting too old to scrub the boats like you do."

I forced a laugh, ready to lighten the mood. "It's not like I'm going far. It's a ten-minute train ride into the City. And I'll be here during

winter break to use your ergs, obviously. Lord knows Dom still won't let me try to fit one in our apartment."

He chuckled. "Leave your uncle alone. He loves that little apartment."

I loved it too, and I would miss it as much as my fucked-up heart could miss a thing in this world.

"Okay, I'm out," I said, turning back to the door. "I'll have my scull back before seven."

"Or when you're good and ready," I heard him mutter.



Ten minutes later, I was where I felt the most centered—rowing alone in the middle of the miles-wide swath of the Obsidian River.

It had taken years of work for me to be able to relax out here, but Dom and Bruce pushed me to conquer my fear of the river as a part of working through my trauma. So, Bruce taught me to row, and I'd worked myself to the bone to *own* this fucking water. I'd gotten so good at it that it became my ticket into the nation's most exclusive college.

Holywell Academy.

It was also going to be my ticket into ferreting my way into the dark corners where the Families kept all their secrets.

I could just make out the Academy from my spot out on the river as I rowed east, heading away from the Boathouse. The stone turrets of the main academic building and the highest floors of the largest dorm were just visible above the lush green trees and brick walls that obscured the rest of the campus from view. It sat atop a hill just to the west of the thriving metropolis of Saint Gabriel City, and it was where anyone who was anyone or ever hoped to be anyone in this hellhole attended school—assuming their family could buy their way in.

Or if you were like me, and you were able to land one of its few coveted scholarships.

Reach, pull, reach, pull.

I turned my scull south and began to pull harder. I was now staring straight at the opulence that was the City itself as I rowed upstream. The City center sat on an enormous peninsula of sorts, with the wide stretch of the Obsidian forking into a Y shape around its borders, its multitude of shiny modern skyscrapers glittering in the morning light.

The skyline was like Manhattan on steroids, and the worst offenders were the four towers belonging to the Four Families. They loomed over the rest—a fitting position for the homes of the people who had ruled the City for generations.

The top of each tower housed the penthouse and living quarters for the members of the Family. Underneath them were the various business enterprises the Family owned and deemed important enough to be housed in its tower. Other Family businesses were spread around the City.

Beneath the Four Families in the City's rigid hierarchical strata were the bevy of its very richest citizens—what we called “Tier One” families—their extreme wealth and business successes dependent on keeping favor with the Families and with each other. Their money flowed downward to the rich-but-not-Tier-One-rich (called, you guessed it, “Tier Two”) families. These people and their vast network of businesses made their homes in other lavish buildings around the City and in its wealthier suburbs.

The City was considered the largest concentration of wealth in the western hemisphere. Even the newest Tier Two families were worth seven or eight figures—achieved only with the blessing and the influence of the Families, of course.

I ran my violet gaze over Spencer Tower, a shiny blueish-silver skyscraper topped with an asymmetrical triangle sporting the Spencer's trident crest that sat front and center of the City skyline, just a block off the riverbank. Spencer was the white-collar empire, controlling the banks, hedge funds, investment brokers, credit companies, and the largest law firm in the City—with James Spencer, Esquire as managing partner.

What the public at large did not know about the Spencer Family was its many less-than-legal activities. We suspected their

involvement in all manner of things like fraud, money laundering, gambling, and insider trading.

The black-paned Ferrero Tower was located a few blocks north of Spencer Tower, easily identified by the open square structure on its roof that glowed red at night. Ferrero controlled the entertainment industry—bars, hotels, restaurants, concert venues, and clubs of all kinds.

The Ferrero's *other* enterprises were lesser known, involving—that we knew of—illegal fights, weapons trafficking, and procuring all kinds of stolen shit for rich buyers, like priceless artifacts that belonged in a museum.

A few blocks further north of Ferrero was Hargraves Tower, a cool gray structure that was designed to look like it was always leaning to the left. The Hargraves empire was in healthcare—hospitals, insurance companies, medical tech, wellness centers, even gyms. You couldn't spend a dollar on a Band-Aid in the City without eighty cents going into a Hargraves pocket.

And of course, because one didn't maintain the wealth and power of one of the Four Families without a lucrative criminal side gig, Hargraves appeared to have its hands in the drug trade. Prescription pills, coke, heroine, you name it—if it was sold or consumed in this City, Hargraves profited.

Reach, pull, reach, pull.

I sucked in a breath, finally daring a glance at what was still being called Knight Tower. It sat on the City's eastern shore, its white panes creating a sleek, simple design. My dad's business—the Knight empire—was technology. On the West Coast, there was Silicon Valley. On the East Coast, there was Knight.

Knight owned or had a stake in dozens of booming tech companies—computers, phones, software, apps, even electric cars. It was generally understood that Knight still operated as it had before my family's "tragic demise in a plane crash while on vacation in the Bahamas," but now the Knight empire had been split between Spencer, Ferrero, and Hargraves—the spoils of a war my dad apparently hadn't known he was fighting until it was too late.

I felt my blood boil as I stared at the beautiful building that had once been my home, then I sucked in a deep breath and let the

familiar numbness consume me—an exercise I'd perfected after seven years.

Reach, pull, reach, pull.

I was now sweating profusely as the sun rose higher in the sky and roasted my exposed skin. My loose white tank top stuck to my back, and I regretted not tying my long hair, currently dyed so dark brown that it almost looked black, into a bun instead of a ponytail, as it was now sticking to my sweaty neck.

The song blaring through my earbuds transitioned to “The Artist in the Ambulance” by Thrice, and I ignored the twinge of pain I felt every time one of my favorite old emo songs hit my ears.

My dad had loved this stuff, and I had so many memories of us rocking out together in our living room when I was a little kid, or of him tinkering with whatever computer or tech thing he was working on while his Warped Tour playlist was blasting on repeat in his office.

I kept him alive with my own playlists, and now even Max was a convert.

Reach, pull.

I finally turned my scull around, giving the City my back like it deserved, and I began to pull toward the Boathouse. I rowed west, the river's eastern border now in my line of sight. To the east there was only a sprawling semi-vacant no-man's-land of dilapidated warehouses and shipping containers that we all referred to as Industrial City—even though calling it a “city” was a bit of a stretch. It was the only blight on the otherwise perfect City aesthetic that surrounded the Y shape of the Obsidian. The trains didn't even run over there, though Max and I had once taken a kayak all the way across the wide river to get a closer look at it.

Bruce had bitched at us later, but it hadn't been very exciting, so we never did go back.

As I headed home, I was once again reminded that “home” was a place the City would never again be for me. I hadn't been back since that night.

And I couldn't wait to watch it all burn.

CHAPTER TWO



I returned my boat to Bruce with two minutes to spare, and he just gave me a knowing stare and a nod as I hustled out the front door, which I suspected was the only goodbye I was going to get from him.

As “Girl’s Not Grey” by AFI hit my ears, I made my way down to Main Street, taking in the Saturday morning hustle and bustle as shop and restaurant owners readied their storefronts for a busy day.

Main Street ran east to west and divided Olde Town, a historic suburb of the City that lay on the western border of the river, into the Northside and the Southside. Northside was where the wealthy, Family-connected residents lived who desired Olde Town’s quaint feel and quieter pace of life. Old colonial rowhouses had been renovated into million-dollar homes. Fancy modern townhouses filled in the gaps. Pristine parks, expensive restaurants, and gourmet coffee shops and grocery stores lined the streets.

The Southside was much, much larger, extending from neighborhoods of smaller but well-maintained historic homes that made up the area just south of Main into a sprawl of blocks and blocks of drab mid-century houses with rusting fences and overgrown lawns alongside aging apartment buildings and crowded public housing. Strip malls popped up along the main roads, and the dining options were mostly fast food or the occasional shabby-but-delicious mom-and-pop restaurant.

The majority of the City's working class lived here, many taking the train into the City daily to toil within the Family empires, while others stayed closer to home—all of them trying to make ends meet in whatever way they could before the City's ruling class sucked them dry.

Main Street itself was where we could get a glimpse of the City's rare middle-class citizen. There were even some small-business owners here who were, by some miracle, making a decent living with no connection to or investment from anyone Family related.

Like my uncle, Dom.

I turned south and walked the last two blocks to my family's bookstore. The happy turquoise brickwork greeted me, and I waved to my aunt, Laura, where she was seated in the large corner window, setting up the fall-release display. I ducked into the back alley behind the store and let myself into our private entrance, making my way up the narrow flight of stairs that led to our small two-bedroom apartment on the store's second floor.

"Hey, honey," Dom said as I joined him in our small kitchen. He was wearing his black training shorts and matching T-shirt sporting the tiger logo of the MMA gym he owned, and he was bent over the stove, carefully folding an omelet. "Have a good morning workout?"

"I did," I replied, taking a seat at one of the barstools. "Bruce gave me his worried face but didn't hassle me too much when he said goodbye."

Dom slid his perfect omelet onto a plate, and then he turned to look at me with his "concerned dad" face. "Bruce feels responsible for you—almost as much as Laura and I do. Cut him some slack. What you're doing—what *we're* doing—it's very risky."

"And very fucking important," I added, not that he needed convincing. Dom was my biggest champion. He knew the stakes, but he also had confidence that I had what it would take.

"What's very fucking important?" Max mumbled as he trudged into the kitchen, all sleep rumpled and lazy.

"Oh, I don't know, Max, the little project that your sister is about to undertake that's intended to cause the destruction of the all-powerful Families of Saint Gabriel City?" Dom snarked at his son.

Max just nodded as he grabbed a box of Cheerios. “Well, yeah. It’s gonna be fucking awesome.” He wandered into the living room, stopping on his way to drop a kiss on the top of my head, and then he threw himself onto the worn leather sofa and began eating cereal straight from the box.

Dom rolled his dark brown eyes in Max’s direction before bringing them back to me, where they softened with deep affection before he said, “Maybe I’m just not ready for you to go off to college, regardless of the circumstances.”

“You old softie,” I teased. “The Academy is, like, five miles from here. And I have a feeling I’ll be seeing you anyway.”

He chuckled. “I suspect you’re right.”

I smiled, full of the affection I felt for my uncle-slash-adoptive father, because I would miss him too. It was a real miracle that he, Laura, and Max had somehow been able to put my heart back together just enough that I could feel love again.

Whatever asshole god that had *not* been watching over my mom and dad that night seven years ago had apparently decided to cut eleven-year-old me a break, miraculously delivering me to Dom instead of letting me drown in the murky black depths of the Obsidian.

My memories of that night were hazy—a brutal head wound will do that to a little kid—but I did remember that I had been unlucky enough to have regained consciousness just in time to listen to the people I’d thought were my parents’ closest friends and allies murder them in cold blood. I’d frozen in shock and terror, deciding to continue to play dead, and then I’d learned that those psychopaths had committed murder in front of three twelve-year-old boys to teach them a lesson.

And I still didn’t know *why*.

But I was sure the fuck going to find out.

Fortunately for me, it seemed that even the sociopathic heads of the Families didn’t have it in them to kill a kid with their own hands, because I’d made it out of that room still alive—barely. I had vague memories of two Enforcers arguing over who was going to have to do the honors as they drove one of their armored Jeeps along the riverbank with my “unconscious” body tossed in the back seat.

Something had come over me—a moment where the will to live won out over the crushing despair of losing my parents in the worst way imaginable—and I'd bolted from the Jeep and jumped straight over the guardrail into the river.

I'd stayed submerged for as long as I could manage, and I remembered feeling disoriented and undecided about whether I shouldn't just let myself drown. They must have assumed I did drown because when I finally floated up under a dock, there had been no sign of the Enforcers or the Jeep.

And then I swam. I was a good swimmer since my rich parents had put me in lessons with the other Heirs as soon as I could walk, but I'd had my goddamn head bashed in, so I wasn't exactly in top form. I didn't know how it happened, but Bruce told me he found me clinging to a piece of driftwood on the riverbank next to his dock when he came to open the Boathouse at five in the morning. I apparently had no sense of self-preservation left, so I'd blurted the whole horrific story to him as he wrapped me in a towel and carried my shivering little body inside.

Instead of turning me over to the Families for what would have probably been a substantial payout to keep quiet, he'd called his friend Dominic Miller—recently retired from the military's Special Forces and who, Bruce knew, had no love lost for the Families.

It was then, and still was today, a strict policy of the Families to keep images of the Heirs out of the media except under very tightly controlled circumstances, but Dom and Bruce had no doubts that I was who I claimed to be. My aquamarine eye color and white-blond hair looked just like my mother's, and she had been among the most recognizable faces in the City.

My memories were spotty after Bruce pulled me from the water, but at some point, I'd woken up snug in a twin bed in a tiny bedroom with stitches in my head and a ten-year-old boy dozing in a sleeping bag on the floor next to me. When he woke up a short time later, he happily informed me that he was going to be my brother and that I could have his bed for as long as I needed to feel better.

We still slept in bunk beds in that tiny room, and I loved it.

"Jojoooo," Max whined from where he was sprawled on the couch, pulling me from my trip down memory lane. "I have a

headache.”

I’d finished the eggs Dom had whipped up for me, so I joined Max on the couch, settling his head on my lap and running my fingers through his silky black hair. He usually kept it in a messy bun on the back of his head, but I suspected he’d known he was going to whine at me for a head massage when he woke up hung-the-fuck-over and had planned accordingly.

“You’re pathetic,” I told him. “You’re lucky I’m feeling mushy about how much I’m going to miss you, or else I wouldn’t be rewarding your reckless behavior.”

“I wasn’t reckless,” he grumbled. “I was high off my win last night, so the guys and I had to celebrate.”

“Maybe celebrate about half as much next time!” Dom called from the kitchen.

“Whatever! Don’t act like you’re not proud!” Max shouted back.

Dom grinned, and I rolled my eyes. Friday Fight Nights at Dom’s gym were legendary on the Southside, and Max was among the best in the under-twenty-one group.

I was no slouch, either, but I’d been busy of late and hadn’t made a Fight Night in a while.

Dom was exceedingly proud of both of us, and he bragged to anyone who would listen about his son’s and his niece’s prowess in the cage.

To the outside world, I was Dom’s niece by marriage, and Max was my cousin. Dom and Max both favored Dom’s Korean mother with their striking dark looks, but we were fortunate that Laura was very Caucasian—a honey-blonde, blue-eyed Midwestern beauty. It was easy to sell my arrival and their subsequent adoption of me after Laura’s “sister” perished in a car crash, leaving behind a daughter.

Dom’s connections in the Shadows—an organization that the Families would have destroyed long ago had they gotten even a whiff of its existence—whipped up a fake identity for me, and I had been Joanna Miller for seven long years. A niece on paper, but now a daughter and a sister in their hearts.

If it hadn’t been for them, I’d still be the traumatized shell of a human I’d been when Bruce found me.

I might even be dead.

Max shifted in my lap, looking up at me with the same dark eyes his father had. “Still rocking the purple, eh? Is that the color scheme we’re going with or are you going to change it up before we move you in tomorrow?”

“It’s *violet*, and yeah, I think I’m going to keep this look,” I replied. “I’ve got too much other shit going on for me to fuck around, changing things. I’m fully stocked up on contact lenses and hair dye for at least the next year.”

Seven years ago, Dom had sat on the end of Max’s bed where I’d been sleeping on and off for days and gently explained to me that I was going to have to work very carefully and meticulously to keep my identity a secret because we had no idea if the Families truly believed I was dead.

The public certainly thought I was after James Spencer had held the world’s fakest sad press conference on the steps of Knight Tower, announcing my family’s death in a plane crash while on our summer vacation.

I’d managed to listen to James speak for about two minutes before I’d run to the bathroom to puke my guts out.

We later found out that they’d actually crashed a real plane to stage the accident, though we never were able to figure out which poor souls’ bodies they’d burned to a crisp in the wreckage.

So, in order to maintain the ruse that I’d died with my parents, I’d learned to conceal my distinctive features by wearing contacts to hide my eye color. I’d had brown eyes for years until I got bored and started a more exciting rotation. I also dyed my hair any color that wasn’t blonde—usually some shade of brown, though I spent a few years as a redhead before I’d decided I’d had enough “does the rug match the drapes” jokes from disgusting teenage boys and went back to brown. It was also good luck that I’d gotten the tall gene from my dad and was now five foot nine, so I was no longer the tiny girl I was when I “died.”

According to our intel, no one suspected a thing, and there hadn’t been even a hint of an off-the-books search for Jolie Knight since that night.

Max smirked at me. “I, for one, just hope someone else decides to call you a purple-eyed freak in the cage again. You’re vicious

when you're pissed off."

I laughed. It wouldn't be long before the entire City found out how true that was.

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HOLYWELL ACADEMY

WELCOME LETTER

Dear Miss Miller,

Congratulations on your acceptance to the most exclusive collegiate academy in the nation. Holywell Academy has produced some of the City's most successful leaders and innovators. The Academy will offer you the tools for success, and we expect you to respect and value the opportunity afforded to you by your admission to this prestigious institution.

We expect our students to keep a minimum grade point average of 3.0 and to attend at least 12.0 credit hours per semester. There are a number of core required classes tailored to the specialized education of our City's future leaders.

All students must live on campus in the student housing assigned in accordance with the Academy's guidelines and the alumni status of the student's family.

You are adults, and we will treat you as such, so there is no school uniform. However, we strongly encourage professional dress, as you are preparing for your future as leaders of this City and networking with your peers and potential future colleagues.

The Academy strives to prepare you not just academically, but with real-world scenarios as well. Students are encouraged to work out conflicts amongst themselves in a fair and just manner without interference from the Academy's faculty or staff.

Please be advised that failure to adhere to the Academy's codes of conduct will result in expulsion. Remember, there can be no path to true success in Saint Gabriel City without a Holywell education.

*Yours sincerely,
Dean Amara Jansen*

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CHAPTER THREE



“Honey, you’re still sure about this? It’s not too late to change your mind.”

Laura flitted around the bookstore—her baby, left to her by her grandmother and mercifully free and clear of any Family connection—and she was obviously trying to keep herself busy so that she didn’t have to think about the fact that I was leaving. Max and I had stopped in downstairs to tell her goodbye, and I appreciated how hard she was trying to act like she wasn’t moping.

“Mom, chill,” Max drawled from where he was perched on top of an empty display table, his long legs dangling. “Dad’s trained her for this for, like, the entire time she’s been with us. Have some faith.”

“I know that,” Laura replied, heaving a big sigh. “I just.... I wish there was another way.”

There wasn’t. “The Academy is my way in, Laura,” I said. “There’s no good way to get close to any of the heads of the Families, but we know that the Heirs are basically left alone within the walls of the school. It’s my only shot at getting what I need.”

She frowned. “And you’re sure those boys aren’t going to recognize you? You were so close with them for most of your life.”

“They won’t,” I said, as sure of that as I was of anything.

And I’d be shocked if I really recognized *them*, either, after what their parents would have molded them into since that night. The feelings associated with the bond we’d once shared were such a

distant memory now, like a pleasant dream I'd once had that morphed into a nightmare.

I didn't have close friends anymore. I had Max. I had my aunt and uncle. I sort of had Bruce when he wasn't being an ornery shit.

I didn't need anything else.

"I'll be checking in a lot," I added, trying to reassure her. "And then when this is all over, we're going to take my inheritance and disappear to an island to do nothing but lie on the beach and drink Mai Tais for the rest of our days."

"Fuck yeah," Max chirped.

She finally cracked a smile, then she threw her arms around me, squeezing tight. "I can't wait. Just come home soon, okay?"

"I will," I said as I hugged her back, even though I wasn't sure I would.

Once I was in, nothing was going to pull my focus from my plans.



"I can't believe you didn't want to have one last hurrah with everyone at the gym last night," Max griped at me.

We sat on the train, each of us with a large duffle bag containing my paltry belongings shoved onto the seat next to us, and we'd just begun the ride toward the Northside. After a few stops, we'd travel over the bridge and into the City.

"Again, it's not like I won't be back," I retorted. "I'm sure I'll hop back in the cage over the holidays—you know, dust the cobwebs off."

"Everyone was asking about you. *Especially* Jennings." He waggled his eyebrows at me, like a dick.

"Ugh, no thank you. He'll get ideas."

Max cackled, always reveling in the "trail of broken hearts" he claimed I left among the guys at Dom's gym. It was ridiculous, because that "trail" was, like, two guys, seeing as my options were pretty limited if I didn't want Max's sloppy seconds—which I did not. Max did not discriminate as to the gender of the person he hooked

up with, and he'd been the one breaking hearts in that gym and at school since he hit puberty.

It seemed to me that we'd had an above-average number of bi-awakenings amongst all the gym bros that frequented Dom's, but what did I know?

Max tossed a muscled arm over my shoulder. "I'll let him down gently next time I see him."

"Maybe you should see if his one lackluster night with me left him with an interest in dick," I retorted, elbowing him in the ribs.

"I would, but he's such a lost little puppy about you. A cute one, though."

I sighed. Relationships did not interest me. There wasn't enough space in my head or my fractured heart for anyone who wasn't my family. Plus, there was the whole thing about how I was *in hiding*. Getting close to someone new was never worth the risk.

"Yeah, but—" I froze, a familiar voice drawing my attention to the small flat-screen TVs mounted along the walls of the sleek train cars, set permanently on the local news station unless they were announcing a stop.

"The Knight industries are b-booming, of course," the man behind the podium stammered, trying to put on a confident smile. "We are so fortunate to have continued to grow even after the tragedy that took my family from us. It wouldn't have been possible without the help... without the guidance and support of the remaining Families. I expect our third quarter to be our best yet."

The man took a few softball questions from the press before hurrying from the stage.

"He's looking thinner," Max remarked. "And a hell of a lot older than thirty-five."

"Yep," I murmured, falling into the daze that always overcame me when I was faced with what was left of my family. "I doubt he can take a shit without James Spencer breathing down his neck. I hope they at least let him have a Xanax prescription."

The man was my uncle—my real uncle—Anders Nilsson. He was my mom's much younger brother, and while I hadn't known him well, I had some fleeting memories of him, all youthful and goofy, blowing through our penthouse every once in a while before traipsing off on

whatever adventure he was having. Sometimes he'd brought me a present from his travels when he visited.

It had been his very unfortunate luck that he'd decided to settle down for a while and get a "real job" with Knight a few months before my parents were murdered and our Family empire stolen. My dad had only just brought Anders onto his personal team to train him, so instead of gallivanting around the globe when everything went to shit, he was trapped here.

For seven years, he'd been the shaky figurehead of Knight, slowly unraveling before our eyes while he was used to add a kernel of legitimacy to the fiction that there were still four distinct empires—though he could never be head of the Family because he was not a Knight. He was just a puppet whose strings were pulled by James Spencer, Andrea Ferrero, and Peter Hargraves.

I was sad for him, my only living blood relative, but it would've been far too risky to ever reach out to him to let him know I was alive. He was under the thumb of the Families now.

As the train pulled into its last stop before we'd cross the bridge, I found myself absently rubbing at the charm I wore on a long chain around my neck, usually safely hidden between my boobs. It was a rose gold cherry blossom that my dad had given me as a late birthday present only a few months before he died and the only possession I had from my old life since Dom had burned the blood-soaked clothes I'd crossed the river in.

I'd almost left it locked in a little safe I kept under my bunk, but I decided it would be best to take it with me, keeping it close to my heart as a reminder of *why* I was at the Academy in the first place.

"It's time, Mom and Dad," I whispered.

Max hugged me tighter.



We changed trains in the City center, hopping onto the direct line to the Academy. I was thankful the trains went underground in the City proper so I didn't have to exit the station under the shadow of fucking Spencer Tower even for a second, instead reemerging into the light

of day a block from the front gate of Holywell Academy on the far west side of the City.

"Damn," Max said with a low whistle as we approached the gate. "We are not in Southside anymore, Dorothy."

"Hey," I huffed, elbowing him. "Act like you've been places."

I'd certainly been places, at least in my previous life, but even I had to stand at the wrought iron gate and gawk for a minute as I took in Holywell Academy.

A redbrick sidewalk lined with stately trees led to the main academic building, creatively named Holywell Hall, since the entire school had once been housed there back when it was built in 1897. It was as long as a football field and five stories tall, made of old gray stones and flanked by turrets that jutted even a few stories higher. Arched windowpanes dotted every floor, and there were honest-to-God gargoyles perched along the roof.

I could see the cluster of more modern dorm buildings off to the left of Holywell Hall, and to the right was the gothic cathedral that now housed the library. Somewhere beyond the main campus were the athletic facilities, and the Academy's boathouse would be located along its western border by the riverfront.

"Name?" The bored gate guard held out his hand, barely looking at either of us.

I handed him the Academy ID that had arrived in the mail last week. "Joanna Miller. My cousin, Max Miller, should be on the list to escort me in."

He scrolled unhurriedly on his sleek black tablet, the white horse logo of Knight peeking out from behind his gloved hand, then he droned, "You're in C Dorm, room 302. Your ID will be activated to allow you access through any of the campus gates, the Academy buildings, and your dorm room. Your school tablet will be in your room. Please review the welcome packet before classes begin tomorrow."

"Download successful," Max chirped at him.

He gave us a droll look before pressing a button somewhere inside his little guard hut, and the gate began to slowly swing open, its hinges creaking loudly.

We made our way down the long sidewalk and then around the left side of Holywell Hall toward the west side of campus where the dorms were located. There were a few people out and about, most of them looking like bright-eyed freshman wandering the grounds with their impeccably dressed parents, but otherwise it was a quiet Sunday at the Academy.

We passed A Dorm—the largest and most upscale of the available student housing and made up of the kind of pricey condos that could be found in any of the luxury residential towers the City offered. This was where the Tier One students would live, and rumor had it that the top floor had been remodeled prior to last year so that the Heirs themselves could have a huge penthouse to live in during their four years here.

B Dorm was slightly smaller and a little older, but it still had that historic college charm to it. This was where the Tier Two students would end up, as well as any wealthy outsiders whose parents sent them to the Academy to rub elbows with the fabled Families of Saint Gabriel City. I suspected the sons and daughters of other important players within the Families, such as Head Enforcers or Private Secretaries, might land in B Dorm as well.

Finally, we arrived at C Dorm sitting at the back of the triangle of dorms and furthest from the main campus buildings, where the scholarship students and anyone else who couldn't pony up for the better dorms would be living.

"They don't even try to act like there isn't a caste system around here, do they?" Max groused as he eyed the simple white brick building. "Five bucks says there's not even an elevator in this one."

"It's like you forgot we're still in the City," I replied as I pressed my ID to the scanner next to the heavy black door. "Of course there's a caste system."

The lock disengaged with a loud snap, and we made our way inside. A small lobby, clean but simple, led to an ancient front desk that was currently unmanned. The stairs (Max was right) were easy enough to find just beyond the desk, and after hauling my duffel up three flights to the top floor, I buzzed us into room 302.

"This is..." Max began, eyes bouncing around the room.

"Great," I finished for him. Because it was.

There was a queen bed (a *queen* bed!), a wooden desk with plenty of drawer space and a chair, and a matching dresser—and the open closet door told me there was enough room in there to actually walk into it. The dark hardwood floor was covered by a simple cream-colored rug. There was even an en suite bathroom.

Best of all, my room faced southwest, so I had a view of the river, and I could even see Olde Town—Northside, but still. I wouldn't have to go to bed at night and wake up every morning staring at the Family Towers and the City skyline.

We set about unpacking me, and within an hour, I had the bed made, my clothes put away, and my bathroom stocked. Max lounged on my bed, snooping through the tablet that had been ready and waiting for me on my desk.

"Have you read this brochure?" he asked as I rummaged in my closet. "It's bonkers."

"Yep," I replied. "This place is dedicated first and foremost to churning out Family bootlickers. It's not going to be the typical college experience."

"I don't think you've packed correctly for the dress code, either."

I poked my head out of the closet to give him an amused grin. "I know."

"Dad told you to blend in."

"Don't worry about m—"

A knock sounded at the door.

He arched a questioning eyebrow at me, and I just shrugged. I didn't know a soul in this place, but it was probably one of my neighbors just trying to be friendly.

I motioned at Max to be ready, just in case. He sat up, rolling to the edge of the bed and pulling his knife from his boot in one smooth motion.

I opened the door to find a girl standing there with a tentative smile on her face. She stood at about my height, though I realized quickly that she was wearing designer sneakers with a tall wedge heel that added a few inches. Her pleated pink skirt fell to mid-thigh and her silky white blouse draped artfully across her curves. She had flawless brown skin and long dark curls, styled perfectly like she was going out on the town instead of moving into her dorm room.

“Hi,” she said brightly. “I’m across the hall in 301. I just wanted to come say hello.”

She seemed genuine and completely lacking in bad vibes, so I motioned her into the room.

“Joanna Miller,” I said, holding out a hand. “Freshman, here on scholarship for crew.”

Her light brown eyes took me in with interest, probably noting my weird eye color, cheap denim cutoff shorts, worn gym T-shirt, and bare feet. “I’m Mari Anzaldua. Sophomore.”

“Anzaldua?” I blurted. “What the fuck are you doing in C Dorm?”

The Anzalduas were a Tier One family that owned several luxury hotel chains. They were linked to Ferrero with Andrea being a minority shareholder, but they ran the business and pocketed the majority of the profits as all Tier One families were able to do.

She sighed, rolling her eyes. “I know. I’m being punished by my parents. They’re unhappy with the fact that I refuse to break up with my girlfriend. I met her when I was at boarding school in Madrid. We’re long distance, but I’m pretty vocal about it on my Instagram.”

“Oh,” I replied, confused. “Why do they care?”

Of all the evil wrought by the institution of the Four Families, homophobia was not actually on the list. Some of the City’s most well-known, wealthiest citizens were queer.

She trotted over to my bed and flopped dramatically down on the mattress, paying no mind to Max still sitting there, staring at her in amusement and twirling his knife through his fingers. “They’re old school enough that they want me to produce an heir through a traditional marriage, even though I’m a lesbian. They don’t care if I see women on the side if I’ll just agree to that.” She narrowed her eyes. “I won’t.”

“Good for you,” Max said, spinning to sit cross legged on the bed while he looked down at her with a sly grin. “But if you change your mind, I’m available.”

“Max!” I snapped. “What part of *lesbian* didn’t you get? Behave yourself.”

Mari was unperturbed, sliding her eyes over to Max like she was just noticing he was there, and I watched as she took in his angular cheekbones, his perfect skin, his thick raven locks that his Korean

heritage had blessed him with tied in his artfully messy man bun, and his white V-neck T-shirt that was so tight that I'd teased him this morning about staying out of my dresser.

"Oh, you are very pretty," she told him, and he preened at that. "But the dick situation is disqualifying, *lo siento*."

"Mari, this is my cousin, Max," I said, leaning my butt up against my desk and crossing my arms to give Max another warning glare. "He's extremely pansexual and a hopeless flirt. Please excuse him."

Max winked at her one last time before he got to his feet. "I've got to get back home anyway. I hope you both keep me in your thoughts and prayers while I am trapped in one last year of high school on the Southside."

Mari wrinkled her nose. "You guys are from the Southside? Is that why you have a knife? You don't need that here, you know. The safest place in the whole City is inside the walls of the Academy, especially while the Heirs are here."

I doubted that and so did Max. He met my eyes and gave me a quick nod, and I knew what he was going to be getting up to when he left my room.

He tossed his arms around me, and I squeezed him back. "I'll be checking in with you later," he whispered in my ear. "Be good. Love you."

"Love you too," I whispered back.

"Nice to meet you, Mari!" he called to her as he sauntered out the door, heading out with his exact replica of my Academy ID and its now activated barcode to case as much of the Academy as he could get away with before hopping the train back home.

I turned back to Mari, finding that it didn't chafe me as much as it normally would to have a stranger in my space, if only because it made the loss of Max sting just slightly less. "Any tips on surviving the first day?"

She grimaced. "Not really. Things are kind of... *intense* with the Heirs here. And it's never, um, *great* for the scholarship students in particular. But you look... tough?"

I chuckled. Any thin skin I once had had been shed the moment Bruce pulled me from the Obsidian.

And this place couldn't break something that had already been broken beyond repair.

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CHAPTER FOUR



On Monday morning, I woke up early, threw on some clothes, and began my trek to the dining hall for breakfast. My scholarship came with a meal plan that provided three meals a day, and I intended to use it because, while Dom and Laura did okay for themselves, I was finished spending their money when I didn't have to.

Mari caught me in the hallway and tagged along, informing me that most students ate in the dining hall, even the ones with kitchens in their dorm rooms and a food delivery app connected to their parents' black cards. Apparently, the Academy food was excellent.

"You're sure that's what you want to wear on your first day, though?" Mari asked, eyeing my tight black jeans, soft V-neck T-shirt, and ratty slip-on Vans. "I know the handbook says there's not a *required* dress code, but...."

"Everyone dresses to impress?" I finished for her.

"Yeah. I mean, you'll see. I wouldn't call what the girls wear 'professional' so much as 'slutty *Gossip Girl*,' but it's more about the price tag on the label."

I just nodded thoughtfully like I was absorbing this information for the first time. While I knew that it would've been a good idea to attempt to blend in a bit more, I'd thought it was a better idea to be dismissed completely—and to be as far from what would have been expected of the Knight Heir as possible.

I am absolutely no one.

I had to admit Mari looked sharp in her high-waisted midlength tartan skirt and creamy white collared blouse, a delicate bow adorning the collar. She also wore opaque black tights and chunky Mary Jane heels.

The whole outfit probably cost two grand.

"You do look great," I told her. I hoped she sent a photo to her girlfriend this morning. "But you are also going to roast in those tights when it gets muggy as shit later."

"*Joder*, I know. The sacrifices we make."

We reached the steps of Holywell Hall, slipping into the stream of students headed to the dining hall that took up the entire east wing of the first floor. I was getting some *looks* as we made our way through the building, mostly of general disdain at what I was wearing, and then also a few leers from some gross assholes.

To Mari's credit, she didn't appear flustered or embarrassed to be seen with me, and she even snapped something in Spanish that sounded very aggressive at a guy after he made a kissy face at us both. I looked forward to learning some more Spanish swears if we continued to hang out.

We finally entered the dining hall to find it full and busy, the loud hum of laughing and chatter echoing in the cavernous space. The enormous room had thirty-foot ceilings, and a dozen antique chandeliers hung low throughout the room. There were buffet lines set up on either side of the hall, and big wooden banquet tables filled the rest of the space, separated into two sections by a long aisle down the middle.

"I'll go grab us plates," Mari said next to my ear. "One of the servers is my yoga instructor's son, so he lets me cut the line."

"Cool," I replied as I dropped my bag into the nearest empty seat. "I'll be here."

It took me a minute to catalogue my surroundings. The boys all had on some version of a suit or slacks, some with a jacket and tie, others without. The girls wore skirts or sharp dresses, most with hem lengths that were not exactly what I'd call "professional." I saw silk blouses, cashmere sweaters, and a hell of a lot of designer shoes. There was an abundance of pastels and plaids, and it hurt my eyes.

I'd just whipped my phone out to check in with Max when the chatter in the hall suddenly dimmed, and the crowd that had been lingering around the doors parted as if the movement had been rehearsed.

Three boys strode into the hall, their steps easy and confident, and they marched straight down the center aisle without so much as a glance around them. They took up their seats at a small, private table at the front of the room that was perched on an honest-to-God dais.

My stomach had flipped and my adrenaline had spiked the instant they'd entered the hall. The reverent behavior of the rest of the students told me without even having to look that these were my marks.

The Heirs. Bennett Spencer, Zach Ferrero, and Noah Hargraves.
My former best friends.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting to feel when I laid eyes on them for the first time in seven years, but as they turned to face their adoring public up on that dais, and I was able to really *look* at them, it was as if someone had put their fist straight through my chest.

My memories of them suddenly rushed to the surface of my brain after having long been buried and threatened to overwhelm me completely. I could still make out the boys I'd once known in their faces, but they were definitely grown men now. Bennett had just turned twenty, and the other two were nineteen—and apparently, they were now also *gorgeous*, all fucking three of them.

I shook off my momentary paralysis, extremely irritated that the mere sight of them had knocked the wind straight out of me. So, as their fanboys and girls began to rush their table like groupies at a rock concert, I pulled my shit together and got to work, studying them from my inconspicuous spot at a random table out among the masses.

Bennett sat in the middle, his posture stick straight as he surveyed his subjects with a cool, bored look. He was the tallest of the three by several inches, putting him somewhere close to six-foot-four. His chocolate-brown hair was styled into an artful coif on top while expertly faded on the sides. The baby face of my memories had hardened into sharp cheekbones and a chiseled jaw. He wore a

dark gray suit, tailored perfectly to his broad chest and shoulders, and though I couldn't see his eyes from where I was sitting, I knew his moss-green tie matched them almost perfectly. He was as serious as I remembered, ever the leader of the little gang.

Zach sat to his left, his lazy slouch a stark contrast to Bennett's rigidity, and he was smirking in the direction of one of the male students who'd approached their table and was now talking animatedly at him. His navy-blue tie hung loose around his neck, and he'd opted out of a suit jacket. He was the most muscular of the group, his corded *tattooed* forearms on full display where his shirtsleeves were rolled to his elbows. His black hair was cut similar to Bennett's, but he kept the top much messier, the disheveled strands falling onto his forehead. And it was hard to tell for sure from my vantage point, but I thought I saw a hint of silver glinting around his lower lip when he leaned over to say something to Bennett with a sly smile, so he may have a lip ring.

Apparently, Zach was off his leash while he was running around the Academy unsupervised, because I couldn't imagine the piercings and the multitudes of tattoos that I could make out *just* on his forearms were sanctioned by the Families. He looked like a rock star had a baby with a CEO.

Finally, my gaze moved to Noah. His kind smile hadn't changed much, and he still wore glasses, but the thin frames that had always been just a little too big for his face when we were kids had been replaced with stylish, thick-framed, dark ones. I knew from memory that his eyes were a deep blue color, and they were currently focused on the girl in front of him as he made polite conversation with her. She leaned suggestively over the table, cleavage on full display, and Noah's eyes somehow remained on her face even though she was very clearly trying to wave her boobs at him. His golden-blond hair was still a little shaggy, though it seemed he'd learned to tame it over the years because it now just looked expertly tousled. He was the leanest of the three, but by no means skinny, his slim navy suit accentuating his long limbs. He'd opted for no tie, the rebel, offering his adoring fans a tiny peek at his tanned chest. Of the three, he had the most approachable and inviting air about him, and I wondered how much of that was real.

“Here you go,” Mari said as she appeared next to me. She slid a plate full of bacon, eggs, and fruit in front of me, and she’d even put together to-go cups of coffee for us both. She tossed a cursory glance at the front of the hall and then just tucked into her breakfast, obviously uninterested in the activity there. “That’s the usual at mealtimes. The Tier Ones vying for inner-circle status. The single girls trying to catch their attention. Same shit, new year.”

“Mmm,” I grunted around a mouthful of bacon.

“There is one thing I should probably warn you ab—”

“Greetings, new students of Holywell Academy!”

One of the fanboys had jumped on top of a table at the front of the hall and was now commanding the attention of the room. It was Chad Hendrickson, sophomore and son of the owner of one of the largest hedge funds in the City. Hendrickson was solidly Tier One—meaning their net worth was in the eight-to-nine-figure range—and as financial industry titans, they were linked to Spencer.

“Chad Hendrickson, Tier One sophomore,” Mari whispered in my ear. “He fancies himself inner circle.”

“Oh, okay,” I replied like this was news to me.

“It’s that time again!” Chad shouted, waving his meaty arm around the room. He’d been kind of a chunky kid back when we attended the same private primary school, and he’d grown up to be a big, stocky guy with a comically thick neck and a buzz cut. He prattled on. “It’s a new year at Holywell, and we have all been *uniquely* blessed to be able to attend school alongside the *Heirs* of the Four Families who, for generations, have been responsible for the incredible prosperity of our fair City!”

A few cheers and polite claps sounded. My eggs suddenly tasted like ash, and I pushed my plate away from me with a firm shove.

Chad’s shit-eating grin got wider. “And because we are so lucky to have the Heirs at the Academy, some of us felt it was a great opportunity for those of you who are here on *scholarship*,” he spat, like it was a dirty word, “to be able to *personally* thank the Families for providing someone of your station the rare opportunity to receive the finest education in the country while walking the same halls as the next generation of leaders of this City.”

The snickering started then. A group of well-dressed girls seated at the other end of my table giggled loudly. I glanced across the way and quickly located a large group of what were likely the other scholarship students. Their clothes were normal instead of screaming high fashion, and they wore faces of either begrudging resignation or wide-eyed panic.

"Oh, is this how they've chosen to haze us?" I asked Mari lightly, taking a sip of my coffee.

"Ugh, I know, I'm sorry," she moaned under her breath. "Just suffer through it and then forget about it, okay?"

I gave her a nonplussed shrug.

The Heirs watched this spectacle with only the mildest of interest, casually eating from the plates that had magically appeared in front of them at some point and occasionally talking amongst themselves.

Chad went on, "And so, we will be continuing the tradition we began last year for all of you lucky scholarship students! When I call your name, come on up!" He paused to pull his phone from his pocket, lifting it to his face to read from it. "Shannon Andersen!"

A tall redheaded girl wearing a simple khaki skirt and an ill-fitting polo shirt rose from the scholarship table. She made her way slowly down the aisle like she was being marched to the gallows, treading silently in her black ballet flats. She came to a stop in front of the Heirs' table, not daring to look at them and staring at her feet instead.

"Ah, ah, ah, Shannon," Chad taunted, his square face flushed with excitement. He hopped down from his tabletop and ambled over to her. "*Kneel*," he commanded.

I saw red. I kept my face blank, a particular skill of mine, but I was white knuckling my fork so hard, I was lucky it didn't snap in half.

Shannon blanched, but she did as she was told.

"Repeat after me, please, Shannon: thank you, Mr. Spencer, Mr. Ferrero, and Mr. Hargraves for your Families' *benevolent generosity* in providing me with the opportunity of a lifetime. I will strive to prove I deserve the gift I've been given, and I will know my place within these walls, or else I will gladly crawl back to the slums from whence I came."

Hahaha—oh, *fuck* no.

Poor Shannon's face was beet red, her hands trembling slightly, but she did as she had been ordered. Chad dismissed her, and she rushed back to her seat without a backward glance, her face still flaming.

And on it went. Some of the students clearly had been warned and had prepared themselves, going through the humiliating ritual with a sort of numbness, but others obviously hadn't been told what awaited them in this hellhole as they stammered or held back tears.

I studied the Heirs as this nonsense went on. It was as if nothing at all interesting was happening right in front of them. Noah's posture had stiffened, a hint of annoyance radiating from him, but Bennett and Zach just looked bored, continuing to chat amongst themselves and only occasionally glancing at whichever poor kid was currently prostrating at their feet.

Then finally, my number was up.

"Joanna Miller!"

I didn't move.

"Is there a Joanna Miller here? Freshman scholarship student, crew team, graduate of Southside High School...."

"Seriously? They're letting Southside trash in here now?" a nasally voice shouted from the group of girls huddled closest to the Heirs' table, eliciting raucous laughter from those around her.

"Joanna, just go and get it over with," Mari said urgently, nudging me with her elbow.

One of the girls seated down the way must've heard her because she decided to narc.

"She's over here, Chad!" She waved her bright pink manicure in my direction.

The entire room turned to look in our direction.

"Oh, I see you, Southside," Chad called, a vicious smile on his face as he spotted me—my T-shirt, messy ponytail, and scowl probably giving me away. "Hop to it. The Heirs don't have all day."

"No, thanks," I called back, and Mari sucked in a startled breath.

Chad's smile slid from his face. I stared him down, feeling every eye on me now.

Including the Heirs.

“Wrong answer, Southside,” Chad barked. “Get up here and get on your knees, or you won’t like the consequences.”

I stood up, throwing my backpack over my shoulder and grabbing my coffee before jamming my earbuds into my ears. I gave Mari an apologetic pat on the shoulder, then I stalked toward the aisle. I turned the opposite direction, headed for the exit, then I paused to toss a quick look back over my shoulder.

“Shove it up your ass, Chad,” I said, and then I left the hall.

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CHAPTER FIVE



“You did *what*?”

Dom’s deep voice boomed through my earbuds since Max had decided that he needed to make my life harder by putting my call on speaker.

“What part of *keep a low profile* did you not get?” Dom continued. I could hear him banging around in the kitchen as he spoke.

“Dom, I would rather actually drown in the Obsidian than get on my fucking knees in front of the Heirs and their flock of asslickers like that.”

“Hell yeah,” Max chimed in. “That’s our girl.”

“Max! You’re not helping,” Dom griped.

“Look,” I said, changing the subject. “Is there anything I need to know about yesterday’s perimeter check, Max?”

“Not really,” he replied, his mouth full of whatever he was eating for breakfast before going to school. “It’s as we suspected—they’ve added Family Enforcers on rotation at the gates, but the Heirs aren’t closely watched while they’re on campus. No personal bodyguards. The tech on their dorm penthouse security system is top-of-the-line, but it’s nothing we haven’t seen before.”

“You got into A Dorm? My barcode wouldn’t get you in there.”

He chuckled. “I met a nice girl on my way over there. She let me use her bathroom, and I now have a high-resolution picture of her ID. I’ll be getting you your duplicate with the A Dorm access as soon as we get it made.”

Stellar. Dom had been hesitant to let Max to join an organization like the Shadows so young, but he was proving himself every day.

"You're the best," I replied. "Alright, I gotta go to class. I'm going to spend a few weeks just getting the lay of the land. Let me know if anything changes in the meantime."

"Will do. Bye, Jojo."

Jamming to "The Taste of Ink" by The Used, I began my walk to my first class, which unfortunately had me heading right back to Holywell Hall. I'd ducked outside and found myself a private tree to lean against as I called Max for updates, and I'd also needed a minute to numb myself again and tamp down the urge to break Chad Hendrickson's face with my fist.

I'd expected some ill-treatment of scholarship students from the general population, but that particular experiment had hit just a little too close to home for me.

I regretted nothing.

Ignoring everyone as I found the small lecture hall where my World History II class was located, I climbed the shallow steps to the back of the room and grabbed an empty seat. I pulled my tablet out, intending to look up the syllabus, when Mari dropped into the seat next to me.

I shot her a questioning glance, more than a little surprised. "Are you sure about this?"

She shrugged. "I didn't grow up around these people. My parents sent me to boarding school abroad for most of my education before they dragged me back here to ensure I had the Holywell degree that would give me the right clout in City society." She paused, narrowing her eyes at the group of Tier One girls that had just flounced into the room, gave us both the stink eye, and had then taken up seats a few rows ahead of us. "I learned last year that I kind of... hate everyone here. I don't really care what they think."

"If you say so," I replied. I wouldn't be able to let her get *too* close, but I liked Mari and didn't mind if she wanted to hang around. "So, what happened after I left?"

She cringed before whispering. "Chad and a couple of his buddies were about to go after you, but then Bennett just goes, '*Hendrickson, leave it,*' all calm and scary-like."

“Huh.” Lucky me. As much as I might’ve enjoyed kicking Chad’s ass after his little show, it would’ve complicated things.

Mari was over it too, apparently. “What are you doing in sophomore-level History anyway?” she asked.

I gave her a droll look. “Even us Southsiders can take advanced placement tests.”

And my marks were sophomores, after all.

The door to the classroom opened again, and the buzz of chatter intensified instantly as Zach waltzed in, trailed by a couple of his fanboys, including a guy I recognized as Dane Jefferson. His Tier One family owned a chain of wildly popular boutique fitness studios and was affiliated with Hargraves.

They filed into the empty seats in the middle of the room. Zach sprawled out in his chair like a lazy king, and I watched the group of girls in front of me as they hung on his every move.

“I spoke to Zach after breakfast,” Lisa Aviano, bar and nightclub heiress linked to Ferrero, cooed at her friends. She twirled her thick dark hair around her finger as she eyed him through her heavy black lashes. “I’m so close to getting him into my bed to seal the deal. My mom is practically *best* friends with Andrea.”

Hannah Langford, daughter of tech venture capitalists once under the Knight umbrella, snorted at her. “You know the Heirs only fuck at the Club, honey, where they have the City’s hottest professionals and iron-clad NDAs. But good luck to you.”

The Euphoria Club—Andrea Ferrero’s pride and joy. Classy burlesque club downstairs, professional sex workers upstairs, all catering to the richest and most exclusive clientele in the City. It also had a secret basement that... interested me.

I ignored the stomach swoop I felt at the idea of my ex-best friends fucking the City’s most in-demand, highest-paid sex workers, while Lisa pouted.

“But Noah had a girlfriend last year,” she whined.

“And we all know how that turned out,” Hannah replied.

The professor finally cleared her throat and began her lecture, so that was the end of my eavesdropping.

Class was uneventful, and I thought the coursework seemed manageable. While I might’ve found myself behind had I spent all of

my formative years in Southside, I'd had eleven years of the finest education and private tutors money could buy.

When the professor dismissed the class, Mari and I began to file out, me on my way to my freshman Literature class and her to Economics. We were on the stairs when someone rammed into me from behind.

"Move, trash," a feminine voice barked at me, eliciting a few giggles from her friends and knocking me hard enough that I stumbled off the last stair.

I smacked right into a hard body, and strong hands grabbed me, keeping me on my feet. A deep voice purred, "Woah, easy there."

I looked up, and I was met with the familiar dark-chocolate gaze of Zach Ferrero. He kept a firm grip on both of my biceps, holding me in place as he looked me over, a smirk forming on his face that was so twelve-year-old Zach, but also so *not*. "Hey, look who I found. It's the Southside Princess."

I straightened, glancing down at where he held onto me, and then back up to his face. "Thanks for the catch, Ferrero. Now get your fucking hands off me."

His eyebrows shot up for a fraction of a second, but then he gave me what I suspected was his panty-meltingest smile. "And here I thought you were ready to get on your knees for me after all."

Internal eye roll. Why were all guys the same?

I arched an eyebrow at him, leaning in to whisper in his ear, "Yeah? You have a thing for slumming it, rich boy?"

He chuckled, and it sounded like sex. "Not before this morning, I didn't."

My nerves were spiking. *Too close, Jolie. He's too close.*

With a quick jerk, I rotated my arms and yanked them out of his grip, then I moved him out of my personal space with a firm shove to his rock-hard chest. "Fuck off. And keep your hands to yourself."

As I marched out the door, aiming for a wide-eyed Mari where she waited for me in the hall, I heard him cackling at Dane behind me.

"You guys have your work cut out for you with that one. I can't wait."



My freshman Lit class was, thankfully, extremely uneventful. Nobody spoke to me, and I was happy about it.

Lunch in the dining hall had been the same, though I'd been on my guard the whole time. The Heirs ate at their usual table and ignored just about everyone, and while a few sneers had been tossed my way by both Chad's and Lisa's crew, everyone behaved.

I didn't exactly trust it, but I wouldn't complain.

My afternoon class on Mondays and Wednesdays was the Technology Skills seminar—a requirement for all students to graduate. I wandered into the computer lab on the top floor of Holywell Hall and found a seat among the rows of the highest caliber Knight PCs currently on the market.

The other students gave me a wide berth, though I couldn't help but feel more than a shade of annoyance as Annie Ling, member of Lisa's Tier One squad and heir to a private hospital empire, took a seat in the row in front of me. She dropped her Hermes handbag dramatically on the tabletop next to her computer, then began chattering away to Hannah Langford and Nick Ruiz, a Tier Two student whose family ran an up-and-coming chain of holistic wellness clinics with a healthy dose of money and involvement from Hargraves.

At the top of the hour, our very pregnant professor waddled in. Entering right behind her was Noah.

The class went all atwitter, and the professor chuckled, motioning for everyone to calm the fuck down.

"As you all can see," she said, rubbing her belly, "I am heading out on maternity leave any minute now. I've asked my TA, Mr. Hargraves, to step in to teach the class while I'm out. I can assure you he is very proficient in all manner of technology skills and will be able to answer any question you may have."

Noah smiled warmly at the class, his eyes lingering on me for a half a beat longer than everyone else before he took up his post behind the professor's desk. He set his sleek black laptop on the desktop and opened it, the white horse on the back of its screen taunting me from the front of the room.

It didn't surprise me that Noah had become some sort of tech wiz. He'd always taken an interest in computers when we were younger, and I had memories of him asking my dad questions or even working on small projects with him whenever the boys had been over at our penthouse. I remembered how excited he'd been that my dad had even given him the time of day the first time he'd asked.

My mouth suddenly felt dry, and I swallowed roughly. I'd have avoided sitting here surrounded by my Family's creations, especially if I'd have known Noah was going to be teaching the fucking class, if it hadn't been required for graduation. I'd expected it would be hard not to think about my dad, but this was going to be *torture*.

"Thanks, Professor Moore," Noah said, and she just waved to him as she waddled back out the door, apparently already checking out of teaching this class. He went on, "I know you all know who I am, and please just call me Noah. We're going to start our unit on data privacy with an assessment test so I can see where everyone is, so please log into your computers to access the test."

We all did as we were told. I worked through mine, making sure I got about half of the questions wrong, and Noah started wandering around the room, checking on students' progress and answering questions.

"You're drooling," I heard Hannah snark at Annie, whose eyes were not on her computer and instead glued to Noah wherever he moved in the room.

"Shut up," Annie huffed at her. "You're just jealous you don't have the attention of an Heir. My family had dinner with his several times over the summer, and just believe me when I say our chemistry is *amazing*."

"Uh-huh," Hannah mumbled, still working through her test. "Sure."

"Finished already?" a smooth voice said into my ear, jolting me out of my eavesdropping.

I turned to find Noah sliding into the empty station next to me, a curious look on his painfully pretty face. Up close, I could see his eyes were the same deep blue I remembered, and the dark brown of his rectangular frames made them pop even more.

“Just a bunch of random guesses,” I replied with a shrug, tearing my eyes from his face and locking them on my screen. “Our *tech* curriculum at Southside High wasn’t quite up to Holywell standards.”

“I see,” he said with the patience of a teacher. “Well, don’t worry. We’ll get you up to speed in no time.”

“Hmm.” I twirled a pen between my fingers, trying not to squirm under the intensity of his gaze on the side of my face. After unexpectedly finding myself up close and personal with both Zach and him today, I was glad I’d decided to start wearing tinted foundation that made my pale skin a little tanner and hid the light dusting of freckles I’d always had across my nose and cheeks. I said, “Aren’t you supposed to be rooting for me to fail out of this place? It’s quite a ways above my *station*, after all.”

“No,” he said, sounding amused. “It’s my job to teach you. And I don’t personally have an issue with those here on scholarship.”

I snorted. “Ah, I did hear that you’re the *nice* one.”

Before he could respond, Annie whirled around in her seat. “Noah,” she whined, “I think one of these questions has *two* correct answers. I don’t want to have it counted against me if I pick the wrong one.”

I caught a hint of an eye roll before he replied, pleasantly, “It’s not for a grade, Annie. Just pick whichever one you think is the most correct.”

She batted her long lashes at him, her silky blouse unbuttoned just low enough to tease a hint of cleavage below her string of pearls as she turned further around in her chair. She whispered, all breathy and obvious, “I was hoping I could talk to you after class? I think you’ll find I know plenty already, and we could have a very *stimulating* discussion.”

Gross.

“Is that so?” Noah asked, chuckling.

Hannah, thankfully, was over it. “Annie, do I need to remind you what happened to Christine last year?” She leaned in like she was trying to speak softly into Annie’s ear, but she was loud enough that I could still make out what she was saying. “After she and Noah dated for six months, she tried to get a meeting with him and his father about an investment in the new company she and her dad wanted to

start. Not only did Noah deny her request, he broke up with her, bankrupted her father by pulling all Hargraves funding from their current business, and ran the entire family out of town. I'm just saying... trying to land an Heir is not fucking worth it."

Damn.

I tried to wipe the shocked look off my face, but Noah was too quick for me.

"You see," he said, leaning in to speak softly next to my ear. "I'm not always the *nice* one."

Then he stood up and strode off toward another row of students, leaving me to ponder exactly what the fuck had happened to Noah Hargraves.

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CHAPTER SIX



“Shh! He’s coming, he’s coming!”

“You’re being too loud, Zach!”

“No, you’re being too loud, Jojo!”

“You’re both loud!” Noah rolled his eyes at us before he crawled to the door of my mom’s giant closet, and he laid flat on the ground, trying to look through the tiny crack of light under the door to see if he could spot Bennett.

We hadn’t picked a very creative place to hide, but the penthouse was so big, it could take Bennett a long time to find us.

“Get off me Zach! You’re in my space,” I whined.

“Don’t be such a baby. I’m not even touching you.”

His socked foot poked me twice, and I shrieked at him, “Stop it, Zach!”

“He’s coming!” Noah whisper-yelled, scurrying back to where we were hiding behind rows of very expensive dresses and throwing himself in between us.

The closet door burst open, and the harsh light of the bathroom now beamed directly on our hiding spot.

“You guys are terrible at this,” Bennett grumbled, throwing the dresses wide and staring down at us like he was so much smarter than we were.

“Yeah, but you’re a sucker!” Zach yelled, then he barreled into Bennett’s legs, taking him to the ground.

“Argh!” Bennett shouted as they fell, and then Noah and I jumped onto the pile.

We shouted and laughed until Bennett finally managed to throw us off. Then my mom called for us, probably because lunch was ready, and I heard her come into the bathroom.

I rolled off Noah’s back, my eyes landing on where my mom stood at the entrance to the closet.

Her face was covered in blood, the thick red liquid dripping down her neck and onto her white sweater. A huge chunk of her skull was missing. She fell to her knees.

“Mom!” I screamed.

I jolted awake, my heart pounding out of my chest and my tank top soaked through with sweat.

“Fuck. *Fuck*,” I panted, trying to catch my breath.

I hadn’t had a nightmare about my parents in years. They’d often started just as this one had—a very real memory that would then mutate into a horrifying scene involving my parents’ bleeding or dead bodies.

Being around the Heirs again was fucking with my head.

I dragged myself out of bed and took the world’s fastest shower to rid myself of my nightmare sweat. I threw on cropped white jeans with a few rips in them, a dark-blue tank top, and my Vans. My dark hair went into a high ponytail, and I smeared my tinted foundation on my face. After a quick coat of mascara to darken my blonde lashes, I was out the door with my backpack that was always packed and ready to go.

I needed to haul ass to the dining hall to grab something to eat on the go or else I was going to be late to my first Leadership Seminar, a class students were required to take in either freshman or sophomore year. Per the syllabus and a reminder email from last night, we were going to be writing an in-class essay first thing this morning that would be one-third of our grade.

With “Ruthless” by Something Corporate thrumming in my ears, I hustled over to Holywell Hall. I breezed through the doors of the dining hall, singularly focused on grabbing a bagel and a coffee when I was accosted in front of the coffee creamer.

“Good morning, Southside,” Chad purred at me, appearing like a gnat in my personal space. “I’m just here to inquire as to whether you’ve wised up after having twenty-four hours to contemplate your insubordinate behavior. The Heirs await you at the front of the hall, and the longer you refuse to kneel, the worse things are going to get for you.”

I stirred my coffee and snapped the lid in place before turning toward the bagel station.

“Hey, slum trash, I’m talking to you,” Chad barked, following me.

I tossed a look over my shoulder like I’d only just noticed he was there. “Oh, sorry, dickface!” I said loudly, motioning to my earbuds that were still firmly in my ears. “I can’t hear you!” I grabbed my bagel and then gave him two middle fingers and a smile as I backed away from the table, then I turned and hightailed it back outside to check in with Dom.



Ten minutes later, I made it to the door of the large lecture hall where the Leadership Seminar was being held. I still had five minutes before class started, but I planned to hustle to my seat to get situated before test time.

Except when I turned the handle, the door was locked.

Chad’s stupid fucking face appeared in the thin pane of glass that was set into the door. A girl stood next to him, wearing an equally self-satisfied smirk, and I recognized her instantly.

Harper Jansen, freshman and daughter of a long line of Tier One bank owners very closely affiliated with Spencer. Her mother was also the fucking *Dean* of Holywell. Harper ran around with Lisa and Annie and the group of top girls who thought they were inner-circle material.

Chad tapped his watch, shrugging at me like he was confused as to why I was still standing outside the door. I knew that the professor, whoever it was, wasn’t going to “interfere in student business” either, so I was fucked.

I banged my fist up against the window in frustration before I tore away, stalking down the hall while dialing Max.

“What’s up, Jojo?”

“Hey, those assholes just locked me out of a class that I’ll fail if I’m not inside the room in less than five minutes to take a test. If I fail this class, I’ll flunk out of the Academy.”

“What the f—”

“Do you have the blueprints of Holywell Hall handy? I need a way in.”

“Uh, yeah. Hang on.”

I hurried around the corner and skidded to a stop on the other side of the back wall of the classroom, then Max said, “Got it up. What floor?”

“Second, west wing. Room 201.”

“Okay, head around the corner from the door toward the windows. There should be a storage closet along that wall.”

I spotted it a few doors away, and I rushed to open it.

“Fuck—locked.” I yanked my backpack to the floor, unzipped the middle pocket, and pulled out my lockpick kit. I reshouldered my backpack, then I got to work.

“Get it?”

“Yeah, I’m in.”

“Okay, see if you can climb up through the ceiling tiles. It’s a drop ceiling, so if you can get up there, shimmy over about ten feet and then jump down through the tiles and into the back of the room. Try to grab at some piping or something while you’re up there so you’re not putting all of your weight on the tiles, or you’ll fall right through them.”

“You’re a fucking king. Thanks, Max.”

“Someone’s gotta keep your ass out of trouble.”

I ended the call with a tap to my earbuds, and then I clambered up the shelves in the closet, which were cluttered with cleaning supplies, and I reached the top without issue. I pushed one of the large tiles upward before sliding it to the side, then I pulled myself up and into the opening.

Copper piping ran alongside the large silver cylinder of the air duct, and I grasped it first with my hands before pulling my legs up to

do the same. After shimmying down the pipe like an oversized monkey for what I guessed was enough distance, I reached below me, nudging at the tile, and peeked in.

The classroom below was large, holding maybe two hundred students in the auditorium-style seating that curved in a semicircle around the professor's podium and whiteboard. It looked like the right place, but I quickly confirmed it when I spotted Chad's fat head still lurking near the classroom door to make sure no one allowed me in.

I pulled the tile back further and then swung myself down and onto the ledge of the high windowsill nearest to me on the side wall. I balanced there for a few seconds, then I jumped the rest of the way down to the floor, landing with an audible thud.

The entire class turned around.

I saluted Chad and Harper, who still stood at the front of the room and were now glaring absolute daggers at me, and then I tossed myself into the first available seat I came across.

None too early because the professor had just begun passing out the test, and he rapped his knuckles loudly on an unsuspecting student's desk in the front row to refocus the class.

"That was impressive, Princess."

I blew out an annoyed breath before turning around to face the row behind me, finding not only Zach sprawled out in his chair and smirking at me, but Noah and Bennett seated next to him. Noah had a bemused smile on his face, while Bennett wore the same blank expression as always, though his green eyes studied me with an intensity that made me twitchy.

Fucking perfect.

"Seriously, I thought Hendrickson's head was going to explode when you just fell out of the ceiling like that," Zach went on. "They teach parkour at Southside High these days?"

"I'm resourceful," I deadpanned before turning back to face the front, the test papers now making their way down my row.

"Stop looking so excited, man," Noah muttered. "You'll only encourage Chad, and he'll take it too far."

"I hope so," Zach replied. "This is the most entertainment we've had in a while."

Noah sighed. "Fine, but you're on your own if something happens and they decide we're on cleanup."

"Nah, the Princess is tough. Aren't you, Princess?"

I lifted my middle finger over my shoulder, willing them to shut the fuck up so I could focus on the essay prompt.

Zach chuckled. "See."

"Don't encourage her either," Noah hissed at him. "She has no idea what she's getting herself into."

Then Bennett finally spoke, his chilly timber sending goosebumps up my arms. "I don't think that's true, actually."



By lunchtime, news of my antics had apparently already made the rounds. The incredulous look on Mari's face when she collapsed into the chair across from me in the dining hall said it all, and I simply reminded her that it was either that or be expelled.

"I guess," she said begrudgingly, taking a delicate bite of her salad. "I *would* miss you if you were gone. No one else has the lady balls to call Chad a dickhead to his face."

Later, after sequestering myself in my room for a few hours to work on homework, it was time for crew practice—my Tuesday and Thursday afternoon block for the fall semester.

I tossed on a sports bra, my gym shirt, and some track shorts before tightening up my ponytail and grabbing my cheap sunglasses. I meandered down to where the Academy's boathouse sat on the banks of the western fork of the Obsidian River. Entering the girls' locker room, I found the locker labeled with my name, ignoring the wary glances I was getting from the rest of the team. I changed into my Academy-issued kit and sat down to lace up the fanciest rowing shoes I'd ever had on my feet while the coach—a middle-aged, no-nonsense woman named Janet who was in the best shape I'd ever seen—barked instructions at us.

It was easy to discern the two distinct groups of athletes in the room. On one side of the locker room were the rich girls from Tier One and Tier Two families who'd grown up at the yacht club and

were just here for a gold star on their resume. On the other side were the girls attending the Academy on athletic scholarship, here to seize the opportunity to obtain the Holywell degree that might give them some kind of upward mobility in the City.

When Coach finished with our first-day instructions, we filed out of the locker room, making our way down to the open grass near the docks. The boys' team was already warming up nearby, and I instantly spotted Bennett among them.

I wasn't the only one. It was my lousy luck that Harper Jansen was also joining the crew team, and I was treated to her prattling loudly to her friends as they pretended to stretch while avidly watching Bennett and the few guys from his team he let hang around him.

"It's almost a done deal," Harper purred with a haughty, self-satisfied smile. "Daddy's been in talks with James Spencer about beginning the negotiations for a formal *engagement*."

She tossed her long dark-blond ponytail over her shoulder as she bent over to stretch her hamstrings, making sure her ass was pointed in the direction of the guys. Her friends gasped and cooed their fakest congratulations at her, while I ignored the pit that suddenly dropped into my stomach at the prospect of Bennett's arranged marriage.

He'd known, even as a preteen, that there was a chance his parents would push for something like this. Theirs was an arranged marriage, and it had been a dying tradition among the Four Families and the top Tiers for generations. But the rest of our parents had all been love matches—even Medusa incarnate Andrea Ferrero to Zach's late father—so it wasn't as if arranged marriage was a requirement of the Families. Young Bennett had talked about it with a sort of resigned acceptance, but none of us thought much about it back then because that kind of thing was a grown-up problem.

I'd only been on campus for a few days, but I hadn't seen Bennett pay much attention to anyone who wasn't Zach or Noah, and certainly not Harper, but that didn't mean things weren't in the works.

As I stood up from my own stretching, I couldn't help but smirk in Harper's direction.

She was going to be shit out of luck because there wouldn't be a Spencer empire to marry into if I had anything to say about it.

"Something funny, gutter trash?" Harper snapped at me. "You look a little too happy for a dead girl walking."

Well, that was a little extreme, but okay. "I was just thinking I should congratulate you on your upcoming nuptials, Jansen," I replied. "I wish you a long and happy life as medicated arm candy trapped in a writhing pit of snakes."

Gasps rang out all around.

Was that too far?

"How *dare* you, you stupid, low-class bitch!" Harper shrieked. "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

Everyone was staring now, including Janet, the boys' team, and their coach.

"I'm nobody, Harper," I said flatly. "Not sure you or your future husband should give a shit what I think."

"You're going to pay for that, you dirty slut," she sputtered at me. "No one insults the Four Families, especially not a lowlife like *you*."

"Ladies!" Janet shouted, barging into our space in the nick of time. "On the water! Move it!"

With one last hateful look at me, Harper marched off to begin her workout, teamed up with her buddies in her crew of four. Janet was wise enough to make sure she stuck those of us on scholarship in the same boats, so my hour on the water was a little awkward but mercifully free of entitled assholes with bad attitudes.

When practice was over, I took my sweet time making my way back to the locker room, hoping to avoid everyone. I paused out in the hallway, pulling my phone out to shoot a message to Dom, who was going to murder me, to forewarn him about how truly terrible I was turning out to be at *laying low*.

Text sent, I glanced up from my phone and found myself looking straight into the same mossy green eyes that were burned into my very last memory of my time as the Knight Heir.

Bennett loomed in front of me, wearing a long-sleeve crew-team shirt and gym shorts that revealed long, muscular legs, and he smelled freshly showered. He stared me down with the cold intensity that seemed to have become a permanent fixture on his face.

I pocketed my phone, then I crossed my arms and held his green eyes with my violet ones. I said nothing—he clearly had a reason for approaching me in this deserted hallway, so he needed to get on with it.

After a few long seconds of a stare-off, he finally spoke. “Unlike everyone else here, I do not think you’re some ignorant girl from the slums who doesn’t know her place. It’s clear to me that you’re an extremely *intelligent* girl from the slums who knew exactly what this Academy would be when she chose to come here.”

I quirked an eyebrow at him. “Careful, Spencer. That was dangerously close to a compliment. I’m sure it’s bad enough you’re speaking to me at all.”

His lips pursed, but he ignored my words. “You know who you are and what this place is. You shouldn’t be at Holywell if you can’t accept how things are done here. Either fall in line or get out.”

Still super fucking bossy, I see.

I stepped an inch closer to him, the two of us nearly toe-to-toe now, and I craned my neck to stare straight into his eyes—eyes that I might have expected to be dead and lifeless by now, seven years after James Spencer had pulled back the curtain. But in this moment, at least, they were lit up from within, all fire and righteousness, and it only made my own burn hotter.

“I’m *exactly* where I need to be,” I replied, my words sure. “If you and the *leeches* you call your peers can’t handle that, it isn’t my problem.”

I dropped his stare and stepped around him, but he reached out, quick as lightning, and caught my hand.

My heart skipped, and I tensed.

“I won’t call them off,” he said, his voice low and threaded with warning.

I just stared down at where his big hand gripped mine. I could’ve thrown him off the second he touched me, but I didn’t, I fucking *didn’t*—I just stood there and let him hold my hand while I braced against the barrage of memories of my best friend that threatened to bury me where I stood.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less of a Spencer,” I murmured.

He frowned, and finally I tore my hand away, intent on putting as much space as possible between Bennett Spencer and me from now on.

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CHAPTER SEVEN



I put my head down and focused on my classwork and my mission, and before I knew it, a month had passed.

Most of my days started with a morning workout, either out on the water or on the indoor rowing erg, before I would drag my ass back to my room to shower, reapply my makeup, and put on whatever “cheap” clothes struck my fancy. I’d try to check in with Dom or Max most mornings before or after breakfast, and then I’d go about my day, attempting to get into the fewest verbal altercations possible.

The bullying by Chad, Harper, and their cronies had continued, mostly in the form of a ban on anyone speaking to me and the usual uncreative verbal insults tossed my way in the hallways. I’d had soup and drinks and other shit “accidentally” spilled on me in the dining hall more than once. I’d also had to walk back to my dorm in a towel after crew practice once after my clothes had disappeared from my locker, which now had a new industrial lock on it thanks to Dom.

It was all fucking stupid, and none of it really phased me, but I knew better than to think it couldn’t get worse.

Mari stuck by me through all of this, earning my great respect, and I’d noticed that when she was at my side, I was mostly just ignored. Apparently, no one had the balls to fuck with an Anzaldúa, “outcast” status or not.

We’d taken to studying together, usually in her room—I didn’t want her to accidentally come across something in mine she

shouldn't see—or tucked away in the library stacks. She video-called her girlfriend daily, and though she wore a brave face, I knew her relationship with her parents had soured further, and it was eating at her.

I also did my best to keep my distance from the Heirs, feeling a little rattled by my unplanned interactions with all three of them during my first days here. I'd known it would be hard to see them again after all these years. I'd even suspected that it might trigger that longing for the time when I was still *whole*—a happy kid with two loving parents and three best friends, blissfully unaware of the festering rot around me. And I'd had no false hopes that the three of them hadn't grown up to be exactly what they were—little princes lording over their kingdom, callous and cold.

But I hadn't anticipated the draw that still pulled me toward those unfeeling bastards, the familiarity and the little hints of the boys I knew still there, and it was messing with my head.

Zach liked to needle me, stirring the pot whenever possible, giving me little bits of flirty attention here and there, if only to rile up the sheep trying to impress him. I rarely took his bait, but it never did deter him.

Noah seemed mildly interested in me, like one would be on discovering new species of insect, but he, at least, was considerate enough of the target on my back not to give me special attention during Tech Skills class or at any other time.

Bennett never spoke to me again after that first day, but I felt him watching me when we were in the same room. I suspected he was waiting for me to put my toe out of line one more time so he could order me to leave again, and I just hoped he'd get bored of me eventually.

But the fact that I was keeping my distance from the Heirs didn't mean I wasn't keeping a close eye on them, learning their schedules and their movements. They kept to their classes and school activities like the rest of us, then they usually retreated to their ivory tower in A Dorm. They left campus occasionally, especially on the weekends, but they were never really gone long, seeming to prefer their home here to their respective Family Towers.

They were even nice enough to leave all together a few times, so my creeping around A Dorm and *maybe* planting a little extra something behind the panel of their penthouse security system went unnoticed.

I did travel back home once, making sure to exit and reenter campus undetected. I used ways in and out that were not through the gates, just to ensure I could do it. Max also visited me a few times, breaking and entering in a similar fashion even though he was on the approved list as my family and could have waltzed in the front door.

By the second week of October, I felt ready to make my first move.

"Knock, knock," I said with a rap of my knuckles on Noah's open office door. "Still a good time to meet?"

Noah looked up from whatever he was doing on his laptop, pushing his glasses up his nose with his finger in a move that made my heart pinch, and he motioned me into his office with his professional smile.

"Yes, definitely," he said. "Have a seat."

I'd requested a meeting during Noah's office hours, supposedly to get his help with our most recent assignment in Tech Skills. It was the easiest way to get him alone, but it wasn't really him I wanted.

It was his laptop.

"So, have you lived in Southside all of your life?" he asked me offhandedly after we'd gone over the assignment. "Or are you a transplant to our fair City?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Taking an interest in the nobodies now, Hargraves?"

He shrugged, giving me his charming smile. "Just making conversation, *Miller*."

Or fishing for information. I had little doubt that at some point someone on Team Heirs had pulled my background, and they would have found everything they needed to confirm I was exactly who I said I was—right down to my standardized test scores from an elementary school in Durham.

"I moved to Southside to live with my aunt and uncle when I was eleven," I replied. "After a family tragedy."

His smile faded, and he nodded, an understanding look on his face. "I get that. Trust me."

Sure, Noah.

He steered the conversation to lighter topics. "So, what's with the purple eyes?"

"Violet."

He chuckled. "What's with the violet eyes? Do you change colors according to your mood, or...?"

"Something like that. Wouldn't want people to think I was trying to fit in or anything."

He grimaced. "You know, you really should consider just... giving them what they want. I know you're tough and all, but things can get a lot worse than they already are. You could have a much better four years here if you just...." He waved a hand, giving me a pointed look.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "What? Got on my knees in front of you three to grovel? To kiss your shoes and thank you and your benevolent Families for raising me from the dregs of the City where I belong?"

He sighed. "That wasn't our idea. I just want you to know that."

"Oh, okay," I said, barking out a laugh. "Sure, that makes it so much better."

"Look," he snapped. "We don't interfere in what the others do. If we put a stop to something like this, it will get back to our parents eventually. And trust me, that could make things worse."

That I did believe—James, Peter, and Andrea were reprehensible scum without a conscience between them.

"Don't worry about me, Noah," I said tersely. "I'm not your problem."

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. That was Max, letting me know it was go time.

On cue, Noah's phone blared at him. He frowned at the screen before getting to his feet. "Excuse me for a minute," he said, putting the phone to his ear. "I have to make a quick call."

He strode quickly from the office, shutting the door behind him.

I dug my external drive from my backpack, then leaned over the desk to connect it to Noah's computer. Since he'd been on it fifteen seconds ago, it was still unlocked. I initiated the cloning process,

pulling everything from his hard drive, including his email, even his recent keystrokes. It would be close, but Noah was going to be sorting through the mess Max just made of the security system on their dorm penthouse for at least five minutes.

I needed four.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I chanted under my breath. “Do this for mama, you beautiful machine.”

The thing about the Families was that each had their own way that they handled security. For Hargraves, and specifically for the private areas accessible only to the Family itself, they used keypads with codes that were changed weekly. We knew that those codes were sent to the Family members and the staff that needed them via encrypted email.

I wanted in Peter Hargraves’ private library. For that, I needed Noah’s code.

The computer chimed, telling me the process was complete, and I quickly set the screen to sleep. Thirty seconds later, Noah walked back in to find me lounging in my chair, bored to death by what was in my TikTok feed.

He ran a hand through his wavy blond hair, looking harried. “Sorry about that. False alarm. I think.”

“Huh,” I said with a shrug, then I stood up. “Well, I should be going anyway. I’m good on the homework.”

“Okay,” he replied, distracted. “Just... think about what I said.”

About how I should just go ahead and get on my knees for them?

I paused at the door. “Noah,” I said seriously, hoping the gravity of what I was about to say was clear to him.

He looked up from his phone. “Yeah?”

“Over my dead fucking body. You got that?”

He stared at me, endearing smile nowhere to be seen, and his blue eyes bored into me with such force that he gave Bennett a run for his money.

“It’s your funeral, Joanna.”

I left, slamming the door behind me.



That night, Mari interrupted my debrief with Dom by banging on my door and informing me that it was Fight Night.

“Oh, how cute,” Dom drawled, overhearing her hollering. “The rich kids have their own little fights. Do you think it’s fencing with the fake swords and the goofy suits?”

I opened the door, and Mari breezed in without a word and went straight into my closet to find me some version of what she thought was an acceptable Fight Night outfit, I presumed.

“I guess I’ll check it out,” I said to Dom. “You know anything about it?”

“Yeah, the Enforcer teams sometimes recruit there for high-level positions that are closer to the Family. Kids with the right pedigree and all that.”

“Lame. Well, gotta go.”

Mari stomped out of my closet in a huff. “I thought surely you would have something appropriately skanky to wear to this thing.”

I barked out a laugh. “Why, because I’m from Southside?”

“Um, no, because you’re eighteen and you’re smoking hot. Why aren’t you showing it off?”

“Is skanky the dress code?”

She quirked an eyebrow at me. “Isn’t it always, around here?”

Half an hour later, I was dressed in a black crop top and some high-waisted denim cutoff shorts that only just covered my ass. I wore comfy purple high-top sneakers, and Mari had curled my hair—making me glad I’d just freshly dyed it yesterday along with my eyebrows.

She had on a tiny skirt and a slinky silk top along with heels that probably cost more than the average rent in Southside. I followed her dutifully across campus and up to the basketball gym on the far north side.

“Are we going to get shit for showing our faces at a school event?” I asked, not really caring but needing to gauge how much bullshit to prepare for.

She scoffed. “Has anyone given you *actual* shit when you’re with me?”

“Nope,” I replied, grinning. “You do come in handy.”

We entered the gym to find it dimly lit save for the single large light fixture hanging from the ceiling that beamed its yellowy light down on a makeshift ring in the middle of the basketball court. The ring was comprised of a spacious area covered in thick sparring mats and enclosed by a circle of rowdy, mostly shirtless guys.

The stands were dotted with clusters of students shouting, cheering, and chatting excitedly amongst themselves. There were certainly a lot of girls here, each decked out like they were going to the club instead of watching dudes punch the shit out of each other in a sweaty gym.

Mari and I snuck onto the third row of a mostly empty bleacher near the entrance. We'd made it just in time to see Chad, sweaty and shirtless, his thick body inflated with muscle, as he slammed his hammy fists into another guy's face.

"Winner, Hendrickson!" Dane shouted into a bullhorn from his spot on the corner of the mat. His ginger hair shone under the gym light, and he had a whistle around his neck and a clipboard clasped in his other hand, so I supposed he was the master of ceremonies this evening. When Chad threw another punch into the barely conscious boy's face, Dane yelled, "Chad! He's done, for Christ's sake."

Chad finally bounced away from the guy, pumping his fists and crowing his victory. I watched him eye a group of girls in the stands near him before he decided to make a lewd gesture at them, causing them to gasp and giggle.

I vowed then that someday I would beat some respect for women—and people in general, really—into Chad Hendrickson.

"Up next, your main event!" Dane's falsetto blasted through the bullhorn. "In this corner, we have last summer's champion, John Tyler Ashmore!"

John Tyler stepped into the "ring," shaking out his shoulders and bouncing on his toes, a determined look on his face. The Ashmores were a Tier Two family, wealthy but not rub-elbows-with-the-Families wealthy, so it made some sense that John Tyler would try to make a name for himself in something like this. He was huge, with the build of a linebacker, and I bet his punches hurt like a bitch.

I didn't envy whoever was getting in the ring against him.

Dane got back on his horn. “And challenging JT is... the One. The Only. Your Ferrero Family Heir, Zachary!”

I jumped to my feet without a thought, my body moving on its own, and I stood on my seat to get a better view of my ex-best friend as he sauntered into the ring. Bennett and Noah appeared behind him in their business casual, taking their places near his corner and effectively clearing the space of any other bodies. They crossed their arms and looked on like they were here to make sure no bullshit was perpetrated against their boy.

Mari popped up next to me, balancing precariously on her stilettos. “Good idea. The Heirs rarely come to these—I guess it was time for them to blow off steam.”

“Them?” I asked as my eyes tracked Zach’s movements around the mat.

“I’ve heard Bennett fights. I don’t know about Noah.”

Interesting. Dom had always believed we should expect the Heirs to be well-trained because they absolutely had the resources to be, and they’d borne witness to exactly what can happen when one of the Families is caught unaware.

And now I would get to see their skills for myself.

John Tyler watched Zach with a blank look, and if he was nervous, he didn’t show it. Zach chose the next moment to rip his tight black T-shirt over his head, leaving him standing there in tiny training shorts and nothing else.

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry as the desert.

Zach was fucking beautiful.

His olive-toned skin was covered in colorful tattoos, sleeves of geometric patterns wrapping around his biceps and spreading across his broad, defined chest. The light caught the muscles in his torso just right, highlighting every ridge of his eight-pack and the deep V-cut of his Adonis belt before it disappeared into his shorts.

I couldn’t believe *that* was my scrawny, messy-headed former best friend.

“Weapons?” John Tyler asked, his voice matter-of-fact as it projected through the gym, and his question surprised me.

Zach barked out a laugh. “Ambitious of you, JT. Not this time. I’m feeling like using my fists tonight.”

Then Dane blew the whistle, and they were on each other.

I watched in equal parts awe and creeping dread as Zach beat the absolute shit out of John Tyler, who was several inches taller than Zach and probably had twenty pounds of muscle on him. Zach was on par with the best fighters I'd ever seen go through Dom's gym, including Max.

He would make a formidable opponent.

John Tyler finally tapped out, bleeding profusely from both his nose and a cut in his head, as Zach had him pinned to the mat and was choking the life out of him. Dane blew the whistle and called the fight for Zach.

The crowd roared, the girls screamed, and Zach beamed that cocky smile around the stands while he threw his arms out wide like he was the fucking Gladiator. When his dark eyes swept over where Mari and I stood, he paused, and I watched as he dragged his gaze slowly down the length of my long bare legs and then back up my body until our eyes met. He winked at me, and then he was back in his corner with Bennett and Noah, whom I had no doubt saw exactly where Zach's attention had snagged.

I only hoped no one else saw it, or else the target on my back was about to get even bigger, and I had shit to do.

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CHAPTER EIGHT



“Hi, yes, hello,” I said brightly to the disinterested security guard at the concierge desk in the lobby of Hargraves Tower. “I’m Annika Volkov. Just visiting my father and dropping off some coffee for his late night in the lab.”

I smiled with all my teeth as I pushed my copy of Annika’s Academy ID, doctored perfectly with my picture, toward the guard. I smoothed my pleated skirt and adjusted my pale pink sweater vest like I was making myself presentable for my father while the guard gave my ID a cursory look before shoving it back at me.

“Fifty-third floor,” he intoned, bored, until he finally actually looked up at me, interest sparking in his eyes. He gave me a flirty smile before he said, “Have a nice night, miss.”

I beamed back at him like he’d just made my whole day. “You too!” Then I flounced away, my borrowed high heels clicking on the shiny floor as I made my way to the elevator with my tray of coffees.

Mari thought I was borrowing her clothes to go to a Halloween party in Southside tonight dressed as “a rich bitch.” Instead, I was breaking into Hargraves Tower by walking through the front door.

Max and his team hadn’t had to dig very far through the information I’d pulled from Noah’s laptop to find this week’s security codes. Noah had most of his shit locked up in a way that had impressed even Max, but what might have been unhackable normally was easier to crack when I’d stolen it right from the source.

I stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the fifty-third floor. I spotted the security camera in the corner, and I waved to it so that my new friend would see I was thinking of him. When the doors opened, I found myself in the lobby of Eagle Pharmaceuticals, a star in the Hargraves portfolio and completely deserted at ten o'clock at night on a Saturday.

It was also conveniently located two floors below Peter Hargraves' private library and server room.

The few cameras placed around the company's hallways had already been looped, so I quickly made my way out onto the large balcony where the lab employees took their smoke breaks.

Once outside, I ditched my coffees and kicked off my shoes, then shoved them into my backpack. I hurried over to the side of the balcony and climbed onto the railing, annoyed that I was having to do this in a skirt.

I stuck to my planned route, reaching out with my bare foot and bracing it on the ledge of the large windowsill that was offset from the balcony at about the height of my shoulder. I used it to launch myself upward, grabbing the railing of the identical balcony on the floor above, then I swung my legs up and climbed over onto the next floor. I repeated the process one more time, clinging to the window ledge and then the balcony railing like a chimpanzee before finally hauling myself onto the smaller balcony just outside Peter Hargraves' private library located just one floor below the penthouse.

I smoothed my preppy outfit like it mattered how I looked during my first B&E, then I approached the balcony doors to enter this week's code onto the keypad next to them.

Before I could finish, the door swung open, revealing two large men dressed in black, weapons strapped to their bodies and matching smirks on their faces.

"What the fuck?" I shouted, jumping in surprise. "How did you two beat me up here?"

Max's grin widened. "I made a *friend* last night who worked for the caterer at last night's dinner party at Casa del Hargraves. We took a chance that his assigned code for the service elevator still worked."

Dom chuckled next to him.

I pouted, crossing my arms. “Both of you are *bullshit*. I just scaled two floors’ balconies in a fucking skirt!”

“What are you doing still standing outside, Jojo?” Dom asked, pasting a stern look on his face intended to rile me further. “Get in here. It’s time to work.”

I shouldered past them, grumbling, and they followed me down the narrow hall that we knew from studying the original building plans led to the library and server room.

Peter Hargraves’ private server was the first stop on my tour of where we had determined the Families’ kept their most sensitive information. I intended to leave here tonight with the security camera footage of that conference room many floors below us on the night of my parents’ murders.

When Dom first began explaining to me how we could possibly gather evidence that my parents had not in fact perished in a tragic plane crash in the Bahamas and had instead been killed by the other three Families, I’d thought it sounded nuts.

Why on earth would James, Andrea, and Peter hang on to a shred of evidence that would ruin their reputations and crumble the facade of the Shining City on the Hill that the Families had spent generations building and presenting to the rest of the world?

The apparent answer? Mutually assured destruction.

They would all have kept the evidence that implicated each other, ensuring that no one broke their little murder circle of trust.

We reached the library door, and I keyed in Noah’s code. The door clicked, unlocking, and we opened it slowly and crept inside with only Dom’s penlight for visibility. It was too dark to make out the details of the grand library, but I’d been in here once as a kid, and I remembered thinking it looked like the Beast’s library. Noah, Bennett, Zach, and I had snuck in behind Peter one evening when we were supposed to be in bed, and we’d hid in the stacks, laughing and reading curse words and sex scenes from grown-up books, and then we’d all fallen asleep there on one of the priceless Turkish rugs.

Noah’s nanny had found us the next morning and chewed us out, but we’d all thought the thrill of sneaking into places our parents labeled off-limits to us had been worth it.

I shook myself out of those memories. They gave me so little happiness and so much grief, as I could only mourn what I'd lost.

The server room was located off the far wall, and we entered with ease, using the same code. Then Dom and I stepped back while Max helped himself to the files stored there via his tablet and whatever magical cable he'd procured for the job.

After a long ten minutes, he gasped, "I think I've got it."

Dom and I peered over his shoulder. There, right on the screen in slightly grainy footage, were Peter and Andrea wandering into that conference room like they were headed to a boring meeting, flanked by their confused sons. James and Bennett entered a few minutes later.

"Oh, Jojo, don't look," Max whispered, now trying to block my view of the tablet.

But I had to see it. "No," I croaked. "Let me."

I forced myself to watch as the big, menacing Ferrero Enforcers dragged my struggling parents into that room, their bulk obscuring the view of the third Enforcer who would have been carrying unconscious eleven-year-old me. After several long, excruciating minutes, they emerged from the room, hefting the lifeless bodies of all three of us between them.

As expected, there was no camera footage of the actual murder—even the Families weren't that bold—but there was the proof that my parents were not in the Bahamas the night of their deaths and instead here in Hargraves Tower in the presence of the Families. We saw them being forced to enter the room against their will, and we saw them exiting in a manner that said they were either unconscious or dead.

I felt... nothing. It was as if the high of the victory that we were, at last, one step closer to getting what I needed to bring the Families to their fucking knees was cancelled out by the low of the horror of reliving my parents' last moments.

So, I was just numb. I'd cried my entire lifetime's worth of tears in that first week while I healed in Max's bed, and that was it. Never again.

There was only justice for my mom and dad.

Dom placed a soothing hand on my back before saying to Max, “Copy just what we need, then pack it up. We still have to get out of here.”

I brightened, looking forward to swapping the balcony hop for an easy ride down in the elevator and a quick waltz by the security guard with a wink and a wave, while Max made quick work of the file. Then he packed his shit, ensuring all evidence of us being here was wiped, and we made our way back out into the library and then down the hall toward the service elevators.

After stopping to slip my shoes back on, I rounded the corner and ran straight into Gifford Buckley—the Hargraves Family butler.

“What the hell,” he hissed, gaping at me as I stood there, trying to look innocent and confused.

Well, *shit*. Gifford rarely left the penthouse unless Peter needed something when he was down here, but we knew Peter was abroad this week, like he so often was.

Max and Dom apparently heard him, thank God, because they did not follow me around the corner and into the elevator bank, instead disappearing in the opposite direction.

Gifford barked at me, indignant, “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

I put on my haughtiest Harper Jansen face. “I don’t believe I’m required to explain anything to the *help*,” I spat. “But I am here to visit *Noah*. We have a date.”

“Mr. Hargraves is not in residence this evening,” he seethed. “And you are on the wrong floor.” He began fumbling with his cell phone, no doubt about to call security down here to haul me off to a dark room for questioning. “How did you even get in here?”

“Noah gave me the code, *obviously*,” I snapped, then I breathed a huge sigh of relief as a gun was cocked right behind Gifford’s bald head.

“Put the phone down, please, Mr. Buckley,” Dom said in a soothing voice.

He froze, both hands shooting into the air next to his face, his still-locked phone dangling from one of them.

“Now, listen carefully to what is about to happen,” Dom continued, calm as could be. “You are going to turn around and head

back to the penthouse, and you're going to forget everything you saw here."

"And why would I do that?" Gifford huffed.

Dom chuckled. "The gun pressed against your skull not enough reason for you?"

"I'm *loyal* to my Family," he sniveled. "They'll see you all executed for daring to steal from them!"

"Oh, that's interesting," I mused. "Isn't it, brother?"

Max stepped into view next to Dom, a wide smile on his face. "It is, indeed. I'd have to think that the Hargraves Family might also take issue with the fact that their *loyal* and trusted butler has been skimming off the Family accounts for years."

Gifford's face paled in the dim light of the elevator bank.

"I don't... I don't know what you're talking about."

"Save it, Buckley," I said. "It's our business to know everything that goes on in this Tower. We have your file, and we will turn it over to your beloved boss if we find out you've even *hinted* that something odd went on this evening."

Gifford swallowed, then nodded mutely.

"And I'm going to also throw in copies of your search history," Max added. "I'm not sure how long you'll have a job if it becomes public information that you get off to women crushing small animals to death with their feet."

Okay, disgusting—and not information I needed to know.

"Alright, yes," he said quickly, that little tidbit sealing the deal. "I'll be going. I saw nothing."

I reached out to pat his pervy chest. "Good boy. We'll be checking on you."

He retreated into the elevator like his ass was on fire.

After he was gone, I let my shoulders sag in relief. "Fuck, that was too close."

"I know," Dom replied. "But we've been prepared for this. You did great." He looked over at Max. "You both did."

"Thanks, Dom," I said. "Let's get the fuck out of here. Being back in the Family Towers is giving me hives."

"Hope you get over that," Max said with a laugh. "They'll all be yours soon."

I could only hope he was right.

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CHAPTER NINE



“You guys! My father will kill us if we break something.”

“Stop being a whiny baby, Bennett,” I said, giggling.

“Yeah, we’re just making space,” Zach chimed in. “This blanket fort is gonna be killer.”

“We should be careful, though,” Noah added. He didn’t like it when one of us was worried. “We don’t want to get Bennett in trouble.”

Zach and I pushed the coffee table over by the tall windows while Bennett watched us, making sure we didn’t scratch the shiny wood floor. Noah dragged a chair over next to the sofa, then he started throwing blankets at all of us.

Zach and I piled our pillows in the empty space while Noah and Bennett draped blankets across the furniture.

“I’m sleeping by Jojo tonight,” Bennett announced as he wedged himself in between Zach and me where we were laying on the floor in our blanket nest.

“No way. You slept next to her last weekend when we were at Noah’s house,” Zach griped.

“It’s my house,” he shot back. “I’m the best to protect her here.”

“No one needs to protect me, you losers,” I said with a huff. Then I shuffled over next to Noah, who grinned at me.

“You’re the only girl,” Bennett pointed out, as if that was a thing.

“Yeah, what if there’s... a MONSTER!” Zach yelled before he tackled Noah and me both.

"Ahh!" I kicked at Zach, and then Bennett tackled him, and we all laughed and laughed.

"Bennett!"

We froze. Mr. Spencer was back early, and we had made a mess of his living room.

Bennett scurried out of the fort and jumped to his feet. "I'm sorry, Father. We'll be quiet."

I laid next to Zach and Noah as we listened to Mr. Spencer's footsteps approaching. His shiny shoes appeared in front of the opening of our fort. He crouched down, and his dark eyes found me.

Suddenly, I felt my skin crawl.

He raised a gun and pointed it right at me. His hand was already covered in blood.

"Why, Father?" Bennett said, suddenly emotionless.

"For the Families," he replied.

Then he pulled the trigger.

I woke up screaming.

Sitting up and sucking in air, it took me a long minute to realize I was in my bed inside my room in C Dorm. Not in a blanket fort at Bennett's house. Not in my bunk back at home.

Not facing down the barrel of James Spencer's gun.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and fumbled for my phone where it was charging on my nightstand.

"Fuck my life," I groaned, seeing that its clock said it was only midnight.

It would be hours before I would be able to get back to sleep after yet another nightmare perverting my childhood memories, and I was going to be worthless during my early morning workout.

Decision made, I tossed my covers off and stumbled out of bed, pulling workout clothes on with the grace of a zombie. I tucked my cherry blossom necklace into the little safe I had hidden at the back of my closet like I usually did when I rowed, and then I crept quietly through the dorm halls and out onto the lawn, heading for the gym.

I was going to get my workout in now, rowing on the erg until I couldn't breathe or think or move anymore, and then I would pass out until it was time for class.

It had been almost five days since the Hargraves Tower heist, and I was actually surprised the nightmare hadn't come earlier—like, that same night. My parents were killed in that fucking Tower, after all.

As expected, the gym was deserted, so after I scanned into the building with my ID, I made my way to the huge weight room. It was as large as the basketball court next door and had an indoor track circuiting the perimeter of the second story. Despite the late hour, the cavernous space was brightly lit by the gym's harsh fluorescent bulbs.

Since the gym was mine this evening, I plugged my phone into the docking station that connected to the room's speaker system, and I cranked up the volume on "Pretty Girl" by Sugarcult before hopping onto one of the sparkling new rowing machines.

And then I rowed. And rowed and rowed.

Fuck James Spencer.

Fuck Peter Hargraves.

Fuck Andrea Ferrero.

Fuck the Four Families.

Fuck their peons and sycophants and legions of lemmings who help them keep their boot on the neck of this City.

And fuck the Heirs. They were all the same.

Just as I was about to turn over a personal record for my 5K, pulling hard to "What It Is to Burn" by Finch, I heard the loud slam of a hand up against the wall as my music was suddenly cut off.

I jerked to a stop on my machine, drenched in sweat and panting hard. I turned to glare across the room, only to find Bennett, dressed in his long-sleeve crew T-shirt and short track shorts, holding the sound system's power cord in his hand and glaring at it like it'd insulted his mother.

Jumping to my feet, I stormed toward him.

"What the fuck, Spencer?" I barked, reaching out to grab the cord from him.

He yanked it out of my reach, the tall motherfucker.

"Turn that emo shit off," he growled at me. "Use those headphones you have constantly stuck in your ears if you want music. This is not your personal gym."

He dropped the cord and crossed his arms to give me his best intimidating stare. He'd shoved his sleeves to his elbows, his toned forearms flexing with the movement, and I hated that I noticed it.

"Or better yet," he went on. "Leave."

"Is that a command from the prince to his lowly subject?" I snarked, taking up a mirror power pose and meeting his angry stare. "Or is the grown man in front of me finished throwing a tantrum?"

He moved to step closer to me—too close—and I shoved my palm into the middle of his wide chest. "Back off, asshole," I snarled. "I am one of the few people in this City who is not afraid of you. Don't. Fuck. With. Me."

Then, out of nowhere, he smiled at me. A small one—just a quirk of the corners of his lips, and it both shocked the hell out of me and reminded me so much of young Bennett that my knees almost gave out.

"I don't *fuck* with people," he replied, removing my hand from his chest like it was a piece of lint on his shirt. "If I wanted to hurt you, you would know it. But the only person at this school that's hurting you is *you*. So, I will tell you again—fall in line and stop making trouble." Then he leaned in even closer, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispered, "And either put on your headphones, or get the fuck out of my gym."

Then he stepped quickly away and strode over to the rowers. He tossed his gym bag to the floor next to his chosen machine, then he hopped on and started pulling like he wanted to break it.

I'd finished my row, but I'd be damned if I'd let him run me out of the gym after that nonsense. After retrieving my own bag, I made my way to the nearby rack to get a few squats in. I looked over at Bennett still rowing like he hated the world, and I held his hard stare while I slowly stuck my earbuds in my ears. Then, for good measure, I ripped my sweaty tank top over my head, using it to wipe my face before tossing it aside and grabbing a barbell.

Bennett's eyes heated as he took me in, as I was now clad only in a strappy sports bra and spandex shorts, and the frown marring his pretty face intensified. I was being petty, but it served him right for being a dick to me while also flashing his forearms around and wearing what were definitely micro running shorts and *touching me*

with his fucking soft lips. If I had to look at those legs while hating him and everything he stood for, he could sit there during his rage row and be subjected to my ass in spandex.

I clicked my music on and tuned him out as I did my squats, and I felt his eyes on me the entire time. Once I finished, I packed my shit and left the gym without a backward glance, the whirring sounds of his machine still echoing through the huge room as he worked out whatever had crawled up his ass on this particular night.



“How are things with your parents?” I asked Mari the next morning over breakfast.

“The same,” she replied, sighing into her coffee. “They’re talking as if they’ll disown me and make my second cousin the Anzaldua heir if I don’t quit it with my *public exhibitionism*.”

“The fuck?” I said around a mouthful of bagel. “Like, talking about your girlfriend on social media?”

“Yes. I know, it’s very stupid.” She waved a dismissive hand. “They hate my second cousin, so I’m not taking them seriously. Don’t worry about me. You have enough going on.”

I did worry about her, but her point was well taken. Chad had been hassling me a bit more as of late, and I could just *smell* the shit brewing with Harper, Lisa, and Annie. Those three were as high up the Tier One rung as Mari was and weren’t quite as susceptible as their peers to being frightened away with just an angry “go fuck yourself”—in English or Spanish, depending on her mood.

I parted ways with my only friend and found an empty desk in the quiet back corner of the Leadership Seminar classroom. I’d just pulled up the assigned reading on my tablet and was sorting through my notes when the three stooges filed into the row right in front of me.

“Morning, Princess,” Zach sang at me before throwing himself into his chair, hair sexily disheveled and tie hanging loose around his neck, per usual.

Noah slid into the seat next to him before turning to give me a warm-but-patronizing smile over his shoulder. "Hey, Joanna. How's it going?"

"Swell, Noah," I replied, scribbling on my notes. "Another great day at Holywell."

Bennett scowled at his buddies like they were misbehaving by acknowledging me at all before he sat gracefully into his own seat. His suit was navy today, and I wondered how much his cufflinks cost.

"Get all those demons exercised last night, Spencer?" I asked lightly, flipping another page in my notes.

Zach and Noah both turned to stare at him with raised eyebrows. He blew out an annoyed breath before throwing an arm over the back of his chair and turning to stare me down. "Yes, thank you. The little show you put on was amusing as well."

"Dude, what—"

"Please," I scoffed, cutting Zach off. "Don't tell me an Heir of the Four Families could possibly be distracted by a pair of underwhelming tits in a sports bra and a little spandex."

"Bennett, what in the world—"

"Your tits are *not* underwhelming, Princess—"

Now Bennett was *smirking* at me. "I'm sure that move worked really well for you when you were picking up what I'm sure were *numerous* unsuspecting boys on the Southside, but it takes a little more than a great ass in spandex to *distract* me."

"Oh, are we slut shaming the poor Southside girl?" I drawled. "How original. And rich coming from a guy who apparently exclusively fucks hookers at the Euphoria Club. I bet you're into levels of kink that us normals could never even *fathom*."

Zach barked out a very loud laugh, and I was pretty sure the entire class was now turned in our direction. They wouldn't be able to hear the details of our conversation, but they sure could see all three Heirs now turned around in their seats and staring at yours truly.

"Let me guess..." I went on because I was an idiot. "Choking? That's your thing, isn't it, Spencer? No, I bet it's... restraints. Yeah, you like to leave marks."

"Oooh, she's got you there, dude," Zach said, laughing.

Noah now wore an amused smile. “What the hell did you two get up to last night?”

“Nothing,” we both said, then Bennett gave me one last heated, angry look before he finally turned around to face the front.

Class dragged on for ninety long minutes during which the Heirs went back to steadfastly ignoring me, to my immense relief. As everyone began to pack their shit to leave, I hung back, pretending to scroll aimlessly on my tablet while I observed Zach digging around in his thousand-dollar leather messenger bag.

Before I could get clear confirmation of exactly where he kept his key ring, Lisa and Harper appeared in the now empty row in front of the Heirs. Lisa hopped up on the tabletop and crossed her legs, her pointy nude Mary Jane heels clicking with the movement and her short white skirt now riding up, nearly exposing her panties. She smiled at all of the Heirs before her cunning gaze zeroed in on Zach.

Harper’s tight periwinkle suit dress wasn’t going to allow her to flaunt herself at Bennett in the same manner, so she leaned casually against the front of their table, angling herself a bit so that all three of them could get a nice peek at her cleavage.

I rolled my eyes and failed to rein in my snort of derision.

“You’re dismissed, Southside trash,” Lisa drawled, waving a hand at me. “You’ve polluted the air around the Heirs long enough today.”

I ignored her, rummaging in my backpack for a second before I exclaimed, “Oh, there it is—thank God. Here you go, Lisa.” I pulled my hand out and gave her the middle finger.

“Classy, as usual,” Lisa spat. “Zach... *Zach*.”

Zach had turned around to smirk at me again, but Lisa screeching his name finally got him to pay attention to her. “What’s up, Lisa?”

“You guys are coming to the Academy’s fall party at The Revelry tomorrow night, right? I’ve had the best VIP booth reserved for the Heirs, of course.”

The Revelry was a ritzy bar and intimate concert venue in the vast portfolio of the Aviano Family. Mari had mentioned that the Academy usually rented a private venue for its fall party, but I’d told her I’d rather give Harper Jansen a bikini wax than go to an Academy party.

However, if I got confirmation that Zach was going, then it might be worth checking out.

He was, after all, my next target.

"Yeah, we'll be there," he told her, sounding more bored than excited. "The Families prefer that we make an appearance at all Academy-sponsored events."

"Excellent," she said with a little clap.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you there, Bennett," Harper cooed. "We haven't been able to spend much time together since our parents have been... negotiating."

Bennett had returned to his default setting—aloof and disinterested. "I'm sure my father will set something up for us should negotiations progress, Harper." He stood up, motioning for the other two to join him. "But we'll see everyone tomorrow night."

He glanced at me one more time, and I met his fierce stare with the same bravado that I had last night—because fuck him. His jaw tensed, nostrils flaring ever so slightly, and then he just *had* to lean into my space, placing his palms flat on the desk in front of me before whispering, "Keep dreaming about what you think my *kinks* are, Miss Miller. Because that's the closest you'll ever get to finding out."

Then he turned and strode down the stairs behind his boys.

"Thanks a lot, dickhead," I muttered, feeling the incredulous, angry vibes that were now being directed at me as I finished packing up.

"Stay away from the Heirs, you garbage whore," Harper hissed at me.

"It is just astounding to me that you dare to speak to them," Lisa added, incensed. "You are so far beneath them. They should just crush you like the cockroach you are."

I stood up, slinging my backpack onto my shoulders. "See you ladies later. Good luck trying to convince your chosen Heirs to fuck you. I don't get the appeal, but to each her own, you know?"

Ignoring their scandalized tittering, I hurried down the stairs and out the door, ready to be finished with privileged assholes for the day.

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CHAPTER TEN



“I still can’t believe you changed your mind about this,” Mari said as we exited the train two blocks from The Revelry. “Not that I’m complaining, but you tend to stick to your guns about things. Are you sick?”

“You’re thinking too hard, girl,” I said, sounding flippant even though I was extremely serious—Mari did not need to be thinking too hard about my motivations for a lot of things. “How often does a girl from the Southside get to party at The Revelry? I’ll put aside my convictions for a night.”

“Fine. I vote you also put aside this celibacy thing you have going on. Find a hot bartender to ride for the night.”

“Stop projecting your sexual frustrations onto me.”

“*Joder*, I know. One cannot survive on FaceTime sex alone.”

I chuckled as we rounded the corner and approached the entrance to The Revelry, closed tonight for a private party just for the students of Holywell Academy. The club was housed inside a remodeled old theatre, the neon lights of the marquee blazing with “The Revelry” in large turquoise block letters. The bouncer stood just outside the old-fashioned theatre box office, and I spied about a dozen of my classmates standing in line to enter.

“I’m very glad you let me dress you tonight, chica,” Mari said as we took our spots at the back of the line. She eyed the girls ahead of us, most of them wearing high-end designer cocktail dresses. “Even if you are essentially still wearing *shorts*.”

“It’s a romper,” I argued. It was simple and black, but the shorts barely covered my ass and the neckline plunged low between my B-cups. “And I wore heels for you.”

“Those are wedged sneakers,” she retorted, rolling her eyes.

“Exactly!”

She huffed at me, failing to contain her smile. She looked bangin’ in her bright-red cropped top with a matching skirt, its high slit showing a lot of leg while the top allowed a peek of her flat stomach. She also wore the most uncomfortable-looking strappy stilettos, but I was pretty sure Mari came out of the womb walking on five-inch heels.

After showing our Academy IDs to the bouncer, we entered the club. The lighting was dim, of course, and I paused to really take in the room.

It was gorgeous, and it truly pained me to admit that about anything connected to Lisa or the Ferreros.

The ornate ceiling remained from the original theatre as did the stage all lit by purple-hued lighting that was arranged throughout the club. The old chandeliers remained as well, and they glowed a bright contrasting orange. There were sleek tables surrounded by plush leather chairs scattered throughout the club’s wide-open floor, and velvet couches were set along walls and around low tables in quiet corners. The expansive bar was tucked up under the old balcony and took up the entire left wall. The small balcony floor contained additional seating and the VIP areas.

The room was crowded, and I recognized almost everyone in attendance as a fellow Academy student. I also recognized a few of the waitstaff and two of the members of the cover band currently commanding the stage as current or former attendees of Southside High.

Mari held tightly to my hand and dragged me toward the bar. “Say what you will about the City,” she shouted over the music, “but the fact that the drinking age is eighteen within City limits is pretty awesome.”

“It keeps us complacent,” I yelled back at her, though I fully planned to take advantage of the lax drinking laws while being forced to party with my classmates.

We arrived at the bar, and it took Mari exactly fifteen seconds to have the very interested eyes of the girl working on our end. She had something fruity in hand for Mari immediately, and soon after she passed me the gin and tonic I ordered because it was Dom's favorite.

I turned to lean up against the bar, surveying the room and instantly locating the Heirs because the best VIP booth was easily identified.

It was a private viewing box of old, jutting out from the wall slightly lower than the balcony and just to the left of the stage. A wide plush loveseat and another roomy chair surrounded a low table piled high with bottles of liquor.

My three marks sat around the table—Zach and Noah on the loveseat and Bennett on his solitary throne—lazily drinking from crystal tumblers and watching the festivities below with only mild interest. They all wore expertly fitted custom suits, and they'd apparently decided to cut loose tonight because none of them wore a tie, leaving a few shirt buttons undone instead.

"Ugh, fuck this place. Fuck *everything*," a voice slurred from nearby, tearing my attention away from my former best friends.

Hannah Langford was seated on a high barstool at the corner of the bar, sequined pantsuit looking pristine while the rest of her looked... very drunk. Her dark red hair was coming loose from what had probably once been a very sleek ponytail, and she'd already smudged her mascara at some point tonight. She squinted at her drink like it was confusing the hell out of her.

"Hey, Langford," I said, floating in her direction out of sheer curiosity. "What's with the booze bath?"

She looked up, squinting again like she was trying to figure out who I was, and then she laughed. "Perfect! Just the person I need right now." She motioned me closer. "My fucking parents think I need a *course correction* on my dating life." She lifted her hands to do some air quotes but abandoned ship when her stool started to wobble. "They want to negotiate a marriage contract for me like it's the fucking stone ages. And fucking *Chad* is on their list."

"Oh, God," I exclaimed, truly horrified.

"I know! See, I knew *you* would understand." She sighed, dejected, and I didn't blame her. Hannah was not my friend, but she had left me alone, never getting involved in shit that had been done to me by her friends, so she was sort of okay in my book.

She didn't deserve to be subjected to Chad, at least.

I leaned in to whisper conspiratorially, "Do you want me to kill him for you?"

She perked up. "You can do that?"

Mari must have overheard us, because she entered the conversation. "No, *por el amor de Dios*, she's joking, Langford. Get it together!"

"Am I, though?" I asked innocently.

Hannah hiccupped, still looking morose, and she pointed a wobbly finger at me. "Hey, Miller. You need to be careful tonight. The girls are plotting. Watch your back."

Not exactly a revelation, but I appreciated her efforts. "Thanks, Langford. You, uh... take it easy, okay?"

She nodded, waving us away. Mari and I scooted further down the bar, settling in to watch the band. We were just in time too, because a familiar face had just hopped on stage for a guest performance.

Mari gasped. "Is that...?"

I grinned. "Yep."

The opening notes of "Dancing's Not a Crime" by Panic at the Disco played, and Max began belting the lyrics into the microphone, his voice smooth and his range rivaling that of Brendon Urie himself.

"I got him into this band!" I shouted at Mari. "I got my first album when I was, like, a year old!"

She gaped at Max, probably rethinking her stance on dick for a hot second, and one look around the room told me she was not alone.

Max was dressed in a simple black T-shirt and tight black jeans, ostensibly on the catering staff tonight, but he still looked and sang like a rock star. Girls *and* guys watched him in awe as he sang and danced to the upbeat tune, and I made a mental note to threaten him with actual castration if he stuck his dick in any hole belonging to one of the jerks I went to school with tonight.

"He's so good!" Mari yelled, swaying to the beat.

I decided to join her, and for a moment I had... a wonderful time. I closed my eyes and focused on Max's fantastic voice as he slayed one of my favorite songs, feeling the music as I moved. For a moment, it was just Max, and me, and the song—no mission, no marks, no Families, no rich dicks making my life harder.

And it was as if that last thought had summoned them.

As Max's song wound down, I opened my eyes to find Noah and Zach at the bar a few feet away, neither of them hiding the fact that they'd just been staring at me. A quick glance back up at their VIP booth told me King Bennett had remained on his throne and was keeping an eye on us.

Mari had wandered away into the crowd to dance, so I was on my own.

"See, man, I told you they teach them how to *dance* on the Southside," Zach said, nudging Noah. "Princess is gonna show our refined top Tier ladies how it's done."

"She is going to do no such thing," I retorted, back to leaning on the bar and keeping my eyes on the band. "Go back to your tower. It must be suffocating for you both down here among the plebs."

"Come on, Joanna," Noah chided, taking the entire bottle of top-shelf vodka that had just been handed to him by the bartender. "Play nice with us. We're all here to have fun."

Says you, Noah.

I gave them both an unimpressed stare, and I watched as their twin smiles slowly vanished, replaced by pursed lips and narrowed eyes aimed at something behind me.

"Hey, Jojo," Max whispered in my ear as he threw his arms around me. "How'd you like my song? I think I'm better than the original at this point."

I turned to grin at him. "Perfection, as always, Maxy."

"Who's your friend, Princess?" Zach interjected, suddenly very serious.

Max chuckled as I sighed in frustration, glancing over at the two of them again with a look that said they were on my last nerve.

"These guys bothering you, Joanna?" Max asked loudly, then he placed a sweet kiss to my temple while he stared them both down.

Noah had forced a smile back onto his face. “No one is bothering her. I’m Noah *Hargraves*. Nice to meet you.”

Max, bless him, ignored that flex and continued to act like he had no clue who they were. “Cool, bro. Do you guys go to school with my cousin?”

That got their hackles down—slightly—though Zach still eyed Max’s muscular arm where it was slung across my shoulders like he wanted to cut it off.

“You don’t look like cousins.”

Great, Bennett had descended from on high. He appeared next to Zach, bringing his broody energy with him, and his suspicious stare was aimed at Max.

Max just laughed, desensitized long ago to the power of the Heirs, having lived with one for seven years. “She’s my mom’s niece. I take after my dad.”

“Not that it is any of their business,” I reminded him, glaring at the guys.

“True, true,” Max replied, dismissing three of the most powerful people in the City in an instant as he turned his back on them. He whispered in my ear, “Now’s the time—Spencer’s left the VIP booth. I saw Ferrero arrive with his bag, so I’m going to sweep the booth while you distract them. Get out on the dance floor, babe.”

Then he smirked at something over my shoulder before shoving me into someone’s waiting arms. “On your break, Jennings?”

Internal groan. *Max, what the fuck?*

I looked up to find Matt Jennings, an attractive, nice guy I knew from Dom’s gym and had maybe hooked up with once, staring down at me like I was the sunshine in a storm. “Hi, Joanna. Do you maybe... want to dance?”

“Um, sure, Matt,” I replied. I’d known Max had an inside hookup with tonight’s catering staff, but he failed to inform me that hookup was *Jennings*. “I can manage a few songs.”

He beamed at me. “Great! I only have ten minutes before I have to be back in the kitchen, anyway.”

He led me out into the middle of the club, holding fast to my hand as we weaved through the throngs of writhing, sweaty bodies. We reached an open space right out in the middle of everyone, and Matt

tugged me into his body as we began to dance to the sultry beat of the band's cover of a Billie Eilish song.

My back was to his front, giving me a full, unobstructed view of the room. Max had disappeared into thin air the second he'd offloaded me onto Jennings, and knowing him, he'd already been in and out of the VIP booth with no one being the wiser.

The Heirs were still at the bar, a crowd of girls wearing the world's tiniest dresses now surrounding them and vying for their attention, but it didn't escape me that their stares continued to wander in our direction. We certainly made quite the couple, Matt in his black catering uniform and me in my little black romper adrift in a sea of sparkly wealth, two Southside kids possessing the rhythm and a degree of shamelessness the kids from the upper crust rarely did.

I turned to face him, done with my former best friends for the night, and I threw my arms around his neck. "Thanks, Matt. This is nice."

"We miss you around the gym, you know," he replied, staring into my eyes with a hint of longing. "*I miss you.*"

"Ah, well, you know I'll be back around for the holidays," I said, attempting to keep it light and friendly. Jennings was very nice and definitely cute, but I was a one-and-done type of girl.

"I was hoping—"

"You were hoping to get back to doing your *job*," a familiar voice boomed from behind him, and I tensed. "Beat it, I'm cutting in."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“Excuse me?” Jennings exclaimed. “Just who do you think you

Zach stepped into the light next to us, and Matt’s eyes went comically wide.

“Oh, shit, are you...?”

“Zach Ferrero. Now fuck off.”

Even Matt’s infatuation with me was no match for the fear of the Four Families that had been ingrained in every citizen, and he scurried off without a backward glance.

I whirled on Zach. “That was unnecessary, you dick.”

Zach just shot me his sexy smirk before yanking me into his hard body by my hips. He was still wearing his dark gray suit jacket, and his shirt was unbuttoned low enough that the top of his toned, tattooed chest was on display. His black hair was artfully messy, and his dark eyes glinted with mischief.

“Quit hanging out with the help, Princess. You’re supposed to be rising above all of that now as a Holywell student.”

I let him pull me in close as we started to grind against each other, his hips moving expertly to the beat. I didn’t even fight him when he ran his big hands up my arms and then placed them around his neck. After all, the longer he was distracted, the better.

That’s all this was.

You lying liar, Jolie.

“You’re a prick,” I told him, for good measure, except that my voice came out all low and breathy.

“I sure am,” he purred, his lips brushing against my ear. “And yet you’re still here, letting me put my hands on you.” Those hands dipped lower on my body, just brushing the top of my ass. He stopped short of copping a feel, so I didn’t have to break his hand.

“For now,” I replied, ignoring the fluttering in my belly that had been decidedly absent when I danced with Matt.

We continued to move, pressed tight together, for several long, hot minutes. The low purple lighting didn’t allow me to see much further than a few feet in either direction, so for now, my world was entirely Zach. He smelled clean, with a hint of something citrusy, and the rush of being so close to him, of being *held* by him—my old friend, the Ferrero Heir—was heady.

Finally, I spied Max moving casually through the crowd like he was on his way to the kitchen, and he gave me a surreptitious thumbs up before he disappeared again. I let out a relieved sigh, accidentally tightening my arms around Zach’s neck and pulling him closer, eliciting a pleased little growl from him.

I decided I could *suffer* through this for a little bit longer now that I knew Max had successfully grabbed what we needed from Zach’s bag.

Zach kept exactly two things on his key ring, which I’d observed that he usually carted around in his bag rather than in his pants pocket. The first was the key fob to his Ferrari. The second was an old brass key that unlocked the door to the hidden basement at the Euphoria Club. Only Andrea, her bodyguard, and a few select top-ranked Ferrero Enforcers had a copy.

Max now had a mold of that key, which meant I would have an exact replica by tomorrow.

“I don’t think Mom and Dad approve of your behavior,” I said into Zach’s ear as the band began its rendition of “Style” by Taylor Swift. I motioned to the VIP box high above us where Bennett and Noah had returned, both watching us intently, their frowns visible from all the way down here.

He cast a quick look up at his best friends before giving them a smirk and the finger. “I am breaking the rules a little bit,” he

whispered, rubbing his rough cheek against mine. “But I can’t help it. You look fucking hot tonight. You always wear the simplest shit and manage to look sexier than anyone else.”

“Which rule are you breaking?” I asked, turning in his arms, backing my ass right up against his body, and slinging an arm around his neck. “Don’t fraternize with the Southside trash?”

He chuckled, now running his lips up and down the column of my throat that was totally exposed to him because I’d opted for my usual ponytail tonight. I felt the cool touch of his lip ring and his hot breath on my skin as his hands returned to their firm grip on my hips. He murmured, “Something like that.”

I refused to think about how damp my panties were at this point. Zach was hot, he could dance like sin, and he’d always feel just a little bit like home to me.

The home I’d had before the Families stole it from me.

I caught Mari’s wide-eyed stare from out in the crowd where she was dancing in a group of some of the more pleasant scholarship students. I shot her a tight smile, which she returned with a “what the fuck do you think you’re doing” look.

“It really is too bad, all these rules,” Zach went on, still purring in my ear as he held me. “Otherwise, I’d love to see how these hips move while you’re writhing on my cock.”

I used all of my strength to bite back a moan. My goofy friend Zach had grown up to be *dirty* hot, and it was about to melt my brain.

“But it’s not to be,” he continued with a dramatic sigh. “The Heirs do have certain... standards.”

And record scratch. *Good—time to wake the fuck up, Jolie.*

I knew he could feel my smile up against his cheek. “Yes, well, I understand. I also have standards.” With one smooth, practiced motion, I freed myself from his embrace and threw my elbow into his ribs.

“Ow, *fuck*,” he growled.

“Never touch me again, you egotistical shithead.”

“Oh, come on, Princess—”

I marched away from him. “Nope.”

My work here was done, anyway.

I was going to hit the bathroom, and then I was going to find Mari and convince her it was time to leave this leech-infested hellhole.

When I located the ladies' room, I found it was, unsurprisingly, a whole lot fancier than was really necessary for a bathroom. It had rich hunter-green carpeting, golden vessel sinks shaped like seashells that sat atop white marble counters, and a rose-gold chaise lounge sat in the corner in case any of us were feeling faint. Someone flushed the toilet in one of the closed stalls behind where I stood at the ornate mirror, and even that sounded dainty.

Having already done my business, I reapplied my nude lip stain and righted my ponytail, then I made my way back out into the dim corridor, on the hunt for Mari.

I hadn't taken three steps into the hallway when something heavy cracked against my skull, and everything went black.



The first thing I noticed when I came to was the same green carpet that was in the bathroom. I was on my back, my head absolutely pounding, and I could feel the drip of warm liquid down the side of my face and pooling in the wet carpet under my head.

Slowly, using every ounce of my remaining strength, I pulled myself up to sitting. It was then that I noticed that my right hand had been handcuffed to the top pipe of what I'd soon discover was an old radiator, forcing my limp arm to hang above my head.

"Shhh, she's awake," I heard Lisa hiss as I fought to open my eyes.

Goddamn it. Everything I'd done, all the preparations and the training, and I let Lisa fucking Aviano get the drop on me.

"Your mom is going to kill you." That was Harper. "Look at all the blood staining her carpet."

I finally forced my eyes open and found myself in an office that was professionally decorated and staged as if it were in a magazine. There was a large wooden desk, two rose-gold chairs in front of it that matched the bathroom chaise, and colorful artwork adorning the

walls. Fresh flowers were arranged in a crystal vase on an understated side table.

I was slouched against the side wall next to the radiator, now looking up into the smug faces of Lisa, Harper, and Annie.

Lisa stepped closer, crouching down to my level to crow at me. "I'm sure you were very pleased with your little display out there. I bet you think you have some kind of pull on Zach, and he's going to be your ticket out of your slum life and straight to the top."

"Ugh," I groaned. "Get a grip, Aviano. If Zach wanted to fuck you, he would fuck you. Taking your insecure bullshit out on me is not going to change that fact."

She screeched and aimed a slap at my face, which I caught before impact with my free hand, squeezing her bony wrist as hard as I could as she cried out. At least my reflexes were coming back online.

"Look," I said, wincing at the pain that rattled through my head with every word I spoke. "I feel like shit right now, and I'm down an arm, but I will still beat your ass. Step away from me."

She yanked her hand away and scurried backward on her pointy heels. She took up her place again next to Harper and Annie, who were now watching me warily. Lisa smoothed her tight white dress, regaining her composure, and then she pulled a silver key from her tiny purse.

"This is the key to this office," she said, holding it high. "We're leaving and locking the door. Then we'll be heading back out to the party to sell this key to the highest bidder." She pretended to look it over, like she was studying its little nooks and crannies. "I wonder how much a shot at slum pussy will net me?"

Great. I was going to have to kill someone tonight.

My head pounded harder.

Harper trotted happily over to the desk a few feet away from me. She cracked open the sleek silver laptop that had been sitting on top of it, and she positioned it so that the computer's camera would be facing my spot on the floor.

"Just a little livestream that we'll make sure the Heirs have a link to," she tittered happily. "Not that we don't all know you're slutty trash, but sometimes it's good to have some solid evidence. The

Academy doesn't look too kindly on public lewdness, either. With any luck, you'll be expelled."

I said nothing. I slipped my free hand into the pocket of my romper, predictably finding that my phone was missing.

"Looking for this?" Annie sang at me, holding up my phone. Then, in a feat of strength that actually surprised me, she hurled it against the opposite wall, and it shattered on impact. "Oh, no—that's unfortunate."

It *was* unfortunate. Dom was going to have to procure me a new one with all the special software we used, and that was going to make him grouchy.

"Are you three done?" I griped, trying to wipe some of the blood off of my face. "I get the picture. Better get going on your evil mission."

"We're not kidding, you dumb bitch," Harper barked. "We're going to make sure this key goes to someone with very *flexible* morals."

They wanted me to cry and beg and plead with them. They wanted to see me break, and they wanted it on camera.

I would never give them that.

"Well, that won't be hard with this group," I said with a lazy shrug.

"Ugh, let's go," Lisa whined. "It's like arguing with a toddler."

I watched as they filed out, whispering to each other before slamming the door behind them. The telltale sound of the lock engaging followed, which meant I had some quick decisions to make.

While I'd reluctantly left my backpack behind in my dorm, I still had a small knife in my shoe and a few pins in my hair.

The camera was a fucking problem, though.

I let out a loud sigh to seem like I was frustrated, and I ran my hand over the bloody, swollen wound on the side of my head, pulling the pins from my hair in the same movement. I yanked on the handcuff like I was testing it, then I groaned in exasperation, turning toward my restrained hand and putting my back between it and the camera.

I mimed like I was pulling at it some more. "Come on! Break, you stupid thing!"

All the while, I inserted the pin in my free hand into the lock, popping it open with a few quick motions. I kept the cuffs where they were, connected to the radiator, as I slowly got to my feet to wait.

My head pounded, and I was going to need to lay down soon.

After a few minutes, the sounds of the key being inserted into the office door and the lock turning gave me the shot of adrenaline I needed to focus and ignore the pain.

The door opened, and a guy I vaguely recognized as a fellow Academy student entered before closing the door and locking it behind him. He was shorter, maybe my height, and he was thick and brawny like Chad. He had close-cropped brown hair and a short, neat beard. His beady eyes took me in eagerly.

Since I didn't immediately know him, he must've been a Tier Two unknown trying to impress his superiors.

"Holy shit," he said, barking out a laugh. "They really weren't kidding. It's the Southside slut, finally getting put where she belongs. I'm so glad I outbid Chad for that key."

I stared at him with a blank look before turning to look right into the camera lens on the laptop. I lifted my sneakered foot, my legs thankfully long enough to reach the desk, and I slammed my shoe into the laptop screen, breaking the camera and ending the livestream.

"Damn, they'll be pissed you did that," the idiot said as he crept closer, leering at me.

"Yeah?" I said, finally acknowledging him. "You disappointed your crimes won't be recorded for the world to see?"

He chuckled darkly. "Baby, there's no such thing as a crime when you're one of *us*."

Well, that was mostly true.

"Oh?" I said, squaring up to him as much as possible while still pretending to be chained to the radiator. "That's good news, then, because when they're dragging your body out of here, I'd rather not be hassled by the cops."

"Funny," he drawled, still advancing on me. "Just behave, and this might even be good for you."

I snapped my hand out of the cuff, and his eyes widened.

"Oh, I think this is actually going to be *very* good for me."

And then I attacked.

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CHAPTER TWELVE



By the time Max had picked the lock on the office door and burst inside with Mari rushing in behind him in a panic, they'd missed most of the fun.

They found me on the floor, straddling the would-be-rapist asshole and pinning his arms down with my knees while I pounded on his barely conscious face.

Had I cheated a bit by pulling my knife from my shoe as I baseball slid underneath him and slashed at his Achilles tendon right off the bat? Maybe, but I hadn't really been in the mood to fuck around.

He'd screamed like he was dying, I'd tackled him to the ground, and here we were.

I rammed my fist into his nose, feeling the satisfying crunch of it breaking as he groaned and gurgled, then I looked up. "Hey," I said to Max, panting. "I didn't know you were still here."

"*Hey*," he repeated, crossing his arms and giving me an incredulous look. "That's what you have to say to me right now? *Hey*?"

"What?"

"Chica, why don't you just... take a little break," Mari said gently, walking over to me and offering her hand. "Max can finish this up."

I stared at her, frowning at her worried face. "I'm fine, girl. He didn't touch me." I grabbed her hand to pull myself up to standing but abandoned that plan when the room spun.

“Uh-huh,” she cooed at me like I was a petulant child. “Let’s just sit down over here. I think you have a concussion.”

“Mmm, probably,” I muttered. I rolled off the bleeding creep and set about finding a comfy spot on the floor with my back resting against the desk.

“Is he dead?” Mari whispered to Max who was poking at the guy with his boot.

“Nah, but he’s gonna wish he was.”

Max bent over and threw two more hard punches right into the guy’s head before he stood up, raised his heavy combat boot, and stomped down hard right on the guy’s dick. The asshole moaned before his eyes rolled back in his head, and he finally passed out.

“Sorry we weren’t here earlier,” Mari said as she eyed the carnage with a clinical detachment that impressed me. “I only caught the whispering that Donavan here had purchased the opportunity to ‘have some fun with the Southside girl’ after he’d already disappeared.”

“You should’ve seen the look on the kitchen staff’s faces when she barged in there, swearing up a storm, *demanding* they hand me over,” Max added.

I smiled ruefully at them. “Sorry to worry you both. I’m pretty sure Lisa beamed me in the head with the heavy crystal potpourri bowl from the bathroom. How embarrassing.”

“Max assured me you’ve had some...” Mari paused, shooting me a pointed look. “*Self-defense* training.”

I shrugged. “It can be rough in our neighborhood.”

Max, who had been fucking with the broken laptop, turned to look down at me. “Let’s get you home to Dad to get cleaned up—”

“What the fuck happened in here?”

Damn it. That voice had interrupted my activities already once this evening. Quickly, I shoved my torn-up, bloody knuckles into the pocket of my romper.

Zach stormed into the office with Noah and Bennett right on his heels. They all pulled up short as they crossed the threshold, staring at the pile of bloody flesh that was Donavan with looks of surprise, or in Bennett’s case, disgust.

“Oh, you didn’t hear?” I asked, tonelessly. “Your girlfriend sold my *slum pussy* to this guy.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” Zach replied, distracted as he took in the situation on the floor.

“Somebody better tell her that,” Mari muttered.

“Are you hurt?” Noah asked me, taking a few strides in my direction before Max stepped right into his path, blocking him from getting any closer to me.

“Do I look hurt, Noah?” I asked wryly.

“Yes,” he bit out, now glaring at Max. “Call off your guard dog so I can check you for a concussion.”

I definitely had a concussion. “No, thank you.”

“Joanna—”

“She said no, dude,” Max said with a dangerous smile. “Back off.”

I watched with mild interest as the two of them began a testosterone-fueled stare off while Zach circled Donovan’s body and Bennett, still bored as ever, was typing rapidly on his phone.

“You do this?” Zach asked Max, a *hint* of respect in his tone. “Pretty fucking brutal.”

Max gave Noah one last shitty smile before glancing at Zach with a shrug. “That’s how we treat sexual predators on the Southside. Were you guys coming in here to give him some high-fives and bro-hugs for a job well done?”

Bennett glanced up from his phone, irritation breaking through his stony façade. “It is not our job to police what the lower tiers do unless it is a direct issue for the Four Families. But now that you all have made a giant mess of things, we’ll have to deal with it. This is an Academy event, which means it is a Family event.”

“Oh, gosh, we *do* apologize for the mess, Your Highness,” I grumbled. “Take it up with Ferrero—his little display on the dance floor hurt his girlfriend’s feelings and caused all of this.”

Zach scoffed, he and Noah having returned to Bennett’s side where all three of them were now staring down their noses at us. “Not even Lisa is dumb enough to think my dancing with you meant anything.”

For a moment, I was glad for the pain in my head distracting me from feeling literally anything else because that was dangerously

close to a direct hit.

"Maybe it's time for you to reconsider your position on remaining at Holywell," Bennett added. "Your presence is causing more trouble than it's worth, and we are not going to continue to clean up after you."

Mari, seated next to me on the floor, squeezed my hand but remained silent. I understood it.

Max, however, did not have the same sense of self-preservation.

"The next one of you that opens your mouth to insult my cousin is going to get the same treatment as the sack of shit on the floor."

"Max!" Mari hissed. "*¡Cállate la boca!*"

I groaned and began the arduous process of standing up. I was not in the mood for another fight, but I'd be damned if I let any of them touch a hair on Max's head.

Zach had stepped forward, a feral smile on his face, but Bennett stuck an arm out, halting his advance. "Out. All of you." He looked at Mari, presumably because she was the only one of us that would take orders from him. "See that she gets medical care. Cover it if necessary, and we'll make sure you're reimbursed."

Mari nodded, hopping to her feet and moving to steady me.

"I don't need your charity," I hissed at Bennett because I was now in a terrible mood.

Max rushed to hold my other side, and the three of us made our way toward the door. At the threshold, I cast one last glance behind us into the room. Bennett and Zach were now conferring, heads together and whispering as they looked over the mess, but Noah had turned to watch us leave.

His blue eyes met mine, and it was disappointment that lurked there behind his dark frames. I shook my head and turned away before he could see how disappointed I was in them too.



For the next week, I recovered at home. I was up to speed with all of my classwork, and my professors (including my Tech Skills TA, Noah Hargraves) and my coach, Janet, were sympathetic to my plight of

needing to nurse a concussion I received when falling down the stairs at my family's apartment.

Dom enlisted the same medic who'd seen to my injuries the night I floated into his life on a piece of driftwood—a friend and fellow Shadow—to patch me up a second time. I wasn't exactly happy to have had my skull cracked in yet again, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't enjoying the time off, doing nothing but lying around and being doted on by Laura.

Mari called Max's phone midway through the week to inform me that rumors had been flying around the Academy regarding both mine and Donovan's absence. Everyone had definitely heard what he'd supposedly paid money to do that night at The Revelry, but as he was currently laid up in the hospital after sustaining injuries in a "car accident," the going theory was that "Southside's hot cousin" had ridden in to save the day. Mari encouraged that story, though she was not exactly enjoying her moment in the sun as the person with inside knowledge on the whole affair.

"*Joder*, people will not stop *talking* to me," she griped through the speaker of Max's phone. "I need you back here to scare them away with your resting bitch face."

"I'll be back in time for class on Monday," I replied, currently curled up on the couch under an old crocheted blanket and sipping the smoothie Laura had just handed to me. "I only just stopped feeling like someone was stabbing a knife through my skull."

"Fine," she huffed, and I could hear her heels click-clacking along the corridor of Holywell Hall as she spoke. "At least get your new phone soon. Not that I don't love talking to Max to get to you."

"Back at you, baby," Max purred into the phone.

"Max," she chided playfully. "Behave, mi amor."

"Seriously," I said, kicking at him with my bare foot where he sat on the coffee table with his Cheshire cat grin. "Keep it in your pants for five seconds."

We said goodbye to Mari, and then Max relocated to the couch, gently pulling my head into his lap so that he could rub at my aching temples like the saintly brother he was.

"So," he said casually after a few minutes of silence. "Are we going to talk about how those three dickheads you used to be best

friends with are all obsessed with you?”

“What?” I tried to sit up, but he held me still. “You’re out of your mind. You heard the things they said to me.”

“I did, and I didn’t say they’re not total and complete assholes,” he replied. “But Ferrero didn’t dance with anyone else that night. Hargraves wanted to beat my face in for touching you. Spencer is constantly watching you. They *all* look at you like that. It’s intense.”

Well, yeah. Intense dislike. Intense annoyance. Intense *condescension*. “You’re on crack.”

He chuckled. “I’m not saying they don’t want you gone from that school. You’re a wild card. You’re upsetting the order—fucking with their equilibrium. But you’re also the girl they were best friends with for eleven years. It’s probably mind-fucking them just as much as it is you, only they don’t have a clue as to why.”

I blew out a breath. “I’m not the same at all, though, Max. I used to be happy. Sweet. *Naïve*. There’s no way they suspect anything.”

“I know. But there’s probably something deep inside them that just has some sort of instinctual connection to you.” He tapped my forehead lightly with his finger. “And while they put up a hell of a front, they did rush down to that office, probably after they opened the link to the livestream. If they really didn’t give a shit, they wouldn’t have bothered.”

It was true, and it irked me. It would make my life so much easier if I could just hate them outright—if there was not a shred of anything decent left in any of them. If there was nothing at all I recognized as the boys I knew. They were assholes, and I didn’t trust them, but after all these weeks, I still couldn’t find it in me to truly *hate* them.

“It doesn’t mean I’ll go easy on them,” I said quietly. “I’m going to take it all away.”

“You are,” he replied decisively. “And I can’t wait to see those fuckers bow down to their queen.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I'd had thoughts about skipping breakfast Monday morning and arriving on campus only just in time to get to my history class, but I decided that I wasn't going to be hiding from everyone after what happened at The Revelry.

Fresh off the train and armed with my earbuds, "A Favor House Atlantic" by Coheed & Cambria playing me onto campus, I entered the dining hall and set about grabbing some coffee while ignoring the stares.

It was cold today, so I'd donned a thick, soft white sweater before I left home, paired with dark jeans and chunky black boots. November had snuck up on me, the chill in the air reminding me that I'd been at the Academy almost two entire months and was currently only in possession of one small piece of the case I was trying to build against the Families—and zero of the puzzle I was trying to solve of my parents' murders. The copy of Zach's key was burning a hole in my backpack, but I still had a few more days to wait before I would be nosing around in Andrea Ferrero's most private business.

Those thoughts forced my gaze to the front of the hall where Zach sat with Bennett and Noah, as always, the three of them looking sharp in their suits. While Noah's attention was occupied by Annie and another one of her hangers-on as they flirted with him from the foot of the table, Zach and Bennett both now had their cold eyes on me.

I held their stares for two seconds before giving them my back. They were probably disappointed I'd returned to school at all, but they were also smart enough not to be surprised by it.

Mari was waiting for me in our usual spot at a quiet table near the back of the hall. "The chatter about everything has started to die down," she said as she sipped her coffee, her keen brown eyes scanning the room. "And you look extremely uninjured, so, hopefully they'll all decide the rumors were overblown."

I nodded. I'd had to ice the shit out of my hand to clear the bruising, and I'd painted my knuckles with concealer this morning to hide what remained of the cuts and gashes there. My dark hair hid the stitches in my head. "I'm not worried about it," I told her. "I was a target before this, and I'll be one after. Nothing's changed."

She gave me a nervous look. "Are you sure you want to hide the fact that you're the one that put Donovan in the hospital? Maybe Chad and Harper and the rest of them would be less inclined to mess with you if they knew."

I snorted. They'd be less inclined to mess with me if they knew a few other things about me too.

"I really had planned to be unremarkable in this place, if you can believe that," I said instead. "I'll make it back under the radar when something else becomes more entertaining than tormenting the Southside scholarship girl."

"Uh-huh," she replied, rightly skeptical.

We finished breakfast and headed to History, slowly making our way toward the third floor of Holywell Hall when Mari's phone buzzed.

Her face lit up, then she looked at me apologetically.

"Take it," I encouraged her. "I'll see you in class."

She had already whipped her phone out and was holding it up to her face as she fluffed her already-perfect hair. "Thanks, chica. I won't be long."

Leaving her behind to chat with her lady, I made my way into the small lecture hall and meandered to our usual seats near the back of the room. I'd just finished a text to Dom and was reading through my essay on patriarchies in world history when my brief and fragile peace was interrupted.

“Ugh, I can’t believe you came back here,” a tiny blonde girl said with a sneer. She’d stopped in front of my desk to look down her nose at me, flanked by two of her friends. She was vaguely familiar, but with her perfect blonde curls, short maroon skirt worn over a frilly cream blouse, and platform heels paired with thigh-high stockings, she looked like every other bitch in Holywell, and it was hard to keep them all straight. She went on, scoffing, “I guess you still haven’t learned your lesson.”

I blew out an irritated breath. I was not in the mood for this. “Guess not,” I said with a shrug, going back to my essay.

“It figures. Southside skanks aren’t known for their brain—”

“Agatha,” a cold voice barked.

Mari marched right into the girl’s personal space, snapping her perfect lavender manicure in her face. “I suggest you move along. You wouldn’t want your mother’s design company to lose the contract she has with every single one of my family’s hotels because you were running your mouth, would you?”

Agatha paled, and it really eluded me as to why I was the one always being called dumb when everyone knew Mari was my one friend on campus, and this exact thing had been entirely foreseeable.

“That’s what I thought. Scurry away now,” Mari said sweetly before dropping into the seat next to me.

I watched the group of them slink away. “It never gets old,” I murmured to Mari, grinning.

My grin vanished as Lisa flounced in, Hannah Langford trudging alongside her. Lisa stopped to chat with a couple of girls in the front row, and I decided to pass the next sixty seconds imagining creative ways to maim her.

As class was about to begin, Zach finally arrived. Dane and a few other Tier One hangers-on were with him. Lisa perked up, a smug smile on her face as she watched him walk by.

“Hi, Zach,” she purred.

He didn’t look up from his phone as he continued to his usual haunt on the other side of the room.

“Zach... *Zach!*”

Not even a nod of acknowledgement.

Lisa's cheeks reddened as she turned away, stalking to her seat a few rows back. Her eyes landed on me before she turned to sit, and she gave me one hell of a cold look.

I returned her stare, my face blank, until she turned and sat down in a huff.

Mari leaned over to whisper, "I've been hearing that while Lisa's been enjoying bragging about knocking you out and getting you into a compromising position as punishment for your continued refusal to *kneel*, she's actually really pissed off that her trick didn't get her more attention from Zach or the other Heirs."

"Maybe she'll back off, then," I mused, chuckling. "Since she's figured out that fucking with me is not a direct ticket into Zach's pants."

"Unlikely," Mari muttered.

As it turned out, Lisa wasn't the only one Zach was ignoring. He didn't look my way once during class or as we filed out into the hallway after we'd been dismissed. Not that this was highly unusual, but he usually didn't miss a chance to goad me when he could.

Mari and I hadn't made it far from the classroom before Lisa appeared in front of us, smirking in my direction.

"How's your head, slum girl?" she asked, her voice raised enough to be heard over the dim chatter of students moving through the hallway.

"Healed," I replied simply. "Thanks for your concern."

"You got lucky, bitch," she hissed, seething. "Next time you won't have your trash family members around to rescue you. Next time, we'll make sure to fucking *end* you."

"Jesus, you are such a *psycho*," Mari barked at her. "It's pathetic how desperate you are for Ferrero's attention. Wake up—he doesn't give a shit."

"No one asked your opinion," Lisa snapped at her. "Remind me: has your family disowned you yet for being a nasty dyke?"

Well, Lisa woke up today and chose violence, didn't she?

The next thing I knew, my fist had flown straight into her tiny upturned nose.

"Motherfucker," I hissed, yanking my hand back and shaking it out. Still a *little* sore from beating Donovan's face in, apparently.

Lisa shrieked like a banshee, her hands flying to her face, and blood began to ooze from between her fingers.

"Time to go," Mari whispered urgently, dragging me down the hall and out of the fray that now surrounded Lisa. A few of her underlings rushed to her side to feign concern.

The last thing I saw before Mari pulled me around the corner and into the stairwell was Zach's dark gaze as he watched the events unfold from across the hallway.



Mari bought me lunch at a trendy coffee shop across the street from the Academy's front gates, where she also made me drink an herbal tea to "calm down." I told her I was plenty calm, but I supposed it made sense that she was worried I might further escalate to using the knife I had in my backpack next time someone pissed me off.

She dropped me off at Tech Skills after loudly barking that exact warning, and I gave her my most innocent look before she huffed at me and stalked off, hips swaying and heels clicking as she disappeared.

Annie gave me a death glare when I walked past her row to go to my station. Hannah and Nick Ruiz both eyed me warily.

"Look, Mari was joking about me having a knife, if you heard that," I said casually as I sat and set about logging into my computer.

Hannah raised a skeptical eyebrow at me, and I winked at her.

Noah arrived, and I did not miss the stern look he aimed in my direction before he set his bag down, put on his usual warm, encouraging smile, and directed us to log into today's module on our computers.

I worked through the lesson, doing my best to ignore Noah as he flitted around the room, answering questions. When the long ninety minutes was over, I packed my backpack in a rush, deciding I was going to get out on the water for a bit before I started on my homework.

"Miss Miller, I need to speak with you before you leave."

I glanced up to find Noah leaning against the front of his desk, his long arms crossed over his chest as he looked at me from behind those glasses like he was daring me to argue with him.

Annie, angry that Noah's attention was on anyone who wasn't her, turned to give me one last hateful look before she marched from the room.

Annoyed, I trudged to the front of the room and took up a post opposite Noah, perching my butt on the front-row table and crossing my arms over my chest to mirror his "I mean business" posture.

Picking up on my vibe, he relaxed, bringing his hands down to grip the edge of the desk on either side of where his annoyingly pert ass rested. He'd ditched the suit jacket today, and instead wore a navy vest that matched his slacks over his white dress shirt and pink tie. His blond hair was a little messy, as though he'd run his hand through it a few times over the last hour, but it did nothing to take away from the hot-professor vibe he was currently rocking.

"How are you doing?" he asked. "Fully recovered from everything that happened at the fall party?"

"Good as new," I replied, eyeing him with suspicion. "Is that really why you asked me to stay after class?"

His smile only grew at my hostility, like he found me amusing. "You really don't believe I could actually care about your well-being?"

"Why would I?" I replied. "Look, I do appreciate the fact that the three of you stuck that piece of shit in a hospital and concocted a cover story, but let's not act like that was for my benefit instead of the Academy and the Families."

He was unruffled. "Will you at least accept this as a peace offering?" He pulled a brand-new silver Knight smartphone from his pocket. "We did see enough of the video stream to know that your phone was destroyed."

I quirked an eyebrow in surprise. Dom had already set me up with a new phone, so I didn't exactly need this suspiciously kind gesture.

"Are there any strings attached to this little gift?" I asked dubiously. "Perhaps some untraceable spyware installed on it?"

"Why?" Noah asked, still grinning. "Are you planning to use your phone in ways that we'd need to be concerned about?"

I coughed. He was joking, but *still*.

I held out my hand, and he placed the phone in my waiting palm. While I had certainly been tempted to tell him to take his *peace offering* and shove it up Bennett's tight ass, I recognized that was my secret privilege talking. I'd give this phone to Max, who actually would sweep it for spyware, and then we'd give it to one of Dom's gym kids who couldn't afford a phone this nice.

Noah beamed at me like he was proud of me for being a good girl and accepting his gift without too much backtalk. "Great. And I know you won't believe me when I say this, but we certainly don't condone what happened at The Revelry. We do have a policy of non-interference in these things, but that was over the line. What the girls did was uncalled for, and what Donovan tried to do was disgusting."

I had to roll my eyes. "Could've fooled me. I can tell you have a bit of a caring heart, Noah, but the other two assholes couldn't have given a single shit about what happened in that room other than the fact that you guys had to clean it up. And I'm sure you have people for that, anyway."

Noah's smile vanished and his blue eyes went hard behind his glasses, and I knew I'd triggered his pissy mode by insulting his best buddies. "Don't presume you know anything about me or the other Heirs. We do what we have to do. And you can't say that you weren't warned—personally and repeatedly, by both me *and* Bennett—that something like this was going to happen if you remained at the Academy and continued to act as you have."

I stood up, realizing that this was what this little friendly meeting was really about, so I was finished listening.

"I'm not leaving school, Noah," I said, weary. I was very tired of repeating myself to them. "So, you can just save the rest of your lecture." I turned to leave.

"Joanna," he rumbled in warning, stopping me in my tracks. I couldn't believe that demanding, *dominant* sound that had just come from my sweet Noah.

Ugh, he's not my anything. Jesus, Jolie.

I huffed out a resigned sigh as I looked back at him over my shoulder.

“Believe it or not,” he said, his deep blue eyes boring into me, “I do not enjoy seeing you hurt. Bennett tells me you’re one of the better rowers on the women’s team. You can do that literally anywhere in the country. Please, just...” He let out a long-suffering sigh. “Just go have a *normal* college experience somewhere that isn’t here. This place isn’t for you.”

As if on cue, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, ignoring the fact that Noah would now know I took the phone he offered when I already had a new one, and I read the urgent message that had just popped into my school email.

I let out a wry chuckle, turning to flash the screen at Noah. “Looks like you may get your wish after all. The dean wants to see me in her office. Immediately.”

I wasn’t getting any sympathy from him. “That tends to happen when you break another student’s nose in the middle of Holywell Hall.”

“No,” I snapped. “That’s what happens when you break Lisa Aviano’s nose in the middle of Holywell Hall. When you break a crystal bowl on Joanna Miller’s head at an Academy event, you get the *Heirs* of the Four Families cleaning up after you.”

He just shrugged, giving me his adorable disarming smile before he stood up from his perch on his desk, and in two quick strides of his long legs he was in front of me. We were almost nose-to-nose when he reached a hand behind me to dig into the back pocket of my jeans, removing the new phone he’d given me from where I’d stashed it.

“Good luck with your meeting,” he whispered.

We just stared at each other for a few long, heated seconds before I finally recovered and stalked out of the classroom, off to introduce myself to the dean of Holywell Academy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Dean Amara Jansen regarded me from behind her stately mahogany desk like I was a stain she'd just noticed on her ten-thousand-dollar Persian rug. She was a thin woman, her dark-blond hair a similar shade as her daughter's, only she kept hers in a severe bob that barely cleared her chin. She wore a pristine cream pantsuit, and her blood-red lipstick matched her nails.

"You know, Miss Miller," she began, dragging her scrutinizing gaze from my messy ponytail down to my boots and back up again. "I am proud of this Academy's commitment to providing scholarships to a few worthy students who have the drive to make something of themselves in this City. While there are, of course, challenges for a certain... *type* of student attending Holywell, those here on scholarship are grateful to be here and understand what a life-changing opportunity this is."

She paused to dramatically shuffle some papers around on her desk, and because I still had a tiny, minuscule kernel of self-preservation left in me, I refrained from rolling my eyes.

"However." Her sharp gray eyes snapped back to my face. "It appears that you have decided to thumb your nose at the gift you've been given. I've certainly heard rumblings of your behavior since the first day of the semester, but punching another student in the face is completely out of line and against our code of conduct." She mustered what I suspected she thought was a look of pity. "I have no

choice now but to expel you from Holywell. You will pack up your dorm room and be gone from campus by tonight.”

I released the breath I’d been holding. I rolled my head around my shoulders and cracked my neck a few times, then I looked the dean right in her haughty, Botoxed face as I pulled my phone from the pocket of my backpack where it sat next to my chair.

“It’s unfortunate that it’s come to this, Dean Jansen,” I said conversationally, scrolling through my encrypted chat with Max.

“It is, indeed,” she huffed, irritated by my nonchalance. “And it appears your Holywell education meant even less to you than I’d thought.”

“Oh, no,” I replied, tapping on the link Max had sent me a few days ago. “My Holywell education means *everything* to me. I meant that it’s unfortunate that our beloved Academy’s code of conduct would see your daughter expelled too.”

I held up my phone, and the video that had been recorded by the laptop in the office at The Revelry—before I’d smashed its camera—began to play.

Harper’s nasally voice sounded from my phone’s speaker.

“... just a little livestream that we’ll make sure the Heirs have a link to, not that we don’t all know you’re slutty trash....” The video clearly showed me bleeding from the head while handcuffed to the radiator as Harper trotted in and out of the camera’s view.

I let the video roll on and watched with great satisfaction as the dean’s face began to flush with outrage.

“We’re not kidding, you dumb bitch! We’re going to make sure this key goes to someone with very flexible morals.”

“Enough!” the dean barked, pounding a bony fist on the top of her desk.

I pasted on a confused expression. “Did Harper not let Mom in on what really happened at the Academy’s fall party?”

The video continued to play as Donovan walked in and spewed his nasty shit. The feed cut out, and I pocketed my phone before giving the dean a look that said, “Your move, bitch.”

“You will hand that video over to me at once.”

Sure, lady.

"I will be happy to email a copy to your school address," I replied. "I will also be emailing a copy to a lucky friend of mine from Southside who is currently interning at City News One. I know that you high-level families have your ways of making these things go away, but it'll be pretty rough once the video is *out* there, you know?"

"Shut *up*, you little—"

"I mean, even if there were no *legal* consequences for, you know, assault, false imprisonment, reckless endangerment, etc., because, let's be honest, I'm sure that's an easy one to just flash some cash at to make disappear. And even if Harper wasn't expelled from Holywell because, well, you're the dean, so that's silly.... But if this got out, it could still be a little troubling for the Jansen reputation. That would be an annoying blemish on her case to be the perfect candidate for the future Mrs. Spencer, don't you think?"

Dean Jansen glared at me, murder in her eyes and her fist clenched around her Montblanc pen.

"Or, you know," I went on. "I could continue to keep this to myself. I don't *love* how my hair looks all matted with blood like that, anyway."

"Fine," she snapped. "You've made your point. In lieu of expulsion, you will receive a written conduct warning in your file." She spun in her chair, grabbing her phone from next to her computer before she began furiously jabbing at it with her thumbs. "Show yourself out."

"Appreciate it, thank you," I said brightly, standing and throwing my backpack over my shoulder. "Let Harper know I said no hard feelings." I was sure it was her that the dean was currently rage-texting, probably to bitch her out for being dumb enough to put her crimes on video.

I'd had enough bullshit for one lifetime already, so I exited the dean's office, ready to hole up in my room for the rest of the day.

Except as soon as I entered the hallway, I collided with a tall, broad chest outfitted in the finest bespoke Tom Ford money could buy.

"Going somewhere?" Bennett asked, catching me in his firm grip before I could bounce off him and into the wall.

Why was Bennett Spencer always *touching* me?

“Unhand me, Spencer.” See? I was going to nip this in the bud right away for once.

Except that I yet again underestimated how quick he was, and before I knew it, he’d manhandled me into a quiet corner of the deserted hallway a few feet away from the dean’s door.

He released my arms but stood close, blocking my exit with his big body. I craned my neck to glare up at him, the tall bastard, and I watched as he carefully studied me with those mossy green eyes.

“You don’t look like someone who just got expelled,” he mused, his gaze roving over my face, kicking my pulse up a few notches. “Or have you been lying about how much you actually wanted to be here?”

“Why are you in my personal space again, Bennett?” I fired back. “Or have you been lying about how much you actually hate me?”

Undeterred, he stepped even closer, placing his hands on the wall on either side of my head, caging me in.

And I continued to stand there and let him because *I liked it*.

“Answer my question,” he demanded, his voice a low, sensual husk.

“You didn’t ask me a question,” I replied, or purred, really, because I’d lost my mind.

He smirked, reminding me so much of Zach, before leaning in to nuzzle at my neck, and the eruption of butterflies in my stomach nearly knocked me off my feet.

He breathed me in, his rough cheek grazing my sensitive skin, and then he whispered in my ear, “Do you need help packing up your dorm room? Or are you a Southside cliché whose meager possessions only fit into one bag?”

“Two bags, actually,” I replied, caving to the urge to touch *him* now by running my fingers through his perfectly styled brown hair while he—holy shit—sank his teeth into the shell of my ear. I bit back a moan, fisting his hair with a rough tug.

“I see,” he said, releasing my ear and dragging his lips down the side of my neck. “Then it sounds like you should be gone in a few hours, then.”

I was tempted to let this charade go on—I really was. Because other than my dancing with Zach at The Revelry, I’d never been so

turned on in my life, and I was pretty sure Bennett would be down to fuck me right here in this hallway if he thought he'd never have to see me again.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I murmured, releasing my grip on his hair and copping a quick feel of his muscular bicep through his suit jacket. "If I was just another casualty of Holywell's elite, washed out because I was so *undeserving* of the generosity of the Four Families?"

He finally removed himself from the crook of my neck, leaning back to look into my face again, suspicion now clouding his heated gaze.

It was my turn to smirk. "You should probably warn your future fiancé that recording her crimes is a dumb move, no matter how untouchable she thinks she is."

He stepped away from me in a flash, putting some much-needed distance between us, the meaning of my words instantly clear to him.

"You have the video," he said, back to being cold and distant.

"I have the video," I confirmed.

"You threatened the dean."

"I absolutely threatened the dean."

He huffed out a frustrated sigh, running his hand through his hair, which was still a little messy from my fingers—I liked that. "Have you lost your mind? You cannot come into Holywell Academy, put your middle finger up at its traditions, punch Lisa Aviano in the face—"

"I will remind you that she broke a bowl over my head first and gave me a *concussion*—"

"—and threaten the *dean* with nothing behind you but your bad attitude."

I scoffed. "I clearly have more tricks up my sleeve than you're giving me credit for. And you forgot that I also *take no shit from the Heirs*."

"That too," he growled. "We do not have the time nor the desire to continue to deal with you."

"I have never asked you three assholes to *deal with me*," I hissed. "In fact, you all need to leave me the *fuck* alone. I didn't ask Zach to run my friend off and dry hump me on the dance floor in front

of the whole school. I didn't ask Noah to keep me after class and then stick his hand in the back pocket of my jeans—"

"What—"

"And I *certainly* didn't ask you to ambush me in this hallway and put your *mouth* on me!" I was nearly shouting by then, thankful that most of the staff who officed on this hall had gone for the day.

Bennett crossed his arms, glaring down at me, and he didn't speak for a long, tortuous minute while I returned his stare, refusing to cower or wilt under it. He may have had regrets about what had happened here between us now that he knew I wasn't being expelled, but I didn't, and I sure as shit wouldn't be made to feel like it was somehow *my* fault.

"Fine," he said coolly. "Enjoy the rest of your semester."

He turned on his heel and stalked off. I finally released the last of the tension I was holding in, sagging back against the wall as I watched him go.

Then I smiled. I'd won this round, and I had faith that I only had a few more days to wait before I won another one.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“B ack entrance is clear. Ready when you are.”

Dom’s deep voice boomed in the tiny earpiece I wore, and Max tapped at his own before he whispered, “Roger. Entering now.”

Thank God. We’d been hiding in this narrow alleyway for an hour, and the stench of the dumpsters and piss was starting to make me nauseous.

Max and I pulled our black balaclavas up over our faces, and he took a moment to fuss over my thin Kevlar vest like a tall, tactical-geared mother hen.

“It’s secure,” I whispered, slapping his hand away. “I haven’t forgotten how to do this, you know.”

His bright white smile was hidden under his mask, but I knew it was there all the same. “Just double-checking, JoJo. That bougie Academy would rot a lesser girl’s brain.”

“Will you two get moving? Christ,” Dom barked in our ears.

Max turned to offer a salute across the street in the general direction of the Dorada Hotel where Dom was holed up in a room facing the Euphoria Club, manning the computers and probably watching us through the scope of his Barrett M95.

We crept around the dumpsters, confident that all external camera feeds had been looped for the next hour, and we entered the Euphoria Club’s kitchen door—left propped open ever so slightly for us after the last employee had called it a night.

The Shadows really did have connections everywhere.

We found the kitchen dark and deserted, as expected. It was nearing midnight on a Wednesday, and most of the Club would be shut down or near it by now—except of course for the escorts that worked on the third and fourth floors. I doubted those hard-working men and women ever had a slow night.

“You remember the way to the basement door?” Dom asked, still managing to hover even though he was not physically here.

“Yes, Dom,” I huffed. “I studied the blueprint before I left, and it’s on my phone if we get lost.”

“You do not have time to get lost,” he replied. “Just like you would not have had time to pick this lock if you didn’t have an exact copy of the key.”

“Dad, stop lecturing us,” Max groused. “You’re being distracting.”

“I am watching your asses,” he retorted.

“Both of you, shut it,” I hissed as we reached the swinging saloon doors that led from the kitchen to the main Club floor.

I dropped to my stomach with Max following suit, and I quickly rolled under the door before popping back to my feet and smashing my body up against the wall in the dim hallway that stretched off to the right of the Club floor entrance.

From my vantage point, I could just make out a sliver of the interior of the Club. Dark wood floors reflected the dim blue lighting that shone throughout the room. The long bar took up the far wall, and the shelves behind it, lined with colorful bottles of liquor, rose all the way to the second floor of the Club’s main interior.

A few of the burlesque dancers appeared to be blowing off steam after their shifts at the bar where men and women dressed in gorgeous, expensive lingerie and costumes sat together, chatting and laughing. Round, golden tables dotted the floor, each surrounded by plush teal chairs. The second floor was open to the first, its art-deco-style railing running around the full circumference of the room.

I couldn’t see the stage from where I stood, but I knew from photos that it sat along the north wall and was framed by black curtains woven with gold geometrical patterns.

Max's big shoulders pressed into mine as he took his place next to me, and he nodded toward the end of the hallway.

"The offices are all clear," Dom said. "It looks like the only people still on premises are a couple of bartenders, a bouncer, and some of the dancers who haven't gone home yet. Remember, you're looking for the nondescript gray door at the end of the hallway, right before you get to the service elevator."

"Got it," I whispered, and then I darted down the hall with Max on my heels.

We passed several office doors, including the spacious one Andrea Ferrero used to meet business partners and important clients at the Club. At the end of the hall, before it turned a sharp corner and continued around to the back of the stage, was the service elevator. Beyond the service elevator was the back entrance to the club, accessible from the parking garage that Andrea had built for the Club ten years ago when she gutted and remodeled one of the last public housing complexes left in the City proper.

"Parking garage is currently clear," Dom informed us, and I could hear him clicking away at the computer in front of him. "Quickly. We don't know when the rest of the staff may head out."

We raced on light feet toward the elevator. As we approached, I scanned the walls for the door.

"There," I whispered to Max as we slowed our steps about ten feet from the elevator doors. Imbedded in the wall was a narrow, unmarked door painted a drab gray that looked like it would house equipment or something equally boring.

Anyone who spent any length of time working for Andrea in this Club knew of the existence of this door, but most could only speculate as to what it led to. The official blueprints of the Club showed it to be a simple storage closet, but we knew, courtesy of a few ex-Ferrero employees that had later joined the Shadows, that it actually led to a large basement area where Andrea kept an additional office as well as a... *workspace*.

"Fuck, Dom wasn't kidding about this lock," Max cursed as we approached the door. "That would've taken us a while to get into."

The doorknob itself looked old and almost rusted over, but there was a matte black K1000 lock just above it. A Knight model that

touted itself as virtually unpickable, it was the cream of the crop if you wanted to go old-school with your security.

No lock was unpickable. Every lock was made to be unlocked, somehow, whether it was by a code, a fingerprint scan, or a simple brass key. High-tech locks could be hacked; key codes could be stolen from an unsuspecting TA by his student; ID card barcodes could be cloned. An old-fashioned deadbolt lock could be picked, but we knew from experience that this one could take even the most skilled locksmith fifteen minutes or longer.

Time we didn't have.

Good thing I had an exact copy of Zach's key.

"This better have been worth getting my head bashed in and having to fuck up a sexual predator," I murmured, pulling the key from the little pouch on my belt. I disengaged the lock with ease, and we cracked the door open a minuscule amount, peering into the darkness to see if there were any signs of life down below.

There were no cameras for our team to hack into down there.

"It's clear," Max whispered, and we both slithered through the crack in the doorway before closing it quickly behind us.

"Locking up," I reported into my earpiece as I turned the deadbolt from the inside.

Max beamed his flashlight down the narrow staircase. The stairs were cement, unremarkable, and free of anything immediately incriminating—like bloodstains. We hustled down to the bottom and found ourselves in a large open space. Max's light bounced off the high ceilings, revealing dark black support beams running along the length and held up by sturdy poles placed intermittently throughout the room.

"Her office should be just beyond an area that looks like a lounge," Dom said.

We continued into the space, and Max's flashlight passed over what was basically a dad's basement mancave, except I was certain the furnishings cost thousands more dollars than the average dad would spend. There were several leather couches, a coffee table, a few lamps, and even a bar cart along the wall. The reddish rug that was now under our feet felt plush and new.

“Damn, okay,” Max exclaimed in a low voice as he shone his light beyond the lounge.

The rest of the large space was bare, but I had a pretty good idea what the chains hanging from the hooks drilled into the ceiling beams in the middle of the room were for, as well as the wall of sharp objects that lay just beyond them. The floor was cement, and I’d bet my inheritance there was a drain in the middle of the room.

“There’s the office,” I said, pointing to the red door just behind one of the big couches.

We crossed the room and made quick work of the much more pickable lock on the door. Once I’d popped it, we darted quietly inside, still working only by the light of Max’s flashlight. This office was small and sparsely furnished—a stark contrast, I suspected, from what Andrea’s “public” office upstairs would look like. There were a few wooden chairs set in front of a simple black desk. There was an old landline phone on the corner of the desk, a monitor that was not connected to a computer, and a whiteboard hanging on the side wall.

Dom’s voice came through my earpiece again. “Top drawer. Hurry—we have a car entering the garage.”

“Shit,” I hissed, moving quickly behind the desk.

“It could be nothing,” Max assured me. “Someone coming to pick up one of the dancers. Janitorial staff. Literally anyone except the handful of people who have a key to the basement.”

I nodded, taking a breath and focusing on my task. The top drawer of the desk was locked but once again easy to break into. I had it open thirty seconds after I pulled my lock picks from my belt.

“Where is it, you heinous bitch,” I murmured as I rifled through the contents of the drawer. A small handgun, a bunch of loose-leaf paper that I only wished we had the time to study or even just photograph, a box of condoms....

“Gross,” Max spat as I set the condoms on the desk.

“Rumor is, she’s been fucking her bodyguard for years,” I informed him. “Maybe even before Zach’s dad died.” My hand finally snagged on something that felt promising at the back of the drawer. “I’ve got it!”

I pulled out the simple old smartphone—a Knight model that hadn't been manufactured for at least fifteen years. I hit the little green power button on the bottom, and I watched with increasing dread as the blue screen flickered to life.

"We're sure this is what she would've used?" I asked, my hand suddenly starting to shake.

"If there was any communication about your parents' murder, she would have used that phone," Dom replied, his voice gentle. "It's what she uses for the stuff that's below board. The account is registered under a fake name, and the bill is paid yearly in cash. If we're lucky, there'll be text messages or at least logs of calls to the Enforcers we've identified in the footage from Hargraves Tower."

"I'm... I'm trying," I whispered, my shaking hands fumbling over the screen's few icons. "Fuck."

"I've got it, Jojo," Max said, reaching over the desk to slide the phone out of my hands.

"Shit, red alert, guys," Dom barked into our ears. "Two high-level Enforcers just exited the car in the garage, and Zach's Ferrari just pulled in behind them."

"No, fuck," I cried, my shakes escalating to a full-body tremble. "We can't leave without what we came for."

"It's okay. I've got it," Max said, his voice soothing me like a balm. "I'm pulling a copy of the SIM card onto my drive. It's almost done."

"Guys, I think you're about to have company. They've got a captive."

"Shit."

"Shit," I agreed, taking big breaths and trying to focus only on Max's serene face.

After a few more seconds, he snapped the phone closed and tossed it back to me. "It's done. We have to hide."

I shoved the phone to the back of the drawer again, tossed the papers on top of it, and tucked the condom box back into its corner. I slammed the drawer closed and followed Max as he raced out the door.

I spun in a circle, my eyes more adjusted to the darkness than they were when we first arrived, my adrenaline pumping hard. My gaze snagged on some scaffolding that had been left along the wall

just near the stairwell. The top of the structure was at least partially obscured by the ceiling beams and the darkness, and we really didn't have shit else for options.

"Max! Climb!" I whispered urgently, directing him toward the steel structure.

We scaled the narrow, rickety ladder to the small platform, which put us about six inches beneath one of the dark beams that held up the tall ceiling. We flattened ourselves to the floor of the platform, our black clothes blending with the beams and darkness. All we could do was cross our fingers that if Zach and his Enforcers came down here, they wouldn't have any reason to look closely at the ceiling in this quiet little corner of the room.

Dom's quiet voice sounded in our ears. "Incoming."

The door banged open, and the sound of muffled voices, along with some struggling and grunting, floated down the stairs.

Max and I watched, silent and still as the dead, as two burly Enforcers, dressed in their black tactical gear that sported the Ferrero serpent crest, hauled a thrashing man into the room. They bypassed the lounge and headed straight to the torture area, and within seconds, the man had been strung up by the chains, his arms flailing and his feet dangling inches above the floor. They stripped his lanky form naked, tossing his tattered clothes into an unmarked bin next to the wall.

More stomping and male voices sounded on the stairs, and I sucked in a breath as Zach came into view wearing a black jacket over a tight white T-shirt and dark jeans. He was followed by a guy I hadn't seen in person since I was nine years old.

I let out a tiny gasp.

"Fuck, is that...?" Max whispered.

I gave him the barest of nods.

It was about to get really fucking bloody in here.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“Fuck you, Ferrero scum!”

I winced. The Ferrero team had a live one on their hands, and this guy apparently thought he was tough.

Zach sauntered into the lounge like it was just another Wednesday night at the Club, ignoring the shouting and cursing from the prisoner.

“Let’s get this fucking over with,” he said to his companion as he switched on one of the lamps in the lounge. “I have class in the morning.”

“My poor nephew,” the guy crooned at him. “Forced to get a fancy degree at a place where everyone kisses his ass just so he can inherit his billions.”

“Fuck you, Frankie. I’m also running all over the goddamn City, cleaning up messes. I need to sleep sometimes, man.”

Frankie “Fingers” Ferrero. He was technically Zach’s uncle, but he was only, like, four years older than Zach was—the product of an illicit affair Zach’s grandfather had later in his life that produced a little bastard half-brother for Andrea to deal with. And she had dealt with him by pretending for a long while that he didn’t exist—he’d apparently only been allowed to take the Ferrero name once he proved to be such an asset to the Family.

And he was an asset because he was fucking crazy. Our sources said he’d become the go-to guy for... *convincing* people to talk, and

he was essentially running the Ferrero Enforcer team now at age twenty-three because everyone was scared shitless of him.

The nickname “Fingers” supposedly came from his favorite souvenir to take from those that found themselves subjected to his *talents*.

He’d come around the Ferrero penthouse some when we were kids, mostly when Zach’s dad had been alive and took pity on him, but he’d disappeared completely into the bowels of the Ferrero apparatus once he’d become a teenager.

He and Zach favored each other, though Frankie was quite a bit leaner than Zach was. He wore an old T-shirt with the sleeves cut off, the gaping armholes giving us a view of the myriad tattoos that decorated his lean muscled arms and torso. His tight, holey jeans looked like they came from the bargain bin at the thrift shop, and his scuffed Converse sneakers were even rattier than the ones I owned. His dark hair curled behind his ears in a little wave that almost made him look innocent, and the tiny barbells pierced through his eyebrow glinted in the low light of the room.

“You didn’t tell me Frankie Fingers was *hot*,” Max whispered, and if I could have moved without shaking the scaffolding, I’d have kicked him.

“*Not the time*,” I mouthed, narrowing my eyes at him in the dark. I hadn’t seen Frankie since he was a skinny, angry fourteen-year-old anyway, so it wasn’t like I could have known.

“Don’t worry,” Frankie said to Zach as they wandered over to the torture side of the basement. “This one talks a big game, but I know a coward when I smell one. We’ll get this done in, like, ten.”

Zach chuckled. “Let’s make it nine, then.” He motioned to the two Enforcers standing silently by while their charge was still shouting curses at them and yanking on his chains. “You two, beat it. Send the cleanup crew in an hour.”

The Enforcers nodded and filed out wordlessly, probably relieved they didn’t have to watch Frankie work.

Frankie had meandered over to the wall and flipped on the lone light hanging from the ceiling nearby and was now blasting a spotlight right onto his victim. Then he began to peruse the selection of pointy, sharp objects that hung on the wall.

The guy had stopped struggling, the paling of his face visible even from all the way up here. If he knew what was good for him, he'd cave quickly to whatever they wanted and wish for a quick death.

While Frankie was sorting through his toys, caressing them lovingly and whistling a happy tune, Zach stepped in front of the guy, his face more murderous than I knew him capable of.

"Did you honestly think," he said, his voice low and laced with venom, "that you could attempt a hit on one of the Heirs of the Four Families and live to tell the tale?"

I sucked in a breath. *A hit? On one of the guys?*

"That little blond shit killed my brother," the guy spat at Zach. "He too much of a pussy to take care of me himself?"

Noah killed someone?

"You and your brother are the worst fucking hitmen I've ever heard of," Zach scoffed, not moving a muscle. "And I hear you're the pussy. Your brother's dead because you used him as a human shield when Noah shot at you."

Jesus.

"Now," Zach went on, his smirk back in place, which loosened something in my chest. "You're going to tell us who hired you, or else I'm going to let Frankie Fingers over there loose with no rules."

"Fuck you!"

"Please don't speak to my nephew like that," Frankie admonished the guy like he was a kindergarten teacher telling a five-year-old not to put crayons in his mouth. "It's not *his* fault you're here, after all. You should take responsibility for your own actions."

"I don't fucking care what you do to me," the guy barked through gritted teeth as he watched Frankie pull a large curved knife of some kind from the wall. "I'm a professional, and I don't give up my clients."

I did admire his tenacity, but I'd have been more inclined to believe him if he wasn't shaking like a leaf right now.

"Are you picking any of this up?" I whispered softly to Dom.

"Not really," he replied just as quietly. "But if he starts screaming anything important, I'll try to record it."

“Alright, my friend,” Frankie said to the guy as he made his way in front of him. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

For all his talk, the guy only made it through the removal of a couple of fingers, at least one toe, and something weird Frankie had done to his balls with the curved dagger thing before he started sobbing and babbling away.

“It wasn’t a hit!” he cried, sniffing and gagging. “We were supposed to kidnap the Hargraves Heir for ransom. I only tried to kill him after he shot my brother!”

Zach had stepped away from the splash zone to stand by the wall with his arms crossed and looking almost bored with this whole thing. He narrowed his eyes at that revelation. “And for whom were you kidnapping the Hargraves Heir?”

The guy heaved and vomited for like the third time.

Frankie shoved a tiny little scalpel in between the guy’s toes. “My nephew asked you a question.”

He screamed. “Fine, fine, okay, okay! It was Silverman! Raquel Silverman!”

Frankie stood up from where he’d been focused on the guy’s feet and gave him an indulgent look. “See, that was very good. You could’ve saved yourself all this trouble if you’d just told us that a little bit earlier.” He looked to Zach. “Is that all you needed?”

Zach nodded, his face hard. “Yep.”

“Raquel Silverman owns a massive pharmaceutical company in Florida,” Dom said in a low voice. “Our file says her company tried to patent a revolutionary cancer drug last year, but it was blocked by Eagle, Peter’s company. They then got the patent themselves and made millions instantly with an identical drug.”

“So, she paid someone to kidnap Noah?” I asked in a hushed whisper.

“I assume she would’ve ransomed him back for the cost of what she thought she lost out on had they been the ones to come to market with the drug.”

“Fuck,” Max breathed. “These outsiders must not understand who they’re playing with.”

“I think there’s a Silverman at the Academy too,” I added.

I could hear Dom's fingers flying across his keyboard. "Yeah. Robert Silverman. Junior at Holywell. He's a nephew."

"Shit."

"Okay, then," Frankie was saying as he cleaned his knives with a silky-looking cloth. "I'll take care of this, and then we can get you back to school for your beauty rest."

Zach shook his head and stepped in front of the hitman, who sagged in his chains, only barely clinging to life. Zach pulled a gun from under his jacket and aimed it straight at the guy's head, growling, "No one fucks with my family."

He pulled the trigger, putting a bullet right between the man's eyes.

I lay there, shell-shocked by watching Zach *kill* a guy. I'd known that there was a strong possibility that my former best friends had been molded by the Families into something I wouldn't recognize after all these years, but it was still a slap in the face to see it with my own eyes.

He called Noah his family.

Zach was on his phone now. "It's done.... Yeah, it was Silverman—you were right. Have Bennett call in his courier for this one. I want what's left of the guy's head delivered to Boca Raton by tomorrow."

He jammed his phone back into his pocket and motioned to Frankie. "Let's get the fuck out of here, man. I hate the smell of piss and vomit."

Frankie smirked. "Yes, let's. I'm headed upstairs." He wagged his pierced eyebrows.

Zach chuckled. "Who's the lucky guy tonight?"

Frankie shrugged, caressing his knives once more before hanging them back on the wall. "I like to keep it fresh. We'll see who catches my eye." He hit the lights, then he followed Zach back through the lounge and up the stairs, slamming the door and clicking the lock back in place behind him.

Max and I lay there in silence for a long five minutes.

"Okay, Ferrero's clear of the garage and Frankie Fingers has disappeared upstairs," Dom said. "Get the fuck out of there now before the cleanup crew arrives."

He didn't have to tell us twice.



Max decided to accompany me back to school. We'd dropped our clothes and equipment off with Dom in his hotel room, changed into jeans and sweatshirts, and now we were both fighting to stay awake on the short train ride back to the Academy.

We scanned in through the front gates since neither of us had the energy to break into campus for the fun of it, and by the time we made it to my dorm room, I knew I was only going to get a few precious hours of sleep before I had to be up again for class—if I could fall asleep at all.

After we'd both showered, we sat on my bed in our PJs—Max kept shit in my room because why not—and we stared at Max's phone where it lay between us.

"You don't need to read it, Jojo," he said gently. "I can just tell you that we got what we were looking for."

"Just show me, Max."

He picked up his phone and logged into our encrypted server before scrolling until he found what I'd asked for.

He handed me the phone, and I peered down at the screen, those numb feelings washing over me once again as I read the copied text messages.

Andrea: JS confirmed, we're on for tonight 10 pm

Andrea: have the packages to HT 24 then

Unknown: understood

The texts had been sent at 3:00 pm on August 2, 2015—the night my parents were murdered, and my life changed forever.

I dropped the phone.

"There are also two outgoing calls to that same number from about a week earlier," Max whispered. "And we have the camera footage to show that 'HT 24' is—"

"Hargraves Tower, twenty-fourth floor," I finished for him. "And JS would have to be James Spencer."

He nodded. "Are you okay?"

I sighed. "I'm both always okay and never okay, Max. I listened as Andrea herself shot my mother in the head. None of this is news

to me. It's great we have more evidence to use against the Families now. But of course, there's fucking nothing here about *why*."

Why had they killed my parents? It sure as shit wasn't just for the fun of it.

"I know, Jojo. We'll find it."

He tucked me into bed then before climbing in on the other side and switching off the lamp. To my relief, I fell asleep instantly, Max's presence making it feel as though we were home in our bunks, tucked safely away from the festering rot of the City.

Zach's happy, laughing twelve-year-old face was the last thing I saw before I slipped into the darkness.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I jumped into the pool, excited to be wearing my new purple swimsuit for our sleepover at Zach's house.

"Cannonball!" I screamed as I aimed right for where Bennett was bobbing in the deep end.

"Argh!" he shouted, ducking out of the way right as I hit the water.

"You're a weenie, Bennett!" I shouted at him as he surfaced a few feet away from me.

"You're ridiculous," he shouted back, splashing me in the face.

"Incoming!"

Zach landed with a big splash in the water right next to me, and I screamed. He swam up underneath me as I tried to kick away to the shallow end, but he grabbed my legs and pulled me the other way.

"Got you," he said with a big grin when his head popped up to the surface.

"Yep, you're the prisoner now," Bennett said, appearing on my other side and grabbing my wrist.

"Cut it out, you jerks!" I shrieked, but I was laughing. "Noah! Help me!"

Noah kicked over to us, his top half folded over the side of an inflatable tube. "Grab onto my tube, Jojo!" He splashed Zach in the face, smiling and giggling.

Bennett and Zach let me go, and I floated with Noah over to the shallow end.

"Come on, Frankie!" Zach yelled at his uncle who was really more like his cousin. "The water feels awesome!"

Frankie was older than us, thirteen, and he usually didn't have time for our kid stuff. He was lying on a lounge by the side of the pool under an umbrella, reading something on his tablet. Probably a comic book.

"No, thanks," he called back to Zach, not taking his eyes off of his tablet. "It'd be cool if you four would stop screaming so much."

"You suck!" Zach yelled back. He liked Frankie, and even though Frankie pretended not to like Zach, I knew he really did.

I decided it was time to dry off for a little bit, mostly because I wanted some lemonade, so I ran up the steps of the pool to get my towel off of the lounge next to Frankie.

"Watch it, Little Knight," he grumbled. "You're dripping on me."

"Sorry, Frankie!" I took the end of my towel and dried off the few drops of water I'd gotten on his tablet.

Suddenly, clouds moved over the afternoon sun, casting a dark shadow over Zach's pool deck. I shivered—I was really cold now.

I looked up to see Zach, Bennett, and Noah standing at the edge of the pool, looking at something in the water. Their faces were blank.

Zach's mom stood on the other side of the pool, wearing a tight red dress and tall red high heels. She smiled at me in a way that made me feel very nervous.

"Look, sweet girl," she called to me. "Look what happens to traitors in our Families."

I turned back to Frankie, confused. "What does she mean?"

Frankie looked at me curiously, twirling a big, scary knife with a curved blade in his hand. Where did his tablet go?

"You don't know?" he asked, cocking his head.

I walked toward the pool. The water wasn't blue anymore. It was red.

"No!" I screamed. "Mom! Dad!"

My parents just floated there in their pajamas, their eyes open, but they weren't moving.

"Help!" I cried. "Help them!"

"We can't," the boys said in unison.

And then someone pushed me into the pool.

"Jojo, wake up. Jojo!"

I gasped, my eyes flying open to find Max, his long hair hanging in disheveled strands around his face as he looked down at me with a worried brow. He grasped my sweaty hand, and I sucked in a few calming breaths.

"You didn't tell me you were having nightmares again," he said, his stern voice sounding just like Dom's. "After all this time?"

I sat up with a groan. "Yeah, I mean, not every night or anything. But there's a lot of reminders of my old life here. It's... a little triggering."

"I'll bet."

I gave him my most serious side-eye. "Don't tell Dom or Laura. They'll worry."

"I hate to break it to you," he said with a soft smile, "but they're always worried about you. No matter what."

I sighed. Having a family again was the best thing that could have ever happened to me, but it also meant that I had people who would be hurt if the worst happened.

If by avenging my parents, I went down with the ship.

And I knew that if it came to it, I would do just that.

"I know that look," Max said with a frown as he hopped out of bed to hunt for his clothes from last night. "They knew what they were signing up for when they adopted you. As much as they might wish you'd be content to remain Joanna Miller forever and just fuck off to Europe to live your life, safe and free, they've spent all of this time preparing you to take back what was stolen from you. They're proud of you. *I'm* proud of you."

A sense of calm washed over me. I didn't know what I'd do without them. "Love you, brother."

"Love you too."

Finding my own sweater and jeans on the floor, I began pulling them on, definitely running late already. Max was going to miss his first-period class at Southside High, and I'd be lucky to get anything to eat before I had to be in my Leadership Seminar.

As I sat on the end of my bed, lacing my boots, a knock sounded at my door.

Max was fully dressed, so he ambled over and pulled it open.

Noah stood there, looking dapper in his dark gray suit and sky-blue dress shirt, and the friendly smile he'd had on when the door was opened dropped right off of his face when he realized it was Max standing there.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked in a low voice.

"Hey, bro," Max replied with his lazy smile, leaning against the door frame. "Neil, right?"

I bit back a cackle.

"It's Noah," he replied through the world's most forced smile. "Noah *Hargraves*."

"Oh, that's right. My bad, dude. All you rich kids look alike to me." Max took a step back from the door and crossed his arms, blocking Noah's view of where I was still sitting on the end of my bed. "You need something?"

"I'd like to speak to Joanna, if you don't mind."

"I do mind, actually."

"You're not her keeper."

"You don't know anything about me, man."

"Max!" I said, worried we were going to draw attention if this dick-measuring continued while Noah was standing in the hallway. "Let him in."

Noah smirked at Max like he'd won something before he stepped into the room and closed the door.

"What did you need that you couldn't ask me in ten minutes when we have class together, Noah?" I asked, standing up from the bed and going to my desk to pack up my backpack. "And I thought Bennett and I came to an understanding that you three were going to be leaving me alone from now on?"

"That sounds like a great idea," Max added, and Noah glared at him before looking at me.

"We absolutely intend to leave you alone," he said. "Completely. But I needed to ask you a question first. You weren't at breakfast, so I thought I'd just stop by instead of pulling you aside in front of the others."

"You embarrassed to be seen talking to my cousin, Nate?" Max asked, his smile failing to mask the threat in his voice. "What the fuck

are you doing in her room, then?"

Noah huffed out an exasperated sigh. "Will you leash your guard dog, please?" he asked me. "The hostility is unnecessary."

This was really the most entertainment I'd had in a while, but I was also going to be late if it kept up, so I moved to stand next to Max, rubbing a calming hand over his back. "Let's just hear what he needs, then you can toss him out on his privileged ass, Maxy."

Noah ran a hand through his wavy blond hair, clearly over our shit, before he pinned me with a scrutinizing look. "How'd you get the video from The Revelry? I know it may not seem like it, but Annie actually is pretty adept with tech, and she set that livestream to be accessible by a link sent to my phone only, and it should have wiped itself off of the laptop in the office as soon as you cut it off. And yet...."

"I have a copy and used it to blackmail the dean into not expelling me," I finished for him.

"Correct. I've checked my phone repeatedly for any sign it was compromised and found none—so I presume you somehow pulled it from the laptop before you left...." He looked at me, a tiny, barely there apology on his face. "Don't take this the wrong way, but your skills in my class are middling at best."

I snorted. "Thanks, Noah. That's on you as my teacher, isn't it?"

He ignored that. "Answer my question."

I smiled. "No."

"Joanna—"

"Is that all you wanted? We'll both be late if we don't wrap up this little chat pronto."

"You heard her, Norman."

"Knock, knock! Chica, I brought you a bagel—" Mari came waltzing into the room, coffee and doggie bag in hand, and she pulled up short with a startled gasp when she encountered Max and me in a standoff with Noah.

"Um," she said slowly, closing the door behind her. "What's going on in here?"

"Nothing, girl," I replied. "Noah was just leaving."

"Hey, babe," Max purred at her. "Missed you."

That perked her up. "Max, mi amor, just who I wanted to see."

She trotted over to him, shoving the coffee and white paper bag into my hands before the two of them did the double-cheek-kiss thing because that was the level they were at in their friendship, apparently. Then she gave him her biggest puppy dog eyes. “Carmen won’t be able to fly to the States until after Christmas, so I need a date to the Holiday Ball. Since my best friend is done with Academy events and all”—she darted a glance over at Noah, holding her chin high—“for good reason.”

Wow, even Mari was feeling a little feisty in the face of an Heir this morning. Noah was getting it from all sides, and the look of exasperation on his face said he’d had enough.

“Mari, you really can’t find a date among the students who actually attend school here?” he griped at her. “The Holiday Ball is the Academy’s biggest event all year.”

That was Max’s cue. “I’d love to be your date, babe. You have to take me shopping, though.” He tossed a smirk at Noah. “Us Southsiders don’t really come with the proper attire for rich-kid parties.”

“Deal.”

Noah’s face had flushed, and seeing him all ragey and flustered when he was usually so friendly and charming made my morning.

“Joanna,” he snapped. “I’m not leaving without an answer.”

“That’s fine, Noah,” I replied, throwing my bag over my shoulder. “I’m headed to class, though. Lock up when you leave?”

Max chuckled, kissing me on the hair before giving me a sly look. He offered an arm to Mari. “Allow me to escort you to Holywell Hall before I head back to Southside.”

She giggled, grasping him around the crook of his elbow. “Gracias, mi amor. Bye Joanna!”

Traitors.

Noah watched them leave, scowling at the door, before turning back to me. He took a few purposeful strides forward, stopping right in front of me to give me a stern glare, his arms crossed like he meant business. My boots gave me a few extra inches of height, so I was almost eye level with his over-six-foot frame.

A small smile crossed his face, his mood apparently improved now that the others were gone. “I’ll get my answers, Joanna,” he

said, his voice low and full of promises.

“And I’ll get mine, Noah,” I said, returning his smile.

His brows crunched together in confusion, his pretty face suddenly boyish and so much like *my* Noah once had been that, right then, I decided to let myself have just one last hit of *my* boys before we would be back to business.

Back to being strangers.

On opposite sides of a war they didn’t know they were fighting.

“If that’s all you came here for, I guess this is goodbye,” I whispered, closing the remaining inches of distance between us, holding his deep blue eyes with mine.

“I guess it is,” he whispered back, wrapping his hands around my hips and pulling me into his body. “I hope you put some serious thought into transferring at the end of the semester. It would be best for everyone—especially you.”

“Hmm,” I hummed, pretending to think it over while I ran my hands up his firm arms and clasped them around his neck. I leaned in, ghosting my lips over his as I whispered, “Fuck you, Noah.”

He smiled against my mouth before taking my lower lip between his teeth. He gave it a gentle tug, and a little moan escaped me.

“If only, Joanna,” he murmured, his lips still pressed against mine.

This risky little dance I’d started was about to go further than I’d intended. With great effort, I released him and stepped back. His hands fell away from my hips without resistance.

I pointed at the door. “Get out.”

He did as I said without argument, pausing at the threshold to throw one last look at me over his shoulder, his smile vanishing and his eyes downcast. “Goodbye, Miss Miller.”

As the door slammed behind him, I hardened my resolve. I still had work to do, and continuing to allow the Heirs so close to me was a dangerous game I could not afford to keep playing.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



For the next two weeks, the Heirs kept to their word, and I kept to mine. I threw myself back into my routine, determined to fade into the background as the semester wore on and the class workload intensified.

I woke up early every day to get my workout in as I prepared for next month's Holywell Chase—our big fall competition before crew season began in earnest in the spring. I kept my nose down and focused on my studies, determined to have my final papers and projects completed before Thanksgiving break. I spoke to only Mari or my family, and I managed to refrain from punching anyone else in the face over the continued comments and jeers from the Tier One bitch brigade and the sexual harassment that Chad had decided was his default whenever I was within earshot.

I still saw Zach, Noah, and Bennett everywhere—in our shared classes, in the dining hall, around campus—but they didn't engage with me, and I kept my distance from them. Bennett had figured out how to stop watching me obsessively every time we were in a room together. Zach didn't needle or tease me. Noah paid no attention whatsoever to me in Tech Skills class.

None of them came anywhere close to *touching* me again.

The three of them had, however, taken to showing up in the weight room early on Tuesday and Thursday mornings when I would usually be there alone. They'd walk past me without acknowledgement, take up a rack on the opposite side of the room,

and proceed to get hot and sweaty together. Zach would usually end up shirtless. Noah wore the tightest gray sweatpants known to man. Bennett always had his tiny shorts on.

It was torture, but I kept my dad's playlist blasting in my ears every time to remind me to keep my focus on what was important.

And I might have also forgotten to wear a shirt a time or two because fuck them—I could also play that game. They never let me catch them looking, but I could feel their eyes on my back the entire hour, every time.

There had also been some excitement on campus around mid-November when Robert Silverman had been hauled out of B Dorm in handcuffs just as most of the student body was walking to breakfast. Rumors flew, the gist being that he'd been found in possession of a large amount of cocaine with the intent to distribute. Campus security had packed him up and shipped him back to Florida before lunch.

Dom informed me later that Raquel Silverman's Boca Raton mansion had been raided by the feds, all her assets seized, and her company was in the process of being stripped for parts and auctioned to the highest bidder.

It was impressive, and I wondered if Peter Hargraves had been the mastermind of that little hit job or if the Heirs had done this one on their own.

I couldn't say I was mad about it either. The Silvermans had come after Noah, and he could've *died*.

I didn't like that at all.

Finally, I was, as always, quietly observing the Heirs from afar because I still had one more mark. I'd somehow known even before I arrived at school that he would prove to be the most difficult, and I'd been right.

Bennett.

I needed a way into Spencer Tower, and he was going to get me in there. Unlike Zach, however, Bennett kept his key ring—containing the key to his ridiculous McLaren Artura and one of only three key fobs in existence that allowed access to all floors of Spencer Tower, including the penthouse—in his pocket. I'd never seen him put it in his bag, and that made things difficult for me.

But I was determined to work it out.

That was how I ended up surprising the shit out of Mari on the Friday before the Thanksgiving holiday began when I approached her about going to the pre-break party being thrown in A Dorm.

"I... what?" She stared at me, a quizzical look on her face as I stood in the doorway to her dorm room. "You want to go to an A Dorm party? I mean, I will not look a gift horse in the mouth here, but... I want it on the record that I think this is suspicious."

"So noted," I replied with my most innocent smile. "What should I wear?"

She gave an excited little squeal before dragging me into her closet.

I emerged some time later, dressed in tight, high-waisted leather pants, a deep-purple crop top, and very expensive black pumps that were a half size too small for my feet. "Mari, first of all, I will break an ankle in these."

"Excuse me, where did the tough bitch that is my best friend run off to?"

I huffed. "Second of all, I am now officially a giant. It's unnecessary."

She hummed, standing in front of her mirror as she put in her diamond chandelier earrings. "Good, now you can look that tall asshole Bennett Spencer right in his face."

I froze. Did she suspect...?

"Well, you could if he wasn't very clearly avoiding you," she added, and I relaxed—marginally. "I approve of that, by the way, even though I really did love watching Harper's head explode over how he used to look at you. But the peace and quiet has been nice, don't you think?"

It had been, but unfortunately, I knew it wouldn't last forever. "Definitely," I replied. "I know we are rocking the boat here by going to this thing, but I'm just... curious, is all. I've never been to one of the Dorm parties."

I was *curious* if Bennett would be drinking. Maybe letting loose a little bit in the crowd. Maybe letting his guard down just enough....

"They are kind of a shit show," Mari said, turning to face me and smoothing the skirt of her very sexy magenta dress. "But it can be

entertaining. We'll give it an hour and see how we feel."

It was a solid plan. I followed her down the stairs and out into the chilly evening air, noting a few other brave souls from C Dorm that were also trekking toward A Dorm to see how the other half lived.

When we arrived at the front doors of the modern condo building that was A Dorm, we found the front door propped open by what looked like a ceramic garden gnome. We entered the lobby and slipped right into the raging party going on inside the large atrium that encompassed the first floor of the dorm.

The atrium had been furnished with clusters of expensive couches and armchairs artfully arranged around low coffee tables. The back of the room appeared to be the designated rec area where there were pool tables and several additional round tables set up for poker games. Double French doors set into the far wall, their arches inlaid with golden filigree, had been thrown open, allowing easy access to the A Dorm's giant patio. I saw several firepits blazing among the many seating areas outside.

C Dorm was basically a hostel, while this was a luxury hotel.

The lighting was low, limited to the few Tiffany lamps that dotted the end tables throughout the room. A large space had been cleared in the middle for the dance floor, and it was already packed with people dancing to the loud music that blared from the room's state-of-the-art sound system.

At the very back of the atrium was a long bar top that opened into a kitchen. It had been piled high with every type of expensive liquor and mixer imaginable. The necks of champagne bottles poked out of the top of several ice buckets perched on the edge.

"I assume there is no keg hidden back there in the kitchen?" I asked Mari as we made our way toward the drinks.

She scoffed at me. "Gross, no."

I let her pour me a glass of expensive champagne before we found an open couch near a group of some of the scholarship students. Mari immediately struck up a conversation in rapid Spanish with one of the guys, and I gave a polite nod to a couple of the girls from my crew team before I settled in to find my mark.

It wasn't hard. While I wouldn't have been surprised to find the three of them on actual thrones like the princes they were, they were

still easy to spot sprawled around a couple of the bigger couches near the center of the room with their fan club surrounding them and hanging on every word.

Zach was dressed down, wearing ripped black jeans that still probably cost a thousand dollars, a tight white T-shirt, and dark boots. He swirled a glass of brown liquor in his hand, and his lip ring glinted in the low, colorful light of the lamp nearby as he laughed at something Dane was saying to him, but his dark eyes were cold.

I felt my lip curl as Lisa, wearing a tiny skirt and a silky, low-cut top, pranced over and made herself comfortable next to Zach, pawing at his tattooed bicep. He didn't exactly acknowledge her, but he didn't throw her off of him either.

Noah was seated opposite Zach on another couch, and maybe because he always seemed the most approachable of the three, he was *surrounded* by girls panting for his attention. Annie had taken up a post sitting on the coffee table right in front of Noah, her legs crossed and her dress riding up high enough to flash him her panties. A couple of her Tier Two hangers-on sat on either side of him, one of them bold enough—or drunk enough—to repeatedly run a hand along Noah's thigh as she spoke to him.

Noah wore his tailored slacks and a light-blue dress shirt with the buttons undone just enough to glimpse the tanned skin of his chest. He wore his usual agreeable smile as he spoke to the girls, but like Zach, his smile did not reach his eyes. Behind those sexy glasses, his deep blue eyes were hard, but the girls didn't seem to realize it—or they didn't care.

Bennett sat in an armchair near Noah, looking like a GQ model in his dark sport coat he was wearing over an equally dark dress shirt. He appeared bored, of course, occasionally sipping from his glass as he watched over the party. While he spoke to no one, Harper had parked herself on the plush arm of his chair while she held court, chatting animatedly to her friends and looking very smug about where her ass was at the moment. Tonight, she wore a skimpy black dress and dark, bold makeup, and I wondered if Bennett liked that kind of thing.

Fuck—no, I didn't.

If any of Heirs had noticed or cared that I'd shown up to this party, they didn't show it—not that it mattered anyway. If Bennett planned to just sit in his chair and brood all night, this was probably all going to have been for naught.

Half an hour passed as I observed the room. People were getting drunker by the second, and the faint smell of weed also wafted through the air. I spotted quite a few couples (and even some throuples) getting busy on open couches and in dark corners of the room as if most of these people didn't have their own private dorm rooms just one quick elevator ride away.

Exhibitionism was apparently an A Dorm party staple.

And Bennett never moved from his spot, which meant Harper didn't either. I decided I would drink about half of this glass of champagne, convince Mari to dance a few songs with me while I gave Bennett one last chance to move, and then we'd call it a night.

Dom and I could reassess my plan over the break.

"Well, if it isn't Southside," a lazy voice sounded, interrupting my plotting. "And here we all thought you didn't like hanging out with us."

Chad ambled into the space in front of me, flanked by a few of his meathead bros and some clinging, giggling girls I didn't know. His eyes were glassy and his words a little slurred, so I doubted anything good was about to happen.

"Fuck off, Chad," I drawled. "You're looking a little pale, there. Mari'll kill me if you puke on her shoes, so best keep it moving."

His girlfriends gasped, scandalized on his behalf, but he just chuckled. "Oh!" he boomed over the music, shooting me a shit-eating grin. "Are you here because you've finally decided to let one of us up in that slum pussy? I've asked around, and apparently you think you're too good to fuck an Academy guy. Or girl—I asked them too."

Ugh, well, now people were starting to look this way, as tended to happen if someone starts drunkenly shouting the word "pussy" in a crowded room. Since I did not enjoy the feeling of Chad looking down on me where I was seated—so comfortably—on the couch, I stood up on my borrowed high heels with an annoyed groan.

His smirk dimmed a bit as I rose to my now well-over-six-foot height on five inches of borrowed Jimmy Choo. I crossed my arms

and looked down into his beady little eyes. “Careful, Chad. You’ll upset your flock of *prime* pussy if you keep worrying so much about mine.” I motioned to the pouting girls behind him. “Look, their feelings are hurt already.”

He tossed a careless look over his shoulder, rolling his eyes before he did a very dumb thing and stepped into my personal space. He made a show of looking me up and down with a gross leer. “It’s too bad for Donovan he didn’t get what he paid for, isn’t it? Or maybe he got further than we’ve all been led to believe? Come on, Southside, you didn’t let him get just a little taste?”

Laughs and jeers sounded, and Lisa’s shrill voice rose over the crowd. “She totally did!”

“Slut!” someone else yelled.

I sighed. This party sucked.

I managed to hold onto my emotionless mask, though my temper was starting to simmer. There were a lot of eyes on me now, including those belonging to my ex-best friends. A quick glance in their direction told me that they were watching this shit unfold with cold detachment—even sweet Noah just sat there without even a hint of a frown on his pretty face.

Chad went on, still talking way too loudly. “I mean, your tits are a bit small for my taste, but I’d still definitely take you for a ride.”

Then he reached for me, aiming one hand to grope the sliver of skin peeking between my high-waisted pants and the hem of my crop top, while grabbing my wrist with the other.

Without a second thought, I jerked the hand he’d grabbed upward and used my other to yank down hard on several of the fingers he’d wrapped around my wrist, breaking them instantly.

“Oh, fuck!” he shrieked, scrambling back a few steps and holding onto his broken fingers. “What the fuck, you psycho bitch!”

“You shouldn’t touch people without their permission, dickhead,” I said simply, shaking out the wrist he’d grabbed like it could rid me of the residual feeling of his slimy hand on me.

“You’re gonna pay for that, whore!” one of Chad’s girlfriends screeched at me.

I blew out a frustrated breath, turning back to where Mari was still sitting with the other tolerable scholarship students she’d been

chatting up. They all looked at me like I'd grown another head.

"What?" I asked. "You guys saw him grab me. Can't let him think he can do that—to me or any other girl."

Chad was still yelling obscenities behind me somewhere while other partygoers whooped and shouted and talked over one another, the bloodlust infecting the crowd and cranking up the volume in the room.

Mari hopped to her feet, smoothing her dress and pasting on her business face before she stalked toward me. "Let's get some air, shall we?" She looped her arm through mine and led me through the gauntlet of wary, appalled stares from my peers as we headed for the doors.

I went willingly—the night was a bust anyway. My mark was apparently rooted to his damn chair, never once wandering into the crowd where his pocket could be more easily picked.

Probably because I'd been thinking of him, my eyes collided with Bennett's as I made my exit. Harper had leaned into his space, her lips near his ear and her hand on his arm as she whispered something excitedly. He didn't respond to her. Instead, he just watched me as I walked toward the doors, dark fury radiating from those mossy green eyes.

Another time, Spencer. Just you wait.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN



“You don’t need to miss out on the party for me, girl,” I said to Mari after we’d sat in silence for a few minutes. The frigid night air had done me some good. I’d cooled off at least a little bit from my altercation with Chad, but I felt guilty that Mari was now freezing her ass off, sitting with me on a stone bench outside of A Dorm instead of enjoying herself inside.

“Are you sure?” she asked, hesitance clear in her voice. “I don’t mind heading back to C Dorm with you.”

“I’m sure.” I gave her a confident smile. “I’ve had enough of everyone’s shit for tonight.”

Enough of Chad’s shit, for sure.

Enough of watching Lisa, Harper, Annie, and other faceless girls rub all over the Heirs like they belonged to them.

Enough of being in the same room as the emotionless husks my ex-best friends had decided to become whenever I saw them.

I waved Mari away, sending her back to the party, then I got to my feet and started the uncomfortable trek back to C Dorm in these heels.

My way was lit by the soft yellow glow of the streetlamps that lined the campus sidewalk. It was quiet out here save for the low thumping of the music I could hear emanating from the open patio doors behind me at A Dorm. An occasional loud laugh or shriek sounded from the parties outside, but otherwise it was only me and the rustle of the fall leaves in the chilly wind. I shivered, quickening

my pace to get back to the heated comfort of my room before I could no longer feel my fingers.

I'd only just passed the entrance to B Dorm when I realized someone was following me.

Slowing my steps, I paused, bending down as if I was adjusting my uncomfortable shoe. I carefully stepped out of my heels, then I whirled around to face the idiots who'd decided to creep up on me.

"Uh-oh, she caught us," Chad droned, stepping into the light of the sidewalk lamp. He held up his hands in mock surrender, the broken ring and pinky fingers of his right hand now sporting what looked like a hasty tape job. "Those kids from the ghetto are probably used to always looking over their shoulders, right?"

"Is that right, Southside?" Chad's accomplice said with a sneer.

I recognized him—Cameron Murphy, Tier One student from one of the big banking families linked to Spencer. He was a tall, lanky guy with dark brown hair he'd let grow into a hideous mullet situation. I was pretty sure he was on the lacrosse team, and he was one of Chad's main lackeys.

He went on, looking at Chad. "You think she's scrappy? Got some fight in her?"

"I sure hope so, man," Chad purred, running his gross eyes up and down my body yet again.

I shouldn't have been surprised that Chad had decided my having broken his fingers in front of the entire school couldn't go unpunished. I'd been tired, frustrated that I was no closer to getting what I needed from Bennett, and had my big cozy bed on the brain, so I'd been caught off guard.

Fighting off not one but two meathead assholes had not been in my evening plans.

I said nothing, eyeing the both of them as I shifted back and forth on my bare feet. The concrete was freezing underneath them, but I'd been barefoot in the cage many times. It was certainly preferable to fighting in Mari's stilettos.

"What, *now* you decide to keep your obnoxious mouth shut?" Chad snapped, advancing toward me. "You need to learn a fucking lesson, Southside."

“You need to learn to keep your disgusting hands to yourself, asshole,” I replied. “I suggest you and Beavis over there turn around and go back to burying yourself in booze and willing girls. I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Too fucking bad,” he shouted in my face. “You’re a mouthy, insolent bitch who thinks the rules of this Academy—of this fucking *City*—don’t apply to her. Maybe if we break that pretty face a little bit, you’ll remember your fucking place.”

He swung his fist right at my nose. I threw an arm up to block the hit before ramming my knee right into his thick stomach and knocking the wind out of him straight away.

“Fuck!” he shouted, staggering back.

I had to move quick because I’d seen Chad at Fight Night, and he wasn’t a slouch. He’d just underestimated me, a girl, and he wouldn’t make the same mistake again if I didn’t put this shit to bed as soon as possible.

Cameron ran for me, attempting to tackle me to the ground, but I quickly stepped out of the way, breaking the loose hold he managed to get around my arm. He was sloppy, not trained as Chad was, so I made quick work of jamming a foot straight into his knee.

“Fucking *shit*,” he wailed and fell to the ground, and I knew I needed to get him out of commission quickly or else I risked being overpowered by the two of them together.

Chad had recovered and came at me again, grabbing me around the middle and tossing me sideways. I hit the ground hard and rolled to my hands and knees, scurrying away from Chad and over to Cameron who was on his ass, trying to get to his feet with a fucked-up knee. I jumped on top of him, slamming his back to the ground and pinning his boney elbows with my knees.

“Lights out, motherfucker,” I hissed, then I rammed my fist straight into the fragile bone of his temple, knocking him right out.

I had no time to enjoy that lovely moment before Chad was on me again. He yanked me off of his unconscious friend and then threw his big body on top of me with a roar. We struggled, hands and fists flying. He landed a hard punch straight into my cheekbone right before I managed to ram my foot into his junk. He seized up, and I rolled him off of me with a mighty heave.

My face throbbed, and the world spun for a few seconds as I tried to get to my feet. Blood trickled down my cheek, and I cursed Chad for yet another fucking gash in my skull Dom was going to have to fix for me.

I didn't have my usual knife in my shoe since I'd let Mari talk me into sexy high heels for the evening, but I didn't live through listening as my parents were murdered in front of me without the kind of lasting trauma that required me to always have a weapon of some kind on me to feel any sense of security.

As Chad recovered from the hard shot to his nuts, he crawled toward me as I stood up, hooking his uninjured hand around my ankle and yanking it in a move meant to take me to the ground again. I stumbled, falling to my knees. Before Chad could crawl on top of me again, I ripped the switchblade from its nest inside my bra, flicked it open, and with all the strength I could muster, I twisted around and jammed the blade down on Chad's hand, stabbing straight through the top of it and nearly impaling my own fucking foot in the process.

"Oh, fuck, oh my God!" he screamed as I twisted the blade in his meaty hand. "What the fuck, you crazy bitch!"

He rolled onto his back, and I took the opportunity to kick him hard in the ribs before I crawled on top of him.

I sat on his chest, watching in fascination for a few seconds as he cried and cradled his bloody hand, the silver of the blade's tip just peeking through his palm.

After I'd had my fill, I grabbed the hilt and yanked it out while he screamed. I wiped the blade clean of his blood using his dirty, sweat-soaked white polo shirt, wrinkling my nose in disgust. "Fucking gross, Chad," I muttered.

He started rocking underneath me, trying in vain to buck me off as he moaned in pain.

"Nope, stop that," I ordered him, pressing my blade to the base of his throat. "Don't you fucking move."

He stilled, sucking in shaky breaths as he looked at me in wide-eyed terror.

"Good boy," I cooed. Fuck, my face hurt. "Now, listen carefully to what I'm about to say. You're going to get your pathetic ass up, and

you're going to walk yourself and Murphy back over there to A Dorm. You're going to sneak in the back so no one sees you, and you're going to say nothing about what happened here tonight. Are you understanding me?"

When he didn't reply, I pressed my blade harder into his throat, drawing just a little blood.

"Ah! Fuck, okay, yes!" he screeched.

"Call a car, or whatever it is you people do, and go get patched up. Tell your parents you got mugged outside the gates, or whatever—I don't give a shit."

He tried to nod but then let out a pained hiss as the movement pressed my blade further into his throat further.

"I'm serious, Chad," I growled, getting right up into his face. "If I hear even a whisper about this, your browser history and some interesting files you have on your laptop are going to become public information."

"What... the fuck... are you talking about?" he wheezed.

I shook my head like I was very disappointed in him. "Tsk. I think you know those girls are all underage, Chaddy. Don't try to deny it. It does make sense, though." I leaned in further, getting almost nose to nose with him before I whispered, "Because Daddy has the same tastes, doesn't he?"

Chad had gone white as a sheet, and whether it was from blood loss or fear, I didn't know nor give a shit.

"Who the fuck are you?" he croaked.

I chuckled. "I'm a ghost, asshole." Then, slowly and with great care, I climbed off of him and got to my feet. I looked down at him, twirling my knife lazily through my fingers. I pointed back toward A Dorm. "Get the fuck out of my sight."

After a few failed attempts, Chad managed to get upright on his shaky legs. He pulled his shirt off with trembling hands and wrapped it around his bleeding palm. He hobbled over to rouse Cameron enough to get him to his feet, and I watched as they limped slowly away.

Suddenly everything hurt, and I was very cold.

I trudged over to the nearest seat—the front steps of B Dorm—and I dropped my ass onto the bottom step. I felt my adrenaline

crashing, and I sucked in a few deep breaths. I stayed there, working on controlling my breathing while my head throbbed, and I watched Chad and Cameron plodding off in the distance as they finally disappeared behind A Dorm.

I hung my head in my hands, willing myself to get up the motivation to walk the rest of the way to my dorm.

After a few minutes, two black-booted feet appeared on the sidewalk in front of me. I lifted my head from my hands just as Zach knelt, bringing himself down to my level to look into my face with those depthless dark eyes.

A hint of a frown tugged at the corners of his lush mouth before it disappeared in an instant, replaced by his usual cocky smirk. He reached up, cupping my swelling cheek with his big hand before rubbing his thumb gently across the bleeding cut there. He pulled his hand away, glancing at his now bloody thumb, then he wiped himself clean on his expensive T-shirt like it was a cheap rag.

“Had enough yet, Princess?” he whispered, eyeing my injury with what looked like amusement.

I wondered if he’d somehow seen the state of Chad and Cameron, but if he had, I doubted he’d have thought any of this was funny.

“It’s just a scratch,” I said, emotionless. I didn’t want to do this with him—with any of them—anymore. They’d made it clear where they stood with me, as I had with them, and I needed to remember that.

His smirk morphed into something more serious. “Eventually, it won’t be just a scratch,” he replied ominously. Then he rose, and he didn’t offer me a hand to do the same. “Go home, Princess.”

As he turned to leave, I muttered, “Someday, Zach.”

He paused, tossing a look of confusion at me over his shoulder, but then he shrugged and ambled off, whistling like he didn’t have a care in the world.

I shifted, pulling my phone from my back pocket, thankful the tight leather had kept it secure through all of the bullshit of the night.

I dialed Max.

“What’s up?”

“Hey,” I said, licking my chapped lips. “I want to come home tonight.”

“Now? It’s pretty late—are you sure?”

“Yeah,” I replied, my voice cracking slightly. “Can you please... come get me?”

Max was silent for a moment. “I’ll be on the next train out.”

“Thanks. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I couldn’t wait to see the back of this place.

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CHAPTER TWENTY



“Dom, are we sure she needs to keep doing this?” Laura stood in our little kitchen, wearing her robe and wringing her hands. She gave her husband her widest, most pleading eyes. “This is the second time you’ve had to patch her up in a month!”

Dom hovered over me where I sat obediently on one of our barstools. Max had half an ass cheek on the corner of the couch where he leaned casually with his arms crossed, giving me a stern glare.

“Baby, it’s not up to me,” Dom replied as he finished gluing the skin of my face back together. “And look—good as new now. She didn’t even need stitches this time.”

Laura rolled her eyes at him before she looked at me, pouting. “I don’t like this.”

“Laura, I’ve had worse injuries than this from sparring at Dom’s gym,” I pointed out. “And you should see the other guy.”

“I am going to murder Hendrickson,” Max announced. “Right after I murder my sister for neglecting to give me a heads-up that I was going to find her *bleeding* when she asked me to come get her from school out of the blue.”

“You are all overreacting,” I griped. “I’m fine. And I literally put a knife through Chad’s hand. He’s under control.”

Dom paused where he was packing the first aid kit at the kitchen counter. “You *what?*”

“Are you fucking serious?” Max said at the same time, a smile back on his face.

Laura handed me an ice pack, and I pressed it to my tender cheekbone. “Look, I let him know we have the receipts for his *and* his daddy’s kiddie porn addiction. He’ll keep his mouth shut.”

Dom sighed, wrapping an arm around Laura where they were both now reclined against the kitchen counter. “We knew this was going to be a dangerous game. And we’re only just getting started.”

I took the four steps required to get from the kitchen to the couch and sank into the cushions. Max joined me, grabbing my free hand and squeezing, like he was reassuring himself that I was here and okay.

“I’ll get us into Spencer Tower,” I said, the determination I felt warring with exhaustion. I looked over my shoulder back at where Dom stood in the kitchen. “I won’t let you down.”

He gave me a wan smile. “I know, Jojo. But this only goes as far as you want it to. I’d rather you be safe—that’s more important than justice for your parents *or* the people I’ve lost.”

I knew he felt that way, but I wasn’t going to let a few bullies run me out of the Academy when there was still so much to be done.

But for now, I wanted to pass out in my bunk with Max tucked safely in his bed below mine, and I wanted not to think about the Academy, the Families, or the Heirs for an entire week.

So, that’s what I did.



Thanksgiving week at home was a wonderful break from what had become my reality at the Academy—though you could say that it was my seven years posing as Dom and Laura’s niece that had been a wonderful break from the reality that was my actual life.

Olde Town was beautiful in the fall. The leaves of the mature trees that lined Main Street had turned lovely shades of yellow and orange. Many of the old rowhouses that surrounded the main thoroughfare were decorated with festive autumn wreaths, and neat piles of fallen leaves dotted the curbs. Though the air had been

chilly, the skies were sunny, and I had a little pep in my step on every walk over to the Boathouse to visit Bruce and borrow his indoor rowers. He'd eyed my busted face with great suspicion, but he hadn't asked, and so I hadn't offered to elaborate.

Mari came down to visit midweek, dressed like a winter princess in a long white coat, sky-blue scarf, and gray heeled winter boots. She blew into Laura's bookstore with fancy coffees for Max and me and then spent the afternoon ignoring us to hang out with Laura, and Dom had been just as charmed by her when he popped his head in after work.

The bruises and healing cut on my face did not escape Mari's notice, either. I insisted my injuries were from training at Dom's gym, but she gave me a squinty-eyed glare that said she didn't exactly believe it. I was worried that if she knew the truth, she'd feel some guilt or blame that she'd gone back to the party instead of walking with me to C Dorm that night.

So, like the good friend I was trying to learn to be, I lied to her.

Once my face had healed up enough for Dom's liking, he lifted his ban on my visiting the gym. I spent a couple of afternoons fucking around with Max, saying hey to a few of our old friends who drifted in and out, but I stayed out of the cage—I'd had enough of beating the shit out of big, mean dudes for at least the next few months.

Poor Matt Jennings gave me a shy little wave when I arrived one afternoon and then proceeded to avoid me like the plague. I could've sat him down and explained that I didn't think less of him for running off at the command of an actual Heir of the Four Families, but also, I didn't have the energy, and it really was better for him to move on from any feelings he had about me, anyway.

The night before my return to the Academy, I finally caved to the itch to get back to plotting the demise of my enemies. I spent a few hours poring over the Spencer Tower blueprints while mindlessly twirling my knife in my hand like it would somehow help to spark some answers.

"We'll get there, Jojo," Max assured me. We were huddled on his bottom bunk, studying his tablet together. "Maybe you should just knock Spencer out and empty his pockets."

I snorted. “That would be cathartic.” With a dramatic sigh, I handed him the tablet and flopped back on the pillow. “I just have this gut feeling that James Spencer was the mastermind behind my parents’ murder. If I’m ever going to find anything that will help me understand *why* they did it, I think he’ll be the one to have it.”

Max nodded, shutting off the tablet and readying himself for bed. “Then we’ll find it. Dom and the team are ready to pull the trigger as soon as we get the keys.”

I sat up, gave him a kiss on his cheek, and then climbed up into my top bunk and crawled under the covers.

That night, I dreamed of young Bennett, Zach, and Noah once again, but this time, I was the one with the gun and the blood on my hands.



When I walked into the dining hall on Monday morning, I felt the eyes of every student present swing in my direction. I sensed the usual loud buzz of chatter suddenly go eerily quiet, even with “Set Phasers to Stun” by Taking Back Sunday drumming in my ears.

My plan had been to grab a coffee and a bagel and duck back outside to call Dom, but I’d be damned if I let these cretins think they could run me out of the dining hall with their hateful looks and conspiratorial whispering.

So, I grabbed a plate and proceeded to pile it high with eggs, bacon, and fruit. I poured myself a giant coffee, then I made myself comfortable at the open end of a table right in the middle of the room.

“Chad, you said she wasn’t coming back!” Lisa’s whine carried from the front of the hall where the top students sat at the feet of their princes.

“The bitch is stupid—what do you expect?” Harper added, loudly.

“Will you guys please *stop* giving her attention?” Annie snapped, and *that* I agreed with.

I stared at them, quirked a questioning eyebrow at Chad, who was sulking over his plate like he was mad at the world.

He glared at me, and I took in his heavily bandaged hand with quiet glee.

My makeup covered the lingering bruising on my face, so except for Zach—and by extension probably Bennett and Noah—no one else knew I'd been involved in a bit of a dustup after I broke Chad's fingers.

I couldn't wait to hear what Chad was telling everyone had happened to his hand.

Of course, thoughts of my brief meeting with Zach had me peering up at where the exalted ones sat looking hot and bored and unperturbed by the shouting and griping below them.

"Chad, you can't let this stand," Lisa hissed. "We *all* saw what she did."

"Drop it, Lisa," Chad barked.

The table quieted, and I continued to leisurely eat my breakfast while I smirked at Chad, who was now trying to murder me with his eyes from where he sat.

Unfortunately, Chad's glum attitude and refusal to participate in plotting against me snagged the attention of the Heirs. Bennett's intense scrutinizing glare was now aimed in my direction. Zach's usual lazy smile had faded to irritation, and he was now puzzling over me as he realized that he might not have the whole story from that night. Noah just looked tired.

"Ugh, who pissed in your crepes this morning?" Harper griped at Chad.

"Seriously, dude," Dane said, nudging him with a laugh. "Buck up. The trash will take itself out."

"Exactly," Annie said, reaching across the table to rub Chad's arm affectionately. "We'll handle it."

Her declaration appeased the masses, I guess, because the usual lively hubbub of the dining hall started up again, and more than a few dirty looks were thrown in my direction.

Mari, who had dropped into the chair next to me midway through all of this, huffed out a sigh. "I think the peace and quiet is over."

"Yep." I tossed back the rest of my coffee and got to my feet, smoothing my worn white sweater that was currently hanging loose off one of my shoulders before slinging my backpack onto my

shoulders. I eyed Chad's bandaged hand and the now professional-looking tape job on the broken fingers of his other hand before giving him a shitty little wave.

I leaned down to whisper into Mari's ear before I made my exit. "Worth it."



The week that followed was a true test of my patience.

The insults and jeers that had on occasion been tossed at me in the hallways and other shared spaces increased dramatically, which meant I generally couldn't stick my head out of my dorm room without being yelled at for being either poor trash from Southside or a loose skanky whore spreading diseases around the Academy.

I quit showering in the locker room after crew practice when I caught someone trying to sneak photos of me from under the stall door. The girl ended up with a broken hand after I stomped on it before she could get the shot, but I had Max monitoring the Academy listserv for days just in case a naked photo of me did end up being passed around the school after all.

I was pushed and tripped when I entered and exited class. Guys propositioned me for paid sex daily. Lisa even tried to get me with a whole mug of scalding hot coffee one morning at breakfast, and I'd only avoided first-degree burns on my exposed skin because I was constantly on my guard, so I'd seen her coming and jumped quickly out of the way.

While Chad refrained from directly participating in any of the bullshit aimed at me, he had plenty of minions willing to mete out what they thought was justice in his name. Mari did what she could, but she couldn't be by my side all day long to scare away the sheep with scathing Spanish insults and threats to bankrupt lower families.

The thing was, if I'd been told exactly what I'd be dealing with because of my decision to break Chad's fingers, I knew deep down I'd still have done it—every single time.

Through it all, I managed to get all my final papers and projects turned in, so I would be coasting through the last few weeks of the

semester. My early morning workouts were still a place of solace, and I was feeling ready for the Holywell Chase on Saturday.

My only failure was with respect to my most important job—Bennett.

Other than in the dining hall, our shared classes, and from afar at crew practice, I never saw him. The Heirs hadn't even invaded my weight room on our designated days this week. They stayed above the fray, as usual, observing as their loyal subjects did their best to run me out of school. They still watched me sometimes, too, but distrust and suspicion finally dampened the fire that used to burn between us.

By the time Friday rolled around, I was exhausted but focused. I was going to kick ass at the Chase this weekend, and then I was going to get myself the key to James Spencer's darkest fucking secrets.

And then I was going to ruin him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I finished tying my shoes with several angry pulls on the laces. The excited chatter and laughing in the locker room around me made it clear that no one else on the team was as put out as I was with their crew assignment for tomorrow's race.

Coach had put me in a coxless four with Harper and two of her cronies, and after the week I'd had, I was not into it. It was Friday afternoon, and we were about to begin our pre-race practice—a trial run of the course with our newly assigned crews.

"Yes, any day now we expect the negotiations to be finalized," Harper prattled on from the other side of the locker room, her huddle of adoring fans getting ready around her. She held out her hand to admire her naked finger as if there was a giant diamond there. "I could be engaged before the beginning of next semester!"

I smothered the possessive beast that tried her rear her head inside of me over that bitch touching one of *my* boys—because they weren't mine and hadn't been for a long time.

"Hey, trash," Harper called as the rest of the team began to file out of the locker room. "Move your ass. You better not slow us down."

I ignored her, forcing myself to my feet. I pulled on my long-sleeved crew shirt because it was cold as shit outside, and then I took my place in line, marching down to the dock like I was on my way to the gallows.

The expansive dock was abuzz with activity. Staff from the athletic department were readying the area for the influx of visiting teams that would arrive tomorrow, and members of the men's team, which had held their practice earlier in the afternoon, were milling about as they cheered in the last of the crews running their time trial of the three-mile race.

Bennett's team of eight pulled hard across the finish line, their coxswain announcing through his bullhorn that they'd beat their fastest time on this course. If they could replicate that tomorrow, they'd have a great shot at beating the team from New Jersey that was currently ranked first in the nation.

I watched as they all celebrated together—a huge accomplishment after months of preparation—and the big beaming smile that bloomed across Bennett's face hit me like a punch to the gut.

I hadn't seen him smile like *that*—so bright and genuine—since we were little kids. I'd thought the last seven years had stomped that kind of happiness right out of him.

Harper dropped the oar she'd been about to load into our boat to clap and cheer, waving at Bennett like a loon.

"Jansen, get your crew hands on now," Coach Janet barked as she stalked past us on her way back up to her office to finish planning for the big event. "I expect this to be our fastest four."

With that, we loaded into our shell, each of us manning our oar and preparing to start strong when it was our turn to head out.

"Let's do this, ladies," Harper yelled from her position at the stern.

"Keep up, Southside, and don't touch me," Bettina Gomez spat at me, apparently unhappy about getting stuck in middle crew with the freshman who had poverty germs she was afraid to catch.

We moved into position out on the water. The racecourse, already marked by colorful buoys, would take us down the west fork of the Obsidian River and out into the wide open water to the south of the City for about a mile, and then we'd loop around and head back.

We would be one of the last of the day to take our practice run. The afternoon sun had already begun to sink in the sky, the clouds of

the early December day doing little to help warm us up as we floated on the water, waiting for the other crews to clear out ahead of us.

"You all know what to do," Harper said to the team, giving me a smug little smile.

Well, that set off a tiny alarm bell in my brain, but I had no time to linger on it because she immediately began to call us to the ready.

"All four, sit ready to row," Harper barked. "Row!"

And then we were off, all of us pulling at our oars in synchrony and with everything we had.

We pulled away from the dock and out onto the open water. I zoned out, focusing on my form and my breathing as Harper steered us south. After several hard minutes, the Academy had faded into the distance, and the ornate skyscrapers of the City proper had come into view. The wind whipped at us, blowing across our bow from the west while we continued to drive south, away from the City's shores.

"Full pressure!" Harper shouted at us, commanding us to row all out as we headed for the buoy that would mark our turnaround.

We were making excellent time, and for about sixty seconds, I decided to give Janet credit for throwing me into this boat full of terrible girls who loathed me, because it was definitely shaping up to be a winning combination for tomorrow.

"Spinning!" Harper barked a minute later as we pulled past the final buoy, the City now at least a mile off in the distance.

I adjusted my strokes, expecting to begin the turn, but I realized instantly that the rest of the crew continued to go full steam ahead as Harper steered us straight past the buoy and further down river.

"What the fuck!" I shouted, whipping around to glare at her. "I know you didn't just miss that turn!"

She stuck her lower lip out at me, feigning a confused look. "Oh, did I?"

Shit.

I watched with great irritation as the few other crews that were near us on the course made the turn and began their return north and back to the Academy. Harper was deliberately fucking up our pre-race run with the full cooperation of the rest of my teammates,

and I knew there was likely only one reason she'd want to give up being prepared to win tomorrow and all the glory that came with it.

She'd give up that little bit of glory if she could return to the Academy docks, bragging to her friends—and the Heirs—that she'd finally gotten one over on the Southside trash.

I jammed my oar into the water, trying desperately to drag the boat down, and while that slowed us, it wasn't going to get me back to the Academy.

"Okay, that's enough!" Harper shouted to the others. I watched as they released their oars, and I heard her do the same behind me. "It's the end of the line for you, gutter slut."

I dropped my oar and gripped the sides of the shell with everything I had, jerking my head around to glare at her. "Fuck you, Jansen. Did you forget the little video clip I still have in my possession?"

She scoffed. "I'm not afraid of anything you *think* you can do to me, skank. It was a nice try, though."

Then she grabbed at my right arm while Bettina and the other traitorous bitch in the boat climbed into my space to try to dislodge my other arm.

I kicked and screamed. I called them every dirty name under the sun. I managed to punch Bettina in the nose and elbow Harper hard enough in the ribs that she fell back into her seat. But we were in a tiny fucking rowing shell that gave me no room to maneuver to fight, and there were three of them and one of me.

They finally managed to dislodge me after a minute of me screaming and clawing at them like a rabid wildcat, and then they shoved me overboard and into the dark, cold water of the Obsidian River.

I hit the water hard, and the icy shock of the river knocked the wind right out of me. I kicked back to the surface, sucking in huge, shaky breaths as my head popped out of the water.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Later, bitch!" Harper cackled at me as the three of them began to row away. "Better start swimming! Can't blackmail me if you're dead!"

I coughed and sputtered, using every ounce of energy I had to just keep fucking breathing as I treaded water. There was no use trying to paddle after them—even with a lopsided crew they were going to be long gone in a matter of minutes.

“Fuck,” I croaked. *“Fuck.”*

Not again.

I spun in a frantic circle, trying to figure out where exactly I was. The waning daylight and the cloudy skies made my visibility shit. Knowing the rough mileage of how far we’d gone on the racecourse, I could only guess that where I was currently floating—treading water and slowly freezing to death—put me about as far from Bruce’s boathouse as from the Academy. Trying to get to either place would mean swimming about a mile, most of it in the dark.

My heart started to pound, my vision narrowing, the sounds of the choppy water sloshing around me fading as my ears started to ring.

Shit, shit, shit.

Just fucking swim, Jolie!

Through the fog, I tried to assess the situation: I was a strong swimmer and could swim a mile in half an hour on a good day. I also knew the temperature of the river was around fifty degrees this time of year, which meant I had to be out of here in an hour or I was well and truly fucked.

I surged forward, kicking and flailing, and I decided on the fly that following the race markers floating in the water back to the Academy was the safest bet as I was losing daylight.

My arms were so heavy, my fingers already going numb, and I didn’t know how long I’d be able to feel my feet. I started kicking, focusing on the rhythm of my legs, and then I swam as hard as I could, sucking in rapid, harsh breaths that burned my throat.

I will not die out here in this fucking river.

I will make it home.

I will see Max again.

I will see Dom and Laura again.

I will tear down this God-forsaken City in the name of Mom and Dad.

I will wrap my hands around Harper Jansen’s delicate little neck and watch as the life leaves her eyes.

Mom.

Dad.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

Follow the buoys, Jolie.

Get home.

I felt dizzy. I hoped I was still going in the right direction.

I was so cold.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

On and on.

And on.

I swam forever.

It was really getting dark now.

I could see lights. I was right next to the buoys. That was good.

I flexed my feet that were now bare since I'd sent my shoes to the bottom of the river a long time ago, desperately trying to keep feeling in them.

It was so dark. I was so cold.

I see boats.

I don't want to die. Not yet.

I was getting closer. I had to be. I was still near the buoys. I could see the dock.

Kick, stroke, breathe.

There was no one left out here. Practice was long since over. No one came looking for me.

There! I was by the dock. I just had to grab it and hold on, then I could rest.

I reached out, but I missed. Shit, where was I?

A big hand surged into the water, grasping my numb, outstretched arm. I was hauled upward, my soaking-wet trembling body flopped onto the dock, and then suddenly I was lifted into strong arms.

"Fuck. Shit. *Shit*. Hang on, Joanna. Just hang on."

The world was spinning around me, and I sucked in desperate, dragging breaths, willing my heart to stop pounding so hard.

And I was so fucking cold.

I tucked my face into the neck of the man who'd pulled me from the river as he ran with me in his arms, his familiar scent wrapping around me, and I gripped him tighter as I let out a pitiful little whine.

"Bennett."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



I lost track of where I was except that I was in Bennett's arms. I heard the loud slamming of a door, and the warmth of central heating enveloped me.

The locker room.

The lights were off except for the emergency bulb above the door, leaving most of the room shrouded in shadows. Bennett strode quickly through the room and into the shower area, and before I knew it, I was out of his arms and thrust into a stall. He cranked the water on, turning the temperature to just barely warm, and then he pulled me into the stream by my soaking wet shirt.

"Take this off," he demanded, the urgency in his voice a shock to my battered system. "Your shirt and your trou. Get them off before you freeze to death."

"Okay," I mumbled. I yanked at my shirt, but it was stuck to me.

"Shit, here." He stripped me quickly, ripping my shirt over my head and pulling my shorts down to my ankles, leaving me only in my black sports bra and simple black cotton panties. I stepped out of my shorts, and he grabbed my shoulders with his big hands and pushed my back to the tile wall, letting me rest against it as he angled the showerhead so that the water was aimed at my torso.

I trembled, the lukewarm water heating my core as the numbness slowly began to recede from my extremities, but it wasn't calming the buzzing in my ears or fixing my tunnel vision or helping me fucking breathe normally.

"Hey," Bennett snapped, grasping the sides of my face and forcing me to look into those mossy green eyes I remembered so well. There was barely any light where we stood, but I could *feel* the intensity of his stare, the deep frown marring his handsome face, and the hard grind of his jaw as he assessed me intently. "Look at me," he demanded. "Breathe. You're safe in here. Just *breathe*."

"Bennett," I said, teeth chattering. "I'm trying.... I can't. I can't breathe."

"You're having a panic attack," he said, still cradling my face. "Breathe with me. In and out. In and out." He sucked in a big breath and blew it out slowly, repeating the same pattern. I watched him, trying to match his breaths, and after a long, hard minute, I was able to slow my breathing enough to do it.

"Good girl," he said, his gruff praise threatening to stir something deep within me, even in my state. "Are you warming up?"

"Yeah," I said, still shaking. "I just... I fucking hate that river, Bennett. I hate it."

"Interesting sentiment for someone who's been rowing on that river for years," he replied. He stepped closer to me, turning off the water as he pulled the lone towel from the rack nearby and wrapped it around me. He still wore his long sleeve crew T-shirt and tight black sweatpants, both a little damp at this point, and he studied my tortured face. "Stop thinking about the river," he commanded. "Stop it."

"I can't," I moaned. It would be in my nightmares forever. He didn't understand.

He moved his hands down to my bare hips, his fingers grazing the skin just above my panties. Then he pulled me in close, enveloping me in his arms, and I could feel the warmth of his body as he held me tightly. He rubbed my back with his big hands, still trying to calm me down, and we stood there, wrapped around each other in that warm shower for several long, quiet minutes as I sucked in big, shaky breaths.

I realized that while all of this had warmed me up considerably, bringing my brain back online, Bennett's hands on my body were beginning to stoke a different kind of warmth in my belly that I had no strength left in me to smother.

“You’re still shaking,” he whispered, pulling back to look at me again. “What do you need?” His strong fingers dug into the skin at my hips. “*What?*” he asked again, now back to be bossy and demanding.

You.

“Distract me,” I croaked.

His green eyes heated at my plea. “Okay, focus on me,” he rumbled, dragging my eyes back to his again. “Just me.”

Then his hand dipped into the front of my panties, and he wasted no time in dragging his fingers down through my folds and straight to my clit.

Instead of batting him away for being a presumptuous shithead, I widened my legs to give him better access, our eyes still locked as my breath hitched.

He began to move his fingers in slow circles, coaxing me to follow him down this path, and all I could do was bite my lower lip and let out a tiny moan.

“Yeah?” he whispered, applying just a little more pressure on that sensitive bundle of nerves. “Better?”

“Better,” I breathed, my heart now pounding for a different reason. “More.”

He grinned at my demand, slow and sexy. “Are you wet for me?”

“My whole fucking body is wet, Spencer,” I snapped at him, his lazy, tortuous teasing of my clit driving me nuts.

He shook his head at me with a wry chuckle, like he’d expected my sass, right before he drove two thick fingers into me, both sliding in with little resistance because I hadn’t been lying.

He closed his eyes, groaning, before he snapped them back open to watch my face with rapt attention as I cried out, my scream at his sudden invasion turning to an obscene moan as he hooked his fingers right into my G-spot.

“Fuck, Bennett,” I whimpered as he began to thrust his fingers in and out of me, the heel of his hand hitting my clit with every stroke. “Oh shit.”

“Eyes on me,” he growled when my eyes fluttered closed, the pleasure that was building in my core threatening to overwhelm me. “Watch what I’m doing to you.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered in what was nearly a whine as my eyes snapped back to his gorgeous face. I lifted my hands to grip him by his damp shoulders as he upped his pace, his fingers working furiously inside me and his hand rubbing against my clit with hard, fast pressure. “*Bennett.*”

“Yes,” he rasped. “Say my fucking name when you come. Forget everything else. There is *nothing* else except my fingers in your pussy and my name on your lips.”

Jesus Christ, I was never going to come back from this. That fucking river took everything out of me, and now Bennett was just going to fill me back up with *him*.

“Bennett,” I gasped. I was wound so tight, teetering right on the edge. “Fuck, I’m going to come. Oh my God.”

Groaning, he drove his fingers harder, his free hand pinning me to the wall so that all I could do was stand there and *take* it.

And then Bennett Spencer, the boy I used to build blanket forts with and chase around the house with a plunger that I claimed was a sword, the boy I used to goad into a temper tantrum over games of Monopoly and slumber peacefully next to in a sleeping bag on the floor of his living room, dragged from me the very first orgasm I’d ever had that wasn’t by my own hand.

I screamed, pleasure rocketing from my core through my no-longer-numb limbs, and I gripped Bennett’s shoulders so hard he would be left with the imprint of my fingernails for days.

“Bennett!” I cried.

“Fuck yes,” he hissed. “Come for me.”

I whimpered, the aftershocks pulsing through me, and I was spent—finished, done for, never coming back. I slumped further down the wall, and he steadied me as my orgasm finally ebbed. We stared at each other, both of us panting now, and he finally pulled his hand from my panties.

He stepped away, disappearing out of the shower for a few seconds before he returned with a towel tossed around his shoulders. He moved in close, cupping my cheek with one hand and directing my attention back to his face again. The hard glint in his mossy eyes told me this hot little detour was now over, and we were getting back to business.

“Withdraw from Holywell and transfer to a new school next semester,” he said, his words somehow gentle but still dripping with authority. “If you try to come back here after the holidays, I’ll have your scholarship pulled.”

I could only give him a flat stare back. Arguing with him about this would accomplish nothing.

“You could have died!” he barked, irritated by my silence, and the flash of distress on his face as he uttered those words was so fleeting, I must have imagined it. “This ends now, Joanna. This is not the place for you.”

I sighed. I was so, so tired. “You can leave now, Bennett. Thanks for not letting me drown.”

He released his hold on my head, now staring down at me with a cold and calculating look. The silence that lingered between us was deafening, disturbed only by the sound of the slow drip of remaining water from the showerhead. He finally turned away, tossing his towel into a corner on the floor and stalking out of the locker room without a backward glance.

I stood in the empty shower, wrapped up in my towel, and I let the events of the evening finally sink in. Everything was so fucked up, and I needed to sleep for a week.

“Too bad I can’t do that,” I murmured to myself, lifting my hand to stare at what I’d been hiding in my clenched fist.

Bennett’s key ring dangled from my fingers, his Spencer Tower key fob glinting in the low light of the shower room like a priceless treasure.

My head was finally clear. It was time to fucking do this.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“Clear!” Max said in a low voice, his words amplified by the earpiece I wore in my right ear. “Entering back alley now.”

We crept into the deserted alley behind Spencer Tower where the door to the internal fire escape stairwell was located. We knew from general reconnaissance that security guards occasionally used this spot for smoke breaks, but fortunately for whomever was on duty tonight, they’d decided not to time their break with our heist.

Max and I were both armed and were not going to hesitate to hurt anyone who got in our way—there was no time to fuck around. Once we used Bennett’s fob to enter the building, we risked alerting anyone who might be monitoring the Heir’s comings and goings that something unusual was going on. We were going in with brute force, if necessary, because this was our one shot at getting into James Spencer’s personal safe.

It was also possible this would all be over before it began, depending on whether Bennett had already figured out his fob was missing and alerted Spencer security to revoke its access. I’d done my best to buy us time, breaking his key chain like it had been dropped and stepped on somewhere on the path from the docks to the locker room, and I’d strewn his car key haphazardly in the grass nearby. If he retraced his steps, he’d at least spend *some* time hunting for the fob on the vast lawn that separated the docks from the locker rooms.

It had been exactly ninety minutes since he'd left me in that shower. Adrenaline coursed through my veins at the prospect of finally getting Spencer Tower, and it was the only reason I was able to keep my feet moving under me. Max hadn't been lying when he said everything was ready to go as soon as I pulled the trigger. We'd known that of all the jobs, this one was going to have the fastest running clock.

"External cameras have been handled," Dom said into our ears. "As have the cameras in the stairwell until you get to penthouse level, so be prepared."

Our team had attempted to hack the Spencer penthouse cameras many times, but they'd been unsuccessful. Fortunately, Spencer only kept security cameras on external entrances and in the one elevator with penthouse access. Like the Hargraves, they didn't want cameras in their most private space, no matter how unhackable they supposedly were.

"Showtime," I said as we approached the door. "Let's hope Bennett hasn't sounded the alarm yet."

I pulled the fob from the pocket of my black tactical pants and pressed it to the sensor next to the heavy gray door. It beeped, the lock on the door disengaging with a loud clunk, and we were in.

Then we began the long trek up sixty-five flights of hard, concrete stairs. It was eight thirty on a Friday night, so there was a chance we could encounter someone choosing to take the stairs between floors on this side of the building instead of waiting for an elevator, but fortunately for us, none of the tower's occupants chose to venture into the dank, cold staircase this evening.

By the fortieth floor I was sweating under my helmet and balaclava, and my legs were so goddamn tired already from my strenuous swim earlier tonight. Max had plied me with an energy bar and a smoothie on the way over here, but it hadn't cured the bone-deep exhaustion I felt from everything I'd endured.

That included Bennett making me come so hard I'd nearly lost feeling in my legs for a second time that night. I'd sort out my feelings about that another time.

"Come on, Jojo," Max urged, still taking the stairs two at a time with boundless energy. "Nearly there. We'll be in and out before you

know it, and then we'll go home and sleep for two days."

"Fuck yes," I replied, huffing as I willed my legs to just *move*. "I'm fine, I promise."

Finally—fucking *finally*—we reached the flight of stairs between the sixty-fourth and sixty-fifth floor, and we slowed our steps, pulling our guns from our belts once again.

Okay—Max had kept his gun aloft this entire time, but my arms were fucking tired, all right?

"Approaching penthouse entry," I said quietly.

"Camera will be positioned on the west-facing wall," Dom's voice informed us.

Max dropped low on the stairs and reached around the bottom of the landing to aim his gun at the camera.

"Disabling camera now."

With a quiet pop, he discharged his weapon, and the sharp crack of the camera's glass let us know he hit his target dead-on.

"Clear," I announced.

We moved swiftly onto the landing, and a nondescript lone black door awaited us.

"Moment of truth," I whispered, pulling Bennett's fob out once again. With any luck, he would still be scrambling around in the grass back at the Academy, looking for this little thing.

I held the fob to the small sensor next to the door, and with an audible pop, the lock disengaged.

Max pulled the door open wide enough for me to slip through. Holding his gun aloft, he followed me on light, quiet steps.

The entrance to the emergency exit in the Spencer penthouse was located down a small set of concrete steps at the corner of their pool deck—an expansive patio that jutted off of the lowest level of their three-story home at the very top of Spencer Tower.

I weathered the hard pang of nostalgia and longing that hit me as we skirted around the dark, quiet pool. The four of us Heirs had practically lived at each other's pools from Memorial Day to Labor Day every summer since we'd learned to swim, chauffeured around by whichever one of our nannies had been assigned the task at the time. Even shrouded in darkness, I could tell not much had changed

other than the fact that no more happy childhood memories were being made here and hadn't been for a long time.

"Pool deck is clear," Max reported to Dom. "There's a light on in the first-level living room."

We slinked along the outside railing, keeping out of view from inside the patio doors, and we prepared to enter the building.

"Spencer and his wife are still confirmed present at the Ferrero charity fundraiser at the Serpentis," Dom said, referencing one of Andrea's most profitable casinos. "And there's no sign of Bennett's car entering the vicinity."

I pulled the second gun I was wearing from my belt and checked it was loaded. "They don't keep a butler, but the housekeeper is probably here," I whispered. "Tranq gun at the ready."

"On three," Max murmured as we paused in the shadows up against the side of the building a few feet from the entrance. "One, two, three, *move*."

In one smooth motion, I darted to the door and swiped the fob across the sensor as Max pulled the door open. I slipped inside, entering the cavernous living room—dark except for the warm yellow glow of a single lamp on a nearby end table. Across the open floor plan and under the harsher light of the kitchen sconces, I spotted the dark gray bob of hair belonging to Mrs. Harris—the Spencers' longtime housekeeper and grouchiest woman alive—who was bustling around behind the sparkling white-marble kitchen counter.

I took aim at the back of her neck as I squeezed the trigger, and the dart flew from my gun with a soft pop.

She staggered, clutching at her neck, before she dropped to the spotless hardwood floor with an audible thud.

"First level is clear," I announced, motioning Max to follow me through the living room, across the expansive foyer, and to the stairs that led to the second and third levels.

"Get a move on," Dom urged. "We know the Spencer Enforcer team will have someone regularly monitoring the entries and exits from the penthouse, but we don't know how long it may take them to notice and flag the entry of Bennett's fob from the fire stairwell as odd—and that's if he hasn't already informed them it's missing."

We jogged up the stairs and hooked a left at the landing on the second floor. Tromping across the long, colorful rug lining the hallway that cost more than a luxury car, we headed straight for the door at the very end.

James Spencer's private study.

I ignored the open door to the oversized media room we passed on the way—too many memories, not enough time to deal with them.

We came to a stop at the closed white door, ready to pick the simple lock if necessary.

"Hell yeah," Max exclaimed under his breath when the knob turned with ease. "Someone got cocky."

"My dad never locked his study either," I whispered as we crept into the deserted office. I took in the floor-to-ceiling windows behind the large desk through which the bright lights of the City lent us enough light to allow a good view of the room. "At some point, you want to relax in your own home, you know? There's so much security already. Not that it helped him much in the end," I added with a sardonic scoff.

Max gave me his sympathetic eyes before he began casing the wall-to-wall bookshelves on the right-hand side of the study. "The safe is behind the books on one of these shelves?"

"Yeah, Bennett saw him access it once or twice as a kid and told us about it." We never had secrets from one another growing up, and it didn't seem like things had changed for them even after everything that had happened. What Bennett knew about his Family, the others likely did too.

"Oh, I see," Max said, and the happy dancing of his dark eyes told me he was grinning under his balaclava.

He yanked a row of books away from a shelf near the windows, and there was the small steel safe, neatly tucked back into an indentation in the wall. "Ready?"

I nodded, moving in next to him. I pulled my tools from the small pouch on my belt and got to work.

With my tiny screwdriver, I removed the screws connecting the small battery that sat behind the safe's control panel. I slid the thin, rectangular battery out, then I disengaged the panel itself, pulling it away from the front of the safe and exposing the wiring behind it.

"Here," I whispered to Max, yanking two of the colorful wires from their connection to the safe. "You're on."

Max pulled his little black box from his belt, plugging the two wires into it before entering a code.

The control panel beeped in my hand, and we were in.

"Do you want me to reset his passcode to fuck with him?" Max asked me as I pulled the safe's small door open.

"Yeah. Set it to 080215."

The night my parents were murdered. If he ever ventured to guess those numbers, he'd know we were fucking coming for him.

"Savage," Max replied, his fingers flying over the keys of his black box.

I peered inside the safe. There were a few thin brown file folders arranged in a neat pile, and I spotted a small silver flash drive shoved into the back corner, its shiny coating glinting in the lights of the City streaming through the windows.

I handed Max the folders before grabbing the flash drive, and I gasped as I turned it over in my gloved hand.

"This is my dad's," I whispered, the familiar small white letters engraved on the drive just visible in the low light.

J. Knight.

"That's a KnightKey500," Max added, looking over my shoulder. "Those things have serious built-in encryption and require, like, a two-hundred-character key. And they'll self-destruct after something like ten attempts to unlock it."

I knew this. My dad always had this on him, never letting it out of his sight. I'd always assumed it was just where he kept whatever project he was currently tinkering with.

I pocketed it. It was mine now.

"Can you scan what's in those folders so we can go through it later?" I asked Max as he started flipping through the papers.

"Yeah, I just need a few minutes," he replied, digging in his pack.

"Hey, you two," Dom's hushed voice came over our earpieces. "The elevator that leads to the penthouse is on the move. Spencer's still at the benefit, so it can't be him. It may stop on one of the higher floors below, but wrap it up, please."

"Shit."

Max leafed through the folders, rapidly taking pictures with his phone that would upload immediately to our server to be stored and reviewed. I reinstalled the keypad back in its place on the front of the safe, and once Max had tossed the folders back inside, I closed the safe door with a firm shove.

We scrambled to put the books back on the shelf in an attempt to buy even a little bit of time before James Spencer noticed someone had been in his precious safe, and then we slipped quietly from the office and shut the door.

I crept along the second-floor hallway with Max on my heels, our feet shuffling silently on the rug. We just needed to get back downstairs and out to the fire stairwell once again, and then we were home free. I'd even leave Bennett's fob for him on the kitchen counter as a thank you.

Just as we began our descent down the stairs, the foyer coming back into view, the elevator announced its arrival at the penthouse level with a loud ding.

We froze. I grabbed for my tranq gun in case it was Bennett. I knew couldn't kill him.

The doors opened, and Frankie *fucking* Fingers came strolling out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Shit, shit, shit.

Max had frozen at my back, awaiting my command. Frankie had exited the elevator while scrolling on his phone with a bored—or maybe annoyed—look on his face, so I had exactly one second to decide if we were going to engage in a firefight with the most feared Enforcer in all the Families—or if we were going to make a break for it.

“*Plan B*,” I hissed, turning on my heel and sprinting up the stairs after Max, who had leapt into action before I’d even finished speaking.

“Oh, what do we have here?” Frankie called out, our hasty retreat catching his attention.

“Shit! Get to the roof,” Dom barked into our ears.

We heard the pounding of booted feet behind us as we crested the stairs and hit the second-floor landing.

“And here I thought tonight was going to be boring,” Frankie said with a laugh as he ran after us. “Oh, come on! I just want to talk.”

Fuck that.

I followed Max as he careened around the corner and ran for the next flight of stairs leading to the third floor, located just on the other side of one of the hall bathrooms.

“Shit!” I shouted as a shot sounded, a bullet entering the wall right next to my head.

Max whipped his gun from its holster and let loose a few shots in Frankie's general vicinity, the bullets pinging off the walls around him since Max was still running for the stairs and not taking the time to aim.

Frankie ducked and rolled out of the way, still laughing, then he got to his feet and charged after us again.

We took the next set of stairs two at a time, Max increasing the distance between us as my legs were beginning to fail me. I jerked out of the way as another shot ricocheted off a light fixture above me, and it was becoming clear that Frankie wasn't trying to hit me directly.

He wanted to take us alive.

We reached the top of the stairs, arriving on the third floor while Frankie gained on us with every stride.

"Take a right! End of the hallway!" I shouted at Max, directing him to the stairwell that led to the roof.

He took off and I followed—or I tried to, but a strong hand wrapped around my ankle and took me to the floor.

"Fuck!" I growled, spinning to kick Frankie in his face with my boot. He dodged, his body draped across the top of the stairs below me, and my blow glanced off his shoulder instead.

"Ouch, babe," he said with a chuckle. "That wasn't nice."

We struggled, and he pulled me down onto the stairs. I leaned forward and swung a punch at his head. He blocked it, knocking my fist back and trying to climb on top of me to hold me down. I kicked at him before I rolled, scrambling to get purchase with my boots on the stairs. He latched onto my backpack, jerking me backwards, and I slipped out of it before he could send me tumbling down the stairs to an inevitable broken neck.

Max came charging back around the corner, gun held high, and Frankie dove out of the way right as Max fired at him again.

Max grabbed my hand and hauled me to my feet, dragging me back up the last few stairs and down the hall. I got my sea legs back and sprinted behind him, headed for the last staircase that would take us to the roof of the Tower where Spencer kept his helipad.

Get Max to the roof. Nothing else matters.

Frankie ran after us, recovering with impressive speed from his dive down the stairs. He fired shot after shot, one finally catching Max in his Kevlar vest. Max grunted, staggering a bit, and in that moment, my world tilted, my stomach dropped to the floor, and my legs tried to give out on me as I stumbled.

"I'm okay!" Max called, bounding to the stairs and beginning to climb. "Come on, Jojo, we're almost there!"

Breathing hard, I recovered, but not in time.

Frankie pounced on me, taking me to my stomach on the bottom half of the stairs.

"Shit!" Max was already at the top, and he turned to race back down.

"No! Go!" I shouted at him.

I yanked my knife from the sheath on my thigh, and then I rammed it backwards with everything I had into the hard body pinning me down.

"Ow, Jesus, babe," Frankie hissed, the blade entering the meaty flesh of his thigh.

I shoved him off me just in time for Max to pull me back to my feet again. We raced to the top of the stairs, flicked the deadbolt on the heavy door, and barreled through to the roof.

Max shoved the door closed, and we both jogged over to the nearest edge of the building, coming to a stop at the solid steel railing that ran around the rooftop's perimeter.

"Ready?" Max asked, turning to me, and then his eyes widened in horror. "Where's your pack?" he gasped.

I smiled ruefully. "Lost it on the stairs between the second and third floor wrestling with Frankie." I motioned urgently to the railing. "You have to go, Max. There's no way he hasn't alerted the Spencer Enforcer team by now. The two of us can't fight our way back out of here alone."

"No," he said fiercely, grabbing me by my biceps with both of his strong hands. "No fucking way. I am not leaving you here with that psychopath!"

"You have to."

"No!" He shook his head violently, squeezing my arms tight.

"Max, *please* go," I begged, my voice cracking. I blinked away the tears that threatened to well in my eyes. I had to be strong. "You *promised* me. You promised before we ever started this that if it came down to it, you would save yourself. This is *my* war. I can't watch them hurt you, Max. I won't do it."

"Jojo, *no*. I can't," he cried. A lone tear leaked from his eye, and the pain I felt in my damaged soul was devastating.

I hadn't known I could feel things like that anymore.

"You have to. They won't kill me, Max. They'll want information first. We have contingencies for this. You guys will get me back out in no time." My eyes were desperate—imploring him to listen. "*Please*. I can't let them have you. It would be so much worse."

The door banged open behind us.

"Go now!" I shouted at him.

"Fuck this so much," he spat, finally letting me go and climbing the railing. He looked back at me over his shoulder. "I love you, but fuck this so, so much."

He launched himself over the side, and I hurried to the edge, leaning over to watch as he fell. After a few seconds, he pulled his parachute, the black, rectangular fabric shooting from his pack and catching him in the air. He sailed gracefully away, disappearing behind the neighboring towers and into the darkness.

"We'll get you out, honey," Dom murmured in my ear, not quite hiding the wobble in his voice. "Don't worry."

"I know," I whispered back.

A gun cocked behind me. I let out a defeated breath, my shoulders sagging.

"That was impressive," Frankie said with a low whistle. "Here I thought I was finally going to be able to corral you both up here for a little chat. I wasn't expecting a BASE jump. And I pulled this off you entirely by accident!"

I turned to face him. He held his handgun aloft in one hand, aiming it straight at my head, and he lifted my pack in his other hand, taunting me with it.

I crossed my arms and stared him down. I wouldn't show these people fear.

Never.

Frankie walked toward me, favoring his injured leg a little bit. He'd removed my knife, but blood now soaked through the thigh of his ripped, acid-washed jeans. He wore another ratty homemade tank top, this one with "Nirvana" scrawled across the front in neon blue, and his dark hair flopped onto his sweaty forehead.

"Good. I see you're ready to behave," he purred. "I'm just very *curious*, you see. I really wasn't expecting this excitement when my dear nephew asked me to do a quick check on things up here since I was already at work in the basement."

He stopped in front of me, dropping my pack to the ground beside us, and he reached up to pull my balaclava down, exposing my face. The seconds felt like hours as he studied me, and then his eyes widened.

He barked out an incredulous laugh. "I'd been wondering just who it was that had the balls to break into James Spencer's fucking house. But of course—it's *you*, Little Knight."

My mouth fell open. I could only stare at him, speechless.

He lowered his gun, letting it hang loose in his hand at his side, and a wide smile broke out across his striking face. "And I thought Andrea was being so obnoxiously paranoid claiming someone had been in her basement office and moved her things an eighth of an inch out of place. But I bet that was you too?"

I just continued to gape at him.

"Shit, I apologize." He pulled me into a ridiculous bear hug. "How have you been? *Where* have you been?"

"Frankie, I-I..." I stammered.

"Fuck, you know what? Don't tell me. I can't *wait* to see how this all plays out."

He released me, stepping back to look into my face again. "I like the purple eyes. That's a nice touch."

"They're violet," I mumbled, still dazed.

"Sure, sure," he said, bending over to pick up my backpack. He held it out to me. "Here. You better get going. The boss will be home soon."

I took my pack from him wordlessly, still stunned I wasn't being hauled off to the *basement* to be wrung for information until my team could figure out how to extract me.

He busted out another laugh, clapping his hands like this was the greatest thing ever. "Things are about to get shaken up here in our fair City. I'm looking forward to it."

Then he nudged me toward the railing.

"Um," I began. "Thanks?"

"Don't mention it, Little Knight," he said, turning to head back down into the penthouse with a surprising amount of pep in his step for someone who'd just taken a knife to the thigh. "See ya later!" he called over his shoulder.

"Bye, Frankie," I mumbled.

He pulled the heavy door open and disappeared through it, the loud clang of it slamming closed echoing across the otherwise silent roof top.

I let out the world's biggest sigh of relief. "Did you get all of that?"

"Yep," Dom replied, also sounding extremely relieved. "So, you know what this means, right?"

I hoisted my pack onto my back and fastened the straps across my chest. "Fuck. Dom, I'm not ready. I still don't have anything on *why* my parents were murdered."

"I know, but we agreed. If you're ever made, we move straight to Phase Two. It's safer for you that way."

Fuck. He was right, of course.

I pulled my balaclava up over my nose and mouth again, tightened my helmet, and climbed onto the railing.

"I'll call Mari," I said as I took in the twinkling lights of the City below me. "She'll be able to help, and I trust her."

"I agree," he replied. "I let Max know you're okay. He'll meet you at the rendezvous point we set for Plan B."

"Got it. Love you. See you at home."

"Love you too, honey."

Then I jumped, my body cutting sharply through the cold night air as I fell. After a few seconds, I released my parachute. As I floated down, navigating my way through the City's skyscrapers and away from Spencer Tower, every ounce of energy I'd reached so deep to find to survive this entire fucked-up night left my body. I sagged in my straps, and I made peace with what I was going to have to do.

This was a fucking war, after all, and I came to win.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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BENNETT



“I swear to God, these things get more painful every year,” Zach griped, taking a giant swig of his bourbon. “When can we leave, again?”

“Stop bitching,” I told him for the third time. “My father is here as the guest of honor, which means we don’t leave until he does. You know that.”

I glanced across the dining hall, which had been cleared of the usual long tables and decorated wall-to-wall with sparkling holiday frivolity, at where Father stood talking to Benedict Hendrickson and Edward Jansen. My mother clutched his arm, dressed in a beautiful white gown, and the bland look on her face told me she’d medicated herself enough to get through yet another one of these events at his side.

“You’d think they’d occasionally attempt to honor someone outside our Families at this thing,” Noah added, absently adjusting his glasses as he cast his lazy stare around the room. “The Academy could try harder to pretend it exists for more than kissing our parents’ asses.”

Zach smirked. “We get our asses kissed plenty too, dude.”

I rolled my eyes. I was tired, and the last place I wanted to be right now was at the Holywell Academy Holiday Ball, dressed in a tux and taking pains to drink just enough to take the edge off without getting anywhere close to tipsy. We were navigating not only our fellow students tonight, but many parents and other representatives from top Tier families, and even a few members of the press.

"You getting your ass kissed tonight, Ferrero?" Noah asked, tossing a knowing smile at Zach. "Lisa has sure been... aggressive."

He snorted. "You can say that again. She slipped me her panties about five minutes after we got here."

I was about to roll my eyes again, but he pulled a tiny scrap of red lace from the pocket of his tux pants, so I ended up choking a bit on my drink instead.

"Wow," I said, waving away the roving waiter who'd stopped to offer me something from his tray of hors d'oeuvres. "I guess I'm not that surprised." And I was lucky Harper wasn't yet at that level of throwing herself at me—but she was betting on a binding contract that would take care of that for her.

I side-eyed Zach. "If you feel like indulging, just do it. We trust you to be careful enough."

He sighed, darting a look over at a nearby cocktail table, where Lisa, Harper, Annie, and several of the other girls from top families hovered. Each wore a couture ballgown and sipped champagne from the flutes they daintily clutched between their manicured fingers, every one of them acting like they felt something other than vicious contempt for the others.

"Nah, man," Zach replied. "That's a net I don't have the energy to untangle myself from right now."

"Maybe you should go for it," Noah muttered, pasting a smile on his face as he waved at Annie's parents, Dr. and Mrs. Ling. "Maybe then you'll stop moping about Joanna finally doing the *right* thing and leaving school."

"I am not *moping*," he fired back. "We all agreed she needed to go. It's just... slightly more boring around here without the Princess. I'm still a little shocked she finally caved."

Honestly, I was too. She was so obstinate, so fucking *infuriating*, and had no regard for her safety whatsoever.

She lived to get under my skin.

"You didn't see how fucked up she was after I pulled her out of the river," I replied. "I told you she was borderline hypothermic and in the middle of a full-blown panic attack. I'd have thrown in the towel after that too."

Noah sighed. He'd taken the news of Harper's latest attempt to punish Joanna Miller for refusing to bow to her betters—and for inexplicably having *our* attention more than she should have—the hardest. He'd somehow weathered the storm of the last seven years right alongside Zach and me and was the only one who'd managed to cling to something resembling compassion.

"Yeah," he said. "Hopefully she's really gone. Not that she could come back next semester anyway, since you had her scholarship revoked."

She hadn't been seen on campus since I left her in that shower, still shaking from the hottest orgasm I'd ever witnessed—the result of what I could only describe as a complete loss of my self-control.

It was something she continued to bring out in me despite how hard I tried to resist it, and standing there with my hands on her trembling, dripping wet body had pushed me over the edge.

She didn't show up for the Chase on Saturday, much to Harper's delight, and she hadn't been in any of her classes over this past final week of the semester. Noah pulled her grades and informed us that she'd turned in all outstanding assignments, so hopefully she took her semester's worth of credit and transferred to a school on the opposite side of the country where she would be forgotten by all of us.

Joanna Miller was a *siren*. Distracting, untrustworthy—we still didn't know how she'd managed to neuter Chad Hendrickson, and that was unsettling.

"How pissed is your dad still, Bennett?" Zach asked, catching my father's hard stare in our direction.

"Very." I was lucky he hadn't ordered Frankie to hang me from the ceiling in the Club's basement.

"Whatever. He'll get over it. We took care of it by getting Frankie up there to chase those criminals out before they could take anything, even if he wasn't able to actually catch them. He can't fault you for losing your keys while you were saving a life."

I snorted. "He can and he will. And he still can't get into his safe, so we don't know for sure nothing was taken."

Even I didn't know what he had in there, but he was extremely agitated about it, whatever it was.

“What the fuck is *he* doing here?” Noah spat suddenly, glaring at the hall’s entrance.

Zach and I turned to see who in the world had gotten on *Noah’s* bad side like that. Entering the hall was Mari Anzaldua, and she was clutching the arm of Max Miller. Instead of his usual shit-eating grin, Max’s face was grim, and Mari’s eyes were red and puffy, as if she’d been crying.

Zach turned back to Noah. “What’s your problem with Princess’s cousin, man?”

“He just pisses me off.”

“Runs in the family,” I remarked dryly.

The low melody of carols that had been playing over the hall’s speakers cut out, followed by the sharp feedback of a microphone switching on.

“Yes, hello. May I have your attention, please?”

Dean Jansen, clad as always in a professional skirt suit, stood at the mic stand that had been set up on the dais where the three of us normally ate our meals. It was the stage for the evening, the sides draped with silky gold fabric and the edges lined with poinsettias, all for the sole purpose of giving my father yet another bullshit award.

The ambient noise of the large crowd quieted as we all turned our attention to the stage.

“Thank you all for yet another successful semester at Holywell and a wonderful Holiday Ball, none of which would be possible, of course, without the generosity of the Four Families of Saint Gabriel City.” The dean beamed an indulgent smile down at my father. “This evening, it is my *great* pleasure to honor our special guest—”

She was cut off as the doors to the hall flew open with a loud bang.

A woman strode confidently into the hall, the crowd parting for her like magic as she marched with purpose straight toward the stage. She wore a deep-red dress that billowed around her as she walked, the high slit teasing glimpses of her long leg and towering stiletto heels.

“Wait, is that...?” Noah murmured, his eyes glued to the girl.

“The Princess?” Zach finished, confused. “What did she do to her hair?”

It certainly looked like Joanna. I knew that body—tall, lithely muscled, legs for days. The confident set of her jaw, visible in her profile as she stalked past where we stood near the middle of the room, was something I'd spent a lot of time staring at over the semester. But that dress was high fashion and much more expensive than she could ever afford, and her hair, expertly styled in cascading waves rather than thrown into her usual ponytail, was no longer dark brown. Instead, it was a striking light blonde.

Almost white.

Painful memories assaulted me.

"Excuse me, Dean," she called as she reached the front of the stage, craning her neck up to stare at Dean Jansen. "I need to say a few words, if you don't mind."

"What is the meaning of this?" Dean Jansen demanded. "Who...." She stared down at her in confusion, and whatever she saw had her suddenly backing away from the microphone, her eyes wide and her jaw agape, like she'd seen a ghost.

Joanna gracefully climbed the stage, and then she turned, head held high as she clutched the microphone stand, and her eyes snapped right to mine.

Noah gasped.

"Her eyes," Zach hissed, his voice suddenly shaky. "Look at her fucking eyes."

Eyes the unique shade of aquamarine I knew so well stared back at me. It was the color forever burned into my brain from both my most cherished memories and the worst night of my life—of *our* lives.

"It... it can't be," I sputtered.

"Good evening, Holywell Academy," she said into the microphone, surveying the room like a regal queen. "If you'll just excuse the brief interruption, I'd like to just say a few words before we get to our *guest of honor*." She spat those last words, refusing to look my father's way, as if he was beneath her.

He stood next to his table at the front of the room, and the horrified look that had broken through his stern mask said he'd come to the same realization we had.

“How could... how could this be?” Noah whispered. “She can’t be her.”

“You all know me as Joanna Miller, freshman and scholarship student here at Holywell—a *street kid* trying to claw and scrape my way out of the Southside by rubbing elbows with the elite of the City. I’ve been reminded constantly during my time here that I don’t belong.”

Confused murmurs surrounded us. Scoffing and complaining could be heard from students.

“You don’t, you trashy skank,” Harper said loudly, and her mother tried to shut her up with a harsh, worried look. “What? Why are we letting her talk?”

My hands shook. The dean had known Kerstin Knight well, and the version of Joanna Miller that stood before us now looked an awful lot like Kerstin had before she died.

“Harper, sweetheart,” Joanna said, shooting her a condescending look dripping with fake sympathy. “I suggest you shut your mouth and listen to what I have to say. You’ll be interested to hear it, I promise.”

“Could she be... impersonating her?” Zach whispered. “She’s *dead*. They told us she was dead!”

But she hadn’t been when she left that room. I’d known it. Sometimes I thought I’d imagined it.

But they *told* us. They’d said they’d killed her too.

“I thought it might be interesting for you all to hear how I came to be at Holywell,” Joanna went on, projecting her voice across the now eerily silent dining hall. “As it turns out, the story involves your guest of honor.”

She finally looked his way, and the look of raw, visceral hatred she gave my father at that moment made my stomach drop to my fucking feet.

“It’s her,” I whispered.

Zach let out a completely humorless chuckle. “Well, that explains a lot, doesn’t it?”

She continued, her voice strong and sure. “When I was eleven years old, I was torn from my bed in my own home. I was hit over the head with the butt of a gun until I lost consciousness.”

Fuck.

"Oh, God," Noah breathed.

I glanced at him. His eyes shone with unshed tears.

It was like we were back in that god-awful fucking conference room, reliving it all again.

"When I came to, I was on the floor of a strange room, bleeding profusely from the head. Unfortunately for me, I regained consciousness just in time to hear our guest of honor, James Spencer, shoot my father to death."

Loud gasps sounded. Voices rose in the room.

My father, a head of one of the Four Families, had just been accused of murder.

A murder he'd absolutely committed.

The members of the press in the room had moved to the front of the stage and were now filming her with their phones.

"Fuck, she heard it all happen," Zach moaned under his breath. "Fuck. *Fuck.*"

Her eyes found Zach's. We knew what was next.

"And then my screaming, sobbing mother, who had just witnessed my father's murder, threw herself in front of my limp body just in time to be shot by Andrea Ferrero. She sounded so thrilled to do it too."

Zach swallowed audibly, but he held her stare with unwavering confidence.

And longing.

It was *her*.

Her eyes moved to Noah.

"And then, of course, I heard Peter Hargraves congratulate the twelve-year-old boys in the room, who they'd just forced to watch as their best friend and her family were murdered right in front of them, on a job well done."

Noah could only stare back at her, wearing every ounce of the heartbreak we were all feeling on his face.

My chest felt like it was caving in.

"I'd played dead this entire time, you see," she continued, tearing her eyes from Noah's before she was back to glaring at Father. "And I suppose I was fortunate that even our illustrious heads of the

Families were too chickenshit to shoot an unconscious eleven-year-old girl. I was carried from that room alongside the bodies of my dead parents, and then I was tossed into the back seat of an Enforcer SUV. While the two lucky men charged with ensuring I ended up as dead as my parents argued over who had to do it, I jumped from the car and threw myself into the Obsidian.”

Her eyes fell on me again, burning into my fucking soul. I stood there, desperately hanging onto my emotionless mask, and just took it all, the disturbing images assaulting me from back then and from just a few days ago.

The river.

The panic attack.

She swam for her fucking life in that river after her parents had been killed in front of her.

Noah looked at me, stricken. He’d realized it too.

“Somehow, I didn’t drown out there,” she said, now looking directly at Harper, who still looked only annoyed by this spectacle.

She hadn’t figured it out yet.

“I made it to the docks in Olde Town. I was taken in by a kind family who has become my whole world.” She beamed down at Max, who smiled back at her, his chest swelling with pride.

I was with Noah now. I hated him.

“You see, I haven’t been sitting on my hands, crying over the loss of my parents and hiding all this time. I spent the last seven years on the Southside preparing for this day. I came to Holywell Academy to do one thing and one thing only—to avenge my parents by taking back what’s *mine*.”

Dread was creeping into every part of my body. As if the revelation wasn’t enough that the mouthy, troublemaking, unbearably *hot* scholarship student we’d spent the semester *dealing with* was actually our dead best friend—it sounded like things were about to get much worse.

“She’s been fucking with us this entire time,” Zach said, blowing out a breath.

“Why?” Noah asked, his low whisper despondent. “Why not just tell us who she was? We would have protected her!”

She looked out over the crowd again. “Before I leave tonight, I will be handing to the lovely members of the press who are in attendance a few things. I have a copy of camera footage from Peter Hargraves’ personal server that will show each head of the Families entering a conference room in Hargraves Tower on the night of August 2nd, 2015. It will also show my family being dragged in, very much alive, and then carried out, very much not.”

“How did she...?” Noah murmured, bewildered. “She got into my dad’s library?”

“I also have a copy of the SIM card of Andrea Ferrero’s burner phone that confirms her orders to her Enforcers to have my family kidnapped and delivered to Hargraves Tower on that night.”

“Goddamn it,” Zach cursed, shock still coloring his every word. “Mom has been bitching about someone being in her office. How the *fuck* did she get down there?”

I knew, just like I knew what was coming next.

“And I have a scanned copy of a document taken directly from James Spencer’s personal safe, signed by all three remaining heads of the Families, whereby they voted to *eliminate* my entire family for the simply stated reason of ‘disloyalty.’”

My father’s face was somehow both pale from shock and flushed with rage.

“She’s the one who stole your fob,” Zach whispered.

“Obviously,” I spat. She’d also apparently jumped off the top of Spencer Tower with a fucking parachute.

There was so much we’d missed. So much we didn’t know.

We’d been staring our dead best friend in the face for an entire semester—the girl whose absence all three of us still felt as profoundly as a phantom limb—and we’d had no goddamn idea.

And she’d been playing us like chumps.

“If you haven’t already figured it out, let me spell it out for you all,” she boomed into the microphone, her knuckles white where they were wrapped around the microphone stand. “My name is Jolie Marie Knight. I’m the daughter of Jeffrey and Kerstin Knight, who were *not* killed in an unfortunate plane crash in the Bahamas but instead murdered by the very people they were closest to. I am here to take back what’s mine, and then I am coming for what’s yours, Mr.

Spencer.” She held my father’s livid glare with the confidence of an equal. “When I’m through with you, the institution of the Four Families will be in ruins, and if the rest of you don’t want to play by my rules, I will happily sit on the docks of Olde Town and watch while the City burns to *fucking* ashes.”

Those aquamarine eyes met mine one last time, and they shone with so much righteous anger, so much defiance, and so much *power*, that I didn’t know whether to be frightened, enraged, or turned the fuck on.

Jolie.

Our Jojo.

Back from the dead.

And she was here to destroy us.



Jolie and the boys will be back in [Seize the Castle](#), Book 2 in the series!



Want a sneak peek at the Prologue and Chapter 1 of Book 2—both from Noah’s POV? [Sign up](#) for my newsletter!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Peeks out from behind hands

Is it safe to come out? This is my first-ever cliffhanger, and my hope is it left you super excited for more and not angry or devastated or anything bad.

Jolie's story was so fun to write. This was actually the first idea I'd ever had for a book (even before I wrote *Mave Fortune*), and I decided I was finally ready to tackle it after fumbling my way into becoming a romance writer over the last couple of years.

So, I want to first assure you guys that while this book was told almost exclusively from Jolie's POV, we will be getting a lot more of the boys in the next book. I intend for the remainder of the series to be multi-POV, so we'll be getting into Zach, Bennett, and Noah's heads from here on out.

I will also pledge to you here and now that the spice will increase by a whole lot next book—eventually. I felt strongly going into this that I didn't want any real movement on the romance side of things until Jolie was no longer lying to the boys about who she was. I am very excited to write my first ever group scenes with more than one guy loving on our lady.

And with that, I want to profusely thank the team behind the magic here, without whom this book would not have been possible.

First, my PA Steph, who keeps me sane and reads all my scribblings and makes sure I have pretty graphics and show up to the right Facebook parties on time. You're the best, and I'm excited to continue this journey with you.

To David and Morgan, who Alpha-read for me and did their best to coax me along this scary path of writing a real series for the first time, thank you for your patience and your many, many helpful thoughts and comments.

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To McKinley, editrix extraordinaire—you're the best, never leave me. Thanks for taking such care with my stories.

To Cherie, who I credit with 95% of the reason anyone has ever picked up an Elizabeth Dear book—thanks for all the time and attention you give in crafting my gorgeous covers.

And, as always, thank you to my husband who supports the insanity that is my now juggling two careers.

I'll see you guys again in Book 2—Seize the Castle, coming very soon!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Dear is the super-secret alter ego of a chick who just wants a little romance and adventure in her life every now and then. She's writing the books she would want to read as an indie romance fanatic and voracious reader and is developing her brand of smart-mouthed heroines, sexy supportive men, and strong family bonds. She loves ALL the tropes and only hopes you enjoyed the ride. Please follow her at the links below to keep up with the latest news.

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