

A GLOVES OFF - NEXT GENERATION NOVEL

A romantic embrace between a muscular man and a woman. The man is shirtless, wearing blue jeans, and has a tattoo on his left arm and a small tattoo on his neck. The woman is wearing a white top and blue jeans, and is kissing him on the cheek. The background is dark.

WANTING THE FIGHT

HE WANTS THE FIGHT ...
BUT HE WANTS HER MORE.

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

L.P. DOVER

WANTING THE FIGHT

GLOVES OFF - NEXT GENERATION

BOOK 3

L.P. DOVER

CONTENTS

Gloves Off Series

Gloves Off - Next Generation Series

Gloves Off Family Tree

1. Peyton
2. Peyton
3. Ethan
4. Peyton
5. Ethan
6. Peyton
7. Ethan
8. Peyton
9. Peyton
10. Ethan
11. Peyton
12. Ethan
13. Peyton
14. Peyton
15. Ethan
16. Peyton
17. Ethan
18. Peyton
19. Ethan
20. Peyton
21. Ethan
22. Peyton
23. Peyton
24. Ethan
25. Peyton
26. Peyton
27. Peyton

28. [Ethan](#)
29. [Peyton](#)
30. [Ethan](#)
31. [Peyton](#)
32. [Peyton](#)
33. [Peyton](#)
34. [Ethan](#)
35. [Peyton](#)
36. [Peyton](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by L.P. Dover](#)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without written consent from the author.

Wanting the Fight (Gloves Off – Next Generation)


Copyright 2022 L.P. Dover

Edited by: Yvette Rebello

Cover Designed by: Letitia Hasser at RBA Designs

Cover Photo taken by: Sara Eirew

Illustrated by: Golden Czermak at Furious Fotog

 Created with Vellum

GLOVES OFF SERIES

[A Fighter's Desire - Part One](#)

[A Fighter's Desire - Part Two](#)

[Tyler's Undoing](#)

[Ryley's Revenge](#)

[Winter Kiss: Ryley and Ash](#)

[Paxton's Promise](#)

[Camden's Redemption](#)

[Kyle's Return](#)

GLOVES OFF - NEXT GENERATION SERIES

Craving the Fight

Taking the Fight

Wanting the Fight

Desiring the Fight

Longing for the Fight

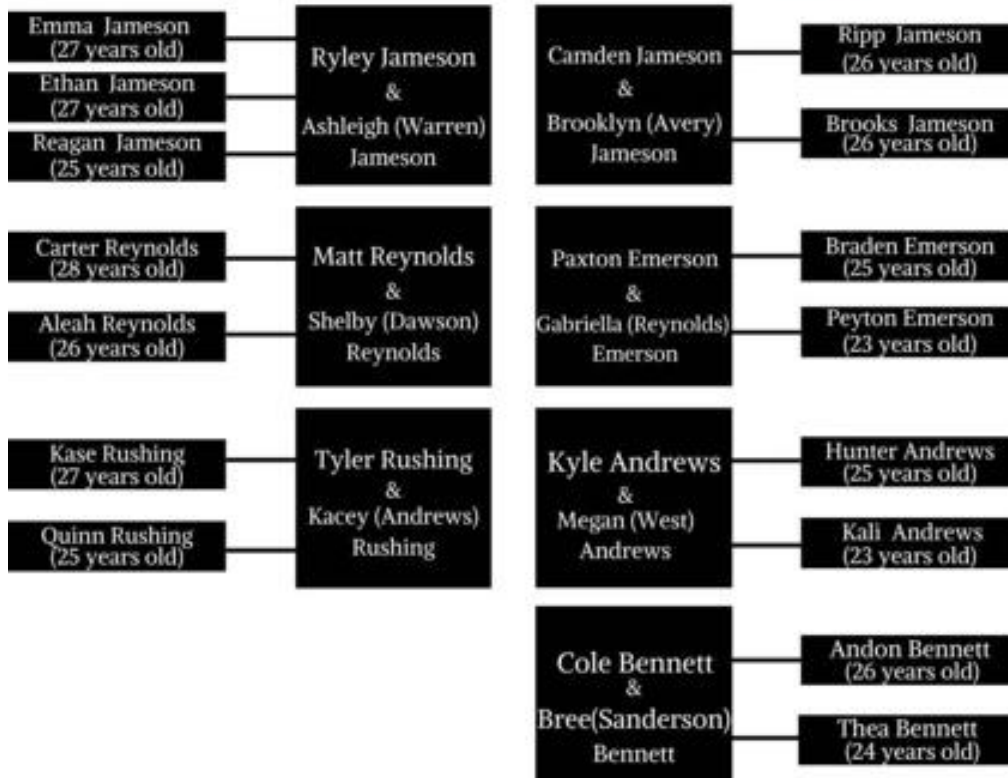
Loving the Fight

Needing the Fight

Ending the Fight

GLOVES OFF FAMILY TREE

Gloves Off



CHAPTER 1

PEYTON

My phone vibrating on the nightstand woke me with a gasp. My head jerked up, and I groaned as I tried to open my eyes; it felt as if my lids were sandpaper scraping against them.

I was dizzy and nauseous, almost like the feeling of being on an upside-down roller coaster. The room was dark, but I could see bits of sunshine peeking through the hotel curtains. Reaching for my phone, I hissed when the edge of the nightstand scraped against my arm. Ultimately, I knocked my cell onto the floor, only to hear it continue to vibrate.

My mouth was dry, and I had a horrible hangover, thanks to all the lemon shots at the Labyrinth. I needed to remind myself never to do that again. However, it was fun at the time. The vodka had gone down nice and smooth.

The only thing giving me a small reprieve was warm silky sheets against my bare skin, but even that couldn't distract me from how miserable I felt. I might've been drunk last night, but at least I remembered the ceremony.

I never thought a last-minute Vegas chapel wedding would've been romantic, but it was. Especially the part where my brother said his vows to my best friend, Reagan. All our friends were in attendance, which made the evening even better. Our parents, unfortunately, might have some choice words to say when they find out.

The phone call I just ignored was likely from either my agent or my mother. I had no doubt the story had already

leaked onto the internet. That was the price for being in the public eye. And it wasn't just me that had to worry about the paparazzi. All my friends were well-known in the entertainment world, and just this week, six of them won their UFC matches here in Vegas.

Getting a bunch of MMA fighters together, mixed with alcohol, was a surefire way of drawing attention. However, even without them, I couldn't go anywhere without the paparazzi skulking somewhere around the corner. That was my life. There wasn't such a thing as having an off day; I had to be *on* twenty-four-seven. It was exhausting. There were days I just wanted to be *me*, not the Hollywood starlet I'd been labeled as.

Burying my face in the pillow, I squeezed my eyes shut and froze. There was a familiar scent on the sheets, a particular cologne that I recognized all too well. Visions of the events last night replayed in my mind. First, there was the party at the Labyrinth, the wedding, and then ...

Holding my breath, I slowly turned my head, my eyes landing on the man next to me. His dark hair was in disarray, and he was on his back with an arm behind his head. When my focus landed on his lips, I bit my own, remembering what it felt like to have him kiss me and stare down at me with his ocean blue eyes. Holy shit. What the hell have I done? Hopefully, I could sneak out and get back to my room unnoticed.

Not only was Ethan Jameson four years older than me, but he was Emma's twin brother. So much could go wrong if word about what we did last night got out. It was reckless and stupid of me to fall for his charms, but I'd wanted to give in for some time now. The alcohol just helped give me an excuse.

I'd always wondered what it'd be like to be with him, to feel his protective fighter arms around me. Ethan wasn't the polished Hollywood actor type I spent my days and nights with on film sets. Oh no, he was far from it. Ethan Jameson was an MMA fighter, skilled and dangerous in the ring, and loved by everyone—primarily women. If the paparazzi were to see us together, it'd ruin everything. Out of all the celebrities

I've worked with, none of them have had long-lasting relationships. They've always been torn apart by the tabloids. I didn't want that to happen with Ethan.

We had our fun-filled one-night stand, but that was it. It had to be. The night had quelled my need for him. Who was I kidding? Even as I thought that my insides ached to feel him inside of me again. My body yearned for him more now than before.

Slowly, I slid out of bed, wanting desperately not to wake Ethan up. If I could avoid the awkward morning-after spiel, that'd be good. My dress and heels were on the floor, so I scooped them up with my phone and purse. The only thing missing was my damn underwear.

I scanned the floor, but couldn't find them. Great.

Fumbling with my phone, I looked down to see I had several missed calls from my agent, Marisa. I just hoped the paparazzi didn't get photos of Ethan and me together. I might've been a little drunk walking along the Sin City strip with my friends, but I was careful. I'd spent most of my life knowing to expect the unexpected. There was always going to be someone around the corner trying to catch me in some kind of scandal.

As soon as I slipped into my dress, I tiptoed to the door, cringing every time my ankle creaked. It'd never been the same since I sprained it as a kid. There might as well have been a horn blaring with how loud it was.

I didn't want to look back at Ethan, so I focused on the door. I was almost there, just a few more steps. Reaching for the handle, I held my breath and latched on, praying that the light from the hallway wouldn't beam in and wake Ethan up. I could hear my heartbeat in my ear and feel it pulsing in my throat as the lock slid free.

I opened the door just a tad.

Almost home free.

I could do this.

“Sneaking out on me, Peyton?” Ethan murmured, his voice right by my ear.

Grabbing my chest, I let out an audible gasp and jerked around, my pulse making my head pound even harder. I slammed my back into the door, and it shut with a loud thud that I knew echoed down the hallway. My heart thundered so hard in my chest I thought it would break my sternum.

“Dammit, Ethan, you scared the shit out of me,” I huffed, sliding my hands down to my stomach. He caged me in and smirked. It took all I had not to look down at his gloriously naked body.

“I’m waiting for the answer to my question. Are you sneaking out on me?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. I’m going back to my room. Our fun is over.”

His gaze moved down to my lips. “Says who? I seem to remember us having a *lot* of fun last night.”

I stood my ground, determined not to let him persuade me back into bed. I had to get out of his room undetected, but with how loud the door slammed, I had no doubt it’d caught the attention of the occupants in the nearby rooms. “And we did, but as I said, it’s over,” I reiterated. “It was a one-night thing. Drunk or not, I remember us making that decision.”

Ethan chuckled. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“And besides,” I added, “Braden will kill you if he finds out we slept together.”

Ethan snorted. “That fucker married my sister last night. He’s not going to say shit.”

“Still,” I said, wishing I could move away from him. Hell, who was I kidding? I wanted to jump back into bed with him. “I have to go.”

Ethan leaned in as if he was going to kiss me but stopped and stepped back. Relief washed through me, but also disappointment. In my mind, I could see it all play out like in the movies, but in this scene, I’d have him crush me in his

arms and demand I stay. Maybe that was why I was an actress and not a screenwriter. I didn't know if I'd be able to leave if Ethan touched me again.

“Okay,” Ethan said, lifting his hands in the air, “As you said, it's over.”

My heart quickened again. “Thank you.”

The dismay grew in my chest, and I made sure not to let it show on my face. What did I want from him? For him to demand I stay and be his? That was ridiculous. It was supposed to be easy to leave him, and that was exactly where I needed my mind to be.

I fumbled for the door handle and opened the door wide. “I'm leaving for California today. Be safe on your trip back, whenever that is.”

He didn't shy away from the door even though he was stark naked. “You be safe too. Maybe I'll see you when I get home.”

I stepped out into the hallway. “Doubtful. But you take care now.”

Turning away from him, I strolled down the hall to the elevator. I needed all the distance from him I could get.

CHAPTER 2

PEYTON

When I got to my room, I took a shower, put on a pair of jeans and a hoodie, and packed up my suitcase. I had my ballcap and sunglasses ready beside my purse. It was the only disguise I had to help me get through the airport without being noticed. Vegas was fun, with many memories I probably needed to forget, but I was ready to return to California and relax.

My phone vibrated on the bed, and Marisa's name flashed across the screen. It just occurred to me that I'd forgotten to call her back. That was one of the reasons why I couldn't be with Ethan; I could never think straight with him around.

"Hey," I answered. "I'm sorry I didn't call back. It was a crazy night."

Marisa laughed. "Yeah, I see that. You're all over the internet. Please tell me you didn't get married."

"No," I burst out. "It was my brother and Reagan."

She blew out a sigh. "Thank God. It was hard to tell, judging by the pictures. There were so many of you waltzing into that wedding chapel. But just a heads up, there are some stories speculating that it was you. So, I suggest not doing anything scandalous in the next few weeks. The paparazzi will be all over you like flies on shit."

"Great," I grumbled, "Just what I need."

The only thing saving me was that it wasn't the first time I'd been seen with the group I was in last night. So, it wasn't out of the ordinary. The world knows about my fighter family,

especially since my mother and father were MMA legends. Now my brother and best friend were too. Hell, all my friends were. I knew how to fight. I might be a little rusty, but my mom made sure to start training me from the time I could walk. In the end, fighting for titles wasn't my passion. Did it bring me joy to know I could kick someone's ass if I needed to? Of course.

With a heavy sigh, I sat down on the bed. "There weren't any photos of me and anyone particular was there?"

"No," she answered and then paused, "wait, is there something I should know?"

"Definitely not," I replied quickly. "Everyone I was with are my childhood friends. You know this already. I just don't want to drag them into the tabloids for something I do."

"No worries. I'll let the world know it wasn't you getting hitched in that chapel. You'll break a lot of hearts when you finally do walk down the aisle, though."

I laughed. "I've got a long time before that happens."

Marisa giggled. "Let's hope so. Your career is at an all-time high right now. Your new movie will hit theaters in four months, and you're already getting interest for several other projects. Not to mention, you have awards shows and other red-carpet events lined up."

My schedule was always packed. I was surprised I even had time to breathe. But luckily, I had a couple of months off. "It's good I have some time to rest before all of that."

"Yep, so enjoy it, babe. I bet you're excited about spending Christmas at home for the first time in years, right?"

Was I? After last night, I wasn't so sure about that. Now that my brother and Reagan were married, I'd have no choice but to be around Ethan. That was dangerous territory.

"I'm ecstatic," I said with forced delight.

Marisa chuckled. "All right, I'll let you go so I can handle the reporters asking for your husband's name. I'll call you if anything comes up. Until then, enjoy your vacation."

We said our goodbyes and I stared at my phone, tempted to search myself on the internet to see what popped up about last night. I'd learned the hard way just to ignore everything. Sometimes it was easier said than done. Reading some of the things people posted about me online was infuriating, but that was how the world worked. People got off on drama.

Groaning, I flopped back onto the bed and closed my eyes. I missed California and the simple two-bedroom apartment I used to share with Reagan before she moved in with Braden. Those times almost seemed like a dream. I'd give anything to turn back the clock. However, I wouldn't see it through if I really had the magic to do that. Reagan and my brother were happily married and in love; I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that. Their home was beautiful, and it made me contemplate purchasing my own place, somewhere hidden away like theirs.

Staying at my apartment was going to be a nightmare. There was no privacy with so many neighbors. I'd dealt with the lack of privacy for years, but now that my career had skyrocketed, I would need more space. Also, it wasn't comforting to know that anyone could just show up at my place.

A knock rapped on the door and I jumped up, my stomach coiling in knots. Or was it butterflies? Hell, I don't know. Ethan has always made me feel crazy. Knowing my luck, it would be him at the door. I hurried over and peeked out the peephole, letting out a huge breath when I saw it was just Reagan. My body relaxed and I opened the door. There was a glow about her, and a part of me envied her.

"Hey, Mrs. Newlywed. How does it feel to be an Emerson now?"

She walked in, looking sophisticated in a gray sweater dress with knee-high black boots. It was different for her, and I liked it. Even her caramel-blond hair was curled in loose waves down her back. As an MMA fighter, her wardrobe usually consisted of workout clothes. This new look suited her.

"It feels amazing," she said in a singsong voice.

I waved a hand up and down her body. “Why are you all dressed up?”

Reagan beamed. “Braden and I want to take a honeymoon. We decided it last night after our second round of—”

“Whoa, stop there,” I said, holding up a hand. “I don’t need to hear about that, especially when it involves my brother. I’d be all up for hearing the juicy details if it were some other guy.”

Reagan laughed. “Okay, I won’t disgust you with talks of how amazing the sex was last night.”

Slamming my hands over my ears, I chimed the word, “La-la-la-la-la,” over and over. Finally, I winked and smacked her arm when I figured I got my point across. “I’m just kidding. You know you can talk to me about anything.”

Reagan draped her arm over my shoulders. “I know. That’s why I love you. And now you’re officially my sister.”

I side-hugged her and let her go. “Yes, we are. Our mothers got what they wanted; our families are finally connected.”

Their goal before we were all born was to have a son and daughter get married. They got their wish. They’d be thrown for a loop if they knew their other son and daughter just had casual sex for the fun of it.

“So, where are you going for your honeymoon?” I asked, shaking my head to get thoughts of Ethan out of my mind.

Reagan walked over to the window and peered down at the bustling city below. “We’re going to Colorado to do some snowmobiling. He thinks he’ll get me on the slopes, but I don’t ski. I tried snowboarding once and—”

“You broke your butt bone,” I said, finishing her sentence and giggling simultaneously. “Yeah, I remember. You were with your brother and sister. I still have the pictures you sent me of you sitting on a heart-shaped pillow because you needed the extra cushion.”

Reagan shook her head and sighed. “That was not fun. My ass hurt for weeks.”

I remembered the pictures she sent of Ethan while they were on that trip. He and Emma had just turned sixteen. Their parents had taken them on that ski trip as a birthday present. It was the first time I’d noticed how cute Ethan was. I was twelve at the time and at the age where I didn’t think boys were gross anymore.

They lived about seven hours away from us, so I didn’t see them all the time. But when we did meet up, Ethan didn’t pay much attention to me. A four-year age difference is substantial when you’re kids. There’s no way in hell that a sixteen-year-old Ethan would ever see a twelve-year-old girl as anything but annoying and immature. Plus, I spent most of my teenage years traveling around the world for my acting career. So I grew up away from everyone.

Nevertheless, I still made time for Reagan. My one goal in life was not to let my fame change me. My mother said she’d kick my ass if I ever let it. She was a former bantamweight champion, which was enough to scare me into obeying her when I was younger. When she wasn’t traveling with me, she was helping train Reagan.

I focused back on her and smiled; we weren’t just best friends now ... we were sisters. “Well, I know you and my brother will have fun on your honeymoon. Do our parents know you guys are married yet?”

Groaning, Reagan rested her forehead against the window. “Yeah, they’re a little salty, but they’re not surprised. I know my dad would’ve loved to walk me down the aisle. But, at least he got to do it with Emma.”

“True. But they’re okay with it?”

Reagan grinned back at me. “They’re fine. Although I’m sure Braden and I will hear snarky comments about it for the rest of our lives.” Before I could reply, her gaze shifted over to my suitcase. “Are you checking out?” There was concern on her face when she focused back on me. “Please tell me you’re not going home alone.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be fine. I have my ballcap and sunglasses. No one will recognize me.”

Reagan crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you driving or flying?”

It was only a four-and-a-half-hour drive from Vegas to my place in LA, but I ended up booking a quick flight so I wouldn’t have to rent a car. One thing was for sure, I couldn’t lie to Reagan. She could always tell when I lied.

“Flying,” I confessed.

She gasped. “It’s not safe for you to fly alone, Peyton. What if someone recognizes you and you get bombarded? You don’t have anyone to protect you.”

Groaning, I went over to her and squeezed her arms. “I’ll be fine, Reagan. I can take care of myself. You don’t have to worry about me.” I walked away from her and picked up the hair tie I’d left on the coffee table. “Do me a favor and don’t tell my brother. He’ll call our mother, and I’ll end up having a stuffy old bodyguard at my door within thirty minutes.”

Reagan snickered. “Yeah, that’s something she’d do for sure.” When my mom traveled with me, she would stand in as my bodyguard. One time, a man tried to touch me, and she knocked him on his ass. The paparazzi caught it all on camera, and no one has attempted to approach me ever since.

“I just want to head back to California for some relaxation,” I said, pulling my hair back into a ponytail.

Reagan’s blue gaze averted to my neck, and she gasped. “What the hell is on your skin?”

I slapped a hand to my neck, thinking there was a bug on me. “Oh my God, what is it?”

Reagan grabbed my chin, moving my face to the side. “It looks like a giant freaking hickey.”

“What?” I shouted, rushing to the mirror on the wall. Surely I would’ve noticed if I had a hickey on my neck when I got in the shower this morning. But, then again, I don’t

remember ever looking in the mirror. My mind had been in a million different places when I got to my room.

When I stopped at the mirror, I could see the telltale signs of a reddish-purple mark just above my hoodie. I jerked the fabric down, and lo and behold, there was an inch-sized hickey there for all the world to see.

“Son of a bitch.”

Reagan snickered behind me; her eyes lit with humor as she watched me through the mirror. “Someone must’ve had some fun last night after the wedding. Care to tell me who it was with? There were only a handful of guys around us last night.” Before I could speak, she held up a hand. “Wait, don’t tell me.” She bit her lip and smiled. “It had to be one of the guys from Vegas. My guess would be Kase. Because I know it sure as hell wasn’t with my brother or Ripp.” My eyes met hers in the mirror, and then hers widened, clearly picking up on my hesitation. “Seriously, Peyton? Ripp?”

Ripp Jameson was also an MMA fighter who happened to be Ethan’s cousin. He had a twin brother named Brooks, who was away working with the FBI. Ripp was sexy in that rugged fighter type of way, but Ethan always had a way of turning my eyes to him.

Swinging around, I faced Reagan. She was my best friend, and we never kept secrets from each other; I couldn’t start now. “It wasn’t with Ripp, Reagan.”

Tilting her head to the side, she studied me and then slapped a hand over her mouth. “Holy shit, I can’t believe this. You had sex with my brother, didn’t you?”

Clearing my throat, I adjusted my hoodie to cover the mark on my neck. “Let’s just say I had a little too much to drink.”

Reagan snorted. “Yeah, I bet that’s all it was. What happens now?”

“Nothing,” I answered quickly. “It was a one-night stand. That’s it.”

By the look on Reagan’s face, she didn’t believe me. “Are you sure?”

“Yep. It’s never going to happen again.”

I can’t afford to be reckless like that ... even if it did feel amazing.

CHAPTER 3

ETHAN

Peyton Emerson.

Now that was a girl I never imagined would want a guy like me. There was something about her, something different I'd never noticed before. It wasn't just that she was sexy-as-fucking-hell with her midnight-colored hair and alluring green eyes that could make any man fall to their knees. Or even her honeysuckle scent that drove me crazy. Maybe it's just the thought that she wanted me when she could have any man she desired.

Whatever was going on between us, there was one thing I did know. I didn't get enough last night. I loved a good one-night stand now and again and was more than happy to break free the morning after, but I didn't want to let Peyton go. She had a fire inside her, an energy pulling me toward her. It was something I'd never felt before. I knew she felt it too.

Once out of the shower, I dried off and ran a towel through my hair before dressing in a pair of jeans and a gray T-shirt. Ripp and I were going to meet Kase for lunch before our fights tonight at the Labyrinth. I was addicted to fighting. I enjoyed the adrenaline rush and hearing people scream my name. Unfortunately, I wasn't as excited about the festivities tonight. A certain dark-haired beauty wouldn't be in the crowd watching me.

It was probably for the best, anyway. I wouldn't have to watch as all the guys made moves on her. Several times I've had to restrain myself, or there would've been an outright brawl inside the club. I didn't want to do that to Kase. Plus,

there was another reason why I didn't want Peyton, my sister, or Braden around tonight. Someone was going to be at the club, someone I didn't want them asking questions about.

Grabbing my dirty clothes from last night off the floor, I tossed them onto the pile in the corner. I reached for a sock that was half underneath the bed, and when I picked it up, something lacy and pink came with it.

“What the ...?”

I held up the thong and smiled. The thought of Peyton leaving my room this morning without underwear made my dick hard. I stowed them away in my suitcase and made a mental note to ensure I returned them to her.

A knock sounded on the door, and I ran a hand through my damp hair. Was it Peyton coming back for her underwear? Maybe she left them on purpose so she'd have to come back and see me. However, it wasn't her on the other side when I opened the door. It was my sister with a devilish grin on her face.

“Reagan,” I said.

She sauntered in past me. “I hear you had a fun-filled night of debauchery after my wedding.” She twirled around to face me. “Care to tell me what the hell you were thinking?”

“Like it's any of your business,” I said, matching her smirk. “Peyton and I are allowed to do whatever we want.”

Reagan's brows lifted. “That may be true, but I doubt my husband will see it that way. You always gave him shit for just flirting with me, and now here you are, messing around with his little sister.”

“She's a grown-ass woman,” I countered.

She placed her hands on her hips. “She's also my best friend. If you hurt her in any way, I'll beat your ass.”

I laughed. “Good luck with that. Something tells me Peyton can handle herself.”

Reagan's smile widened. “That she can. She's also a stubborn ass which is why I have a huge favor to ask you.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Her smile faded. “Peyton’s flying home today alone. Braden and I decided to take a honeymoon, so we can’t go with her.”

“Alone?” I snapped. “Has she lost her fucking mind?”

Our parents had left Vegas the morning after the fights, so they weren’t around either. Peyton’s parents had entrusted all of us to keep her safe. I’ve seen pictures and videos of how crazy things can get when Peyton’s out in the public. Hell, I saw it firsthand last night when we walked The Strip. If she wasn’t surrounded by a group of MMA fighters, I couldn’t imagine what would’ve happened.

“She has,” Reagan answered. “I don’t want her stepping foot in that airport alone.”

I held up a hand. “She won’t. I’ll handle it.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Does that mean you’ll be her bodyguard?”

“It does.” I tried not to let my grin show just how much I was going to enjoy what I was about to do. Judging by the twinkle in Reagan’s eyes, she knew exactly what she was doing by coming to me, especially after knowing what happened between Peyton and me last night.

Reagan beamed. “Great. You might want to hurry and figure everything out before she leaves, though.”

I walked over and grabbed my phone off the desk in the corner. “Got it. I know what I’m going to do.”

“Thanks, brother. I know you weren’t planning on leaving Vegas for another week.”

“It’s okay,” I said, walking back to her. “Being Peyton’s bodyguard will be ... interesting.”

She snorted. “Not for Peyton. I think she’s done with you.”

“Eh, maybe so.” I shrugged. “Either way, it’ll be an adventure. She’ll be all mine for that four-and-a-half-hour drive.”

Reagan opened her arms and hugged me. “Good luck. You’re going to need it.”

Yes, I do.

“Have fun on your honeymoon wherever you’re going.”

Reagan squeezed me once more and let go. “Thanks. We’re going to Colorado. It’ll be nice to see some snow.”

I stepped back so I could look at her face. She was happy, which made me happy for her, even if she did marry one of my best friends. “Don’t worry about Peyton. I’ll take care of her.”

Reagan smiled again. “I know you will.” She stepped back toward the door. “Stay safe. I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.”

As soon as she walked out the door, I called Ripp. The line rang and rang, but he eventually picked up. “Hey, man. What’s up?” he answered.

“I’m heading back to California today.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Reagan said that Peyton was going to fly home by herself.”

Ripp scoffed. “What the fuck is she thinking?”

“That’s exactly what I said. So I’m going to drive her back instead.”

“What about your fights? Have you told Seth you aren’t going to be at the club?”

And there it was ... my secret. No one other than Kase and Ripp knew of my dealings with Seth Michelson, a man who was part of one of the most powerful mafia families in the country.

“Not yet,” I said. “I’m going to as soon as I’m off the phone with you.”

“Okay. If you’re fine dealing with Peyton on your own, then I’m probably just going to stay here.” He’d be missing out on a quarter million dollars if he left. Of course, I would

get it too, but Peyton's safety was worth more to me than the money.

"Sounds good, man."

"Oh, and speaking of Peyton, have you looked on the internet this morning? There are pics of us everywhere. People are wondering if she was the one who got married. Most know it was Braden and Reagan, but there are other speculations as well."

"You know I don't pay attention to that shit," I grumbled. A lot of the stuff in the tabloids was garbage: just lies to get sales.

Ripp laughed. "Neither do I, but it was hard to avoid."

After looking over at the time on the microwave in the small kitchenette area, I sighed. "All right, brother, I have to get Peyton before she tries to leave."

"Have fun with that."

We hung up and I hurried into the bedroom to pack up my suitcase. Once that was done, I called Seth. He picked up on the second ring. "Good morning, Jameson. Are you ready for your fight tonight?"

"Not exactly," I replied, dropping my luggage off by the door. "That's why I'm calling. I won't be at the Labyrinth."

"Why's that?"

"I have to make sure Peyton gets back to Cali safely. She doesn't have a bodyguard at the moment."

Seth chuckled. "I see. Well, she needs one. I saw online that you were all seen heading into a wedding chapel. I take it your sister and Braden tied the knot?"

"They did," I responded.

"Good. I'm happy for them. They went through hell and back to be together."

That was the truth.

“Ripp is still staying in Vegas,” I informed him. “He’ll be fighting at the club tonight.”

“Honestly, I’m not worried about it, Jameson. I don’t just go for the fights. I have other reasons for being there.” When he didn’t elaborate, I let it go. The less I knew of his business, the better. It wasn’t wise to get involved with the mafia, but what we were doing wasn’t illegal. “I don’t know how long I’ll be in Vegas, but if you come back, call me. I’ll meet you at the club.”

“Will do,” I said.

The call ended and I slipped my phone into my pocket before walking out the door. The smell of coffee filled the air as I headed down the hallway toward the elevators. Peyton’s room was on one of the floors above mine, so I pressed the button and waited.

A few months ago, Seth had come to Vegas and showed up at the Labyrinth to watch the fights. He was fascinated with the setup and wanted to join in on the bets. He brought in more money which made Kase happy, especially since it was all legal. I was earning the cash fair and square for my fights.

Kase was hesitant to draw the attention of the mafia to his club, but Seth offered to be there under an alias. None of us wanted his brother, Nikolai, to get wind of his involvement.

Nikolai and their father wanted vengeance over something that happened twenty-five years ago. My parents and several others in our inner circle played a part in their takedown. For that, my sisters and I were marked.

Nikolai started first with my twin sister, Emma, and we all ended up getting sucked in. That was why I bore the Michelson brand on my back. A dragon tattoo. It was to bind me into fighting for them, a payback for my parents’ part in taking down their lucrative underground fighting ring. It was all a huge clusterfuck, but luckily, I hadn’t been fully pulled in ... yet. My time was coming.

While waiting for the elevator, I pulled out my phone and typed Peyton’s name into the search engine. She was

everywhere on the internet. I clicked on “images” and thousands popped up. Of course, the most recent ones were of her walking down the strip with everyone last night. She was so fucking sexy, and I was right there with her. I clicked on the article titled *Who Did She Marry?* and there was a poll with all the answers. A pang of jealousy twisted in my gut as I read who was in the number one slot. *Kase Rushing*. And there at the very last entry was none other than me.

CHAPTER 4

PEYTON

Everything was set.

My flight was scheduled to leave in three hours, and the cab would arrive shortly to take me to the airport. Was I nervous about going through the airport alone? Unfortunately, I was. I'd never done it before. One thing was for sure, my mother was going to kill me when she found out, but probably not before my brother got to me. I kept waiting for the dreaded knock on my door.

Reagan was my best friend, and we always kept each other's secrets, but this was different. She was genuinely worried about me, and I had a feeling she was in her room right now, plotting with Braden on how to keep me away from the airport. That was why I needed to leave before they could stop me.

Grabbing my suitcase handle, I pulled it up and rolled my luggage over to the door. I was ready. However, a loud knock made me jump back when I was about to open the door. My pulse skyrocketed, and I held my breath. Maybe if I didn't answer, whoever it was would think I had left.

"Peyton, open up," Ethan called. "I know you're still in there."

Silently, I groaned and tilted my head back. I needed to stay away from him before I continued my reckless path of falling into his arms again. Not moving an inch, I stayed in my spot, refusing to open the door.

He knocked again. "Seriously, Peyton?"

Go away, I wanted to yell. Why did he have to make things so complicated? A few seconds later, all was quiet. I was about to look through the peephole when my phone started to ring.

Dammit!

And then I heard Ethan's laugh just outside the door. "You should've put it on silent, cupcake." I swung open the door to see Ethan leaning against the frame with a smirk on his face.

"So much for distance. You're infuriating, Ethan. What do you want?" I snapped.

He straightened and peered over my shoulder at my suitcase. "I'm here to stop you. Reagan paid me a little visit. Apparently, you have it in your head that you're going to the airport alone."

"I *am* going alone," I challenged.

His grin widened. "No, you're not."

He slid in past me and grabbed my suitcase. "Looks like you're stuck with me. My stuff's already in the truck. And just so you know, there are paparazzi everywhere. I'm not letting you navigate through that shit on your own."

Why did it turn me on to see his protective side? Why couldn't I just hate him? It'd make things so much easier.

"So what? I'm just supposed to forget about my flight?"

Ethan stared incredulously at me. "I'm sure you'll manage. You're worth what? Millions? I'm sure you won't go broke after spending a couple hundred on a flight." True, but I didn't like throwing money away. He wheeled my suitcase out into the hallway.

"I thought you were staying in Vegas a while longer," I stated, grabbing my purse off the couch and joining him.

"I was," he said, turning to face me, his expression serious, "but getting you home safely is more important. I'm your stand-in bodyguard."

Bodyguard, huh? Was it wrong that I liked hearing those words come out of his mouth? We walked side by side to the elevator.

“It’s not an easy job, Ethan. You’re going to regret taking it on.”

Ethan snorted. “I can handle it.”

The elevator doors opened, and we stepped inside. I was thankful we were alone.

“They’re going to be all up in your face, asking you questions and saying God knows what.”

“Do you think they’ll ask if we’re together?” he wondered.

My heart thundered in my chest. “Probably. And what exactly would be your reply?”

He shrugged. “I’d say it’s none of their fucking business.”

I shook my head. “That right there is a dead giveaway. They’ll know something’s going on. If they ask, you’re my bodyguard, plain and simple.”

“Ah, so you’re embarrassed by me. Am I not worthy of you?”

Grabbing his arm, I squeezed it and stepped in front of him, staring right into his crystal blue eyes. “That’s not what I’m saying, Ethan. Being around me in public complicates things, not just for me but for you, too. I need you to trust me and do as I say. The world knows you’re a close friend. We’ve been in the tabloids numerous times together growing up. You’re filling in as my bodyguard while my mother’s not here. Got it?”

Ethan paused as if contemplating my words, but then he nodded once. “Got it.”

When it came time to take things seriously, Ethan was always good at that. He knew when to joke around and when not to. It was what I loved about him, my brother, Ripp, Brooks, and my cousin Carter. The guys were always protective of Emma, Reagan, and me growing up.

The elevator doors opened, and I reached for my suitcase. Two men in the lobby appeared to be guests, but I could see their cameras hidden under their jackets. They hadn't noticed us yet.

“When I'm with my mom, I always have the luggage,” I said, taking the handle. “That way, your hands are free to knock some jackasses onto the ground if need be. We have incoming out front and to the left.”

Ethan's body tensed, and he took the lead. “Stay close and move fast.”

I chuckled. “I've been through this a gazillion times, Ethan. I know what to do.”

With my ballcap on my head and my sunglasses on, I was ready to go. I followed close on his heels to the door that led to the parking garage. It only took a few seconds before someone shouted out my name and cameras started to flash. Ethan pushed the door open, and we were bombarded with more flashes. It was a good thing I had my shades on.

I recognized a few photographers from last night, and with Ethan taking the lead, they gave him a wide berth. He was well-known in the MMA world as the middleweight champion. I doubted any of them wanted to get on his bad side.

“Peyton, is it true your brother married Reagan Jameson last night?”

Ethan and I continued to walk to his truck, but I couldn't stop smiling. Now that was a question I could answer. I looked over at the photographer— a young woman with curly brown hair pulled into a ponytail. If I had my guess, she'd probably been in the parking garage for hours, waiting for a moment like this.

“They did,” I answered her. “Reagan was a beautiful bride. I know both she and my brother are thrilled.”

A slew of questions were shouted at Ethan and me, but we kept walking. There were too many to answer. Finally, Ethan and I made it to the truck, and he opened the door for me.

“Ethan, are you and Peyton together now?” More cameras flashed. “How does it feel to be with one of the sexiest actresses in the business?”

Our eyes met, and I could see a twinkle in his. I had no clue what would come out of his mouth, but I prayed it wouldn't be something that'd give us away. He helped me into his truck, and I moved my suitcase to the backseat while he faced the paparazzi.

“As of right now, I'm Peyton's bodyguard,” he shouted so all of them could hear. “And to answer *your* question,” he called out, pointing toward a man in the back. “I wouldn't know what it feels like to be with one of the sexiest actresses in the business. But whoever Ms. Emerson decides to give that privilege to will be one lucky man.”

He shut my door and went around to the driver's side. More questions were fired at him, but he kept quiet. Once inside the truck, he started it up and sped away.

As soon as we were away from prying eyes, he looked at me and smiled. “How'd I do?”

“Not bad, Jameson. Not bad at all. We got lucky, though. Those photographers gave us our space. It's not always like that.” Maybe it *was* stupid of me to think I could fly home alone.

Ethan's smile faded. “Well, if they cross that line, I'll have no problem putting them in their place.”

Leaning my head against the seat, I took in a much-needed breath. “Welcome to my world.”

“Please tell Ethan thank you for us,” my mom said. “I appreciate him bringing you home.”

I glanced at Ethan out of the corner of my eye. We'd been on the road for two hours, and I spent most of it on the phone with my mom, telling her everything about Reagan and

Braden's wedding. I left out the part where I was supposed to be on a flight.

"I'll tell him," I promised her.

"Oh, your dad and I will stop by your apartment to ensure everything's okay there. It probably wouldn't hurt you to stay with us tonight. You could move back in with us while you find a home where we can install an amazing security system."

I was grateful for her protectiveness, but sometimes it was overbearing. "No, Mom. I'll be fine on my own. I'm twenty-three years old. I don't need to be living with my parents."

"Hey, it's just a suggestion. I only want you to be safe. There are a lot of sick bastards out there. I know that by personal experience."

And that was true. When she was around my age, she was kidnapped by a man named Scar—the operator of the Dark Side—and forced to do things I could only imagine. That was why she was so protective of me now. She never told me in great detail what had happened to her, but I knew it was messed up. What I did know was that she was forced to fight men, sadistic men who wanted to hurt her in all ways imaginable. Scar would've had my father killed if she didn't fight them. My parents thought that part of their lives was over, but it wasn't.

The Dark Side was an underground fighting arena, headed by Scar before Nikolai had him killed, and funded by many others, including the mafia—mainly the Michelsons. I had yet to meet Nikolai Michelson personally, but I knew he had a vendetta against my family and friends. He said he would come after us all, and I knew my time would come. He'd already gone after Emma and Carter and Reagan and Braden. Our only saving grace was Seth Michelson, Nikolai's older brother. He was on our side, but even that made me cautious.

"All right, sweetheart," my mom murmured. "I'm going to let you go so your dad and I can check out your apartment. And if anyone's lurking about, they better think twice."

I laughed. "I think the paparazzi already know how scary you and dad are."

"And they better not forget it. I'll see you soon. Love you."

"I love you too." We hung up and my phone was almost dead, so I shut it off and slipped it into my purse. "Sorry about that," I said to Ethan. "I should've known that'd be a long conversation."

Ethan smiled. "It's okay. What did Gabby say about Reagan and your brother? Was she upset?"

I shrugged. "Yes and no. But I've been warned not to do the same thing. Apparently, *your* dad is a little upset that he didn't get to walk his baby daughter down the aisle. My dad will never forgive me if I do that to him."

I was nowhere close to getting married, so my dad had nothing to worry about. Turning my attention to the window, I watched as the desert and mountain landscape passed us by. "My mom wanted me to thank you for bringing me home."

Ethan's deep chuckle made everything inside of me tighten. "My pleasure. It's too bad you didn't get your wish, though. You know, the one where you didn't want to see me when I got back home. I didn't exactly give you a choice."

"We're not at home yet," I informed him. "As soon as you drop me off, I don't have to see you if I don't want to. Right now, I'm stuck. I'm not going to sit here whining because of it."

"So, are you trying to say it's not bad being around me?"

Rolling my eyes, I turned to him. "You're my friend, Ethan. We just happened to make a mistake last night, that's all. I don't want things to be awkward. I'm going to be home for a couple of months, and we'll have no choice but to be around each other. Also, Christmas is coming up."

"Do you want to pretend nothing happened?"

He glanced over at me, but I turned my head quickly. I didn't want to look in his eyes.

“I do,” I replied. It wasn’t the truth, but it also wasn’t a lie.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him still staring at me. But then he huffed and turned his head back toward the road.

“All right, it never happened then,” he said.

“Good. Glad we got that settled.”

He sighed. “Me too.”

And this was the awkwardness I’d wanted to avoid. *Think, Peyton. Start up a new conversation.*

“Your fight the other night was pretty epic. I’m glad I was able to be there and watch everyone win. I didn’t realize how much I missed that excitement.”

Ethan grinned and peered over at me. “I liked having you there. We’ve gotten to know each other a *lot* more this past week.”

“Yes, we have,” I agreed, ignoring his accentuation on the *lot* part. “We’re finally on the same wavelength now. You were never interested in talking to me when I was a teenager.”

He laughed. “That’s because I’m four years older than you, Peyton. You were a little bit behind me.”

“Me?” I shrieked. “Seriously? I was way more mature at twelve than you were at sixteen. Don’t fool yourself otherwise.”

We both chuckled together, and it was nice. “Yeah, maybe you’re right,” he gave in. “You were never annoying like Reagan.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “And speaking of growing up, what about *you*? You’re twenty-seven and single. Your sisters are both married and beginning the next stages of their lives. How does that make you feel?”

He shrugged. “Lucky. I’m enjoying my freedom.”

“Yeah, I bet you are. It must be nice to come and go as you please. Have sex with anyone you want, whenever you want.”

Ethan smirked at me. “Is that jealousy I hear?”

“Of course, it is. I’d give anything to be able to do what I want.”

“No, no, not that. I’m talking about the ‘sex with anyone you want’ part. Your voice sounded a little angry when you said it.”

“Nope, not at all,” I fired back with a smile. “Trust me. I couldn’t care less what you do in your free time.”

“Okay, cupcake, let’s switch things around. You’re twenty-three and single. Your two best friends, who are also my sisters, are happily married. How does that make *you* feel?”

Ethan glanced over at me, his blue eyes searching mine before he had to focus back on the road. How did it make me feel? The first emotion I felt was happiness, but there was something else, something deeper. I never realized it until now. I was sad, envious, and a part of me was angry. The truth was, I didn’t know if I’d ever have what they had.

“Peyton?”

“Sorry,” I said, my voice low, “I’m actually ashamed to admit my real feelings.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I stared down at my hands in my lap. “I mean, I am happy for them, but I’m worried I’ll never find that kind of happiness. With the way my life is, it’ll be impossible. The media tear people like me apart. I’ve worked with so many couples who were in love but being in the public eye and having trash written about them all the time broke them up. It’s sad.”

Ethan shrugged. “Maybe they weren’t strong enough together to handle it.”

“You think it’s that easy?”

“Why not?” he said, meeting my gaze. “I don’t give a rat’s ass what the media says about me. I know who I am. And if someone were to write something false, I’d hope the person I’m with could trust me.” He cleared his throat. “Take you, for

instance. I'd have to watch you make out with other men in your movies if you were mine. I'm sure there'd be some speculation about an on-screen affair or some shit like that. I have no doubt this new one coming out in a few months has some pretty hot and heavy scenes with you and another guy. I've seen the teaser trailers."

I could feel the burn rise in my cheeks, but he had a point. "That's why it'll be hard and almost impossible for me to keep a relationship. I'm an actress, and I have to kiss a lot of men in my movies. I haven't fallen for any of them."

Ethan scoffed. "Really? What about Josh Mayfield? You were both into it from what I saw on those clips." Now, who had jealousy in their voice?

A laugh escaped my lips, and I turned to him. "Josh is gay, Ethan."

Ethan's eyes widened when he glanced over at me. "For real?"

"Yes," I said, laughing again. "I think we had more chemistry together than I had with any of my straight costars. Josh was the best. His boyfriend was there watching us on set."

Ethan shook his head. "There's no way in hell I could've watched that."

"Well, at least you don't have to worry about it," I said. "We're not together."

A sigh escaped his lips. "No, we're not."

Even if we wanted to be, we couldn't.

CHAPTER 5

ETHAN

We pulled into the parking lot of Peyton's apartment complex, and I parked beside the silver Audi R8 she never drove. I scanned the lot, and I didn't see any paparazzi around. It didn't mean they weren't there, though.

The last hour of our trip had been spent in silence, except for the music on the radio. Every now and again, I'd watch Peyton out of the corner of my eye, at the way the wind would blow through her midnight-colored hair. All that did was drive me insane, especially when it'd blow her honeysuckle scent my way.

The more time I spent with Peyton, the more I wanted her. What was crazy was that I'd never paid much attention to her until this past week. As kids, I never saw her as anything more than a friend. She'd changed over the years. When she started acting, I noticed how beautiful she had become. But then her career took off and she left. I went on with life and never gave much thought to her. It was great seeing her in the movies and watching her rise to fame, but I had my own life and stardom to achieve. It paled in comparison to hers.

When she came back home, I thought Hollywood would've changed her, but she was still the same Peyton, only sexier than I'd ever imagined. Last night with her wasn't enough. A deal was a deal, though. We both agreed to one night, no strings attached, no complications. Maybe it was for the best. She had her life, and I had mine. *That's the way it is and the way it's going to be.*

I turned off my truck and opened the door. “I’ll walk you in and then head out,” I said to her.

Peyton nodded. “Sounds good.”

I wanted to believe I saw a hint of disappointment in her gaze, but it was probably just wishful thinking on my part. We both got out, and I grabbed her suitcase from the backseat. She lived on the second floor, so I followed her up the stairs. When we got to her door, she reached into her purse and fumbled almost nervously with her keys as she tried to slip them into the lock. Hell, I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t feeling nervous too. I didn’t want to think of the semantics of everything.

I wanted to do what felt right, what felt good.

Kissing her, spreading her wide on the bed, and feeling her legs wrapped around me was what I wanted, but Peyton wasn’t just any girl. I could do that with anyone I wanted, but it wasn’t like that with her. Last night was strictly about the sex, but things were different today. We’d crossed a line, and we couldn’t go back.

Honestly, I didn’t know how to move forward. The rules had changed.

Peyton opened the door, and I walked in behind her, leaving her suitcase in the living room where the scent of coconut and pina coladas engulfed me. Everything inside was just as I remembered it from the last time I’d been there. Peyton loved succulent plants, and they were everywhere. They were in every corner, on the fireplace mantle, bookshelf, and the kitchen counters. Peyton loved nature. It was one of the things I remembered about her when we were younger.

When her family visited mine at our cabin, Peyton would play in the dirt and name every flower she found in the forest. I never cared about any of that back then, but now, I realize how brilliant Peyton was. There was more to her than her ability to act and mesmerize a crowd. I wished I could say the same for myself. But unfortunately, all I could do was fight. Maybe I *wasn’t* worthy of her. Perhaps a one-night stand was all I was suitable for.

Peyton turned to face me and stuck her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. “Thanks for bringing me home.”

Fucking hell, I wanted to kiss her.

Instead, I kept my distance. “You’re welcome.” I looked around her apartment to the hallway. “Do you want me to take a walk-through?”

“No. My parents did that already. So everything should be okay.”

I faced her again, and her eyes drifted down to my lips. Why did she have to make this so damn hard? The last thing I wanted to do was make a move and push her away.

“All right,” I said, backing away toward the door. I turned away from her and opened it, peering down into the parking lot. It made me wonder if there were paparazzi out there, snapping photos of us right now. I didn’t like the thought of Peyton being by herself. Shutting the door, I turned back to her. “I really don’t like you being here alone.”

Peyton crossed her arms over her chest. “I’ll be fine, Ethan. Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

We stared at each other for the longest time. Her eyes shifted to my mouth again, and I couldn’t take it anymore. Closing the distance, I pulled her into my arms and pressed my lips to hers. She opened up to me, and I clutched her tight around the waist, pushing my tongue against hers, tasting her. I broke away first and cupped her cheeks, loving the sound of her ragged breaths.

“I had to do that one last time,” I said, breathing her in. “If you ever need me, you know where I’ll be.” That was where I had to end it.

Turning on my heel, I shut the door behind me. When I got in my truck, my phone rang. I was hoping it would be Peyton asking me to come back up, but it wasn’t her. It was my mom.

“Hey,” I answered.

“Hey, sweetheart. I heard you were bringing Peyton home from Vegas. I was calling to see if you two wanted to stop by

for dinner before you take her to her apartment.”

“I just dropped her off.”

“Well, that stinks. Your dad and I would still like for you to come. What do you say?”

I started up my truck and headed in their direction. “Sounds great. I’ll see you in a few.”

After dinner, I decided to stay with my parents for a while. It’d been a long time since I sat with my dad just to shoot the shit. When we weren’t training, I was usually out with Ripp at various bars and whatnot. I wasn’t in the mood for that tonight. My dad poured us a glass of whiskey, and we sat by the pool.

It was late November in Santa Monica, California, and the temperatures had dropped to the high fifties. Still, it was nothing compared to what I was used to at our family’s cabin in Sierra Nevada. Of course, there were days when I missed the cooler weather, but I also loved my life on the beach.

“Do you want to train in the morning?” my dad asked.

Laughing, I looked down at my phone sitting on the table between us. “Um ... it *is* morning already. Something tells me we’re not going to be worth a damn in a few hours.”

My dad chuckled and lifted the glass to his lips. “Yeah, you may be right. We can skip out if you want. I still have to head to Fightanium to handle payroll. It’s my month for that.”

Fightanium was the gym he started up with my uncle Camden who was also his twin, Peyton’s parents, and another fighter, Matt Reynolds, whose son was married to my twin sister. One day, I would inherit part of my father’s share of the business. It was our legacy.

I leaned my head against the chair and peered at the night sky. “Yeah, let’s skip it. I’ll do extra training tomorrow.”

“What’s wrong, son? You’ve been a little preoccupied tonight. Would you rather be out on the town instead of hanging out with your old man?”

My lips pulled back and I turned to him. It was like seeing myself in a mirror, except he had blond hair, and mine was dark like my mother’s. Other than that, I’d always been told I looked exactly like him.

“Actually, no,” I answered in all honesty. “I wasn’t feeling the bars tonight.”

My dad’s brows lifted. “Wow, that’s a first. I remember what it was like to always party with Camden.” He finished off his whiskey and set his glass down. “I grew out of that real quick when your mother came back into my life.”

When I didn’t say anything, I could see him watching me from the corner of my eye. “What?” I laughed. “Why are you staring at me?”

“Are you into someone? I recognize the look on your face. It reminds me of me when I met your mom.”

I glanced over at him. “What made you want to change for her?”

He smiled and looked off into the distance. It was dark, but I could hear the waves crashing against the shore. “I fell in love with her,” he answered. “There’s no way she would’ve put up with me if I continued down my path. Going out to bars, drinking all night, and sleeping with random women didn’t have the same appeal anymore. All I could think about was her.”

That was how it’d been the past week in Vegas. With Peyton around, I didn’t want to hook up with anyone else. I had hundreds of chances, but I didn’t want that. My focus was on Peyton. I thought my need for her would quell once I’d had her, but it only intensified.

“Who is she?” my dad asked.

I scoffed. “Someone I really shouldn’t be messing with.”

“Please tell me she’s over eighteen?”

“Seriously?” I snapped incredulously. “What the fuck? Of course, she’s over eighteen.”

My dad held up his hands. “Hey, I had to ask. You said you shouldn’t be messing with her, so my first thought went to her age. What’s wrong with her?”

I shook my head. “Nothing’s *wrong* with her. I just wish I knew what she wanted.”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

I scoffed again. “Oh, she’s told me what she wants, but I don’t know if I believe it. Her actions say otherwise.”

My dad burst out laughing. “Ah, yes. I get it now. Your mother was the same way with me. This girl sounds like she wants to protect herself. I can’t blame her.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I countered. He stared at me like I was an idiot. Maybe I was.

“You’re the carbon copy of a younger me, son. You’re twenty-seven years old and have never been in a serious relationship.”

“This girl hasn’t either,” I informed him. At least, I didn’t think she had been. There were a couple of guys she’d been pictured with in the tabloids, but never anything about her being seriously involved with anyone. “Her life is a little complicated. The whole situation is complicated, especially considering who she is.”

My dad’s brows furrowed. “How old is she?”

I stared right at him, knowing he would eventually put two and two together. “Twenty-three.”

His lips pursed, and then his eyes widened. “Were you with this girl today?”

Turning away from him, I ran a hand over my face. “Yep.”

“Oh hell, son. What have you gotten yourself into?”

“I wish I knew,” I said, sighing.

My dad blew out an exasperated breath. “Well, I *can* tell you this, I’m not about to say anything to her father. I know he likes you because you’re my son, but I hope you and Peyton figure something out. Our big Christmas party is in less than a month. Hopefully, things aren’t going to be awkward between you two.”

“Yeah, I hope not either. Because it sure as hell is right now.”

My dad stood and placed a hand on my shoulder. “You’ll figure it out. I have no doubt.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s late, and you’ve been drinking. Do you want just to stay the night?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’ll do that,” I said, looking up at him. “I might stay out here for a while, clear my head.”

He patted my shoulder. “Okay. I’ll see you in the morning, or later this morning to be exact.”

Once he was gone, I closed my eyes and listened to the waves. I tried to think of something other than Peyton, but nothing worked. I had a feeling nothing would.

CHAPTER 6

PEYTON

It felt good to be in my own room and not in some hotel. I thought sleep would come quickly, but my mind was racing. I had two months to spend in California, and I had no clue how I wanted to utilize that time. Reagan was on her honeymoon, and I didn't want to monopolize her when she returned, especially since she was a newlywed. Of course, there was always my mother, but I was around her often. I was pretty sure she'd want me to spend time at Fightanium, but that was where Ethan would be.

It'd been hours since he left, and his kiss still burned my lips. I didn't know what to do about him. If he hadn't broken away from the kiss and left, I would've been happy to sneak away to my bedroom for another round. We were safe from prying eyes behind closed doors, safe from the media who'd no doubt tear us apart. If there were a way to keep our relationship hidden, I'd do it. Unfortunately, I couldn't ask that of Ethan. It was best to let whatever transpired between us fizzle out.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly. I was too tired to get up and turn on my soothing music player. I could really use the calming sound of a babbling brook right about now. So instead, I closed my eyes and snuggled into my pillow, pulling my covers up under my chin. Everything was eerily quiet around me. I could hear the ocean waves outside my window if I listened closely. I concentrated on that for a bit longer, and it wasn't far after that I began to feel the drift of sleep. I welcomed it.

But then, my eyes shot open when a sound I recognized all too well echoed down the hall. My front door always made a slight creaking noise when it opened, and I knew I had just heard it. With my heart racing erratically, I could feel my fight or flight response kick in. The adrenaline rushed through me so fast that I thought my chest would explode. Even my body broke out in an ice-cold sweat.

Grabbing my phone off the nightstand, I quickly slid out of bed and hid behind my bedroom door. There was no escape from my bedroom unless I opened the window and jumped out, but I'd surely break my legs if I did that.

It was hard to concentrate with the pounding in my ears, but I did hear the click of the front door shutting. Someone *was* in my apartment.

"Fuck," I hissed. My hands shook as I pressed 9-1-1 on my cell.

"9-1-1. What's your emergency?" the operator called out.

I didn't know if she'd be able to hear me, but I whispered the words as low and as fast as I could. "Someone just broke into my apartment. My name's Peyton Emerson." I recited my address and sucked in a shaky breath. "Please send help now."

I hung up just as I could hear the telltale sound of footsteps creeping down the hall. Sweat poured down my back and beaded along my forehead. I was terrified, and I didn't know what to do. I only knew that whoever was in my apartment wasn't there with innocent intentions. All I needed was a weapon. Glancing hastily around my room, the only thing I could see as being somewhat of a defense mechanism was the glass vase on the dresser right near me; it contained one of my favorite succulent plants.

Setting my phone down on the dresser, I snatched up the vase, the glass cold as ice against my hands. All I had to do was escape out of my room and out the front door. I'd figure everything else out as it came. The footsteps drew closer, and I held my breath as a figure stood in my doorway. It was dark, but I knew it was a man by his build. I could see him through the crack at the side of the door. I was so scared I felt sick, my

stomach turning in painful knots. The man stepped into my room, a low growl hissing from his lips when he noticed the empty bed. It was now or never; I had to strike.

Raising the vase high, I charged after him and slammed it onto his skull. The glass exploded and shattered all over my floor. The intruder dropped to his knees, but he was in my escape path.

“Fucking cunt!” he shouted. “You’re gonna pay for that!”

I jumped past him, but he grabbed my ankle and I slammed onto the floor, the breath whooshing out of my lungs with the pain. I gasped for air, but I couldn’t get any in. It felt as if I was going to suffocate. Panic consumed me and I thrashed around, struggling to find my strength even though I couldn’t breathe. But then, the pain ebbed, and I sucked in a breath. The man tried to slide me across the floor toward him, but I kicked as hard as I could at his face, his shoulders, everywhere.

“*Someone help me!*” I screamed. “*Help me!*”

The fear had been replaced with anger. This man had come into my home to do God knows what to me. I wanted him to hurt, to know he’d made the biggest mistake of his life. My hand brushed across a shard of glass, a piece about the size of my palm. It tore my skin in my haste to grab it, but it was my only saving grace. The man pulled me closer, his hands all over my body.

“*Get off me!*” I screamed, punching him with my left fist. The shard was in my right hand, and I sliced the glass across his cheek, neck, forehead, and everywhere I could until he backed away, wailing in agony. His blood was all over my hands, and I fought the urge to throw up. I had to get out of there.

Dropping the glass shard, I raced down the hallway and out the front door, right into the arms of another man. His arms latched around me, and I screamed. “*Let me go! Someone help me!*”

“Peyton, it’s me,” a familiar voice shouted. “It’s Brian. I’m your neighbor downstairs.”

Tears clouded my vision, but I couldn’t wipe them away because of the blood on my hands. My mind was a jumbled mess, but I knew Brian was a police officer.

“Brian,” I cried, unable to control my shaking hands. “He’s in my apartment.”

Brian let me go and guided me toward the stairs. “I’ll handle it. My wife has already called the station. She’s waiting for you. You’ll be safe.”

Quickly, I made it down the stairs before anyone else in the apartment complex could rush outside to see me. Brian’s wife, Emily, hurried outside when she saw me and draped a blanket over my shoulders.

“Come on. Let’s get you inside.” She pulled me into hers and Brian’s apartment just as the sirens wailed in the distance. “You’re safe, Peyton,” Emily murmured, pulling me into her arms. “You’re going to be okay.”

“Am I?” I sobbed, holding onto her. “I don’t know if I believe that.”

It was a night from hell.

Brian had apprehended the intruder, who was now on his way to the hospital due to the severe gashes I’d inflicted. Emily helped clean me up and gave me a fresh set of clothes before I was taken to the police station to provide my statement. I was beyond exhausted and ready for it all to end.

My dad glanced back at me through the rearview mirror, and I could see the anger in his eyes. He was like a madman when he showed up at the apartment. I know he wanted to kill the man who attacked me, and he probably would’ve if given a chance. Brian told me that if I’d slashed the guy just an inch over on his neck, I would’ve hit his jugular, and he probably would’ve bled to death. I went numb when I heard that. I

didn't feel guilty or sorry that I almost killed a man. If I hadn't fought back, there was no telling what he would've done to me. In a way, I wished I had killed him.

"It's going to be okay," my mom murmured, rubbing a hand up and down my arm.

"Let me guess," I said, resting my head against the back of the seat, "the news stations are probably swarming around my apartment, right?"

I looked over at my mom and she sighed. "Just a little. You're going to make major headlines this morning."

"Great," I grumbled. "I thought my time here at home was going to be peaceful." Tears streamed down my cheeks, but they were angry tears. The place that had been my haven was now violated, tainted. "I can't go back there. I don't want to ever go back to my apartment."

My mom cuddled me in her arms. "And you're not going to. Once the police are done, I have a crew of guys going to clean the place up and move your things out. It's time you found somewhere secure live. In the meantime, you'll stay with your dad and me until something suitable is found."

It didn't surprise me that she'd already made that decision without telling me. The less I had to deal with, the better. When we arrived at my parents' house, I went inside and took another shower, letting the soap and hot water clean every square inch of my body. I couldn't scrub my hands enough. I didn't want any trace of that man's blood on me.

Once out of the shower, I wrapped a towel around my body and looked in the mirror. My eyes were swollen and red, and I looked like death. Also, right there on my neck was the hickey Ethan gave me. Groaning, I trudged into my old bedroom and put on a pair of fuzzy pajama pants and a T-shirt. A blanket was on my bed, so I snatched it up and wrapped it around my shoulders to hide the mark on my neck.

Voices other than my parents echoed from downstairs, and I slowly made my way to the living room to see who was there. When I turned the corner, Brian was standing with my

parents, and across the room was Ethan and his parents, along with Camden and Brooklyn, Ethan's aunt and uncle, who were close family friends.

The second mine and Ethan's eyes locked onto each other, he rushed over and folded his arms around me. "Fuck, Peyton. Are you okay?"

Tears sprung to my eyes, and I clutched him tight. "I am now."

I didn't want him to let me go, but he did when Brian called out my name. He came up to me and held out my phone. "This was in your bedroom. I figured you'd need it."

"Thanks," I said, taking it from him. There were several missed calls from Reagan, Braden, and my agent. I texted Reagan and my brother and told them I was okay and would talk to them later. Brian smiled sadly at me, and I hugged him. "Thank you for coming to my rescue tonight."

He and his wife had been my downstairs neighbors since Reagan and I moved into the apartment. They were in their mid-thirties trying to save up to buy a house in Malibu. I had never been so thankful to have a police officer live near me.

Brian let me go and laughed. "You did all the work tonight, Peyton. The guys and I were impressed at how hard you fought back."

It all played out in my head, and it almost felt like a bad dream. I wished it was.

"What were you able to find out about the guy?" my dad asked, coming up behind Brian.

Sighing, Brian kept his eyes on me. "His name is Peter Dellinger, thirty-four years old and an LA resident his whole life. Some of my fellow police officers went to his place and found some disturbing things there."

Swallowing hard, I wrapped my arms around my stomach. "Like what?"

Brian glanced around the room. "It's pretty sick, Peyton. He had a room with nothing but your pictures on the walls,

ones cut out from the tabloids, and even ones with you at your apartment.” By the disturbed expression on his face, there was more to the story. I was almost afraid to hear it.

“What else?” I asked.

With a clenched jaw, Brian’s gaze averted to the floor. “I’m not sure you’ll want to hear the rest.”

“I do,” I demanded. “Tell me.”

Brian huffed and rubbed a hand over his face. “There was a custom sex doll in his bedroom. It looked exactly like you.”

“What a sick, fucking bastard,” Ethan hissed.

My stomach rolled, and I held a hand over my mouth. “Oh my God. I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s pretty messed up,” Brian added. “From the look of things, he’s been stalking you for a while. He picked the lock to get into your apartment.” He rested a hand on my shoulder. “But don’t worry, he’ll never be free again, Peyton. Once he’s out of the hospital, he’ll be sent to prison.”

“Son of a bitch,” my father growled. “I’d have given anything to be there and snap that fucker’s neck.”

My mom huffed. “Same.”

Brian focused on me. “I’ll keep you updated when we find out more. But, until then, stay away from your apartment. The reporters are salivating over this whole ordeal. They’ll be dying to hear what you say about it.”

“I’ll lay low,” I promised him. “Trust me. I don’t want to be dealing with that craziness right now.”

He said his goodbyes to everyone, and I turned to Ethan. I’d known him a long time, and so many emotions were warring across his face. Taking my hand, he led me outside to the back patio. The second we were away from everyone, I wrapped my arms tightly around his waist.

“I’m so tired, Ethan. I’m so damn tired right now. I think the adrenaline is long gone.”

I felt safe in his arms.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you stay there by yourself. I should’ve been there.”

“It’s not your responsibility to protect me,” I whispered.

A low growl rumbled in his chest. “I would’ve killed him, Peyton. When I heard what happened, I was so fucking pissed and scared.” He held me tighter. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Slowly, I stepped back and looked up into his eyes. There was something that’d been on my mind since the break-in happened.

“You don’t think Nikolai Michelson had anything to do with this, do you?”

Ethan’s gaze darkened with pure rage. “So, help me God, I’ll kill the fucking bastard if he did.” He blew out a sigh. “But honestly, I don’t think so in this case. This Peter guy was obsessed with you.” His jaw clenched. “But I wouldn’t put it past Nikolai. He’s a magnet for psychotic, deranged pieces of shit. Look at what happened to Reagan and Braden.”

That was true. Nikolai had tried to keep his hands clean by using others to get his revenge on our families.

My phone began to ring, and I looked down at the screen. “It’s my agent,” I said, glancing back at Ethan. “Someone must’ve told her what happened.” He nodded and I turned away to answer it. “Hey, Marisa.”

“Oh my God, Peyton, are you all right?”

“Physically, yes. Mentally, no.”

She sighed heavily into the phone. “I thought I’d have a heart attack when Barry called me.”

Barry Drayton was the producer of the romantic comedy we had just finished filming. He was a night owl, so it didn’t surprise me he’d be up at three in the morning watching the news.

“How insane is it right now? I haven’t turned on the TV.”

Marisa scoffed. “Honey, it’s all over the place. Hundreds of people must be out in your apartment’s parking lot. With

that being said, everyone knows where you live right now.”

I loved that apartment. There were so many memories there with Reagan. It broke my heart to leave it with a bad memory.

“I’m not going back there, Marisa.” My whole body felt so tired I didn’t know if I had the strength to walk around anymore. “All I wanted was time to rest, but I really just want to get away right now.”

“Maybe I can help with that,” Marisa said, her voice low and soothing. “I was going to call you when I knew you were awake, but it sounds like this might be what you need.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“I got a call last night asking if I thought you’d be interested in filming a Christmas movie in Asheville, North Carolina, at the Biltmore House.” I’d always wanted to visit there but never had the time. It was gorgeous at Christmas, decked out in hundreds of lit Christmas trees. “You’ll be playing the role of a princess if you accept,” Marisa added. “You’ve never done that before. The only problem is it’s not going to be a box office hit; it won’t be in the theaters. But it seems like a fun, lighthearted role to take.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Ethan, who had walked over to the edge of the patio with his focus on the black horizon. My mind was a jumbled mess. I didn’t know what to do about him or how I was supposed to feel. Did I want to find solace in his arms? Yes, more than anything, but I couldn’t, not right now.

“How long is the filming supposed to take?” I asked.

“They said filming will start as soon as you arrive, but you’ll get a break for Christmas and come back the day after. Filming will finish up right after the New Year.” It didn’t sound so bad. “Are you interested?”

Ethan turned to look at me, and I quickly moved my gaze away from him. If I had to look into his eyes, I didn’t know if I’d be able to make the decision. “Yes,” I said, rubbing a hand

over my chest. “Call me when you have more details. I want to leave as soon as I can.”

As soon as I hung up, I could feel Ethan drawing closer. “Is everything okay?”

Nodding, I turned to face him, but I still couldn’t bring myself to look into his eyes. I didn’t want him to see how much I wanted him. I had no doubt he’d forget all about me once I left. The time away would definitely do me some good. Ethan Jameson was loyal, protective, and a great guy. We were friends, but that was all it ever would be between us.

“Everything’s fine,” I replied. “My agent told me about a Christmas movie she thought I might be interested in.”

“And are you?”

I stared down at my feet. “I am.”

“When would you leave?” he asked, his voice concerned. His hand gently grasped my chin, and he tilted it up, giving me no choice but to look at him.

“As soon as possible,” I answered, peering into his crystal blue eyes.

His fingers slid from my face. “I understand.”

Clutching my phone, I stepped away. “I should probably tell my mom. She’ll be the one accompanying me.” A part of me wanted to hear him tell me not to go or that he wanted to be the one to go with me. But instead, all we did was stare at each other. “Goodbye, Ethan.”

Not waiting for him to speak, I turned on my heel and headed inside, my heart hurting with each step. I thought our one-night stand would be fun and uncomplicated.

Boy, was I wrong.

CHAPTER 7

ETHAN

FOUR WEEKS LATER

It was Christmas Eve, and Fightanium was closed to the public. As a result, Ripp and I had it to ourselves for the entire day. Everyone else was at my parents' house, preparing for the big Christmas party. I planned to be there soon but needed to blow off some steam first.

Ripp bounced on his feet and stared at me with a shit-eating grin on his face. He was the same height as me, but we competed in different weight classes. I was a middleweight, and he was in the light heavyweight division. He may have a little more muscle mass than me, but I'd put him on his ass many times.

"Peyton comes back today," he goaded.

I swung at him and missed, his smile widening at my failure to connect. He knew the mention of her would throw me off my game.

"Your point?" I growled, circling the ring.

Ripp smacked his gloves together and laughed. "No point, really. Just wondering when you're going to sack up and tell her how you've been moping around for the past month."

I charged at him and deviated at the last minute, swinging my leg across his and making him fall to the mat. I punched him square in the face. His head snapped to the side, and he burst out laughing. Growling, I pushed away from him and got

to my feet. I never should've told him about that night in Vegas with Peyton.

“Why haven't you called her?” he asked, his tone more serious. “I know you've been worried about her.”

Ripping off my gloves, I tossed them onto the mat. “She's busy. I didn't want to bother her.”

She hadn't called me either. I took that as a sign that she didn't want to talk to me. After everything that happened to her, I didn't want to hover like I knew everyone else was, especially Reagan. She kept me in the loop about everything Peyton was doing. She was much better and enjoying her time in North Carolina. In just a few short hours, I'd be seeing her again. Hence, the reason why I needed to blow off steam. I hadn't been doing it any other way.

Grabbing my gloves, I hopped out of the ring and shoved them into my gym bag.

“Why don't you head to Vegas with me after Christmas,” Ripp suggested. “You haven't fought at the Labyrinth since you bailed on Seth.”

I picked up my towel and wiped it across my forehead. “I'm not into it right now, man. Besides, Seth Michelson makes plenty of money without us. He hasn't cared in the least that I haven't been there.”

All I've done the past month is train, eat, sleep, and train. With the holidays here, neither one of us had any professional fights on our schedules. My next one wasn't until late March.

Ripp hopped out of the ring and took off his gloves. “If you change your mind about Vegas—”

“Not this time,” I cut in. “I'm going to hang around here.”

Ripp nodded and packed up his gym bag. “Are you going to say anything to Peyton tonight?”

Scoffing, I slung my bag over my shoulder. “Like what?”

He shrugged, his expression serious. “I don't know, maybe that you care about her? You've been pissed off ever since she

left.” He grabbed his bag and started for the door. “Only you can fix that, brother. Tell her how you feel, or move on.”

As soon as he was gone, I locked up and went out the back to my truck. Ripp had a point. Not telling Peyton how I felt before she left was my mistake. I thought our one-night stand would be enough, but it wasn't. Ever since then, she'd been all I could think about. I hadn't slept with a single person since that night.

On the way home, I drove right by Peyton's apartment complex. Everything had settled down in the past month. All her things had been moved out, and someone else had already moved in. The paparazzi had followed her to North Carolina, which was the only reason I'd been able to see her. Pictures were snapped of her on the movie set, standing in front of the Biltmore House with her male costar. The thought of her kissing another guy pissed me off, but it was her job. She looked happy, and that was all I could ask for.

When I arrived at my Venice home, I parked my truck in the garage beside Peyton's Audi R8. Her brother used to live with me, but now that he and my sister had their own place, it left me with a lot of space, including an extra spot in the garage. I'd offered to keep it while Peyton was gone.

I walked inside and everywhere I looked were Peyton's succulent plants. I didn't see the point in her renting a storage unit for her things, so I offered up my place to her parents. I had no clue if she knew or not, but her brother's old bedroom was now technically hers.

Once in my room, I tossed my gym bag onto the floor and took off my shirt. It was four-thirty, and the party was going to start at six to give Peyton and Gabriella time to arrive from the airport.

I walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Before I could take off the rest of my clothes, my phone rang. It was still in my gym bag, so I dug it out and saw Reagan's name on the screen.

“Hey,” I answered.

“Hey. When are you coming to the party? Everyone’s here early.”

I froze.

“Everyone? As in ...”

She snickered low. “Yes. Peyton just showed up. I think she was a little disappointed she didn’t see you.”

I scoffed. “I doubt that.”

“I know my best friend, Ethan. She might not have said much about you the past few weeks, but I know she’s been thinking about you. I could hear her sadness through the phone. So, if I have to lock you two in a room to get you to talk, I’ll do it.”

“I’m sure we’ll find a way at some point tonight,” I said.

“Good. Now get your ass over here.”

“I’ll be right there.”

After taking a quick shower, I ran a towel through my hair and dressed in a pair of jeans and a light blue T-shirt. I walked past the kitchen but then stopped when I noticed the small, silvery snowflake gift-wrapped box sitting by itself on the counter. Taking a deep breath, I walked over and stared at it. It was for Peyton, but I had no clue if I should give it to her or not.

CHAPTER 8

PEYTON

It was good to be back in California. The time away was exactly what I needed. I'd missed my family and my friends. What made me nervous as hell was seeing Ethan. There were days I wanted to call him, but I never followed through. Filming for the movie kept me plenty busy. I just buried myself in work.

"Oh, Peyton, it's so good to see you," Ashleigh shouted, holding out her arms.

Ashleigh Jameson was Ethan's mother and my mom's best friend. Ethan had her dark hair, but that was about it. He looked exactly like his father in every other aspect. I hugged Ashleigh and then moved through the crowd to do the same with everyone else. The whole crew was there ... except for one. *Ethan*.

Reagan looped her arm through mine and pulled me into the kitchen. The whole house was decorated with twinkling white lights and smelled of cinnamon and freshly baked cookies; it was my favorite time of the year.

"Come on. I waited on you before getting into the peanut butter balls."

She opened the red and white snowman container, and the smell of peanut butter wafted up to my nose.

My stomach growled. "Starting with dessert first, huh?" I teased, setting my purse on the counter.

Reagan winked and handed me a one of the sugary-sweet confectioneries. "Like always."

We tapped our chocolate-covered balls against each other, and I tossed mine into my mouth; it tasted like heaven. Reagan smiled and it warmed my heart. There was something different about her. Maybe it was the red sweater she had on or the shimmer in her blonde hair. Either way, she looked amazing.

“There’s something different about you,” I said to her. “I can’t put my finger on it. It’s almost like you’re glowing.”

Biting her lip, she looked around as if she was making sure no one was nearby. “What’s going on?” I coaxed, grabbing her hand. “Are you pregnant?”

Her smile widened, and she leaned in close. “Not yet, but Braden and I decided to start trying. I’m so excited I can’t contain it.”

“What about your career? Are you going to stop fighting?”

She picked up another peanut butter ball. “Professionally, yes, when I finally do get pregnant. But after that, I’m going to concentrate on coaching. It’s what I really want to do.”

Pulling her to me, I hugged her hard. “Oh, Reagan, I’m so happy for you.”

“Shh, don’t say anything,” she whispered. “We want to surprise everyone when it happens.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” Letting her go, I stepped back and glanced through the entryway to the living room. Ethan still hadn’t shown up. “I’m going to run to the restroom,” I said to her, grabbing my purse. “I’ll be right back.”

I didn’t have to use the bathroom, but I wanted to sneak away for a few minutes to collect my thoughts. A part of me was angry at Ethan, but mostly I was confused. I figured the past few weeks away from him would erase him from my mind, but it only enhanced things. He hadn’t called or texted the entire time I was gone. But, then again, I didn’t communicate with him either. I had no doubt he’d moved on to other women, which was probably why he hadn’t bothered to call.

When I walked by the bathroom next to the kitchen, someone was in there, so I decided to sneak away upstairs. I stopped outside the upstairs bathroom and glanced over my shoulder at the room across from me. There was a shimmer of light that felt as if it was beckoning me closer. It was my favorite room in the house.

When I stepped inside, my breath caught in my lungs. I'd never been in there at night to see how magical the ocean truly was in the darkness. The room was nothing but floor-to-ceiling windows. In the distance, the moon lit up the sky, making the black water below shimmer like diamonds. The moon also lit up the room, its glow giving me the perfect amount of light; it was relaxing.

There was a couch and two loveseats facing the windows, but I didn't want to sit. So instead, I placed my purse on the sofa and walked to the windows to peer out. Over to the left, I could see the Ferris wheel lights on the Santa Monica Pier. My parents used to take Braden and me there all the time when we were kids, when things were simpler. There were many times I wanted to go back, but it wouldn't be the same. Too many people knew who I was. If I could be a normal person for a day, I'd pay whatever price it took just to experience the freedom.

"I found you."

Ethan's low, smooth voice made my heart jump in my chest. Hearing him now made my feelings for him come back with a vengeance. I wanted to turn around and look at him, but I couldn't do it. I kept my focus out the windows even though I could see his reflection. He had on jeans and a light blue T-shirt that matched his eyes. His dark hair looked like he'd just run his hands through it, but it was sexy.

"Here I am," I said, tearing my eyes away from his reflection.

"How have you been?" he asked, his voice drawing closer. My skin broke out in shivers, almost as if my body anxiously waited to feel his touch.

"I'm fine. You?"

Stopping next to me, I could smell his cologne and feel the heat of his skin. “Not good, if I’m being honest.” The words came out angry.

I jerked my head toward him, my chest tightening at the sight of his crystal blue eyes; there was so much emotion in them. I knew the second I looked into them, I’d lose myself.

“Not good? What is that supposed to mean?” The words came out breathless.

Ethan stepped closer, his eyes searching mine. “I didn’t want to do this now, but I can’t wait any longer. The past few weeks have been driving me fucking mental.”

“Why?”

His gaze shifted to my lips, then back to my eyes. “Because I want you, Peyton. I’m tired of playing games. You might be okay with our one night together, and that’s fine, but you should know it’s not what I want. Maybe it was at the beginning, but not anymore.”

My whole body trembled, and all I could do was stare at him. That was the last thing I expected to hear come from his lips. Ethan cupped my cheeks and peered down at me.

“I wanted to tell you how I felt before you left, but you had just been through so much. So I waited for you to call. And when you didn’t, I just ...”

“Got angry,” I whispered, watching his eyes widen. “I know exactly how you feel.”

His brows furrowed. “What are you saying?”

It felt as if no time had passed between us, and we were right back at the night in Vegas. We were connected in ways I’d never felt with anyone else. I placed my hands over his.

“I waited for you to call, too. I figured you’d forgotten about that night.”

Ethan’s eyes darkened with need. “There’s no way in hell.”

His lips closed over mine so quickly it caught me off guard. I melted against him and let him devour me, his arms

crushing me into his body. It almost felt like I was in a dream, replaying what I wanted to happen in my mind. That at any moment, I'd wake up and be there all alone.

Breaking from the kiss, I slid my hands up to rest on Ethan's chest.

"Tell me you want this," he said, his eyes searching mine.

"I do, but it'll never work. The second people know we're together, we'll be exploited. It's too much stress; it'll ruin what we have together."

"Not if we don't let it. Who says we have to go public?"

"You would be okay with that?"

Smiling, Ethan tucked my hair behind my ear. "I'll do whatever it takes to make this work." Then, taking my hand, he brought it to his lips and kissed it. "As long as I know you're mine, I can handle anything. Only this time, when you return to North Carolina, I expect you to call me."

I smiled. "I can handle that. Luckily, I'll only be gone for a couple of weeks, and then I'm right back here."

A smirk spread across his face. "And I'm sure we can figure out a way to sneak you into my house. I don't know if anyone told you, but ..."

I held up a hand. "Reagan's already informed me all my stuff is at your house, including my car."

His gaze narrowed in concern. "How do you feel about that?"

I shrugged. "At first, I was terrified because I knew I'd have to see you at some point, and I didn't know if I was ready. But now, I think it works out perfectly."

Ethan stared into my eyes and slowly leaned down to kiss me again. "How long do you have before you head back to Asheville?"

My smile faded. "My mom and I leave the day after tomorrow."

His arms snaked around my waist. “Tomorrow it is then. I’ll come pick you up at your parents’ house.”

I clutched my hands behind his neck. “That might be a problem.”

He cocked his head to the side. “How come?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said in a singsong voice. “Maybe it’s because I might not be there.”

His gaze narrowed. “Where will you be?”

I winked. “At Reagan and Braden’s. At least, for the morning I will be. I’m spending tonight there and eating Christmas morning breakfast with them. After that, I’ll be with my parents.”

“Ah, I see,” Ethan replied, smirking mischievously. “I’ll just stop by Reagan and Braden’s then.”

“What will you tell my brother when you come to pick me up?”

Chuckling, he held me closer. “I’m sure we’ll think of something. But, right now, we need to get back to the party.”

“Do you think you can keep your hands to yourself?”

“Doubt it,” he replied, grinning evilly. “Just keep your phone handy. We’ll text and meet up somewhere in the house.”

Giggling, I pushed him toward the door. “Can’t wait. Now go. I’ll see you in a little bit.”

He disappeared into the hallway, and I sighed—a secret relationship.

Sadly, it was the only way for us to be together. At least, for now.

CHAPTER 9

PEYTON

It was Christmas morning, and it was already shaping up to be the best one yet. I felt terrible for crashing in on Reagan and Braden's first Christmas together, but they insisted. We played cards, and Reagan and I ate a whole container of peanut butter balls. It was probably why I woke up nauseated, but I pushed through it.

Reagan and I had made a whole batch of buttermilk pancakes, and I couldn't let anything ruin that for me. I doused more syrup on my plate and closed my eyes as I swallowed the last bite of buttery, sugary goodness.

"Did you honestly think I didn't notice you and my brother sneaking off together last night?" Reagan chimed in.

I could feel the heat rise to my cheeks, but I kept focusing on my pancakes. Braden had finished eating breakfast and was in the living room.

"Hopefully, no one else did," I whispered, glancing over at her. "I think it's best we keep it all under wraps. You know how the media gets. I don't want anything to ruin what we're trying to build."

Reagan beamed. "Build? Sounds serious already. Then again, given how my brother's acted this past month with you gone, I'm not shocked he wants to jump in headfirst."

Butterflies danced around in my stomach, making me smile. "Taking things slow is kind of ridiculous considering we've already slept together. Behind closed doors, I want to

see where this goes. But out in the open, we're going to keep our distance. He agreed to do this with me."

Reagan nodded. "I think it's smart to keep your relationship a secret for now. I'm glad Ethan agreed."

Me too.

Reagan grabbed the last strawberry on my plate and tossed it in her mouth. "Are you seeing him again before you leave?"

The doorbell rang and I grinned. "It just so happens that I am."

I heard Ethan and Braden chatting in the living room a few minutes later.

Reagan smirked. "So, are we keeping my husband in the dark on this, or are you going to tell him about you and Ethan?"

Sheepishly, I bit my lip. "Maybe you can when I'm back in North Carolina? I can only imagine the level of shit he's going to give Ethan, especially after the hard time Ethan gave him when you two started seeing each other."

Shaking her head, Reagan giggled. "Fine. I'll tell him when you're gone."

"Thanks," I said, sliding out of my chair. I took my plate to the sink and rinsed it before placing it in the dishwasher.

"What are you and Ethan going to do when you leave here?" she asked, clearly knowing by the mischievous sound in her voice. My cheeks burned, and I had no doubt she could see the redness when I turned around to face her.

"Just spending time together since I leave out tomorrow. We're using the excuse that I want to go through my things."

Her grin widened. "Did you invite him to Christmas dinner at your parent's house tonight?" I'd thought about it. It was only going to be my parents, Reagan and Braden.

"Don't you think it'll make things obvious?"

Reagan shrugged. "I know you want to keep your love life hidden from the world, but this is your family, Peyton. They'll

understand and I know they won't tell anyone. It's not like they'll leak the secret to the tabloids."

"True," I replied, already knowing that fact. "I think I'm just nervous."

Reagan scoffed. "Please. Your mom will be thrilled. Our mothers have been plotting the union of our families ever since we were born. They got their wish when Braden and I married, and now they have another son and daughter together. They won't be able to contain their excitement."

We both laughed and I hugged her. "Are you just saying all this so you don't have to tell my brother yourself?"

She snickered. "Maybe. I kind of want to see Braden's face when you spill the beans."

Ethan appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, crossing his arms over his chest. He looked different today with neatly gelled hair and was wearing a pair of jeans and a thin gray sweater that hugged his muscular arms. Very sexy.

"And what are you two talking about?"

Reagan chuckled and let me go. "Your funeral."

She patted him on the shoulder as she stalked past him. Brows furrowed, he watched her go and then turned back to me. "Do I want to know what she's talking about?"

I glanced past him into the living room where Reagan and Braden were on the couch, not paying any attention to us. Grabbing his wrist, I pulled him away from the doorway and kissed him. If we were going to tell my family about us, I'd decide later. Right now, I just wanted to focus on being with him for the last day I was in town.

"I'll tell you later," I said, whispering against his lips. "I know you just got here, but I'm ready to go back to your place."

Ethan's lips pulled back with that sexy smirk of his. "And what do you want to do when we get there?"

I winked at him. "I'm sure we'll figure it out."

We said our goodbyes to Reagan and Braden, and they walked with us outside to Ethan's truck. My excuse for leaving was so that I could grab some of my things from Ethan's house. In all honesty, it *was* the truth. After the attack, I left everything in my apartment. I didn't want to step foot in there ever again. It still hurt my heart knowing the last time I saw that place—my solace that had so many fond memories—it was tainted by that psychotic bastard.

I hopped in the backseat to stay hidden ... just in case. It was Christmas day, so I hoped the paparazzi had better things to do, like spending time with their families. Reagan and Braden lived in a gated neighborhood which was what I wanted. They didn't have to worry about photographers camping outside their house.

"Braden didn't seem to care that you were leaving with me," Ethan said. He glanced at me through the rearview mirror and I smiled.

"It's probably because he doesn't think I'd be crazy enough to get with you."

"Or it could be vice versa."

We both laughed and it felt good to hear his again. I'd missed the sound while I was gone. He was always so serious in the fighting ring, but there was a fun, caring side to him as well. If there was one thing I enjoyed about being home, it was that I could be myself. There was a certain way I had to be with the Hollywood crowd, and it was exhausting. Did I like wearing fancy dresses and going to parties and awards shows? Of course I did, but sometimes it was lonely. My agent and mother were mostly my dates, except when I went with Jake Parker. He was one of the former costars I dated while filming our movie *All It Takes*; it was one of my biggest films. Our relationship didn't last long; we were too different.

"What are you and Ripp going to do while I'm gone?" I asked, reaching over to rest my hand on his leg. Ethan clasped his hand with mine and brought it to his lips, kissing it gently.

"Who says I'm going to be hanging out with Ripp?"

“Seriously,” I countered. “You’re always with Ripp.”

Chuckling, he squeezed my hand. “Ah, you know, the usual. We’ll be going to clubs every night and getting drunk.”

A spark of jealousy ignited in my gut. It made me wonder if that was what he’d done the past few weeks while I was gone. I didn’t have a response that wasn’t laced with anger, so I clenched my teeth instead. When I tried to let go of Ethan’s hand, he gripped mine tighter.

“I’m kidding, Peyton. I haven’t been out clubbing since our time in Vegas.”

“Really?” I asked, feeling the jealousy ebb away. “Why not?”

We arrived at his house, and he pulled into the garage beside my Audi R8. Once the garage door closed us in, Ethan turned in his seat to face me, grinning playfully.

“Because I didn’t want to. Does that make you feel better? Don’t think I didn’t notice the hostility when you tried to pull away from me.”

I bit my lip. “Sorry. Guess you can say I don’t like the thought of you going partying without me. A lot of stuff can happen when you’re drunk and surrounded by beautiful women. Women who’d do anything to be with you.”

Ethan clutched my chin and leaned forward, his lips warm against mine. “You have nothing to worry about.” He got out of the truck and opened my door. “Besides, I’m the one who should be worried about you always being around your male costars. How many of them have you dated?”

After grabbing my purse, I slid out of his truck. “Not many.”

Ethan froze, his gaze curious. “Please tell me you didn’t get with that fucking douche you starred with in *All It Takes*, did you? I saw shit in the tabloids with you two, but I didn’t believe it.”

Cringing, I walked past him to the door. I didn’t want to answer his question. Jake Parker really was an ass once I got

to know him.

“You did, didn’t you?” Ethan asked, stepping in front of me to open the door that led into his kitchen.

Groaning, I walked past him and set my purse on the counter. “Yeah, it wasn’t my wisest choice. After that fiasco of a relationship ended, I promised myself I’d never date another of my costars.”

Ethan shut the door behind us. “What other famous men have you dated?”

“Who’s jealous now?” I asked, turning to face him.

Ethan held up his hands, but there was humor on his face. “Hey, I’m just wondering who my competition is when you go back to filming twenty-four seven.” He stalked closer. “I might have to take over being your bodyguard so I can be on your sets.”

My heart flip-flopped in my chest. “Now that would be interesting. I’m sure my mom would like to retire from the job at some point,” I said, wrapping my arms around his neck. “I hate that she spends so much time away from my dad.”

Ethan clutched me around the waist. “She just wants to make sure you’re protected.” His smile faded. “When you were gone, I worried about you every single day, especially after everything that happened. I wanted to be there for you but didn’t think you needed me.”

The way he looked at me made goose bumps fan out over my skin. “If you only knew,” I murmured, lifting on my toes to kiss him. We held each other, and my gaze shifted over to my purse. “Oh, I got you something.” He let me go and I grabbed my purse off the counter. “It’s not much, but I had it made a couple of weeks ago.” I reached in, pulled the small, glittery red gift bag out of my purse, and handed it to him.

Ethan peered inside and smiled when he lifted his gift out of the bag. Hanging from a silver ribbon was an ornament—a pair of ceramic MMA fighting gloves painted black with his name in red.

Clearing my throat, I pointed at it. “Again, it’s not much. There was a small Christmas shop near the Biltmore House, and the lady who owned it made custom ornaments. I didn’t know what it would be like to see you again, but I thought it might break the ice between us.”

Ethan kissed me. “I love it, Peyton.” He lifted the ornament, but then his smile faded. “But unfortunately, we have a problem.”

“What?” I asked, waiting for him to look at me. Ethan nodded for me to follow him, and I did. When we reached his living room, that was when I figured it out. There was no Christmas tree to hang it on. However, there *was* one of my plants in the corner that could easily pass for one. It was a Norfolk Island Pine that stood about three feet tall. Grinning, I held out my hand. “There’s no problem at all. Let me have the ornament.” Ethan handed it to me, and I walked over to the plant, gently hanging the ornament on one of the branches. “There. Now you have a Christmas tree.”

Coming up behind me, Ethan snaked his arms around my waist, and in his hands was a small box wrapped in silvery snowflake wrapping paper. “What’s this?”

Ethan brushed his lips across my neck. “I wanted to get you something. I hope you like it.”

Excitement bubbled in my chest as I ripped through the paper and opened the black box. Inside was the most beautiful diamond-encrusted snowflake necklace I’d ever seen. His mother had one just like it, and I always complimented her whenever she wore it.

“Ethan, it’s gorgeous,” I breathed. “It looks just like the one your dad got your mother.”

It was a gift he’d given her before Ethan was born. I turned around in his arms, and he pulled the necklace out of the box. “And I know you loved it, so I thought you might want one of your own.” It had to have cost a fortune.

He unclasped it and started to put it around my neck, but I stopped him. “Wait.”

His brows furrowed. “What’s wrong?”

Biting my lip, I took the necklace and carefully placed it on the end table beside his brown leather couch. “Nothing’s wrong. I just don’t want anything to happen to it.”

Understanding flashed in his crystal blue gaze. “Oh yeah?” he murmured, his voice low and dark. He kissed my cheek and slid his lips down my neck. “So, what are you saying?”

His teeth nipped my neck where he’d left a hickey the last time we’d slept together. “I think you know,” I whispered back.

Kissing his way up my neck and chin, he stopped at my bottom lip and sucked it. “Are you sure?”

His rigid cock pressed into my stomach, and I moaned. “Yes. I’m more than ready.” Taking my hand, he led me down the hallway to his bedroom, the anticipation building with each step. I had the overwhelming urge to rip off his clothes and mine. I’d never felt so passionately about being with someone before. It was intoxicating, and I wanted to indulge in it.

Once we made it to Ethan’s room, I could barely catch my breath as we tore off each other’s clothes. He grabbed a condom out of his nightstand drawer, and I pushed him down on the bed, straddling his waist. He slid his hands up my thighs, and goosebumps spread over my skin as his cock slid against my clit. Leaning down, I kissed him, loving the sound of his groans.

He deepened the kiss and held me tight against him. My hips moved against his, desperate to feel him inside me. Grabbing my hips, he dug his fingers into my skin and rolled us over. Looking down at me, it was hard not to tremble under his raw gaze. He brushed a finger across my lips.

“Fuck, I’ve missed being able to touch you.”

I kissed his finger. “Same.”

His lips found mine again, trailing down my neck to my breasts. He bit my nipple and I moaned, every square inch of my body tingling with desire. Eyes burning with heat, Ethan

kept them on mine as he opened the condom wrapper. My heart raced as I watched him slowly stroke himself, his gaze penetrating me with unadulterated passion. My pulse quickened as I waited for him to take me. But instead, he slid the condom on and laid down, pulling me onto his lap with his cock throbbing between us.

I rocked against him, and he tilted his head back and groaned. "You're killing me." I tried to sit up and take him inside me, but his grip on my waist tightened. A mischievous twinkle sparkled in his eyes. "Not yet, baby. You need to get worked up a little more."

I could already feel the wetness between my legs. "Seriously? I'm way past ready."

Chuckling, he licked his lips. "I'll be the judge of that." He tugged my hair gently, coaxing me to lean back and expose my breasts to him. He licked his lips and pulled me to him, sucking a nipple into his mouth.

"Yep. I'm really way past ready now." Two could play at that game. He bit down on my breast, and I closed my eyes, moaning with delight.

"I think you might be about there," he teased, sucking harder.

I hooked my arms around his neck, torturing him by trapping his arousal between our bodies and sliding his length along my wet center.

Before I could come back with a retort, Ethan pressed his lips to mine, pushing his tongue deep inside my mouth. His cock pulsed between us, and I moaned into his mouth in response. I moved my hips against him to give him a taste of what it would feel like with me riding him. Ethan groaned with need and bit my lower lip. His strong grip on my ass held me firmly in place while he thrust against me.

"Stop teasing me," he growled.

I bit his lip back, sucking it between my teeth. "You started it first."

He bit me back. “You win, sunshine.” I lifted my hips and allowed the tip of his cock to graze my opening. By his grip on me, I knew I was in for the ride of my life.

Slamming me down over his cock in one thrust, he stopped and held me there, maintaining eye contact. I loved being stretched to the point of pain and seeing the passion in his eyes. His fingers dug into my hips and he squeezed, holding me still, as he began pounding into me with short, fast thrusts, his breaths coming out quick and shallow. His mouth came down on my breasts, which were teasing him by bouncing in his face.

His body was so hot around me, burning my skin, but it was nothing compared to the heat between my legs. I was so close to losing control . . .

“Oh fuck. I’m gonna come, baby,” he groaned, his teeth teasing my nipple. His arms wrapped around my body, and he pulled me against him as he pushed his hips into mine. My insides tightened, and I screamed out my release as his body spasmed and jerked. After I milked him to completion, his body trembled beneath me, and he rested his forehead on mine.

“Merry Christmas, Peyton.”

A giggle escaped my lips. “Merry Christmas to you too.”

CHAPTER 10

ETHAN

After dinner, the women decided to stay in the main house and watch Christmas movies while Braden, his dad, and I retreated to the five-car garage. Paxton was a former light heavyweight champion with many talents. He used to race cars and fix them up on the side. I'd always been fascinated by all the things he could do.

Walking around his garage, I couldn't help but admire the photos on the wall of all the vehicles he'd refurbished. Braden came up next to me and pointed at a picture of a candy-apple red Opel GT.

"I'd give my left nut to have that car."

I laughed. "I bet you would. But this is the one I'd give mine for," I said, tapping the photo of a 1969 blue convertible Chevy Camaro.

"I can find you one if you want," Paxton called out.

"I think I might take you up on that. I'll pay anything."

Braden clapped a hand on my shoulder and laughed. "He can definitely afford it with all the money he's been making at the Labyrinth," he shouted to his dad.

It was well-known that I openly fought at the Labyrinth, but no one other than Ripp knew Seth Michelson had an interest in doing business there. It was hard not to get seduced by the money. Before things escalated with Peyton, there was nothing else I was interested in. Now that I have her, the money wasn't important.

“When are you headed back to Vegas?” Paxton asked, handing me a beer from the refrigerator. He passed one to Braden, and we all sat down at a table in the corner beside a yellow 1964 Ford Falcon that Paxton was getting ready to restore.

I opened my beer and took a swig. “Not anytime soon,” I replied. “But I think Ripp is. He likes being out there.”

Paxton chuckled. “Yeah, I remember what it was like. I enjoyed it too.” He gulped down his beer and smiled at Braden and me. “You know, I might have to get back in the ring again. I’d love to face off with Tyler Rushing.”

Braden almost fell out of his seat. “Seriously?”

“That would be fucking epic,” I added. Watching Paxton go head-to-head with Tyler Rushing would be a grand event. It would draw in so many people.

Braden turned to his dad. “Yeah, it would.”

They looked so much alike it was uncanny, but everyone always said the same for my dad and me. The only difference between them was the hair and the tattoos. Paxton had a little gray mixed in with the dark and more tattoos than Braden.

Paxton finished his beer and slammed the bottle on the table, laughing. “I think I’ll give that bastard a call and see if he’s up for it.” But then, he sent a warning glare to us. “Just do me a favor and don’t mention this to anyone yet. I’m sure a certain someone will have something to say about it.”

Braden snorted. “Got that right. Mom will shit a brick.”

Paxton shrugged and winked over at me. “Eh, it’ll be fun. I may be in my fifties, but I can still kick some ass.” Braden and I both knew it too. I’d been in the ring plenty of times training with him. Paxton glanced at me and then over to Braden. “Now that we’re away from the girls, I think it’s time you boys were straight with me. I’ve been meaning to ask this for a long time.”

Braden side-eyed me, and I did the same to him. I had a feeling I knew where this conversation was headed.

“Straight about what?” Braden asked.

Paxton sighed. “I’ve kept quiet for a while, but I started to notice odd things with you boys.”

I laughed, hoping to throw him off, and Braden joined in. “Like what?” I replied.

Paxton’s gaze narrowed, almost as if he could see right through us. “Like the fact that both of you, along with Carter, Ripp, Kase, and Hunter all have the same dragon tattoo on your backs. I’ve been trying to figure out where I’ve seen it before, and it hit me about a month ago. I just didn’t want to believe it was true.”

Braden blew out a heavy breath. “Believe what?”

Paxton leaned forward on his elbows, his hardened stare trained on us. There was a time when he fought at the Dark Side along with Braden’s mother. They had to do it to survive, just like Braden and my sister had to do just a couple of months ago. Paxton, however, had killed people when he fought; he was known as the Reaper. He even had the skull tattoo as his brand, just like Braden and I had the dragon.

“I have no doubt things have changed in the last thirty years,” Paxton said, “and I can only assume it’s gotten worse. You don’t have to give me the details, but I want to ensure you’re okay.”

Braden and I stared at each other, and we both nodded. “We’re fine,” Braden spoke up. “At least, for now.”

Paxton nodded and I could see the muscles in his jaw tense. “You’re in trouble because of me, aren’t you?”

It wasn’t just him but everyone else in our circle, including my parents. We kept the secrets to keep them all safe.

“We’re handling it,” I said. “We haven’t failed yet. We don’t want to get you and everyone else involved.”

Braden huffed. “Exactly. We got this.”

Shaking his head, Paxton fisted his hands on the table. “I should’ve known the past would bite me in the ass.” He reached out and grabbed Braden’s wrist. “Let me help you. We

can take the fuckers down like me and the others did all those years ago.”

Braden shook his head. “No, we got this.”

He turned to me, and I nodded in agreement. “We promise,” I said.

By the troubled look on Paxton’s face, I had a feeling that one way or another, he’d find himself back in the middle of it all. The last thing I wanted was for our parents to be in danger. But, on the other hand, I knew my time with Nikolai Michelson would be coming soon.

The side door to the garage opened and Reagan came in, arm linked with Peyton. “Are you guys going to stay out here all night?” Reagan chided. “It’s Christmas.”

Braden stood and strolled over to them. “Hey, we don’t want to be stuck watching your lame-ass Christmas movies.”

Reagan crossed her arms over her chest. “Do you really want to do this right now? Who was the one watching *A Knight Before Christmas* with me last night?”

“Whoa, nice one,” I called out. “You’re never gonna live that one down, brother.”

Paxton snickered under his breath. “That sister of yours is a spitfire. Braden needed someone like that.” I couldn’t agree more. I looked over at Peyton, whose eyes lit up as she watched Reagan and Braden banter back and forth. Paxton grabbed his beer and sighed. “We should probably join the ladies. It is Christmas, after all. If they want to watch something like *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*, I’m all up for it.”

Peyton walked over and gave him a side hug. “Hey, I’m good with that.” She let him go and walked next to me as we returned to the house. “Do you have to leave, or can you stay a little longer?” she asked, keeping her voice low. Everyone was behind us, and it took all I had not to wrap my arms around her waist and hold her close.

“I’ll do whatever you want.”

“Good,” she said, grinning wide. “You’re staying.”

When we got inside, Peyton’s mother was on the phone, pacing back and forth in front of the couch. From the concerned expression on her face, it looked as if something was wrong. Peyton walked over just as her mom ended the call.

“What’s wrong?” Peyton asked her. Everyone had gathered around, and she looked at us before fixating her gaze on Paxton.

“My mom fell and they think she broke her hip. The ambulance is taking her to the hospital.”

Paxton walked over to her, and they talked amongst themselves. Sighing, Peyton stopped in front of me. “I hope my grandma’s okay. My mom’s been trying to get her to come live here instead of that assisted living place. Maybe when she’s better she’ll change her mind.”

Paxton and Gabriella finished their conversation and joined the rest of us. Gabriella focused on Peyton and sighed. “Your dad and I are getting ready to head to the hospital, but we’ve decided he’ll be the one flying with you to North Carolina tomorrow.”

Peyton hugged her. “That’s fine. I know you need to be with grandma.”

“Wait,” I said before Paxton and Gabriella could walk away. Everyone turned to look at me while Peyton stared curiously. “I can be Peyton’s bodyguard in North Carolina,” I stated, staring right at Paxton and Gabriella.

Paxton smiled but shook his head. “I can’t take you away from your training.”

“You won’t be,” I assured him. “My next fight isn’t until late March. I’ll be sure to get plenty of working out done.” A snicker from Reagan echoed from behind, and even Peyton tried to keep from smiling. I stepped forward and stood beside Peyton but focused on Paxton and Gabriella. “Let me do this. I *want* to. Peyton will be safe with me.”

Paxton and Gabriella shared a look, and then Gabriella turned to Peyton. “It’s up to you, sweetheart. If you want Ethan to be your bodyguard, I’m fine with it. Your father and I trust him.”

Peyton nodded at them. “I do. In fact,” she said, reaching down to take my hand. “There’s something we should probably tell you.”

CHAPTER 11

PEYTON

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Our room at the Biltmore House Inn was exquisite. During the day, we had the best views of the Blue Ridge Mountains, but at night, it was only darkness and bright stars. You couldn't see them in California the way you could here. So, Ethan and I made it a point to sit out on the balcony every night in the cold so that I could look up at the sky.

It's been a week since Christmas day when I told my parents and brother about my relationship with Ethan. Of course, Braden had some choice words to say, especially since Ethan gave him a hard time when he started dating Reagan. My parents quickly warmed to the idea and were fully supportive, especially my mother and Ethan's. Their dreams have come true. Although, my dad did tell Ethan that if anything happened to me, he'd kill him.

The patio door of our suite opened, and Ethan came out, holding two glasses of champagne. "Fifteen minutes to go," he said, setting our drinks down on the small round table between our two chairs.

His breath billowed into the air, accentuating how cold it was. We didn't have these frigid temps in California. It wasn't so bad being wrapped up in fuzzy pajama pants, one of Ethan's hoodies, and a blanket. I wanted to enjoy every minute of the crisp North Carolina mountain air. It was almost

midnight, the beginning of a new year. I looked down at the bubbly liquid and smiled.

“Thank you. I feel bad not hanging out with the cast, but I’ve been drained today. I just wanted to relax and bring in the new year alone with you.”

Ethan kissed me and sat down. “Hey, I’m not complaining. I’ve been dying to have you all to myself. Plus, it gets me away from having to see that wanker costar of yours drool all over you. I swear he’s going to nut all over himself when he finally gets to kiss you.”

Which was going to be soon.

We had a week of filming left and on the last day it was going to be the final scene where Robert and I had to kiss. Ethan leaned his head back against the seat and sighed.

“You’re doing good with keeping calm when Robert’s around,” I mused. “I know it pisses you off.”

Ethan turned to look at me, and I could see the lights from inside our room twinkle in his blue eyes. “I want this to work, Peyton. I’ll do anything to be able to be with you.”

Having this week alone with him had been unforgettable, but we spent most of it on set or in our suite. I was afraid to see what would happen if we ventured out of the bubble. That was when things would get complicated. After this week, we’d be back in California, and back to reality.

Wrapping the blanket tighter around me, I curled my legs up, unable to take my eyes away from him. Just having him stare at me warmed me to the core. It made me wonder if he was ever like this with any other woman. He was different from the rest of the guys in our hometown group. My brother was a jokester but was serious when he needed to be. Our cousin, Carter, was as serious as they came. He was the oldest and felt responsible for everyone, but now he was married to Ethan’s twin sister, which I think has softened him up a bit. Ripp and Brooks were twins and Ethan’s best friends and cousins, but they couldn’t be more different. Ripp liked to party, just like Ethan, but his twin brother, Brooks, had his

head on straight. He was away on an undercover FBI mission, trying his best to change the world and make it a better place.

“What are you thinking about?” Ethan asked, his voice low and smooth.

I smiled. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I was thinking about the guys and how some of them have changed. Like my brother, Carter, and Brooks.”

Ethan nodded. “They have. And it’s crazy that two of them married my sisters. I never would’ve thought that.” We both laughed; I couldn’t agree with him more.

“Yeah, Braden and Reagan were a shock. Carter and Emma, not so much.”

Carter and Emma were first loves, and even though they had some years apart, I knew they’d get back together eventually. Taking a deep breath, I looked up at the sky and let my breath out slowly, watching as it turned to steam the second it hit the cold air.

“Where do you see this new year taking you?” I asked Ethan.

I waited to hear him speak, but there was only silence. Finally, I peered over to see him staring at the sky.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” he answered. “I guess it all depends on you.”

“What do you mean?”

His eyes shifted to mine, all serious and sexy. Sometimes I found it hard to breathe around him. I wanted him all the time. My thoughts drifted to him even when I was on set this week. It was hard to concentrate with him around ... but I loved it.

“What I mean,” he said, smirking playfully, “is that I’ve enjoyed being your bodyguard. I like protecting you and keeping you safe. You do your work, and then at the end of the day, you come home with me. I could get used to this.”

“What about your fights? Your next one is in March.”

His smile dropped. “Yeah, I know. It’d be nice to have you there, but I understand that you can’t.”

I *wanted* to be there. I wanted to go to all his fights. Just like I wanted him by my side at all my events. Could it be possible to make it work? Ethan and I didn’t have anything on our schedules until mid-February which meant we had a month and a half of freedom.

I had an idea ...

“Ethan,” I said, feeling all the excitement in my chest. I swung my legs over the edge of the chair so I could get close to him. Then, grabbing his hands, I pulled him closer. “Do you want me at your fights?”

He didn’t hesitate when he answered. “Of course I do. I mean, fuck, Peyton. I’m waiting for the day I can tell everyone you’re mine.”

I squeezed his hands. “Same. I have so many awards shows this spring, and I’d love to have you with me ... as my date, not my bodyguard.”

Ethan pulled me over to his chair, and I straddled his waist, his hands firm on my cheeks as he cupped them. “What happened to keeping us a secret?”

Placing a hand over his, I leaned into his touch. “How about this? Why don’t we sneak away for the next month and a half, just you and me? For now, we’ll still keep our relationship a secret. Let’s focus on what we have and build on it. Then, when we feel ready, we’ll let the world know.”

Ethan’s lips touched mine, and he opened mine with his tongue. I gave in to him, loving how he claimed me. He broke away first and I grinned.

“Does that mean you’re up for it?”

He chuckled and I could feel his cock stir between my legs. “In more ways than one,” he said, sliding his hands down my waist. “But where exactly do you want to sneak away to?”

The choices were endless.

We could go anywhere in the world, but I've always loved the beaches of North Carolina. And since we were already in the state, all we'd have to do was drive to the coast.

"I want to go to Wilmington," I answered. "We can find a private place on the water. It'll be fun."

Ethan winked. "I don't doubt that."

The alarm on my cell went off and I smiled. I'd set it to go off one minute before midnight. I handed Ethan his glass of champagne and grabbed mine as well.

"The countdown is on." I clanked my glass against his, and we watched as the time ticked down the last ten seconds.

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two ... and right at one, I kissed Ethan, determined to bring in the New Year right. My heart was whole, and I don't think I'd ever been so happy. It felt as if I was where I needed to be.

Fireworks went off in the distance, and I could hear others in the hotel yelling "Happy New Year." I slowly moved away, trembling at the raw hunger in Ethan's eyes.

"Happy New Year, Peyton."

"Happy New Year to you, Ethan," I said, holding up my glass. "Cheers."

We drank our champagne and set our glasses back down on the table. Ethan wrapped his arms around my waist. "For a month and a half, you're all mine. I hope you're ready for that."

I was ready.

I was ready for our time together.

What I feared was what was going to happen when it was all over. Would our relationship be strong enough to withstand the drama-seeking and lies from the tabloids? We were going to find out very soon.

CHAPTER 12

ETHAN

ONE WEEK LATER

The movie was about to wrap up, and I was thankful I made it through Peyton and Robert's kissing scene without storming the set and punching the douchebag in the face. I watched the entire scene, trying my damndest not to laugh. The pansy-ass bastard hated the kiss and stormed away in disgust when it was over. Peyton had eaten a salad for lunch and made sure it had plenty of onions and tuna.

The woman was ruthless.

However, if the movie had been on more of the R-rated side, I honestly didn't know how I'd be able to handle watching bedroom scenes if I were to stay her bodyguard. I hated the thought, but I wasn't about to tell her that. Acting was her job; it had been that way long before I came along.

Would it be nice if she starred in movies that didn't require her to kiss other men? You're damn right, but that was the business. That was what made relationships in Hollywood hard. Peyton warned me, but I was determined not to let it mess with my head. I trusted her; it was just the men I had a problem with.

Everywhere I went with her on set, the men gawked at her, the lust clearly showing on their faces. Of course, Peyton wanted to keep everything a secret for now, but as soon as our relationship was out in the open, I was going to make damn sure everyone knew she was mine.

My cell vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out to see Ripp's name on the screen. "Hey, man," I answered.

“What’s up? You still in Asheville?”

I watched Peyton as she hugged the director and everyone else in the movie. The front lawn of the Biltmore House was packed with the film crew and trailers for the actors.

“Yep. The film just wrapped. Peyton’s saying goodbye to everyone right now, and then we’re headed to the coast.”

“Nice. You know I still can’t believe you two are dating.”

“Neither can I. I didn’t see it coming.”

“That’s because you never paid attention to her. She’s changed a lot the past couple of years.”

That she has.

“So, what’s up with you? How’s Vegas without me?”

Ripp snorted. “Better than ever. I’m getting all the women. I don’t have to compete with you anymore,” he laughed.

I chuckled with him. “No, you don’t.”

It felt like those times were so long ago now. While it was fun doing whatever I wanted with whoever I wanted, I didn’t give a shit about that anymore. All I could think about was Peyton.

“No worries. I just thought I’d call and tell you about my night. I won close to half a million with my fight. Michelson’s been bringing in some major clientele to the Labyrinth.”

“How’s Kase handling that?” I asked.

The club was his livelihood. He was stepping into some pretty deep waters getting Seth’s people in there.

Ripp sighed. “Fine, I think. He’s getting a cut of the money, so I’d say he’s doing pretty damn well. I mean, shit, he’s reaping the rewards without having to do anything. Off my fight alone, he got a hundred grand. That’s not counting all the other fights scheduled last night.”

“Fucking shit,” I said, keeping my voice low. I didn’t want anyone on the set to hear me. “That’s insane.”

“Tell me about it. The money is flowing out here in Vegas. I think I’m going to stay a little longer. Sin City definitely has its perks.”

I wanted to be happy for him, but something nagged at my gut like he should be cautious with his actions.

“Be safe out there, okay? I don’t want you getting in over your head.”

He laughed. “I’m not. Although, I do think I should tell you something that’s got me concerned.”

My stomach clenched. “What?”

“It may be nothing, but Seth’s been paying a little too much attention to Kali. He wants her. I can see it.”

That was not what I wanted to hear. Kali Andrews was part of the Vegas fighter group and a close friend of the family. She was also the female bantamweight champion.

“Does her brother and Kase know?” I asked.

Ripp sighed. “Doubt it. I don’t want to start something, but I plan on keeping my eye on her.”

“Good. Keep me updated if things progress. We don’t want Kali getting involved with him.”

“That’s for damn sure.”

Peyton finished up her rounds and started toward me. “Hey, man, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.”

We hung up and Peyton’s gaze narrowed as she closed the distance, strolling over in her winter blue ball gown and tiara. Her character was a princess, and she looked every bit of the part.

“Everything okay?” she wondered.

I slid my phone into my pocket. “It was Ripp checking up on us.”

Her brows furrowed even more. “You’re worried about something. I’m good at reading people, Ethan. That’s one thing you’ll never be able to hide from me.”

There were so many people around, packing up the set. “Why don’t you go get changed, and then we’ll start on our way to Wilmington? I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Peyton stared at me for a few seconds and then nodded. “Okay. I’ll be back in a few.”

We had about a five-and-a-half-hour drive from Asheville to the coast. So there was plenty of time for talking. A few moments later, she returned dressed in a pair of black leggings, black fuzzy boots, and a long, cream-colored sweater with her face wiped clean from all the makeup. She was so fucking beautiful that way.

When she first became famous, I expected her to turn into an entitled bitch like many other movie stars who let fame get to their heads. Needless to say, I was shocked when all I saw from her was the same Peyton I grew up with, only now she was older.

Her grin widened the closer she got to me. “I would ask what you’re thinking about, but something tells me this isn’t the time or place.”

I wanted to kiss her, but we were out in the open. To everyone around, I was just her bodyguard.

“It wasn’t anything like that,” I said, smirking. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

One perk about Peyton being the lead actor in the movie was that I could park our rental car right by her trailer. So we hopped into the black Chevy Tahoe, and Peyton stared out the back window as we drove away from the Biltmore House that was still lit up with all the Christmas lights.

It was closing in on five o’clock, which would put us getting to Wilmington around eleven if we only made a couple of quick pitstops.

“As far as all the movie sets I’ve been on go,” Peyton began, “this one was by far the best. The private tour we got was amazing. I loved seeing all the hidden passageways.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, it wasn’t bad.”

She smacked my arm. “Wasn’t bad? You liked it, I know you did. You’ve always been interested in historical sites. Or at least you were when you were younger. The museums in Washington D.C. are your favorites.”

I was shocked she even knew that about me. “How do you know that?” I asked, peering over at her curiously.

She was right. I excelled in all my history classes in school, and Washington D.C. *was* one of my favorite places to go.

Peyton shrugged, her expression sheepish. “I may have eavesdropped on you and Ripp when we were younger. I remember you telling him about the museums.” She bit her lip and snickered. “And there was also a time I snuck into your room at your family’s cabin and saw the books on your bookshelf. It was all history-type stuff. I thought it was cute.”

Now that we were out of the parking area and away from prying eyes, I stopped the car; there was no one behind us. I leaned over and kissed her, nipping her lip playfully.

“So, you were stalking me, huh?”

“What?” she shrieked, pulling away. Her cheeks turned red, and she laughed. “I was *not* stalking you. I was a little girl with a crush. That’s it.”

Grasping her chin, I looked into her emerald eyes and smiled. “I think it’s cute.”

Grinning, she jerked her chin out of my hold. “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

A car came up behind us, so I pressed the gas. It wasn’t long before we were on the highway and headed east toward Wilmington.

“What were you and Ripp talking about?” Peyton asked, breaking the silence. “And like I said earlier, I could tell something was wrong. You don’t have to keep things from me.”

Reaching over, I threaded my fingers with hers. “I don’t plan on it, Peyton. Although I’m not gonna lie, I am a little

worried about how you'll see me after I tell you." I glanced over at her, and she froze.

"Just tell me, Ethan. It's better to get it all out, and we'll go from there."

With my other hand clutching the steering wheel, I kept my eyes on the road. I had no idea what she would say when I told her my secret. There were selfish reasons why I did what I did. I had let the money get to my head. Did I care about the money now? No, but it was bad for a while.

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly. "You know Ripp and I used to go back and forth to Vegas often, right?"

"Yeah," she replied, drawing out the word slowly. "You spent a lot of time at the Labyrinth. I know that."

"You don't know all of it," I said, glancing over at her. "We signed up for a lot of fights. More than what we should've." It wasn't healthy or safe to fight as much as we did.

Peyton squeezed my hand. "That's not surprising. Was it every day?"

"Pretty much," I replied.

"Well, at least you're taking a break now. Did you think that was going to make me mad? You're a big boy, Ethan. It was your decision to make."

With a heavy sigh, I peered over at her. "That's not all."

Her face fell. "Oh, God. Now you're scaring me."

I turned my focus back to the road. "A lot of people placed bets on me, Peyton."

She snorted. "Of course, they would. You're amazing and they knew you'd win."

I decided just to let it out. "Seth Michelson was involved."

The car grew silent, and when I looked over at Peyton, her mouth dropped. "Are you fighting for him?"

“No,” I stated adamantly, “it’s not like that. However, he is the one who brought in the extra people to watch the fights.”

“What does Kase say about it?” she asked. “Surely, he doesn’t want the mafia overrunning the club.”

I shook my head. “He doesn’t. But he loves the money, just like Ripp and me. I didn’t want anyone to know what I was doing because I was ashamed.” I tightened my hold on her hand. “I let the money seduce me. There was so much of it that I became addicted to winning it.”

“How much are we talking? Is it more than when you compete?”

“Way more,” I said, meeting her gaze in the darkness.

Her brows furrowed. “How much are we talking? Like hundreds of thousands?”

“No.” I turned my attention back to the road. “Millions.”

She gasped. “Millions. Holy freaking shit! Ethan, that’s insane. You’ve only been going back and forth to Vegas for a few months.”

“I know.” I’d earned enough in those few months that I could stop everything and just retire.

“And Seth isn’t forcing you to fight?”

“No,” I replied truthfully. “Seth and I would have a huge problem if he tried to force me. I did it all on my own. The last time I fought was before Reagan and Braden’s wedding.”

Peyton placed her other hand on top of our clasped ones. “Thank you for telling me. I can understand why you did it. There were times when I wanted to earn more money, even though I had millions in my bank account. It’s crazy because I don’t feel that need anymore.”

The overwhelming desire for the money disappeared that first night I was with her. “Neither do I,” I murmured. “You broke me of that habit.”

She smiled. “Good. We’ll find new things to get addicted to.”

I stared down at her lips. “I think I’m already in trouble of that.”

CHAPTER 13

PEYTON

FIVE DAYS LATER

The house we rented in Wilmington wasn't on the beach but in the channel. We had our own private dock and rented an eighteen-foot boat. We've been here for five days, and never once have we left the house except to go out on the boat or just relax on the dock. Regarding food, I ordered our groceries online under a pseudonym and had them delivered to the front door as we needed them. Everything was perfect.

Ethan and I cooked our meals together and spent sunrises and sunsets on the dock. He even caught our dinner this afternoon, but I took no part in cleaning the fish. Luckily, he knew how to do that. It was something he and his father had done a lot when he was growing up.

"Babe, you coming?" Ethan called out.

It was time to watch the sunset.

Quickly, I pulled my hair up and hurried out of the bathroom. Ethan was by the front door waiting on me, dressed in a gray hoodie, jeans and a baseball cap. We still had neighbors close by, which meant we had to disguise ourselves somehow to keep people from recognizing us. That was why I rented a house no one would ever expect me to rent. I didn't need the million-dollar fancy beach house. I wanted something small and cozy.

Ethan opened the door, but then my phone rang. I pulled it out of my back pocket and saw it was my mom. I held it up so Ethan could see.

“I’ll be right out. You go on ahead. I know you like your sunset fishing time.”

He leaned over and kissed me. “I’ll see ya out there.”

As soon as he walked out the door, I answered the call. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hey, sweetheart. You doing okay?”

I watched Ethan through the window, walking down the pier to the boat dock where he had all his fishing gear. “I’m doing great. It’s been a long time since I’ve been this relaxed.”

“Are things good between you and Ethan?”

A smile spread across my face. “Better than good.” I’d fallen in love with him. “We’re going to stay here for another month. I kind of like living the hermit life.”

My mother burst out laughing. “Enjoy it. Because once February comes, you’ll be going here, there and everywhere.”

The sky started to turn pink with the disappearing sun. I’d miss this haven when it was time to leave.

“Speaking of that, I need your honest opinion.”

“What is it?” she asked, her voice sounding concerned.

“When the time comes, if Ethan and I were to go public, do you think our relationship will survive?”

The line went silent for a few seconds, and then she sighed. “Do you believe in him, Peyton?”

I looked out the window at him and my heart soared. I couldn’t imagine spending a day without him. We hadn’t been together long, but I knew without a doubt that he was what I needed.

“I do,” I murmured, feeling the truth in my soul.

“Then there’s your answer. It’s going to be hard dealing with the press and the time apart, but you’re strong-willed,

Peyton. You've always worked hard for what you wanted. If you want Ethan and this relationship to work, I have no doubt you'll succeed. The question is ... does he want it as bad as you?"

"I don't think he'd be here with me if he didn't."

"That's good to hear. If Ethan's anything like his father, I know how hardcore his love runs. Ryley adores Ashleigh."

"Just like dad is with you," I added, averting my gaze to the bracelet she gave me many years ago; I hardly ever took off. "And vice versa."

She had given me the bracelet as a reminder that she would always love and protect me; I cherish it. There was a time back when she was my age when she was forced to fight men for the sick pleasure of the people at the Dark Side. She had to do it, or else my dad would pay the price with his life. But, ultimately, he was pulled into it anyway and had to fight to survive.

"Your dad is special," my mother said. "Just like I think all the guys in your group are. I wouldn't know what I'd do if I didn't have my brother, your dad, Ryley, and Camden in my corner."

My stomach started to rumble, and a wave of nausea hit me. I'd been fighting it for a few days now. "Mom, do you mind if I call you back tomorrow? I'm not feeling really well right now. I think the fish we ate isn't settling in my stomach."

"Oh no. I hope you get better. Text me later, so I'll know you're okay."

I grabbed my stomach and swallowed hard to keep from throwing up. "Will do. I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

I hung up quickly and bolted to the bathroom, collapsing onto the floor by the toilet. My phone fumbled out of my hands and slid across the tile. Everything I'd eaten for dinner came up in a rush. I thought I'd feel better after throwing everything up, but the nausea was still there. Slowly, I got to my feet and brushed my teeth. My belly felt a little crampy,

and the blood drained from my face when I looked at myself in the mirror.

“Oh, no, no, no, no, no.”

Frantically, I searched the floor for my phone and snatched it up.

“This can’t be happening.”

My hands shook as I scrolled through my phone and to my calendar. I’d been so busy that I hadn’t paid attention to the dates.

I was two weeks late.

I don’t know how long I stayed in the bathroom, but I was numb. The only thing I could feel was the cold tiles against my legs. I couldn’t even remember when I sat down on the floor. It felt like I was playing a role in one of my movies; it didn’t seem real.

Ethan and I had been safe. We’d used condoms every time we were together. So what the hell was I going to do?

“Peyton?” Ethan called out.

His footsteps thumped down the hallway, and I jumped to my feet, frantically turning on the faucet. A light knock rapped against the door.

“Hey, you okay in there?”

I kept the water on to mask the thickness of my voice. “Oh yeah, I’m fine. You know how my mother likes to talk.”

He laughed. “That I do.”

It was hard looking at myself in the mirror. I didn’t want to lie to Ethan or keep him in the dark, but I didn’t want to say anything until I knew what was happening. “I’m almost done in here. I’ll be out in a second.”

“Okay. The sunset is fucking amazing tonight. I don’t want you to miss it.”

Once he was gone and I heard the front door shut, I quickly grabbed my phone and started a grocery order. I couldn’t just go out and buy a pregnancy test. If someone were to recognize me and snap a picture of me grabbing a test, it’d be all over the internet.

I quickly ordered various things and added in several tests, all different brands. Unfortunately, since it was getting late, the order wouldn’t be fulfilled until first thing in the morning.

My nerves were shot, and the thought of waiting made my impatience worse. There was no way in hell I’d be able to sleep tonight, not until I knew my fate. What would my future even look like? My career would have to be put on hold, and I had no clue if Ethan was even ready to be a father. We hadn’t even talked about that *or* marriage. We’d only been together for a short amount of time.

Tears welled up in my eyes, but I fanned my face, refusing to let them fall. “Pull yourself together, Peyton,” I grumbled at myself. “You can do this. You don’t even know if you’re pregnant.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I let it out slowly and walked out of the bathroom. My mom’s California State University hoodie was on the bed, so I picked it up and slipped it over my head. I’d often wondered what it would’ve been like to go to college and get a degree instead of pursuing my acting career. School was never my path. But, then again, what *was* my path? I never expected to become a mother at twenty-three years old. I stopped at the front door and leaned my head against it.

“You don’t know if you are,” I whispered. “Don’t stress.”

Easier said than done.

I thought through my options. It wouldn’t be the end of the world if I were pregnant. Stressing wasn’t going to help the situation. The unknown was the only thing bothering me now. Life would be so much simpler if I could just go out and get a test without having to hide.

Opening the door, I walked outside and let the cool breeze brush over my face. Ethan was right ... the sunset was breathtaking. The sky was nothing but shades of pink, orange, and purple. I walked down to the dock where about twenty small crabs scurried across it to hide underneath. I'd tried getting pictures of them before, but they were so fast I could never get to them in time.

At the end of the dock, I could see Ethan casting his line into the water. We'd grown into a routine since we'd been in Wilmington. While he fished every sunrise and sunset, I would sit with him and enjoy the tranquility of the ocean. It was quiet and peaceful. I didn't realize how much I would enjoy solitude.

Ethan glanced back at me and smiled, just a simple uptick of his lips. Every time he looked at me like that, it was as if all my troubles would disappear, and everything would be all right. I walked down to him, and he reeled in his line, setting his rod on the dock.

Reaching for my hand, he pulled me to him, enveloping me with his warm embrace. With a heavy sigh, I rested my head against his chest.

“Are you okay?” he asked, kissing the top of my head.

I snuggled into him more. “Yeah. I just love it when you hold me.”

He held me tight, and I focused on all the sounds around me. His breathing. The seagulls squawking overhead. The sound of the rippling water as the wind ripped across it.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I forced away the tears. I couldn't lose it now. Ethan's hands slid up my back, then he brought them to my face, pulling me back so I'd have to look up at him. He stared deep into my eyes, and I lost myself in his blue gaze for a moment. Nothing else existed but him and me. Then, cupping my cheeks, he kissed me gently, and I closed my eyes, relishing the feel of his warmth.

“I love you, Peyton.”

The words brushed across my lips, and my eyes flashed open. It was as if all the emotions from the past hour poured out of me. Tears streamed down my cheeks, and it felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my chest. Ethan wiped my tears away.

“Why are you crying?”

Placing my hands over his, I smiled up at him. “Because it felt amazing to hear it. I love you too.”

Ethan smiled and kissed me again, his tongue parting my lips so he could taste me. The groan that vibrated in his chest made my body tighten.

“I’ve wanted to tell you for a while now,” he murmured, resting his forehead on mine. “I never thought I’d say those words to anyone other than my family.”

“Same. You’re my first.”

The heat-filled look in his eyes made me tremble. His grip on my face tightened, and I could see his need for me. I’d been wanted by other men before, but never by someone who looked at me the way Ethan did, like I was the only one who mattered. Every time I was around him, his focus was on me. It made me feel special, wanted. And not just because of who I was.

“And I don’t ever want to let you go,” he said, brushing his thumbs across my cheeks.

“Good. Because I don’t want you to.”

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I held him tight and breathed him in. He made me feel safe, that everything was going to be okay.

I had to believe in him ... in us.

CHAPTER 14

PEYTON

The morning had finally come, and I'd barely slept a wink, even after using up all my energy in the bedroom with Ethan after we professed our love to each other. I was exhausted, but I was ready. Our grocery order had been dropped off on the front porch, and luckily, Ethan was outside on the dock. There wasn't much else we could do since we were trying to stay out of the public eye. I was happy he found something he enjoyed. Most of his life was spent working out in the gym and fighting. We only had one more month of this freedom before we had to head back to California.

Before putting the groceries away, I pulled out the four pregnancy tests and hid them in the bathroom's towel closet just in case Ethan came inside. Once I was done putting away the food, I slowly made my way back to the bathroom. I unboxed all four tests and placed them on the counter. All four were different. One would show two pink lines if I were pregnant, two would display a positive, and the last would simply have the word "pregnant" on the tiny screen.

Looking at myself in the mirror, I drew in a slow breath and let it out. "Here we go."

Maybe it was stupid to do all four tests at once, but I had to know for sure. I followed the directions and set all the tests on the counter, making sure not to look at them as I washed my hands.

The rapid beating of my heart pounded in my ears, and I had to sit down to keep from fainting. It was the longest two minutes of my life. Then, finally, when the time ran up, I stood

and stared at myself in the mirror again. I wanted to look down at the tests, but I was frozen. If they came up negative, life could go on like normal. But if they were positive ... Well, that left many open paths. At that point, the question would be ... which path were we going to take?

Slowly, I took in another breath and glanced down at the tests.

All four of them wielded the same result.

There were two pink lines, a positive sign and a “pregnant.” I had my answer.

Heart racing, I grabbed one of them and shoved it into my hoodie pocket. Was I ready to tell Ethan he was about to be a father? Not really, but there was no way in hell I could keep it to myself. I prided myself on being strong, able to handle anything, but this ... I needed him. This was going to change both of our lives.

Exposing our relationship to the media was one thing but coming out as a couple *and* being pregnant was another. When I got outside, the sun was bright in the sky, warming my cheeks as I walked through the yard. I slid my hands inside my hoodie pocket and clutched the pregnancy test.

As I walked down the dock toward Ethan, my heart almost sped out of my chest. In my hand, I held what could possibly be our future. And I was about to show it to him.

Ethan was on the boat we rented, cleaning off some of the night’s debris from the thunderstorm. It was fifty degrees outside, and he was shirtless, his skin golden and tan from the summer.

On his back was the Michelson dragon tattoo.

My stomach clenched at the sight, and I froze. Nikolai Michelson wanted his vengeance on our families. He’d already tried to ruin Emma and Carter and Reagan and Braden. I did not doubt that Ethan was next on his list. Or hell, me for that matter.

What if he tried to do something to our child? Why didn’t I think of that before?

The world spun around me, and I had to hold onto the dock to keep my balance.

“Peyton,” Ethan shouted, jumping off the boat and rushing toward me. He grabbed my arms to steady me. “What the hell? You look like you’ve seen a ghost. You’re so pale.”

The dizziness started to subside, and I leaned into him. “Some days it’s easy to forget, but when I see the dragon on your back, it’s a stark reminder of everything that’s happened.”

Ethan grasped my face, his gaze lethal and hard. “You don’t have to worry about that, Peyton. I can handle Michelson and whatever shit he throws my way. I’m not going to let him hurt you or anyone else.”

Eyes burning, I stared into his eyes and let the tears fall. “It’s not just you and me anymore, Ethan.”

Confusion swept across his face. “What are you talking about?”

I looked down at my pocket and pulled out the pregnancy test, lifting it so he could see the positive result. His eyes fixated on it, and his mouth gaped in shock. All my emotions hit me at once, and it felt like I was about to lose control. More tears fell like rivers down my cheeks.

Ethan took the test and stared at it. I had no clue what was going through his mind.

“I thought I could keep it together,” I said, breaking the silence. “So much can go wrong. Being pregnant is one thing, but we’re not in a normal situation. Our time is coming, Ethan. We saw what Nikolai did to your sisters, Carter, and my brother. We’d be fools to think he wouldn’t come after us, especially once word gets out about ...” I clutched my stomach. “Dealing with him is far worse than the paparazzi could ever be.”

Ethan slid the test into his pocket and grabbed my face. “Hey, hey, hey, calm down. It can’t be good for the baby getting all worked up.”

He pressed his lips to mine and wrapped his arms around my waist. My muscles eased, and I melted against him,

holding him to me. Ethan chuckled lightly and stared at me with utter happiness on his face.

“Forget Nikolai, Peyton. I’m not going to let him spoil this moment for us. Tell me everything. When did you think you were pregnant? How far along do you think you are?”

My fears eased at his excitement. I wasn’t expecting that at all.

“Just yesterday,” I replied. “I mean, I was having issues with nausea for days now, but after I threw up last night, I checked my calendar. I’m two weeks late. That’s why I made a grocery order last night and put in some pregnancy tests.” I bit my lip, holding off for a few seconds before telling him the rest. “And I think we got pregnant from that night in Vegas.”

Ethan’s eyes widened. “Holy shit. Why didn’t you tell me? You didn’t have to go through all of this on your own.”

There was no answer that would make sense. “I don’t know,” I ended up saying. “I guess I was just worried how you would take it. We haven’t been together long and only just said we loved each other last night. There’s so much that’s going to change. I don’t know what all to ...”

Ethan pressed his lips to mine, cutting off my words. “We’ll figure it out ... together. All you need to know is that I love you, and I *will* take care of you and the baby. I want this, Peyton.”

Tears clouded my vision. “I want it too. But I’m not ready to go back to California or tell anyone yet. I still want our time here.”

Ethan grinned. “We can do that. First, however, you should probably see a doctor. I don’t know how all that works, but I’m pretty sure you need to get checked out.”

He was right. I didn’t want to go another month without confirming everything with my doctor and ensuring the baby was okay.

“Leave it to me,” I said. There was a way to bring my doctor to us.

Ethan kissed me again and then bent down on his knees, his head resting against my stomach with his arms around my waist as if he was hugging the baby. It was sweet, adorable, heartwarming, you name it; it was everything I could ever want. All it did was make me love him even more. Never in a million years would I have imagined a hardcore MMA fighter on his knees over a baby.

“Are you happy?” I asked him.

He kissed my stomach. “How could I not be?” he said, getting to his feet. He stared down at me and tucked the hair behind my ear. “The woman I love is carrying my child.”

“Things are about to get crazy. Are you ready for it?”

I could see the determination on his face. “I am.”

CHAPTER 15

ETHAN

I was going to be a father. Now that was something I didn't expect.

When I told Peyton I was ready, I meant it. We've known for two days now, and it still seemed surreal. If this had happened with someone else, I would've been stressed the fuck out. I'd always been careful. Even with Peyton, we used protection.

We hadn't talked much about the future or what we would do, but I hoped to do that soon. I could tell a lot was going on in Peyton's mind. As much as I knew this baby would change our lives, it would definitely change hers. Her career had skyrocketed, but now she would have to take a break. I didn't want her to have to put her life on hold.

What I really didn't want was for her to resent me later.

Leaning against the wall, I watched her from across the room as she stared out the window, waiting for her doctor to show up. Dressed in a pair of leggings and one of my UFC sweatshirts, Peyton was the epitome of beauty. Her midnight-colored hair hung down her back in waves because she fell asleep with it wet last night; I liked it that way. Now and again, I'd see her rub a hand over her stomach and smile. It was times like that when I had to believe she was happy and ready for this change in our lives.

Every second I was around her, my feelings grew. I had this overwhelming need to protect her and our baby. It was all I could think about. Peyton was terrified that as soon as

Nikolai discovered our situation, he'd come at us full force. Hurting her would bring the ultimate pain to me. Nikolai was that sick of a bastard, he'd get off on that.

Unfortunately, there was no way we could keep her pregnancy a secret. She had too many awards shows and interviews coming up in preparation for her movie release in two months.

Peyton gasped and moved away from the window, her eyes widening when she noticed I was across the room, watching her.

"Oh my God," she exclaimed, slapping a hand to her chest, "I didn't know you were there." She cocked her head to the side, her lips spreading into a smile. "Were you watching me?"

I shrugged and smiled back. "Maybe. Is Dr. Morrow here?"

She nodded. "I'm so nervous right now. I know I'm pregnant, but once she's done here, it'll confirm it."

She came up to me, and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her into me. "Everything will be all right. Like I said earlier, we'll figure out what to do. One step at a time."

Our first step was getting Dr. Morrow to North Carolina. Peyton had called her yesterday and told her we'd arrange a private jet if she could come as soon as possible. We even offered her a hefty bonus and had a rental car waiting for her at the private airport this morning.

Needless to say, it worked, and she was able to make the time to come today. As soon as she finished with us, the private jet was waiting to take her back to California.

The doorbell rang and Peyton sucked in a breath as she stepped back and looked at the door. "Here we go."

She hurried over and I followed her. When she opened the door, Dr. Morrow was there holding two large hard cases in her hands. She looked to be in her late forties with short, sandy blonde hair and wide-rimmed glasses. She set the cases down and hugged Peyton.

“It’s so good to see you. I’m excited about your new movie.”

Peyton chuckled lightly. “Me too. I hope you like it. It’s a funny one.” They let each other go, and Peyton smiled at her. “Thank you for coming.”

Dr. Morrow placed a hand on Peyton’s shoulder. “Anything for you.”

She turned to me, and I held out my hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Ethan Jameson.”

Dr. Morrow shook my hand. “Sarah Morrow. It’s a pleasure.”

I reached down and grabbed the cases. “Let me help you.”

Dr. Morrow blew out a breath. “Thank you. The one on the right is quite heavy. It’s the portable ultrasound machine.”

She walked inside with Peyton while I brought in the cases and shut the door. They went straight to our bedroom, and I set the cases on the bed. Dr. Morrow opened the lighter case which was filled with medical supplies and a small cooler. She handed Peyton a clear specimen cup and nodded toward the bathroom.

“I know you’ve taken several tests, but it’s standard procedure. When you done, I’ll draw some vials of blood and take them back to the lab. Then, I’ll call you later tonight with the results.”

“Sounds good,” Peyton said, taking the cup. She glanced nervously at me and retreated into the bathroom while I watched Dr. Morrow set everything up.

“I take it this was a shock to you both?” she asked, keeping her voice low as she set up a small tray with needles and vials.

“Just a little,” I replied. “We’re not telling anyone yet, if you know what I mean.”

She glanced over at me, her gaze solemn. “I’m a doctor, Ethan. Everything we do here is confidential. I don’t know what it’s like to be a celebrity, but I *do* have famous clients. I hear all the things they have to go through. Even if I wasn’t a

doctor, I'd never spill this kind of secret to anyone. It's a special time that you both should be able to share without all the stress from the media."

That made me feel better. Doctors had to uphold their oath of confidentiality, but I was pretty sure there were ways they could get away with spilling secrets.

Peyton came out of the bathroom carrying a couple of large towels. "All right, that's done. I left the cup by the sink, if that's okay."

Dr. Morrow nodded. "It is. I'll be right back." She grabbed a plastic bag filled with various things and disappeared inside.

A few minutes later, she came out and smiled. "The urine test came back positive. Let me get some vials of blood, and then we'll do the ultrasound."

Peyton sat on the bed while Dr. Morrow prepped her arm and inserted the needle. She then took several vials of blood and packed them into the medical cooler. Once that was done, she opened the case with the ultrasound machine and set it up. I wasn't expecting to see the giant probe that looked like a massive dildo.

Peyton snickered and I looked over at her, my mouth gaping.

"You're not getting jealous, are you?" she teased, laying one of the towels on the bed. Dr. Morrow tried to hide her smile and failed.

"Uh," I began, returning my attention to the foot-long dong. "Maybe. That thing is fucking huge."

"All right," Dr. Morrow said, laughing. "I'm going to step out of the room while you take off your pants and underwear. You can cover up with that other towel you brought out if that makes you feel more comfortable."

She stepped out of the room, and Peyton smirked up at me as she took off the bottom half of her clothes. "Don't worry. That thing has nothing on you."

I snorted. "This is going to be interesting."

Peyton leaned up and kissed me, her expression turning serious. “Yes, it is. We’re about to see our baby. It almost doesn’t seem real.”

A ribbon of nerves swirled in my stomach. “You know this is exactly what happened with my parents. Emma and I weren’t planned. They were young too, and everything worked out.”

Peyton wrapped her arms around my neck. “I’m not worried about us, just the rest of the world.”

I kissed her gently and sucked her bottom lip. The world was going to make sure it stayed the hell out of our way. I wasn’t going to let anything come between us.

“You know what I *am* worried about?” I said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Peyton searched my eyes. “What?”

I slid my hands down to her bare ass and squeezed. “*You* not wearing any underwear. I’m two seconds away from spreading those legs and fucking you senseless.”

Peyton smacked my arm. “Shh ... Dr. Morrow’s just outside that door.”

A couple of seconds later, we heard a light knock.

“Peyton, you ready?” Dr. Morrow called out.

Peyton lay on the bed, and I covered her with the other large towel. “I am,” Peyton shouted.

The door opened and Dr. Morrow strolled back in, shaking her head and grinning. It was apparent she’d heard what I said. After the machine was turned on and calibrated, she picked up the enormous probe and slid a condom down on it along with a heaping glob of gel. I sat down beside Peyton and held her hand.

“Are you ready?” the doctor asked, glancing from Peyton to me. We both nodded, and she got into position between Peyton’s legs. “Okay, here we go.”

Peyton stiffened and squeezed my hand when Dr. Morrow slipped the probe inside. She looked up at me and laughed. “It’s so cold.”

I winked at her. “Don’t worry, I’ll warm you up later.”

Dr. Morrow’s shoulders shook as she turned to the screen. It was hard to tell what I was looking at as she moved the probe around. Dr. Morrow reached over and turned one of the knobs on the machine.

“It might help if I turn up the volume. That way, you can hear your baby’s heartbeat.” There was a whooshing sound, along with what sounded like horses galloping. It was all jumbled together. Dr. Morrow gasped and jerked her head toward us, her eyes wide. “You’re not going to believe this.”

My heart was about to jump out of my chest. I didn’t want anything to be wrong.

“What is it?” Peyton asked, panic in her voice.

Dr. Morrow pointed at the screen. “There’s nothing to be scared of. Take a look. I thought I heard something funny. Now I know why.”

When I focused on the screen, I didn’t have to understand ultrasounds to know what I was seeing.

Holy fucking shit.

I was in so much trouble ... especially if they were girls. There were two of them.

CHAPTER 16

PEYTON

Not only was I eight weeks pregnant, but it was with twins! They were due in August. I came away from that one-night stand in Vegas with not just one baby but two. Even though Ethan was a twin, I wasn't expecting to have them. I had no clue how I would handle two babies at once.

It was closing in on ten o'clock, and Dr. Morrow had just called to say that all my blood work was exemplary. She'd already given me a bottle of prenatal vitamins I was supposed to take daily. Other than that, I was good to go. The next time I would see her would be at my twelve weeks visit in four weeks. It was precisely when Ethan and I needed to head back to California. We had four more weeks of solitude, and I wanted to enjoy every minute.

Snuggling between Ethan's legs as we lay on the couch, I breathed him in, loving how gentle he'd been with me. I wasn't a porcelain doll by any means but seeing how careful he was around me was sweet. He ran his fingers up and down my arm, his body warm all around me; I was in heaven.

"If you could go back to that night in Vegas, would you still have made the same decision knowing what you know now?" he asked, his voice low.

A pang of guilt spiked in my stomach.

"Would you?" I countered.

He didn't hesitate with his answer. "Yes," he replied.

Slowly, I sat up and turned to face him. By the way his jaw tensed, he could tell my answer wasn't the same. "I promise

it's not like that, Ethan. Just hear me out.”

He nodded, but I could see the hurt in his stormy blue eyes. “I would still make the same decision to be with you. That is something I don't regret. I love you so much that it makes my heart hurt. My only wish is that I would've loved to have more time with you, with just *us*.” I reached over and cupped his cheeks. “I have to share you when I've only had you to myself for a short while.”

His smirk made my heart lighten. “You are the most important person in my life, Peyton. You will *always* come first.” He leaned up and kissed me, his lips firm against mine. “Didn't I promise you something earlier?”

I smiled. “You mean when I was getting probed?” He chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, I remember you saying you'd warm me up. I am a little cold right now.”

Ethan snaked his arms around my waist and pulled me to him, my back against his chest. His hands slid over my stomach to my breasts, massaging them in his firm grip. I arched my back, wanting more.

Ethan bit the tender flesh behind my ear, his voice gruff. “I want you so fucking bad.”

“Then take me,” I whispered.

Sliding his hands underneath my thighs, he lifted me in his arms and stood so fast it made me shriek. His lips found mine again, and I got so lost in his touch that I lost track of time. One minute, we were in the living room, and the next, I was on the bed. I couldn't get my clothes off fast enough, but eventually, I succeeded. It was hard to concentrate while watching Ethan start to take his off. He moved like a male stripper, so fluid and smooth.

“If you weren't an MMA fighter, you would've worked well at a strip club.”

Ethan's devilish grin made my body tighten in all the right places. “Are you saying I need to give you a show one day?”

“Yes,” I breathed, my body aching for him to touch me. “I would love that more than anything.” I bit my lip. “And you

can start now.”

Crawling backward, he caressed his fingers down my legs until he was completely off the bed. Never taking his gaze off mine, he unbuttoned his jeans, letting them fall to the floor. His cock bulged behind his boxers, and I bit my lip as he rubbed his arousal through the material. Slowly, he slid his boxers down and smirked as he gave himself a few pumps up and down his length. He watched me watch him; it was the most erotic thing I’d ever seen.

“Is this what you wanted?” he asked.

“Oh, yes.” I touched myself, and his eyes darkened with need. “Come here,” I said, needing him now.

Ethan wasted no time and crawled on the bed, opening me wide. His tongue trailed up my inner thigh and passed over my clit with one quick flick. My body jerked, and the feel of his breath as he chuckled made my toes curl. It was so hot hearing his satisfaction.

Delving deep, he buried his tongue inside me and swirled it around. His tongue was so warm and needy as he tasted me, driving me to the edge. My clit ached for release, and when he pulled his tongue out and started sucking on it, my body exploded. Fisting my hands in his dark hair, I screamed out my pleasure. He slowly lowered his pace and licked me as my body shook, tasting my desire for him.

When I looked down, his blue eyes blazed with an intensity that made me tremble. I’d never seen anyone stare at me like that. It was kind of scary but in a good, primal way. He covered me with his body, and I could feel his tip at my opening. I wanted him to push in so fucking bad. But, instead, he closed his lips over mine and grabbed ahold of my face, kissing me deeply. I tasted myself on his lips.

His cock pushed in a little and I moaned, biting his bottom lip. “Make love to me, Ethan. I want to feel you. I want to feel all of you.”

Growling deep in his chest, he plunged in as far as he could go. I screamed and dug my nails into his back as he

rocked me back and forth, hard. My core stretched to fit all of him, but the pain of it made my eyes water. It hurt, but it felt so damn good.

Ethan found a spot behind my ear and bit down, sending chills cascading down my body. What made it even better was that he didn't stop there. Down my neck and across my collarbone, he nipped and sucked his way until he reached my nipples. As hard as he could, he took my nipple in his mouth and pulled with his lips, flicking his tongue across my swollen peaks.

Another orgasm built between my legs and judging by his strangled groan, I could tell he knew I was about to come. Instead of leaving me on my back, he wrapped his arms around me and lifted me up on his lap. We were sitting up on the bed with me on top of him. He was in so deep.

“Ride me,” he commanded, never taking his mouth away from my nipple.

Lifting my hips, I sat down on him until I got a good rhythm. My body clenched and I was so close. Ethan was, too, judging from the way his cock pulsated inside me. “I’m going to come,” I warned.

“Keep going, baby. I want to come inside you.”

My eyes rolled into the back of my head and my insides tightened. Just the thought of him releasing inside me sent me over the edge.

“Yes,” I cried breathlessly. His fingers dug into my hips, and he held me down on his cock as we both reached our climax, our bodies melding together. I could feel his release as he came inside me, all hot and primal as he yelled out, his body jerking in spasms. Laying my head on his shoulder, I felt my heart beat out of control.

Ethan lowered me to the bed and gently pulled out before resting behind me with his arm across my stomach. He kissed my shoulder and held me tight. “I love you, Peyton.”

“I love you, too.”

I was exhausted, but in a good way. Ethan was asleep but I needed a ginger ale and some saltines to help with the nausea. I was told it would subside around the second trimester, so I was counting the days.

While I ate my crackers, I scrolled through my phone and looked at old pictures. I wanted to call Reagan and my mom and tell them the baby news, but there was no way they'd be able to keep *that* a secret from everyone in the group. Ethan and I had already decided to get everyone together when we returned to California and tell them all at the same time. It was going to be a madhouse. I had no doubt that my mom would want us to have a gender reveal party and everything else. The family was going to be excited when we told them it was going to be twins.

There was so much Ethan and I needed to discuss. The main thing being ... where were we going to live. All my stuff from the apartment was at his house, but he didn't have the privacy we needed. His place was in Venice, right on the beach where anyone and everyone could walk by. It wasn't where I wanted our twins to live, not when the paparazzi could camp out on the beach and sneak pictures of us. So that was something I planned on talking to Ethan about soon.

Once I ate my fifth saltine cracker, I guzzled down the ginger ale and tossed the can in the trash. Hopefully, by eating the snack, I wouldn't wake up as sick in the morning.

My body felt heavy as I walked down the hall to the bedroom. After brushing my teeth, I took off my bracelet and set it and my phone on the bedside table. The bed was warm from Ethan's body, and it made me smile, especially when he reached over and wrapped his arm around my waist, his hand lying gently on my stomach.

"Sweet dreams," he murmured sleepily.

"Same to you."

Closing my eyes, I could feel my body drifting off to sleep. But then, my phone vibrated on the table, jerking me awake. Who the hell would be texting me this late? It was two o'clock in the morning here in North Carolina, but back at home it would only be eleven. My agent had been known to call or text at crazy times.

Groaning, I grabbed my cell, squinting against the screen's brightness in the darkness. There was no number or name, only the word "unavailable". I hated it when I didn't know who it was. So many times, I would get calls with a recording saying the warranty on my car was about to expire. Always the same stupid stuff.

I slid my finger across the screen to look at the message. When I clicked on it, chills ran down my spine, and my pulse quickened. All the text said was *One is the beginning*. It was eerie and strange but oddly familiar.

Where had I seen that saying before?

Ethan patted my hip. "Everything okay?"

I set my phone back on the nightstand. "Yeah, everything's fine. It was just a text."

Lying my head back down, I closed my eyes again but swiftly opened them back up. *One is the beginning*.

I didn't like it ... I didn't like it at all.

CHAPTER 17

ETHAN

ONE WEEK LATER

It'd been a long time since I'd seen snow fall, but today was one of those days. Out of all the places I could go to see it, I never thought it'd be in Wilmington, North Carolina. There wasn't expected to be much, maybe an inch or so, but it was still great. It made me miss my family's mountain cabin. A part of me wished that was where Peyton and I had gone during this break, but she wanted to be in Wilmington. One day soon, I was going to take her to the cabin. It was where my parents raised my sisters and me away from prying eyes. We'd have privacy there.

My phone started to ring, and when I looked at the caller, I quickly glanced back at the house. Peyton was in there making hot chocolate and was supposed to join me on the dock. I didn't want to keep anything from her, but I didn't want her to hear my conversation with Seth Michelson, especially when I had no clue what he wanted.

"Hey," I answered, my tone rushed.

Seth chuckled. "Hey, yourself. Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"A little," I replied. "What's going on?"

"I haven't heard from you in a while. When I asked Ripp where you were, he evaded my question."

“That’s because I don’t want anyone to know. I’ll be back in California in a couple of weeks. Did you need something?”

“No. I was just calling to see if you were ever coming back to Vegas. A lot of my people have been asking about you. They want to watch you fight.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I watched Peyton carefully walk down the patio steps, smiling up at the snowy sky with a mug of hot chocolate in her hands.

“I have a lot going on right now, Seth. I don’t know if I’ll ever go back.”

“Interesting,” he said, chuckling. “I thought you loved the money.”

“I did, but now I have other things I need to focus on.”

He sighed. “I know what you mean.”

“Do you?” I asked. I remembered what Ripp said about Kali and how Seth was showing interest in her.

“What do you mean by that?” he fired back.

I didn’t want to get on Seth’s bad side since he had helped my family and protected them from his psycho-ass brother. But I had to watch out for Kali. She needed to be protected from him. I just had to hope the Vegas crew would have her back.

“Look, I don’t know what’s going on out there, but you know Kali is a close friend, right? She’s off limits.”

The line went silent, but then Seth huffed. “That’s not your decision, Jameson. Kali has a mind of her own.”

Peyton joined me on the dock, her smile falling when she looked at me. “Yes, she does,” I said to Seth. “She’s the bantamweight champion and strong enough to take care of herself. I’m just saying that it might not go over well with my guys out there. They’re not going to want her involved with you, even if you aren’t the enemy like your brother.”

“Thanks for the concern, but I’ve got this. If you decide you want to fight again, give me a call.” He hung up and I

blew out a sigh.

Peyton blew into her hot chocolate. “What was that about? Were you talking to Seth? I still can’t believe I haven’t met him.”

I scoffed. “I’m hoping you never do. But there might be a time when you need him.”

The blood drained from her face. “I don’t want to think about that.”

I held out my hand. “Can I see your phone, please?”

She handed it to me, and I added Seth to her contacts. “I’m adding him to your list so you can call him if something happens with Nikolai.” I gave her back her phone, and she sighed as she slid it back into her pocket.

“I hate this.”

“So do I,” I agreed, draping an arm over her shoulders. “What do you think of the snow?”

She smiled but the emotion didn’t touch her emerald eyes. “I love it. But changing the subject isn’t going to get you out of this.” She looked up at me. “What did Seth want? I heard you say something about the bantamweight champion. What does Kali have to do with your conversation?”

Sliding my arm away from her shoulders, I stared at her for a few seconds before answering. “I’m hoping nothing. He first asked if I was coming back to Vegas.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “And you said?”

I cupped her cheeks. “I said no. But that’s not what concerns me right now. Ripp mentioned before that he noticed Seth paying a lot of attention to Kali. She doesn’t need to get involved with him or his people. We all know what happened to Reagan when she did.”

Peyton jerked her face out of my hands. “Oh my God, Ethan, that’s not good. What are we going to do?”

“*We* are not going to do anything. Ripp is still in Vegas and I’m hoping he, Kase, and Hunter can handle it.”

Peyton turned away from me and huffed. “Is this ever going to end? There’s always going to be one of us in danger.”

“Not if someone puts an end to Nikolai. It’s the only way to be free.”

She jerked around. “Please tell me you’re not going to volunteer yourself. He almost killed Carter and my brother. I can’t let him get to you too.”

“Hey,” I said, grabbing her around the waist. She tried to pull out of my grasp, but I held her tight. “I’m not going to lie, if I ever got the chance, I’d take it in a heartbeat. But I’m not stupid, Peyton. I’m not going to seek Nikolai out.”

I could see the fear in her eyes. “You promise?”

Keeping my eyes open, I kissed her, hoping she could see the truth. “I promise.” And I meant it. I hated Nikolai for everything he’d done to my family. He’d threatened to kill my parents and used my sisters as pawns in his vile, twisted games. The guy deserved to die. I just hoped I was there to witness it when the time came. Peyton shivered and I wrapped my arm around her. “Come on, let’s go inside. Maybe we can watch one of those girly-ass movies you like.”

Peyton perked up and I was glad to see a smile back on her face. “I better not hear you complain. It was your idea.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I grumbled as we headed off the dock to the house.

Her phone beeped and she pulled it out of her back pocket just as we got to the door. I took her mug of hot chocolate so she could get to the text. Her smile swiftly dropped, replaced by terror.

“Peyton, what’s wrong?” I demanded. She stared at her phone, unable to move. I took it from her and read the text.

Unavailable: **Two ... there is nothing you can do.**

“What the fuck?” The number was unavailable. “Do you get texts like that often?”

I gave Peyton back her phone and her hot chocolate. “Not like *that*,” she said, shaking her head. “I’ll get telemarketers

sometimes but never anything cryptic and weird. But I did get one similar about a week ago.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me? What did it say?”

She looked away. “It said ... ‘One is the beginning.’”

I didn’t like it.

“Maybe we should call my aunt Brooklyn and see if she can have it traced.”

Peyton gasped, her eyes piercing into mine. “No. I don’t want to make a big deal out of this. If I get another text, we can call her. It’s probably nothing.”

It didn’t sound like nothing to me.

Chewing her lip, Peyton stared at me. “You don’t think it could be Nikolai doing it, do you?”

I wouldn’t put it past him to do some stupid shit like that, but Nikolai wasn’t the type of guy to resort to texts. He would’ve called her outright.

“It’s not his style,” I informed her. “He doesn’t hide behind texts. But then again, I’m not ruling him out.”

Peyton slid her phone inside her pocket, her smile not reaching her eyes. I could tell the text had rattled her. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t do the same to me.

Peyton took my hand and pulled me to the door. “Come on. We have a movie to watch. Let’s forget about the texts.”

That was easier said than done.

CHAPTER 18

PEYTON

ANOTHER WEEK LATER

I awoke with a gasp at the sound of my vibrating phone. Every time my phone beeped with an incoming text, my stomach filled with dread. Heart racing, I reached over and grabbed my cell off the nightstand. I was relieved to see it was a message from my mom. There was also one from Reagan, but I'd check it later. If I didn't respond to my mother first, she'd begin to worry.

Mom: **Just thinking about you. I hope you're doing okay.**

The words were blurry, so I rubbed my eyes before texting her back. I wasn't about to tell her I had just taken a nap. There would be lots of questions. I wasn't a nap-taking type of person.

Me: **I'm doing great. Just enjoying my peace and quiet before the chaos when I return.**

Mom: **I understand that. Give me a call sometime tonight so we can catch up.**

Me: **Will do.**

I always made it a point to call her every day. Usually, she was with me, but I was glad she had this time with my dad. She'd devoted too much of her time to making sure I was protected while away filming movies. Now that I was with Ethan, I couldn't imagine being away from him for long

periods. The amount of sacrifice my parents went through hurt my heart, but I was grateful nonetheless.

Lying back in bed, I looked at the two cryptic text messages. Both had been sent on Tuesdays, and it was now Tuesday again. Ethan was worried about it; I could see it on his face whenever I got a call or a text.

We had two weeks left in Wilmington, but a part of me wondered if we should go ahead and head back to California. What pissed me off was that I didn't want some silly texts to take away this time I had with Ethan.

We still didn't have a plan on what we were going to do when we got back. It was something I wanted to talk to him about. There was so much we had to do, so much planning. One thing was for sure, I had to call my agent and tell her before our secret came out. I had no doubt she'd already planned several things for me around the time the baby was due to be born. But, unfortunately, those events I wouldn't be able to attend.

The smell of garlic and herbs wafted past my nose, and my stomach growled. I was hungry but still so nauseous. Whatever Ethan was cooking smelled delicious.

Sliding out of bed, I grabbed my soft, fuzzy snowflake blanket and draped it over my shoulders. When I walked into the kitchen, Ethan was shirtless and in a pair of jeans, standing in front of the stove. I stared at the dragon tattoo on his back, wondering if the texts *were* from Nikolai Michelson.

Shaking my head, I banished the thought from my mind. All I had to do was not focus on the tattoo.

"Something smells amazing," I called out.

Ethan glanced at me over his shoulder and smirked. "You're awake ... finally."

Still wrapped in my blanket, I strolled over to him. "What are you making?" I looked in the large pot, and my stomach growled even more. "Ah, potato soup."

Ethan shook some salt and pepper into the pot. "My mom's recipe. There's a salad in the refrigerator and beer bread in the

oven. It was one of my mom's favorite meals when the weather was bad." I looked out the windows at the gray sky and the pouring rain. "There's nothing better than soup on a stormy day."

I kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry I slept pretty much the whole afternoon."

Ethan stepped in behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, lips gently pressing against my neck. "It's okay. I worked out and made some phone calls. My parents wanted me to tell you hey."

"Are you going to be ready for your fight in a few weeks?" I asked, turning around in his arms. "You haven't had access to a gym."

Ethan smiled, his arms pulling me into him. "I'll be fine. When we return to California, I'll hit the workouts hard. No one's going to take my title from me." He smacked my ass and stepped back. "Why don't you go sit down? Dinner's ready."

"Okay."

I pulled my blanket off and draped it over the back of the chair before sitting at the kitchen table. Ethan brought over a bowl of potato soup, a small salad, and a large piece of beer bread with butter.

"Thank you. I promise to cook dinner tomorrow. You haven't tried my chicken parmesan."

Ethan chuckled as he spooned soup into his bowl. "Sounds good. I look forward to it."

As soon as he sat down at the table, I dug in. The potato soup was creamy, and the bread had just enough beer flavor. I just hoped all the food stayed down. I was tired of throwing everything up.

Ethan stirred his soup, the steam billowing into the air. "I've been thinking. We haven't yet talked about what we're going to do when we go back to Cali."

"I was just thinking about that earlier today," I said. "What are your thoughts?"

His gaze dropped to his bowl. “Well, I kind of did something while you were sleeping.”

He had me curious. “Tell me.”

His crystal blue eyes lifted and pierced into mine. “Living at my place isn’t an option. There’s no privacy. I called a real estate agent today to get the ball moving on selling it.”

That was a shock.

“Wow. You’ve been busy.”

He laughed. “Our babies will be here before you know it.”

Hearing him say that warmed my heart. “Yes, they will. So, do you want us to find a house together?”

He nodded. “That’s what I need to talk to you about. Reagan called and said she sent you a link, but you never responded.”

I gasped. “Oh yeah, I never opened it to see what it was.”

Ethan cleared his throat. “Well, I told her you were taking a nap, so she sent it to me. She said you’d love it. I was going to surprise you with it tonight. I probably shouldn’t have done it without you, but I had to act fast.”

He pulled out his phone and came over to me, setting it down on the table. When I looked at the screen, my eyes lit up. It was a house ... and one I recognized because I’d seen it before; it was right down the road from Reagan and Braden’s, tucked away in a private, gated neighborhood.

“Oh, yeah. I love that place,” I breathed, holding a hand over my heart. Then, gasping, I jerked my head to look at him to see a mischievous smile. “Ethan. Are you trying to tell me you ...”

He cocked his head to the side. “Bought it? Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m trying to say.”

Jumping to my feet, I threw my arms around his neck, shrieking so loud I knew it had to hurt his ears. The excitement welled up so much in my chest that I felt like I’d explode.

“Oh my God!” I squealed. “I don’t know what to say.”

He pulled me back and clutched my face. “Tell me you’re not mad I did it without you. I know we’re supposed to do this stuff together.”

Tears filled my eyes. “No, I’m not mad. On the contrary, I’m excited, thrilled, ecstatic; you name it.”

I kissed him hard and started to cry. The emotions were strong, and I knew it was the pregnancy hormones making everything heightened.

“I’m just so happy.”

Ethan swiped the tears off my cheeks. “The house went on the market today. I knew that if I didn’t put in an offer right then, it’d get taken.”

I leaned into his touch. “I would’ve done the same thing. Thank you. I can’t wait to move in.”

Ethan winked. “As soon as we get back to California, we’ll sign the papers.”

I kissed him again. “Now there are more things we get to add to the list of telling people. Not only are we together now, but we’re pregnant with twins and moving in with each other.”

Ethan’s shoulders shook with his laughter. “I can only imagine what the headlines are going to say.”

We spent the entire dinner talking about our newfound plans and what all we were going to get for the house. My array of succulent plants were definitely coming with us.

I couldn’t wait to see our house in person. I already knew I was going to love it. Ethan did mention that we could’ve always moved to his family’s cabin in Sierra Nevada, but it was too far away from everyone. We’d have privacy, but not our families. My mom would never forgive me if I moved her grandchildren six hours away from her.

The time was closing in on eleven, and Ethan was in the shower since he got sweaty after his nightly workout. After

grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator, I closed all the blinds in the living room and retreated to the bedroom. The smell of Ethan's soap filled up the room and I breathed it in, loving the scent. So many smells made me sick, but I couldn't get enough of his soap.

I set my phone and bottle of water on the nightstand and hopped into bed. A few minutes later, the shower water turned off and I rolled over onto my side, pretending to be asleep. Ethan came out, and I could feel his eyes on me. The bed dipped down and his fingers traced along the back of my neck, down my arm and to my thigh. I remained completely still, even though my skin broke out in shivers. His touch drove me crazy, and he knew it.

Ethan laid behind me, his naked body hot and hard against my back. He kissed my neck and shoulder, his teeth nipping at my skin. Biting my lip, I had to hold back a moan; it all felt so good.

"Are you too tired?" he whispered, his voice low and gruff.

I shook my head. "Never when it comes to you."

His hand slid down to my underwear and gently tugged at them, but he only got so far when my phone buzzed on the nightstand. He froze and so did I. It was Tuesday, an exact week since my last text.

Ethan growled and sat up. "So, help me God, Peyton. If this is another one of those texts, I'm gonna fucking blow."

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "It's Tuesday, Ethan. If it is one, they're right on schedule."

I opened my eyes and sat up, afraid to check my phone. However, I wanted to be the one to do it instead of Ethan. So I grabbed it, and when the light on the screen came on, I could see part of the text. It was the word *Three* followed by the three dots of doom.

"It's them," I said, unlocking my phone. I went straight to my messages and clicked on the text. My blood ran cold when I read the rest of the words.

Unavailable: **Three ... You need to be ready for me.**

I didn't want to imagine the meaning behind them. Be ready? The thought made me sick to the core.

"Peyton. What does it say?" Ethan demanded. With shaky hands, I passed him the phone. His face contorted and filled with rage. "Son of a fucking bitch! That's it. I'm calling my aunt and uncle. It's time we get the feds involved."

I couldn't argue with him. I'd already had a brush with death not long before when that psycho stalker, Peter Dellinger, broke into my apartment. I didn't want or need anything like that to happen again. I wasn't worried about myself, but I was for my babies.

"Call them," I said. "We need to know who's doing this."

Ethan stormed to his feet and threw on a pair of boxers and a T-shirt before snatching his phone off the dresser. Luckily, it was only eight thirty in California. He paced back and forth while the line rang through the speaker, the tension growing in the room with each step he took.

"What are you going to tell them?" I wondered. "They don't know about Nikolai. Only my dad does."

Ethan nodded. "I know. I'm going to see if Brooklyn can get her people to trace the number."

A few seconds later, Ethan's uncle Camden answered the phone. "Hey. Long time no talk."

Ethan sighed. "I know. How are you?"

Camden and Ethan's father sounded so much alike on the phone. They were twins, so I could see how people would get them confused.

Camden chuckled. "Not bad. I heard you've been Peyton's bodyguard. How's that going?" He had a mischievous tone to his voice as if he already knew what was going on between us. Ethan picked up on it too.

"Who told you?" Ethan replied.

Camden laughed again. “Your mother. I overheard her talking to Brooklyn.”

Ethan stared over at me. “Speaking of Brooklyn. Peyton and I need to talk to her.”

Camden’s tone changed. “Is everything okay? You don’t sound like it.”

Ethan’s jaw tensed. “Not really, Cam. Peyton’s been getting some fucked up texts. I want to see if Brooklyn can get her people to trace the number.”

Camden huffed. “What the hell? That girl’s already been through so fucking much with that sick cunt who broke into her apartment.”

“I agree,” I called out.

“I’m sorry, Peyton,” Camden said. “Our families are no strangers to this kind of shit.”

If he only knew.

“Hang on, you two. Let me get Brooklyn. She’s upstairs.”

A few minutes later, Brooklyn’s voice came over the phone. “Hey, guys. Cam just gave me a quick rundown. What’s going on with these texts?”

Ethan sat down on the bed to get closer to me. “I’m going to let Peyton explain.”

“Hey, Brooklyn,” I said.

“Hey, sweetheart. I know you’ve got to be a little unnerved right now.”

“Just a little,” I confessed. “The texts have been bizarre. The first one I got was three weeks ago on a Tuesday. And then I got another one last Tuesday and another tonight. I don’t know why they’re coming in on Tuesdays.”

Brooklyn grunted. “Interesting. What did they say?”

“Just random shit. Like this last one said, ‘you need to be ready for me.’”

Brooklyn huffed in disgust. “Sick bastards. Okay, I’ve got some guys I can contact to see if they can trace where the texts are coming from. It might take a few days for them to get on it. Until then, stay vigilant. I know you two are incognito right now.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “We haven’t left the house, and our grocery orders are under a different name. As far as I can tell, no one knows we’re here. I haven’t seen anyone showing up in the driveway to take pictures.”

Brooklyn sighed. “Good. If things change, give me a call.”

We said our goodbyes, and that dreaded feeling in my stomach came back. I didn’t like waiting. So much could happen.

CHAPTER 19

ETHAN

THE NEXT TUESDAY

It took a few days, but Brooklyn finally got in touch with her people, and they'd been trying to figure out the text situation for the last two days. Again, it was Tuesday, a week since Peyton's last text. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't give a shit about a stupid text, but this was different; it felt different. There was something in the messages, something menacing. We'd be idiots to brush them off.

It was getting late and for the past hour, Peyton had been sitting on the couch, staring out the window as the sun faded. Once it grew dark, you could only see the light from the boat dock and the houses across the waterway. We had one more week left in Wilmington, but the allure of it had worn off. In the beginning, it was fantastic having the freedom and enjoying the alone time. Now, all I could think about was keeping Peyton safe, wondering if there would be someone lurking around the corner to take her away from me. Before, I had nothing to lose, but that wasn't the case anymore.

I had *everything* to lose.

Peyton's phone was on the coffee table, and there were times I caught her staring at it. There was fear in her eyes, and it infuriated me. I didn't want her to be afraid.

My phone started ringing, and she gasped, jerking her head in my direction. Grabbing my phone off the kitchen table, I swiped my finger across the screen: it was Brooklyn.

“Hey,” I said, putting the call on speaker. I walked over to the couch and sat next to Peyton. “What’s going on?”

Brooklyn huffed. “Nothing good. I know that’s not what you want to hear.”

Peyton stared at me; her expression full of disappointment.

“What do you mean, nothing good?” I asked.

“It’s crazy, Ethan. My people should be able to trace where those texts came from. But instead, they weren’t able to find anything. It’s like someone already went in there and erased all the information.”

“Who has the ability to do that?”

The line went silent for a few seconds, and my gut contorted. It had to be someone with a lot of power. Not just anyone could do what Brooklyn and the FBI could do.

“Someone very skilled, I’m afraid,” she answered. “It’s not common, but it takes a good hacker to break into our systems. Only someone on the inside would be able to manage it. There’s a good chance we won’t find this person, not unless we catch them in the system.”

“It *is* Tuesday today,” Peyton spoke up. “Is there any way to have your guys on standby?” It was almost nine o’clock. There were three hours left for the texter to keep up the pattern. “If I get a text,” Peyton continued, “we can call you right after. Would that give your guys a chance?”

“It’s possible,” Brooklyn replied. “It doesn’t hurt to try.”

“We’ll keep you posted,” I said into the phone. “I’m sure the text will arrive within the next couple of hours.”

“I’ll have my phone with me.”

We hung up, and Peyton jumped to her feet. “What the hell?” she snapped. “If the FBI can’t trace the damn texts, what will we do?”

There was only one thing we could do. We were alone out here, and I had to ensure her safety.

“We need to go home. I know it’s probably not what you want, but you’re vulnerable here. There’s no house alarm or anything to help us out. As soon as we get back to California, we can install every safety feature into our new home.”

I knew she wanted to enjoy the last week of her freedom away from the press, but her safety was more important. Peyton stared down at me but then nodded. “Okay. Let’s go home.”

Standing, I drew her into my arms, breathing in her honeysuckle scent. “It’s for the best. Go pack while I call and reserve us a private jet.”

“Sounds good,” she whispered, moving out of my arms.

Before she could start down the hall, my phone rang again.
Seth Michelson.

“Fuck me,” I grumbled. I wasn’t in the mood to talk to him.

Peyton hurried back over. “Who is it?”

I stared at the phone. “Seth. I have no clue what he wants.”

Instead of putting it on speaker, I accepted the call and put it up to my ear. “I don’t have time to talk, Michelson,” I snapped.

Seth’s question made the blood run cold. “Are you in Wilmington, North Carolina?”

“Why are you asking that?” I nudged for Peyton to move, and she hurried down the hall. We needed to get out of Wilmington as fast as we could.

“What’s going on?” she asked, whispering the words as I joined her in the bedroom.

Grabbing her suitcase out of the closet, I tossed it on the bed and opened it up. “I need you to pack,” I ordered. I didn’t want to scare her, but if Seth knew we were in Wilmington, others had to know too.

Seth sighed. “You’re with Peyton, aren’t you?”

“That’s none of your business,” I growled, tossing my duffel bag onto the bed. “Now answer my question ... why are you asking if I’m in Wilmington?”

The blood drained from Peyton’s face, and she moved faster. I was worried for her, for our babies. The stress wasn’t good.

“I knew you were in North Carolina already. An article popped up online with Peyton at the Biltmore House, and you were in the background. One of my men heard Nikolai sent one of his guys to Wilmington. My first thought went to you. He also heard my brother say something about getting two birds with one stone. You’re not in California, and neither is Peyton. I had a bad feeling, so I wanted to call and check up.”

“Fuck!” I shouted, storming over to the dresser. I ripped it open and grabbed a heap of my clothes, throwing them all in my bag. “Your brother knows we’re fucking here? Goddammit! Was it him sending Peyton all those fucked up texts too?”

“I don’t know about all of that,” Seth claimed. “Nikolai doesn’t take the coward’s way out and send texts. He goes straight to the source.” I knew it wasn’t his style to send texts. But if it wasn’t him, then we were dealing with someone else. “But if I were you,” Seth continued, “I’d get out of North Carolina, quick and fast. We knew my brother would come for you one day, but I was hoping it wouldn’t be when you’re on the other side of the country. I can’t help you out there.”

“No shit,” I hissed. “We’re leaving tonight.”

I hung up and tossed my phone on the bed. Peyton slapped a hand over her mouth, tears filling her eyes. “Ethan, what the hell? Nikolai knows we’re here?”

“Hey,” I said, clutching her face. “Calm down, Peyton. Seth said that Nikolai sent *one* of his guys. I’ll do what I have to do to protect you, even if that means breaking that fucker’s neck.” It took her a few seconds, but she took in a deep breath and nodded. I kissed her quickly. “I’m going to make a phone call to get our flight. As soon as I’m done, we’ll leave.”

She nodded and got back to packing. Turning on my heel, I marched down the hall. Why couldn't it have been Nikolai himself hunting me down? I'd have given anything to get a shot at him.

CHAPTER 20

PEYTON

I was almost done packing when my mom called. I didn't want her to hear the panic in my voice, but she'd worry herself to death if I didn't answer the phone. If she only knew that my problems were all because of her and my dad. They did the right thing by taking down the Dark Side all those years ago. But unfortunately, they didn't know the consequences of their actions would haunt my friends and me.

Picking my phone off the bed, I cleared my throat and answered it. "Hey, Mom."

"Why didn't you tell me about the texts?" she snapped. "I had to find out from Brooklyn."

After shoving the rest of my clothes into my bag, I zipped it up. "I didn't want to worry you. A lot is going on that I haven't told you about. I promise to tell you *everything* as soon as I get home. Ethan and I are grabbing a flight out tonight. But the short version is that I've been getting a text every Tuesday for the past four weeks."

"What did they say?" she demanded.

I could hear Ethan talking to someone on the phone in the living room. I sat down on the bed, my stomach coiling in knots. "It's just stupid stuff, mom. Like the first one said, 'one is the beginning.'" I heard the sharp intake of her breath before the silence. "Mom?"

"What were the others, Peyton?" I'd never heard my mom sound so terrified. "Was it 'two ... there's nothing you can do'? And 'three ... you need to be ready for me'?"

Now it was my turn to freeze. Chills ran down my spine, prickling every square inch of my skin.

“How did you know that?”

“Peyton, you’re in danger, sweetheart. You need to come home now. I never told you the specifics, but those were the sayings on the notes Rage left me by my door with the black roses.” Rage was a guy who had stalked her for quite some time, and eventually kidnapped her. He’d killed a lot of people in the process. She kept most of the gory details from me, but I could only imagine what she went through.

“There were only four letters, before when Scar came after me,” my mom continued, “Please tell me you haven’t gotten the fourth.”

“No,” I said quickly. “Not yet.”

“Good. You need to leave now. Whoever is sending you those texts is part of the Dark Side. No one else knows what was in my letters except your dad and a couple of others.”

Ethan’s footsteps pounded down the hall and I grabbed my bag, my back drenched in a cold sweat. I didn’t know what to think. Ethan hurried into the room and took my bag, his brows furrowed. I grabbed his arm to keep him from leaving.

“Are we good to go?”

He nodded. “A jet will be at the private airfield in thirty minutes.”

I blew out a breath. “Mom, I’m going to go. Ethan and I are heading back tonight.”

She blew out a relieved sigh. “Thank God. Be safe and I’ll see you soon.”

We hung up and I placed a shaky hand over my mouth. “She got the messages too.” Ethan’s gaze narrowed in confusion. “My mom,” I reiterated. “Instead of texts, those same messages were sent to her in letters. They were from Rage, the guy who was obsessed with her.”

His expression darkened. “And your dad fought him?”

I nodded. “And killed him. So, whoever sent the texts knows what was in those letters. Only someone from that time all those years ago would know. Which means ...”

Understanding flashed across his face. “Which means Nikolai wouldn’t know that himself. None of us were born then. So, someone from the past is involved in this.”

Clutching my stomach, I swallowed down the bile. I felt even sicker with each passing second. “We need to get out of here ... like now.”

Ethan scanned the room. “Do you have everything?”

I searched the room and gasped. The bracelet my mom gave me was still on the nightstand. I rushed over and slid it on my wrist. “I do now.”

Ethan nodded toward the hallway. “Come on. Let’s load our shit up and get out.”

Heart pounding, I followed him down the hall, my head growing dizzy as I tried to look around quickly to make sure we hadn’t left anything. Finally, we hurried out the door, and Ethan threw our bags in the trunk. It was dark and I didn’t feel safe like I had the past few weeks. It was as if someone was watching us.

I was about to get in the front seat when my phone beeped. Ethan rushed to my side, but I froze. “This can’t be happening.

“Don’t look at it,” Ethan said. “Let’s just get in the car and get going.”

It was like Pandora’s box. I knew it would only bring trouble and suffering, but I had to see who it was. Quickly, I swiped to unlock my phone and tapped on my messages. And right there was a text from an unavailable number. I clicked on it to see the fourth and final message.

Unavailable: **Four ... I’m coming to your door.**

Only a split second had passed before everything took a volatile turn. A figure in black came up behind Ethan and pistol-whipped him in the back of the head. Ethan’s knees buckled, but he righted himself, jerking around quickly to

attack the man behind him. He punched him so hard that the man fell to the ground.

“Get in the car, Peyton,” Ethan shouted.

I jumped in, but more figures in black were advancing toward Ethan. Five of them, to be exact, all holding guns pointed straight at him. One of them stepped forward, and all I could see were his eyes through the slits in the black ski mask. They were icy and blue but also soulless and full of danger.

“You’re not going anywhere,” the guy said to Ethan. Those icy eyes turned to me. “Get out of the car, Peyton. If you don’t, your boyfriend will pay the price.”

Blood dripped down the back of Ethan’s neck and onto his shirt. There was nowhere to run to. I stared at the blue-eyed man, and there was no hesitation in his stance. He *would* kill Ethan if I gave him a reason to.

Ethan stood in front of me, blocking me from the man’s view. “What the fuck do you want, asshole?”

The guy’s eyes crinkled as if he was smiling underneath the black mask. “You’re going to find out soon enough. Let’s go.”

“Where?” I asked.

Three men went up to Ethan and dragged him away from the car. The man with blue eyes came to me and grabbed my wrist. “You can either come willingly, or I’ll force you. Which will it be?”

I wanted to fight, but I had to think of my twins. Ethan tried to fend off the three guys, his eyes wild as he looked at me. We didn’t stand a chance against them all. Swallowing hard, I put on a brave face and jerked my wrist out of the guy’s grasp.

“I’ll come willingly. I don’t want you touching me.”

His eyes lit with humor as I slid out of the car. Then, he stepped up to me and snatched my wrist again. “Sorry. You’re just going to have to get used to it.”

The guy pulled me away from the car and ordered one of his men to grab our things out of the trunk. No vehicles were in the driveway, so I had no clue where they planned to take us.

I was pulled around the side of the house toward the dock, and my eyes widened. There was a boat waiting for us, a nice one at that. Whoever was taking us had money and lots of it.

Ethan grunted and growled from behind, along with the other men. He wasn't making it easy on them.

"Where are you taking us?" I hissed.

The guy chuckled and continued to pull me down the dock walkway. "Your new home. You'll learn to like it."

When we got to the boat, two men were onboard, wearing the same black clothing and masks. I was handed off to them and taken below deck.

"Sit," one ordered, pointing at the plush leather couch. I sat down just as the three men with Ethan came down the stairs, pushing him onto the couch beside me. His wrists were bound behind his back, and bruises were already showing up on his face. Fear racked my entire body as I moved closer to him.

"Are you okay?"

His murderous gaze never left the men watching us. "I'm fine." But then he turned to me. "Are *you* okay?"

I didn't know how to answer that. Physically I was fine, but I was terrified. Before I could say anything, the guy with blue eyes returned, holding a black piece of cloth in his hands. He roughly tied a blindfold around Ethan's head and then pulled out a syringe from his back pocket.

"What is that?" I demanded.

He stuck it into Ethan's arm quickly before Ethan could fight back. It only took a few seconds for his body to give out. The man with blue eyes turned to me.

"It was a sedative. He'll be all right ... for now."

He grabbed my arm and hauled me away from Ethan. My eyes burned as I turned and watched the distance grow between us. I was led down a small hallway to a bedroom. So many thoughts ran through my mind. I was the only female on a boat with God knew how many men. The last thing I wanted was to be alone with any of them.

“Get in there,” Blue Eyes commanded.

“I’m not going in there with *you*,” I snapped. His laugh made my stomach coil.

Squeezing my arm, he pushed me inside and I fell onto the bed. I felt a prick in my arm and then the warmth of the drugs as they spread through my veins. My eyes grew heavy, and I couldn’t lift my arms. The bed dipped down, and I felt the man’s body as he towered over me.

“Get your rest, Peyton. You’re going to need it.”

I took one last look at his blue eyes, and then the darkness took me.

CHAPTER 21

ETHAN

I awoke to the smell of sweat and a musty basement.

Ripping off the blindfold, I looked around but there was nothing but darkness. The only light came from the crack below a door across the room. And beyond that, I heard muffled noises, only it sounded as if it was in the distance. The bed squeaked as I got up, and my legs felt heavy as I made my way to the door.

When I opened it, I wasn't expecting what I saw on the other side. It was a vast warehouse, only I was sealed off from it, looking into it from behind a window. Guys walked by, but none of them paid attention to me; it was as if they didn't know I was there.

Everything was dark on the other side of the window, faintly lit by dimmed light. There was exercise equipment on one side of the room, and on the other was a fighting ring, surrounded by a cage and barbed wire. There had to be over fifty guys, all ranging in height and size, working out.

And over in another corner with their separate workout space was a group of ten women, all appearing to be in their early to mid-twenties. They all had the same look ... athletic with long, midnight-colored hair.

At all the exits were men standing guard in their black clothes, and I had no doubt it was the guys from last night, only this time they weren't hidden behind ski masks. By the looks of everything, it had Nikolai Michelson written all over it. This was his style.

The door to my right opened, and I jerked my head over to face the man walking in. Behind him were three other guys. They walked over and surrounded me, their bodies tense as if they expected a fight.

“You’re awake,” the main guy said.

I recognized his voice from last night. He was the one who’d taken Peyton away from me. The guy was my height and build and around the same age. He stopped a few feet away from me and smiled.

“I didn’t expect the drugs to wear off for another few hours.”

I stormed toward him. “Where’s Peyton?” I didn’t get any closer before the three men stopped me. “Where’s Peyton?” I shouted again, snarling the words.

The guy took a step toward me. “She’s okay. Not that it should matter to you. She’s not yours anymore.”

The fire burning inside me felt as if it’d explode any minute. “So help me God, if you touch her, I’ll fucking kill you.”

His lips pulled back. “Too late. I already have.” He focused on the men restraining me. “I’m heading out, but I’ll be back tonight with everyone else.” Then to me, he said, “You might want to get ready. It’s going to be a long couple of days for you.”

Once he was gone, the men let me go and two of them followed him out, leaving only one. Turning back to the window, I looked around at all the people working out; I had no clue what the fuck was going on.

“I’d heed his warning,” the guy said. I turned around and glared at him. He had a menacing leer and a scar down the right side of his face.

“Why is that?” I growled.

The guy’s dark eyes narrowed. “Because it *is* going to be a hard couple of days. That is if you survive it. And even then, you won’t be going anywhere.”

“What the hell’s even going on here? What is this place?”

He glanced around at all the people and then smirked at me. “It’s an audition. You all have your parts to play.”

“Audition for what?” I snapped.

The guy shrugged. “You’ll see. But *you* don’t have to audition like all of them,” he said, nodding at the warehouse full of guys. “Your role has already been picked for you.”

My role? He walked off and I stared at all the fighters. What role was that?

CHAPTER 22

PEYTON

I could feel the piercing in my skull before I even opened my eyes. The nausea was overwhelming. With my eyes closed, I could feel the room spinning.

Shielding my eyes with my hands, I opened them and looked around the room. I was hoping last night was all just a bad dream, but it wasn't. I had no clue where I was. All I knew was that I'd been drugged.

However, I wasn't expecting to wake up dressed in a sexy set of pink lingerie in a room that looked like it belonged on the *Gone with the Wind* movie set. Every piece of furniture was antique, from the wardrobe and dressers to the four-poster canopy bed. There was even a fainting couch across the room, nestled up against the pale blue wall with my suitcase resting on it.

Heart racing, I jumped out of bed, only my legs gave out and I collapsed onto the floor. It felt as if I hadn't walked in days. I had no clue what time or what day it even was. There wasn't a clock or a TV in the room. Once I stretched my legs, I unsteadily got to my feet and stumbled over to the fainting couch.

I sat down and unzipped my suitcase, desperate to find a change of clothes. The thought of one of those guys touching me to put me in the lingerie made me sick. I didn't want to think of what else they did to my body. From what I could tell, there wasn't any pain between my legs, and there was no evidence that I'd been raped.

My phone was in my hoodie pocket last night, but I couldn't find the sweatshirt anywhere in my stuff. So I dug through my things and changed into a pair of leggings and an oversized green sweater. My prenatal pills were underneath everything else, and when I reached for them, the door to the room opened.

Grabbing my chest, I jerked around to see an older woman, probably in her early seventies, with her gray hair in a bun and wearing a black housekeeping dress with a white apron. It was as if I'd stepped into an alternate universe. None of it made any sense. She had a silver tray in her hands, and on top was a covered dish and a small carafe of water.

"Good evening, Ms. Emerson," she said sweetly, smiling kindly at me. "My name is Martha." I was still in shock as I watched her bring over the tray and set it on the small wooden table next to me.

"Evening?" I asked. "Is it not morning?"

The woman chuckled lightly. "Heavens, no. You slept the entire day. I figured you'd be hungry, so I brought you some dinner. I wanted to ensure you were taken care of before I left for the day."

"Where am I?"

Martha's hazel eyes furrowed in confusion. "You're at Aubrey Oak Plantation. I figured you knew that."

Before I could speak, another woman marched through the door. She was younger and looked to be in her late twenties. Her sleek blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but it was her cold, dark eyes that made me wary. The black leather pants she wore hugged her petite frame, and the same went for her red top. When she smiled, I could tell it was fake.

"I can take over from here, Martha."

Martha patted my hand in a grandmotherly way. "Be sure to check out the gardens. They're beautiful."

She strolled out the door, leaving me alone with Barbie and her crazy eyes. "Who are you?" I asked her.

The woman marched over to the windows and peered out, her expression bored. “Cecilia. I wanted to make sure you were awake.” She glared at me with her salty gray eyes. “Eat so we can get going. Someone is waiting for you.”

“Who?” I demanded.

Cecilia moved away from the window, her gaze darkening even more. “You don’t have the power to ask those kinds of questions. You’re in my domain now. The world doesn’t revolve around you here.” Her words were laced with jealousy and malice. There was something familiar about her, almost as if I knew who she was. But, unfortunately, I couldn’t place her.

“What about Ethan Jameson? Is he okay?”

Her sneer turned into a smile; I didn’t like it. “You mean your boyfriend? Yeah, that’s not a secret around here. You two should’ve been more careful if you were trying to keep that a secret.”

“Please,” I said, hating myself for even saying the word to her. I would do anything to make sure Ethan was all right. “Is Ethan okay?”

Cecilia shrugged. “I think so. You’ll get to see him later. He’s with the others.” She waved me off. “Now stop asking questions and eat. I need you ready in ten minutes.”

My stomach was too queasy to eat, but I knew I had to for the babies. When I opened the covered dish lid, steam billowed out and there was salmon, pasta, and broccoli. I forced as much down as possible and drank the entire carafe of water. Cecilia watched me the whole time, impatiently tapping her foot. Once I was done, I stood and followed her to the door. She led me out into the hallway, and just like in the bedroom, every bit of furniture was antique. We passed a library and another couple of bedrooms that looked as if no one had ever slept in them. Everything was pristine.

“Are we in Wilmington?”

Cecilia huffed. “Nope. Louisiana.”

The breath whooshed out of my lungs. “You can’t be serious? What the hell am I doing here?” What terrified me

even more was how anyone would find Ethan and me.

She scoffed. “What did I say about the questions? You’re really fucking annoying.”

“Yeah, well, excuse me for wanting to know why Ethan and I were kidnapped in the middle of the night. None of this is making any sense.”

Cecilia opened a door that led down a dark set of stairs. Reluctantly, I followed her to another hallway. All the doors were shut, so I had no clue what was behind them. Finally, Cecilia stopped and faced me, her hand reaching out to knock on the closed door to her right.

“It’ll make sense soon. I’m just glad I don’t have to worry about you anymore.”

Her grin widened when a man’s voice echoed from behind the door. “Let her in,” he called out.

Cecilia pressed the handle, and the door opened wide. “Go on,” she ordered. “He’s waiting for you.”

I walked into the room, and she shut the door behind me. Everything was dim, but I could see six movie-theater sized chairs and a big screen on the wall. In one of the chairs at the front was a man; I could see the top of his head.

“I’m honored to have you in my home, Peyton.”

He stood and when he turned around, I gasped in shock. I knew exactly who he was. The man was a legend in Hollywood, one of the biggest movie producers in the country. Everyone wanted to star in his movies, and I knew plenty of women who’d slept with him to get the opportunity.

“Martin Fairchild,” I said.

He had the same gray eyes as Cecilia. And that was why I thought she looked familiar; she was his daughter. I couldn’t believe I didn’t see it before. I’d beaten her out of numerous movie roles.

Martin smiled and placed a hand over his heart. “You know who I am. It looks like I’ve done something right.”

I stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Or something completely wrong. You kidnapped Ethan and me."

Martin waved me off. "You're safe and you're fine. My intention was never to hurt you."

"What about Ethan?" I countered. "What is your intention with him?"

It was so hard to keep my dinner down. My whole body was stressed to the point I thought I'd break down and cry, not just out of fear but anger as well. I wanted to know that Ethan was okay, that there was a way to keep him safe.

Martin flourished a hand down to the front two theater seats. "I'll get into that soon. Right now, I just want to talk to you. Give you a little backstory as to why you're here."

Answers were good, only I was afraid I didn't want to know them. There was no one else in the room and it made me uncomfortable being alone with him. He was a known womanizer and had probably slept with hundreds of girls my age. He had to be in his fifties, just like my parents.

Slowly, I made my way down to the front and sat in one of the seats. Martin took the other and stared at me, his gray eyes twinkling in the dim light.

"You are so beautiful, the exact image of your mother." The world knew who my mom was, but there was a familiarity with the way he said it.

"What do you know about my mother?"

He sighed and looked over at the screen, almost as if he was reminiscing. "I wanted to work with her a long time ago. I thought she'd make a great actress." His expression turned dark. "Ultimately, she chose your father and her fighting career."

"And let me guess, you didn't like that?"

His head jerked my way. "Honestly, no. I thought she was wasting her potential. She had a face for the big screen, just like you. I would've given anything to have her."

My back stiffened. When Ethan and I were taken, I thought it was Nikolai Michelson's doing, but now I wasn't so sure. This was something completely different.

"The texts? Was it you?"

His leer broadened. "Did it scare you? It would've been more poetic to do the letters and black roses like Rage did with your mother. That guy was a nasty piece of work. I was glad your father put an end to him." My mind felt like it was going to implode. There were too many connections, and I couldn't get my brain to work.

"How do you know all of that?"

Martin grabbed the remote that was on his armchair. "I was there when it all happened, Peyton. And now I'm going to let you see it."

He lifted the remote and the screen came to life, the lights dimming even more around us. When the video started to play, the first image was of my mom. After that, it was just clips of her walking into her apartment or working out in the gym with my uncle Matt who was training her at the time. The sick bastard had stalked her, and she had no clue. My stomach clenched with disgust; I was almost afraid to watch what else was on the video.

"What do you know about your mother's time at the Dark Side?"

I watched a clip of my mom opening her apartment door and reaching down to pick up the black rose and letter left for her.

"Not much," I said through gritted teeth.

I didn't want to look at him. If he was that twisted to record these videos all those years ago, there was no telling what he was capable of now. Martin chuckled, the sound sinister and vile.

"Well, then, this will be a treat. You'll get to see firsthand how amazing she is."

I was so thankful she never got mixed up with him. She'd made the right choice not going into the acting business. Maybe I should've done the same.

The video continued to play.

There were moments with my mom and another guy at a coffee shop, and then my dad showed up, obviously pissed off that she was with someone else. Martin pointed at the screen. "That was Rage, only your mother didn't know it at the time. He played his part well."

"What the hell did you do? Follow her around twenty-four-seven?" I snapped, glaring over at him.

His lips tilted up, revealing an evil sneer. "It made for a great movie, sweet girl. One that got me where I am today. It enticed the right people." He nodded toward the screen. "Keep watching. This is where things get good."

The clips of my mother stopped for a while and switched to a dark, dungeon-looking type room with a caged fighting ring. It was the Dark Side. There were bloody men, some fighting with weapons, some just with their fists. Some would think it was fake with all the blood spurting everywhere, but I knew it was real, especially when one of the fighters had a sword run through his gut.

Slapping a hand over my mouth, I had no choice but to look away. I'd never seen something so violent, so graphic.

"Weak stomach?" Martin teased.

Swallowing hard, I squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm not used to seeing people get killed."

"You get accustomed to it after a while. It *was* quite fascinating, especially when your father got in the ring. Look."

My head jerked back to the screen.

Martin fast-forwarded to another fight that featured my dad and a burly man covered in tattoos. They fought and it was evident my dad was a far more superior fighter. But in the end, my dad circled around behind the man, grabbed him around the neck and twisted. He fell down dead to the mat. After that,

my dad walked casually out of the ring and disappeared through the crowd.

Mouth gaping, I watched as he did the same to countless other men. I didn't have it in me to even keep count. Martin paused the video.

“Your father was so noble. As much as I hated him, he did the world a service. Those men he killed needed to die, just like Rage. They were all rapists, child molesters, wife beaters, you name it. But Paxton wasn't real Dark Side material; he had too much heart.”

When I looked over at Martin, he kept his eyes on the screen as the movie continued. The following clips were of my mother, fighting off men and dominating them. I knew she was forced to fight men, but she destroyed them all. It made me feel good to watch her kick their asses. Now that was something I *could* watch.

Martin sighed, his gaze transfixed on my mom. “Look at her. Isn't she beautiful? It's a shame you don't know how to fight like her. I'd love to see that kind of fire again.”

I wasn't as good as her, but I knew how to fight, only now it wasn't possible in my condition. But if she were here now, she'd unleash that fire onto him and probably kill him. I knew for a fact my dad would.

“It wasn't my path,” I said simply.

Martin shrugged. “No worries. I have a solution for that.” He shut off the video and stood. “I think you've watched enough right now. I believe it's time for you to see what I have planned.” He held out his hand, but I got up on my own which amused him even more by his smirk.

“Where's Ethan?” I demanded.

Martin folded his hands in front of him. “He's with the others.”

My brows furrowed. “Others? Who? I want to see him.”

He nodded. “You can see him, but he has to get ready.”

“Ready for what?” I asked, hoping he couldn’t hear the fear in my voice.

Martin smiled and waved for me to follow him. “You’ll see.”

CHAPTER 23

PEYTON

I was blindfolded and put in the backseat of a car. There were muffled voices just outside and then, a few minutes later, the front passenger door opened, and someone hopped inside. The car started to move, and I prayed I wouldn't lose my dinner. The last thing I needed were questions as to why I was sick. I was worried about what would happen if anyone found out I was pregnant. There was obviously a plan for Ethan and me, and I knew that plan didn't involve my pregnancy. If anything, it made the situation a million times worse.

Pulling in a breath, I let it out slowly.

“How did you sleep?”

My back stiffened at the sound of the voice. It was the guy from last night ... the one with the blue eyes. Clenching my teeth, I refused to answer.

“All right, I see you don't want to talk. Maybe you will when you hear that I just got through seeing your boyfriend. That's where I'm taking you.” There were so many questions, but I couldn't give in. He was baiting me into something, I knew it. “Don't worry, beautiful. You'll soon start to understand what you're doing here. It'll all be over soon.”

“And then what, huh?” I snapped, feeling the rage overcome me. Biting my tongue wasn't a virtue of mine. “Do you let us go? Do you kill us? What? I'm sick and tired of not knowing what the hell is going on.”

“*You* will be fine.”

“What about Ethan?” I fired back. The car went silent for a few seconds.

“Let’s just say that all depends on him.”

I didn’t want to imagine the horrors I would see when we arrived at our destination. My mind raced with all the possibilities. Judging by the videos I watched tonight, anything could happen.

“You do know my family expected me home last night. So with Ethan and me missing, they’re bound to be looking for us.”

“They won’t find you, Peyton. We have too many connections.”

So did my family, but if we were in Louisiana, there was no way they’d know to look for us here. “Let me guess, is Nikolai Michelson one of your connections?” It didn’t hurt to say his name. The thing was, I had to know.

“That’s enough questions,” he said. “We’re almost there.”

A few minutes later, the car came to a stop. The guy got out, and my door opened. The scent of a swamp filled my nose, all pungent and smelling like decaying plants. I didn’t want to get out, and I didn’t like the guy touching me, but I had no choice other than let him take my arm. He made no headway in taking off the blindfold.

“I got you. Just walk,” he commanded.

The path was gravel, and I took it one step at a time. In the distance, I could hear a bunch of voices as if they were inside a building.

“Mr. Fairchild’s waiting for you upstairs,” a voice called out.

The guy’s grip on my arm loosened, and he placed my hand on a rail. “We’re going up. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Why don’t you just take off the blindfold?” I huffed. “It’s not like I have a phone or know where I am so I can tell anyone.”

“All in due time.” We walked up the stairs, and then a door opened.

“Where do you need me?” a deep voice asked.

The guy with me sighed. “Bring Jameson up here.”

Relief washed through me; I was ready to see him. I wanted to make sure he was okay. We walked inside, and the guy removed the blindfold. The space was dimly lit, with chairs lined up by a window that overlooked a large room below. I could hear men fighting, but I couldn’t see them.

Standing by the window was Martin, and there were two guys either side, both dressed in black, one with a shaved head while the other had his brown hair in a man bun. I glanced over my shoulder, and that was when I got my first look at the guy with blue eyes. He was maybe in his late twenties and had sandy blond hair and a muscular build, just like Ethan. His eyes raked down my body, and then he smirked when I scowled at him.

“I don’t think you and my son have had a formal introduction,” Martin called out.

I jerked my attention back to him. “Your son?”

Martin shrugged. “Adopted son. Not many know. I took him in when he was twelve. His name’s Caden. You might want to get used to being around him.”

My heart dropped in my chest. “Why is that?”

Martin’s gaze shifted over to Caden and then back to me. “We’ll get into that later.” He waved for me to take a seat. “Come on. Sit down. We have more to discuss when your boyfriend gets here.” I didn’t want to sit down, but I did so anyway. The chair was too far away for me to see what was going on below the window.

Several minutes later, footsteps could be heard coming up the stairs. My pulse raced and I turned my attention to the door. Caden stood next to my chair, too close. It was as if he wanted to goad Ethan.

When the door opened, a guy in black came in, and then right behind him was Ethan. The second they removed his blindfold and he saw me, I jumped to my feet and he pushed past the guy in black, only to be stopped by Caden stepping in front of me.

“Calm the fuck down,” Caden warned. “She’s okay.”

Ethan’s jaw tensed and I knew he would fight through them all to get to me. I didn’t want him risking anything, not when I had no clue what their plans were for him.

Ethan faced off with Caden, his teeth clenched hard. “Get. Out. Of. My. Way.”

I’d never seen him look so lethal, so dangerous. It brought shivers to my entire body.

“Ethan, don’t,” I warned.

“No, it’s okay,” Martin said. “Caden, back off. There’s no harm in letting them be together. I mean, it’s not as if he can do anything about the situation.”

Caden glared back at Martin and then moved out of the way. I wasted no time running into Ethan’s arms. He held me tight, and I didn’t want to let go.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

“I’m fine. I’m more worried about you. Did anything happen?”

I knew what he was referring to. “No, I’m good.”

“Shall we get down to business?” Martin asked. “You do want to know why you’re here, right?” Ethan let me go, but I stayed right next to him. Martin flourished a hand toward the window. “Come take a look.” His evil grin widened. “Peyton, you might recognize some things.”

I held onto Ethan’s arm as we walked toward the window. When I peered down, I felt a spine-tingling chill run down my back. “Oh, my God.”

“What is it?” Ethan questioned. It wasn’t all the same, but I nodded toward the fighting cage surrounded by a barbed wire

fence. The room looked almost like the one in the Dark Side video, except this one was a much larger space.

“It’s a replica of the Dark Side,” I said.

Ethan growled low. “They’re going to want me to fight.”

Martin came up next to me, beaming as he watched all the young men working out on the equipment in the corner. “Ding, ding, ding. You are correct, Mr. Jameson.”

I wasn’t stupid to think otherwise. The second I saw the fighting ring, I knew that had to be the plan. Martin faced us, leaning against the window as he stared at Ethan.

“Peyton’s already had the privilege of watching parts of the original Dark Side movie,” Martin explained. “Peyton, dear, do you want to tell him about it?”

I tried not to think about the gory parts, but it was hard to erase them from my mind. I looked up at Ethan and then down to the fighting ring. “The star of the show was my mother. I saw her fights with the men she faced off with and all the incidences with Rage.”

“What else did you see?” Martin pressed.

Tearing my eyes away from the ring, I focused back on Ethan. He knew what my dad had done in the past, so I wasn’t worried about his reaction. “I saw my dad fight and all the people he killed.” Ethan nodded in understanding and didn’t say a word. He draped his arm over my shoulders, pulling me into him.

Martin moved away from the window and crossed his arms over his chest. “And this brings me to my proposal,” Martin announced. “I want to remake the movie, change it up a bit.”

“I never saw the ending,” I challenged.

He shrugged. “Neither did I, but I’ve heard of it. Things had gotten a little crazy when Rage had your mother kidnapped. In the end, your father and the cops found them at an abandoned house. When Rage tried to leave with Gabriella, he was stopped and Paxton jerked him out of the car, smashing

his brains all over the road. I would've loved to have gotten it on film, but I wasn't about to risk getting caught."

I knew my dad had killed Rage, but it was sickening hearing the way Martin told the story. I could see the blood thirst in his eyes.

Martin's gaze narrowed curiously at me. "Surely, Gabriella told you what truly happened?" The disappointment was evident on his face when I shook my head.

"No. I think my parents wanted to protect me from the truth."

He huffed. "That's unfortunate. Looks like we'll have to come up with our own version. I was hoping to get some better insight from you."

It all started to come together. I moved closer to Ethan, wondering what they had in store for us. "If you're making a new movie, where does that leave Ethan and me? What parts do we play?"

Martin chuckled. "You should know the answer to that. You're the spitting image of your mother. You'll make the perfect Gabriella Reynolds."

The breath hitched in my lungs, and everything moved in slow motion. Ethan lunged for him and punched him so hard Martin's head snapped to the side, and he stumbled to the floor.

"You son of a bitch," Ethan shouted, moving so fast he was on Martin in the blink of an eye.

Before he could rear back and strike again, Martin's men hauled him off, slamming him against the wall. The guy with the man bun punched Ethan in the ribs while the other jerked his head back. Tears sprung to my eyes and I tried to rush over, but Caden wrapped his arms around my waist.

Martin slowly got to his feet, laughing. He wiped the blood off his lip with the back of his hand. "Take him downstairs," he commanded to his men. "He's about to find out what part he's going to play."

I fought against Caden, trying to rip myself out of his arms. “You fucking prick, let me go!”

The two men forced Ethan to the door. “Peyton, stop!” Ethan growled, turning his wild, pleading eyes to me.

I didn’t want to stop, but I knew why he wanted me to. His gaze shifted to my stomach, but only for a split second. Then, as much as it killed me, I relaxed my body and Caden loosened his hold.

Martin smiled at me and nodded at Caden. “Keep her here. I’ll be back.”

The men blindfolded Ethan and pushed him out the door. Martin followed them, leaving me alone with Caden. Our situation was direr than I ever could’ve imagined. If Martin wanted to make another movie with me as the starring role of playing my mother, I was in a lot of trouble.

CHAPTER 24

ETHAN

I was thrown back into the room I was in before and had to catch myself against the window. All the guys were still working out in the gym on the other side. The same went for the women on the other.

Tweedledee and Tweedledum stood guard by the door and shut it once Martin entered. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to kill them all. The thought of Peyton being alone with that bastard, Caden, infuriated me beyond belief. I'd never been so fucking angry in my life. I was worried for Peyton, concerned about what they'd do to her if they found out she was pregnant. It was clear from the moment we were taken ... they weren't going to let us go.

"Are you seriously going to put Peyton in the ring?" I growled, my body shaking with rage.

Martin smirked and cocked his head to the side. "Do you not think she can handle it?"

"She's not Gabriella," I snapped.

He nodded. "That's true, she's not. But she sure does have her mother's looks. Just like you do with your father." He circled the room but kept his distance from me. When he got to the window, he peered out. "Look at them. They all want to be a part of my movie." He smiled as he watched them. "I'll pick out my favorites once I'm done with you here."

I threw my arms out wide. "And what exactly do you want with me?"

Martin nodded at something behind me. I glanced over my shoulder at the TV on the wall. “I have something you need to watch,” he said.

When the TV turned on, it took a few seconds for a video to appear. There were men all around the ring with bloodlust in their eyes. The camera was situated above everyone else so it gave a perfect view of the center of the ring. When the crowd in the video turned their heads, my eyes widened at what they were looking at. Two men appeared, heading toward the cage. It was my dad and Scar. This had to be the same night as the fight between him and Camden.

It was no secret there was bad blood between my dad and his twin brother back then, but they kept the details of their epic fight to themselves. The only proof that it had happened was the jagged scar on Camden’s face.

My dad and Scar exchanged words, and I could see the fire in my dad’s eyes. Two other men were in the ring, dressed in black robes with their faces hidden. And in front of them were two gray carts filled with what looked like glue and shards of glass. *Motherfucker.*

The crowd went crazy as Camden entered the room, dressed in his signature red and black shorts and red robe. He climbed into the ring, lifting his hands in the air triumphantly as if he’d already won the fight.

“Your uncle was always an arrogant ass,” Martin chimed in. I’d never seen that side of him.

Camden walked over to one of the hooded men who wrapped his hands and then dipped them in the glue and glass. My dad refused to have it done and stormed to the center of the ring.

“So gallant, your dad,” Martin said with a sigh. “I thought he was a fool for refusing.”

Clenching my teeth, I bit back my words and continued to watch. The glass on Camden’s fists reflected against the light as he faced off with my dad. When the fight started, it was bloody and brutal. Both brothers tore savagely into the other.

Camden got the upper hand a few minutes later and had my dad by the neck. One of the glass shards on his glove was right by his carotid artery. Time seemed to stand still as I watched the exchange. I knew it was closing in on the end.

My dad's muscles shook, his energy fading. Their mouth's moved with words I couldn't hear. Then, it was as if my dad had a surge of energy. He broke free and jammed Camden's glass-covered fist into his face, resulting in the infamous scar. Camden slapped a hand over the wound, blood oozing through his fingers. Then finally, my dad powerhouse kicked him in the side, and Camden's legs buckled beneath him. As soon as he hit the mat, my dad was on him, and he didn't let go until Camden went limp in his arms.

The TV paused with my dad standing tall over Camden. He always told me those were dark times; I could see it on his face. Martin whistled, catching my attention.

"Quite the fight, huh? It was pretty epic to watch. Although it would've been more poetic to see one of them kill the other."

"So, is that what you're doing?" I snarled, facing him head-on. "Do those guys out there know you're going to film them killing each other?"

Martin smiled. "As a matter of fact, they do. That's why they're here. It's why *you're* here. However," he said, drawing out the word, "I have to rewrite the script just a bit. I didn't anticipate you and Peyton together." He pursed his lips. "It makes things more complicated. Originally, I was going to have you play the part of your father, but that doesn't work with the dynamics."

Eyes gleaming, he smiled.

"*You* are now going to play Paxton's role. Yes, he won against Rage, but things will be a little different this time around. Who knows who the winner will be? Guess we'll find out tomorrow night." What I did know was that he didn't want the winner to be me. "Do you want to know how this all got started?" Martin was the type of man who enjoyed listening to himself talk.

“I’m sure you’re going to tell me anyway,” I hissed.

He chuckled, the sound sinister and dark. The man was a fucking lunatic. “Many years ago, when I was young, I wanted to film movies. It was my passion. I made some short indie films, but nothing ever took off. Then, it just so happened that I became friends with the right people. They wanted me to film at the Dark Side, and I agreed.” It wouldn’t surprise me if it was the Michelson family. Martin’s eyes lit up. “It was exhilarating being able to catch all that violence on film. The energy was real, raw ... dark. I became fascinated with the whole process, especially when Peyton’s mother was forced to fight. She was a goddess in the ring.”

I scoffed. “You wouldn’t think that if she were here. She’d kill you, and so would Paxton.”

Martin waved me off. “No one’s going to find us.”

That’s what I feared more than anything. I could fight my way to Peyton, but if we were untraceable, I had no clue if we could get out alive.

“Anyway, back to my story,” Martin continued. “When I completed the video, I was given an obscene amount of money. It was what I needed to work my way up in Hollywood.” He walked over to the window, his gaze distant. “Over the years, I kept tabs on Gabriella and Peyton. I knew one day I’d need Peyton to star in the sequel. I just had to wait for the right time.”

It was almost as if he was in a trance. I’d been around all sorts of people in my life, and he was severely fucked up in the head. He moved away from the window and started for the door.

“But to answer your question on whether I’m putting Peyton in the ring, the answer is no. Will she be in the film? Yes. But I have other plans for her.”

“What?” I thundered. “What are you going to do with her?”

Stopping at the door, he glanced at me over his shoulder. “If you’re dead, it’s not going to matter. But if you survive ...

well, we'll figure that out when the time comes." He nodded toward his men. "Blindfold him and bring him to the house. I don't want him here with the others."

I turned to the window and looked at all the guys willing to put their lives on the line for fame. What was worse was that they were ready to kill for fame. One of them would be my opponent, and I had a good idea of who it would be.

And tomorrow night, one of us would be dead.

CHAPTER 25

PEYTON

Luckily, I wasn't alone with Caden long before a phone call had him stepping outside. Being alone with him terrified me. There was a promise in his eyes every time he looked at me which indicated he was going to get what he wanted very soon. I didn't want to imagine or think what it would be like if he succeeded. So I had to stay strong.

About thirty minutes passed before Caden came waltzing back through the door. His phone rang again, and I tried to listen in on the conversation, but it was too muffled. As soon as he hung up, his eyes landed on me.

"It's time to go." He grabbed my arm, pulling me to the door.

I jerked out of his hold, and he turned his lethal gaze my way. "You seem to have a problem with putting your hands on me," I snapped. "If you don't stop, you'll be wearing your balls as a necklace."

My threats didn't work on him. He snatched my arm again, and I hissed as his grip tightened harder. Caden's icy blue eyes pierced into mine, his mouth just inches away.

"And you have a problem with following orders. Sooner or later, you *will* submit to me."

Never, I wanted to say, but I didn't want to fuel the fire. Instead, I followed him out the door and was surprised he didn't blindfold me since it was such a big deal earlier. I quickly scanned the area, but there was nothing but a dirt road leading away from the swamp. We were at a warehouse in the

middle of nowhere. Caden kept me close, and as soon as we were down the stairs, he led me to another door that opened to a hallway of the warehouse. It was dark and smelled both moldy and earthy. There was no one around, just us.

But then, once Caden opened another door and nudged me inside, we weren't alone anymore. It was a small room, only big enough for a small table and four chairs. Martin stood by the window, which I assumed was a two-way mirror, just like the one in the previous room we were in.

He waved me over, and I joined him while Caden stood on my other side, his body too close for comfort. When I looked out the window, a group of ten women was sparring on the blue mats.

Mouth gaping, I stared at them in confusion but also fear. What was going to happen to them? But what was even scarier was that they all looked like me.

“What the hell is this?” I demanded.

Martin leaned in close, his voice by my ear. “You need to pick one, maybe two.”

“Why?”

He chuckled. “Because she’s going to be your stunt double. I can’t have *you* getting damaged during filming. I need someone disposable.”

The thought made me sick. “You’re an evil son of a bitch,” I seethed. “I’m not choosing anyone.”

Caden grabbed me around the waist, his warm breath on my neck as he leaned in. “I’ll put a bullet into Jameson’s head right now if you don’t. In fact, I’d thoroughly enjoy it. All I need is a reason.”

“Why can’t you pick her?” I spat at Martin.

His eyes gleamed with delight. “Because I want *you* to. You know your mother better than anyone.” He nodded toward the women. “Watch them fight and pick the one that fights just like her. She’ll come home with us tonight, and you can coach her. We start filming first thing in the morning.” I didn’t want

to condemn any of those girls. “They know what they signed up for, Peyton,” Martin informed me. “Now watch them and pick one.”

He stepped away from me, and so did Caden. They whispered behind me while I studied the women. It was eerie watching ten women with the same features as me fight each other.

As I stared at them, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of lives they had outside of here. I know from my previous roles that there's a chance of some injury when you're a stunt double, but this is on a different level. They could be seriously hurt, or even killed. Who in their right mind would audition for a movie when that was the risk?

It only took a couple of minutes to pick out the girl who was the exact replica of my mom. Her moves were so similar it was just like I was watching my mother in the ring.

“I found her,” I said, feeling the guilt well up in my chest.

Martin and Caden came back and stood next to me, one on each side. “Which one?” Martin asked.

I pointed at a dark-haired beauty dressed in a pair of black spandex shorts and a pink tank top, who also had her hair braided the same way my mom always did when she competed.

“Her.”

Martin nodded with approval. “Good choice. I was thinking of her as well.” He looked over at Caden. “I'll have my guys bring her to the house if you want to take Peyton back.”

Caden grabbed my arm, and chills ran down my spine. “Happy to,” he replied.

Martin disappeared out the door and went the opposite way from Caden and me. We walked outside, and he led me over to a black Mercedes with dark-tinted windows. He opened the passenger's side door and let me go so I could get in. Quickly, I searched the interior to see if a phone was lying around, but there was no such luck.

Caden hopped in and we started on our way down the long dirt road. Turning my head, I watched as the warehouse grew smaller behind us, creating more distance between Ethan and me. I wanted to know if he was okay.

“Why didn’t you blindfold me?” I asked Caden.

“Because there’s no point in it anymore.” He glanced over at me, his evil blue eyes making me shiver. “After tomorrow night, you’re not going to be here. You won’t be able to tell anyone what happened.”

I could feel the blood drain from my face. “You’re going to kill me, aren’t you?”

The heat in his eyes ignited. “Oh no. I’m not about to let you go.” He focused back on the dirt road. “You’re going to be mine, Peyton. We’re leaving this place behind.”

The world spun around me, but I held it together until we arrived at Martin’s house. It was a massive plantation, just like I thought, with white columns surrounding the entire structure. The whole second level had a deck that wrapped all the way around. Its beauty wasn’t enough to get my mind out of the nightmare I’d been thrust into.

Caden took me to the bedroom I’d stayed in last night and shut the door. Only then did I allow myself to break down.

“What am I going to do?” I whispered to myself.

I had no clue where Ethan was or how to get us out of this mess. It was clear that Martin had no intention of keeping Ethan alive. I had one day. *One* day to figure everything out.

Voices could be heard down the hall, and I wiped my eyes quickly. I refused to let Caden or Martin see me so weak. But, of course, it didn’t help that I was exhausted and nauseated.

The door to my room opened, and Martin stood in the doorway. “I have someone here for you. I figured you could give her some pointers.”

His demeanor had changed, almost gentlemanlike and not the deranged fucktard like before. He looked at someone outside the door and flourished a hand inside the room. The girl I chose to fight as me in the film strolled in, only now she wasn't in her spandex and tank top. She wore an unbuttoned flannel shirt with just a black sports bra underneath and jeans with scuffed-up black boots.

When her eyes met mine, her mouth dropped. "I have to be dreaming. Peyton Emerson?"

Martin nudged her further inside. "I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about." Then, when the girl turned to him, he continued, "When you're done, your room is right next door. I had your things put in there."

She nodded once. "Great. And thank you for choosing me. This is an opportunity of a lifetime."

Martin smiled, the gesture chilling me to the bone. How could she not see the evil on his face? "Yes, it is," he agreed. "See you tomorrow."

He shut the door and I expected to hear it lock, but there was nothing. I stalked past the girl and opened it wide to see one of Martin's men standing guard; he was the big and bulky one with the shaved head. He glared at me as if he was bored.

"Problems, Ms. Emerson?"

Huffing, I quickly scanned the hallway, wondering how many other guards there were lurking about. "You have no idea," I spat, slamming the door.

I leaned against it and noticed there wasn't a lock to keep people out. Great.

"What's your name?" I called out. The girl flopped down on the fainting couch and propped her feet up.

"Wren Langston."

My heart started to race. "Do you have a phone on you?" I could use it to call for help.

She folded her hands behind her head. "Nope. They took it as soon I stepped into the house." All my hope drained away.

“I hope my room’s as nice as this,” she gushed. “Talk about the lap of luxury.” She cocked her head to the side to look at me. “Not to mention, I get one-on-one time with Peyton Emerson. You’re the last person I expected to be here. Guess there’s more to Hollywood life than I thought.” She sat up and rested her elbows on her knees. “Talk about a dream come true, though.”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” I said, hoping she could see how serious I was.

Her smile faded. “Maybe not for you, but for someone like me, it’s a life changer.”

Keeping my voice low, I moved toward her. “And I’m not here on my own free will. I was kidnapped, along with Ethan Jameson. Do you know who he is?”

Wren’s gaze narrowed, and then she burst out laughing. “Of course, I know who he is. What is this, a joke? You’re kidding me, right?” She scanned the room. “Where are the cameras?” I would’ve loved for it all to be fake. When I didn’t budge, her face fell. “You’re serious?”

I nodded. “Sadly, I am. What do you know?” I sat down beside her on the fainting couch.

Wren shrugged as if she didn’t have a care in the world. “I know I’m going to fight and get paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to do it.”

“You’ll be fighting men, Wren. You’re playing the role of my mother. She was a competitive fighter when she was younger.”

Her eyes widened. “I was right, then.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Excitement flashed across her face. “When I saw the website about the auditions, there were videos of a woman fighter. It looked exactly like your mom. I knew it couldn’t be her, but the fighting style was exactly the same.”

“You know who my mom is?” I asked.

“Seriously?” she scoffed, “your mother’s a legend. I’ve studied her moves my entire life.” She looked away. “She’s the only role model I had.” By the tone in her voice, I had to assume she’d had a hard life.

“Tell me everything,” I begged. “You said you saw a website about the auditions. How?”

Wren picked at her fingernails before meeting my eyes. It was the first time I’d really looked at hers. They were a pale green, a shade lighter than mine. “I have a friend. Well,” she said with a shrug, “he’s more than a friend. He’s practically my brother; his name’s Parker. We ended up in the same foster home several times over the years. When we turned eighteen, we left that life behind. It’s been hard, staying in hotel rooms here and there. Sometimes we’ve had to sleep on the streets. But, anything was better than what we dealt with our entire lives.” My heart hurt for her. I couldn’t imagine the kind of life she had. She waved a hand in the air. “Anyway, that’s enough of my sob story. You have better things to do than listen to it.”

“Hey,” I said, setting a hand over hers. “I’m no better than anyone. Keep talking. I need to know what you know.”

She blew out a sigh. “The website. Parker is kind of a hacker. He’s stolen money a few times from accounts, but only a little here and there if we were having a rough week. It just so happened that he came across the website one day. It mentioned auditions for fighters and stunt doubles. I love to fight, so he thought it was something I could do. And if picked, we’d get the chance to win three hundred thousand dollars. I couldn’t pass that up. That money could do so much for us.”

Martin had to realize that by bringing Wren in here I’d tell her what was going on. She’d be a liability. How was he going to keep all the other people that were supposed to star in his movie silent? That was easy, he couldn’t. If they saw Ethan and me, they’d surely recognize us. Martin would have no choice but to remove all obstacles that could trace back to him.

Would he seriously get rid of everyone? My mind raced with all the possibilities. Martin lived by a swamp, his warehouse in the middle of nowhere and away from everything. All he'd have to do was throw the bodies in the water and let the alligators take care of the rest. There would be no trace of anyone. Martin couldn't just have anyone showing up at his doorstep for these auditions. He had to be looking for specific kinds of people.

“With the other women,” I began, “did you talk to them much?”

Wren nodded. “Most of them, yeah. They're just like me. Hard up for money.”

“What about families? Do any of them have husbands or kids?”

She snorted. “Hell no. They were pretty much loners, doing everything they could for a buck. Damn good fighters, though. Guess that's how you have to be when you live on the streets.”

They were women with nothing to lose. I bet the same went for the guys. If they were to go missing, nobody would even notice.

“What else was on the website? Did it lead you here to this house?”

Wren shook her head. “Oh no, there was only a phone number. When I called it, I was told I had to pass the interview first. It turned out the place where I had to meet the guy was only an hour away from where I lived.”

“Where did you meet this guy? And when?” I asked.

“Charlotte,” she replied. “North Carolina. At a hotel downtown. It was three weeks ago.”

That was interesting. Was it a coincidence that all of this took place in North Carolina while Ethan and I were there too?

“Were you not scared to meet a stranger in a hotel room?”

She shook her head, her expression hard. I could see it in her eyes that she'd seen her fair share of trouble through the

years.

“No,” she answered. “When you’re someone like me, you get used to fighting off men. I’m not a stranger to violence, Peyton. I’ve had to escape a lot in my life.”

My eyes burned. “I’m sorry. I can’t even imagine.”

She shrugged. “It’s the cards I’ve been dealt. But anyway, I met with the guy. He was young and sexy as hell with sandy blond hair and crystal blue eyes.” Her lips pursed, and she looked away as if remembering all the details. “He was regal, but there was something dangerous about him. Very sexy if you ask me, especially dressed in that expensive suit of his.”

My stomach fell, although I wasn’t shocked. I’d never seen Nikolai Michelson in person, but it sounded just like him.

“Did he give you his name?” I asked, hearing my pulse pounding in my ear. If she said his name, it wouldn’t change anything. Ethan and I were trapped either way. It would just confirm that Nikolai helped.

Wren nodded. “His name was even sexy too. Nikolai. Nikolai Michelson. He’s the one who gave me the money to travel here.”

And there it was, the confirmation.

Bile rose up the back of my throat and I stood, clutching my stomach tightly. Nikolai told Wren his name. There’s no way he would do that if he knew she’d make it out alive. I walked away from her and grabbed one of the bed posters.

“You’re not getting your money, Wren. Nikolai Michelson is a fucking douche. He’s been after my family for months now.” I glanced at her over my shoulder. “None of you are getting out alive. This movie Martin wants to film is brutal. Now that you know I’m here, he’s not going to let you go.”

Wren jumped to her feet. “Like hell, he’s not. I’ve gotten myself out of tighter spots than this.”

“Then help me,” I begged. “I’ll give you five times the amount of money you’d get from this stupid film. And if you want to fight professionally, I’ll get my mom to train you.”

Your name will spread far and wide. You won't have to steal money or wonder day to day where you'll be sleeping." I closed the distance between us and grabbed her hands. "Please, Wren. I can't do this alone."

Her gaze narrowed. "Don't take this the wrong way, but are you sure Gabriella Reynolds is your mother? If it was her in this situation, she'd be throwing punches left and right to get out of here."

"Believe me," I said, keeping my voice low, "I would if I could. My mom taught me how to fight."

Wren shrugged. "Then why don't you?"

Shaking my head, I could feel my eyes burn. "Because I can't risk it."

"Risk what?" The breath caught in her throat, and she immediately dropped her gaze to my stomach. "Oh my God, are you pregnant?"

"Yes," I whispered.

Her eyes met mine. "It's Ethan's, isn't it?"

I answered her with a nod. "No one knows. I don't know what they'd do to me if they found out."

Wren's eyes blazed like fire. "Don't worry. If they want a fight, it's a fight they'll get. I don't know what to do right now, but I'll figure something out. I always do."

Can I trust her?

It didn't matter if I could or not. We were both in a shit ton of trouble.

CHAPTER 26

PEYTON

Wren had stayed for a couple of hours and then left to go to her room. I slept maybe for an hour, and my body was exhausted. I knew I needed sleep, but I couldn't, not when I had no clue where Ethan was or if he was okay. I felt so damn helpless; it made me sick to think of myself as a damsel in distress. But, unfortunately, that was exactly what I was. Martin's plantation was an armed fortress. How could I escape it and find Ethan?

After a quick shower, I changed into a fresh pair of jeans and a hunter-green sweater. A knock sounded on the door just as I slipped on my boots. Martha strolled in, dressed in her housekeeper uniform and carrying a tray of food.

"Good morning, dearie. How'd you sleep?"

"Like shit," I answered.

Her smile turned down. "Oh no. I'm sorry to hear that."

A familiar voice echoed down the hall, and I watched as Cecilia marched past my door, hauling a suitcase behind her. It was the first time I'd seen her since last night. Martha mumbled something that sounded like "thank the heavens."

"Is she going somewhere?" I asked.

Martha smiled sweetly. "New York. She's auditioning for a movie."

And she was missing out on all the bloodshed today. If Ethan and I escaped this hellhole, I was going to make sure Cecilia paid for her crimes, just like her psychotic father. She

was going down along with everyone else. I hoped to hell there was some evidence somewhere to convict Nikolai Michelson. He'd upped his game, and Ethan and I were the pawns this time.

Martha lifted the cover on the tray and set it on the wooden table by the couch. "Once you eat, you'll feel better."

Plastering on a fake smile, I nodded and stared at the eggs, bacon, and two pancakes topped with strawberries. Martha said her goodbyes, and I forced myself to eat.

A few minutes later, the door opened and Wren strolled in, dressed in a pair of black spandex that barely covered her butt cheeks and a red sports bra. Her dark hair was braided just like how my mother always did it. She came over and sat down next to me, her expression grim.

"What's happened?"

Wren rolled her eyes and huffed. "Well, for starters, some guy came into my room this morning and made me put these ridiculous shorts on. I can feel them going up my ass; it's annoying as fuck. Someone is supposed to come get me in a few minutes."

My gut clenched. "Are you not scared?"

She scoffed. "I'm used to fighting off men. I can do this." Her gaze shot to the door and then back to me. "I don't have much time, but I thought you should know. When I left your room, Eric was standing guard. He's the guy with the man bun."

I nodded for her to continue. "And?"

She shivered and had a disgusted look on her face. "So, I kind of flirted with him and invited him into my room. I gave him a hand job."

"Why the hell would you do that?" I hissed.

She pursed her lips. "It's not like I wanted to. I did it for information. The guys around here are so hard up for a little action that it's insane. I'm surprised none of them have touched you."

“One has,” I informed her. “Caden. It turns out I’ll belong to him when all this is over.”

The blood drained from her face. “I know who you’re talking about. If there’s one guy I don’t want to get in the ring with, it’s him. I’ve seen crazy in my life, and he’s crazy. I’m talking psychotic killer.” She shook her head as if trying to get him out of her mind. “I wonder what part he’s playing in all of this.”

There was only one role it could be.

“Rage,” I answered. “He was the one who had my mom kidnapped back in the day. My dad and the police tracked them down. In the end ... my dad killed him.”

Wren’s mouth dropped. “Wow. I had no clue it was like that. I’d read on the internet about how the FBI busted up the underground fighting ring your parents and their friends were involved in, but nothing specific about the circumstances.”

“It’s come to haunt us,” I said, running my hands over my face. “Nikolai Michelson’s family holds a grudge against mine for shutting down their operation.” I flung my arms out. “That’s why I’m here. My best friends, my brother and my cousin have already been targeted and survived it. Now it’s mine and Ethan’s turn.”

Wren’s brows furrowed. “It sounds really complicated.”

Voices could be heard down the hall and she gasped, her expression focused. “Quickly. After I gave Eric his two-minute hand job, I asked him about Ethan. Apparently, he was here last night ... in a room in the basement. Martin didn’t want him at the warehouse. They were afraid he’d find a way to escape.”

“What about his fight?” I asked. “Did Eric say anything about that?”

Wren shrugged. “Only that his fight is the last one tonight. All the other guys will be going before. He got a hand job for giving me useless information. However,” she said, moving closer. “I did listen through the door when he was talking to

another guard. If Ethan wins his fight, they're taking him away."

"What do you mean taking him away?" I asked.

She shrugged. "To kill him, I would think. All I know is that they said they're going to take him away and make it look like an accident."

Deep down, I knew they wouldn't let him go if he were to win. It made me sick to the core and angry at myself for not knowing how to help. Surely, my parents had to know something was wrong. But, unfortunately, there was no way they'd be able to find us in such a short amount of time. We'd only been missing for what would add up to a day and a half.

Wren cleared her throat. "And with you," she said and then stopped, her expression torn.

"What about me?"

She peered over at the door again and lowered her voice even more. "They're taking you to Mexico. As soon as everything is done tonight, there's going to be a boat waiting to take you there."

It felt as if my world had just crumbled all around me. If Martin and Caden took me out of the country, there was no coming back. Whatever happened, I couldn't let them get me on that boat. I would have to fight, even if it meant risking everything I loved.

The voices drew closer outside the room and Wren started to stand, but I grabbed her wrist. "If you see Ethan, tell him everything you told me. He has to know their plans. I don't want him risking his life for me. I want him away from here and safe, and then he can get the help he needs to find me."

She nodded once. "I will. I promise. But there's something we need to make clear." I could see the torment in her pale green eyes. "If it comes down to my survival or his, I have to choose myself. I hope you understand."

I would never ask anyone to put their life on the line for me.

“I do,” I whispered. “And I don’t blame you.”

The door opened and we both looked to see Caden in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a dark gray T-shirt with his icy blue eyes fixated on me. “It’s time to go.”

CHAPTER 27

PEYTON

Wren rode with Eric and the guy with the shaved head to the warehouse while I was stuck with Martin and Caden. It was a ten-minute drive from the plantation, and there was only swampland between here and there. If Ethan and I were to escape, there was a chance the bayou alone could kill us. There were alligators, venomous snakes, and bacteria that could eat your flesh if it got in your wounds. So the odds were stacked against us. Still, if given a chance, I'd take that risk.

Once inside the warehouse, Caden took me to the same second-floor room as yesterday, where I could see down into the fighting ring through the two-way mirror. When I peered down, cameras were set up all around, but the room was empty. It was dark and dingy, even though it was mid-morning outside. The place looked exactly like the actual Dark Side in the first film.

Caden shut the door, and chills ran down my spine as he drew closer. I didn't look at him, but I could feel his presence suffocating me.

"Where is everyone?" I asked, hating that I even had to speak to him.

Caden's arm brushed against mine as he stared down into the cage. "You mean, Jameson?" My back stiffened, and I held my breath. "He's downstairs," he continued, "waiting. Do you want to know who he's fighting tonight?"

Slowly, I turned my glare to him, and his lips pulled back in a wolfish grin. “I’m sure I can guess.”

Caden shrugged and turned his focus to the ring, his grin fading into a scowl. “It wasn’t originally supposed to be Jameson and me battling it out. But *you* changed the script. I want to thank you for that.”

“Go to hell!” I spat.

In a lightning-fast move, Caden grabbed my neck and pushed me against the window, his breath hot against my cheek. The breath whooshed out of my lungs and I choked.

Grabbing onto his wrists, I tried to pry him away, but he was too strong.

“I’m getting sick and tired of your fucking mouth,” he growled. “Either show me some goddamned respect, or I’ll force it out of you.”

I couldn’t get a breath in, and I panicked. Caden’s grip on my neck grew tighter, more bruising. All I could do was claw at his wrists. The world started to dim around me, but Caden let me go.

Falling to my knees, I hunched over and sucked in a ragged breath. Tears clouded my vision, and I had to squint against the light as someone entered the room, the sunlight filtering in from outside.

“What the fuck is going on here?” It was Martin.

I looked up to see Caden storm over to him. “One way or another, she *will* listen to me.”

He marched out the door and Martin sighed as he came over to me, offering me a hand. I smacked it away and got up on my own. When I was on my feet, I moved to the furthest chair away from him and sat down.

“You have your mother’s stubborn disposition, but it’s not going to work here, Peyton. My son has no patience for it.”

I tried to speak, but my voice came out as a rasp. “You’re all fucked up in the head.”

Martin chuckled and sat beside me. “I can see why you’d think that. Caden’s been obsessed with my videos ever since I adopted him. You could say he’s grown an infinity to Rage’s character. That’s why I knew he’d want to star as him in the remake.”

“Rage was a woman-killing bastard,” I seethed.

Martin patted my leg and I cringed with his touch. “Then I recommend you do what Caden wants. I’d hate to see something happen to you, sweet girl. You’re too beautiful to be discarded.” Martin stood and looked down at his watch. “All right, it’s time to start filming. Ms. Langston is ready.”

I wiped the tears away from my eyes. “What kind of men is she fighting?”

It was so hard to speak from the pain in my neck.

Martin smiled. “The same kind your mother did. These men have a taste for hurting women; they get off on it. If Wren’s anything like Gabriella, she’ll easily make it through. I’m curious to see how she does.” He pulled out a black walkie-talkie from his waistband and spoke into it. “Bring Wren out. The cameras are ready.” I was hoping he’d have a phone on him, but I didn’t see one. He motioned me over to the window. “You’re going to want to watch this.”

It was the last thing I wanted to watch, but I had to make sure Wren was okay. I stood and peered down into the cage just as Wren was pushed into it by two men in black robes. She stood in the center and circled around, her eyes darting back and forth as if terrified.

Martin tapped on the window. “Tell me, is she acting, or is that fear real?”

“It’s hard to tell,” I answered honestly. But I hoped it was fake.

Martin stared down at her in fascination. “I let her watch the videos of your mother when she fought. It looks like Wren’s taking my pointers to heart. Now, that’s a good actress. I told her to act scared, and that’s exactly what she’s giving me.”

A few seconds later, the two robed men came out of the darkness with a guy strolling behind them. The men who had fought my mother were disgusting pieces of shit with beer bellies and moved as slow as molasses. But the guy about to get in the ring was anything but that. He wasn't as in shape as most fighters judging by the small amount of extra weight around his midsection, but he was tall and had at least a hundred pounds on Wren. What made it worse was that he had a whip in his hand.

“What the hell is this? That guy could crush her in a matter of seconds.”

There was so much bloodlust in Martin's eyes that it made me sick. “Don't worry, sweet girl,” he said. “If she's as strong as your mother, she'll make it through.”

Wren bounced on her feet, and I sent up a silent prayer. *Please God, give her the strength she needs.* The robed men shut the cage doors, locking Wren in there with the man. My pulse pounded so hard in my ears that it was the only thing I could hear.

The man cracked the whip, and Wren jumped back. She looked up at the window, and even though I knew she couldn't see me through the glass, I could see her. There was determination in her eyes, a power only a true fighter had.

Come on, Wren.

The man went on the attack, using his massive body to pin her in. She jumped out of his way and rolled across the mat, but not before he slapped the whip across the back of her thighs. I could hear her scream echo through the room as she fell to her knees. The guy charged at her and tackled her to the mat, pressing his body into hers. He tossed the whip away so he could use both of his hands.

“I gave her the hard one first. She'll breeze through the last two if she can defeat him.”

I didn't even want to respond to that. She was outmatched and clearly the vulnerable one in the ring. Her life hadn't been

easy, and now she'd found herself in a shitty situation just to earn money to survive in the world.

The guy had Wren's arms pinned above her head with one hand while the other violated her body, gripping her breasts and touching all over her.

"No!" I shouted, pounding on the glass. "You son of a bitch, get off her!" I grabbed Martin's arm. "You have to stop him. Are you going to let that bastard rape her?"

The anger coursing through my body was beyond anything I'd ever felt.

The man jerked Wren's sports bra aside and gripped her breasts again before moving his hand to her shorts. I couldn't watch anymore. Before I could turn away, I focused on Wren's face. The fire in her eyes grew as if a switch had been turned inside her. She elbowed the guy in the face, his blood splattering across the mat. But she didn't stop there. She kneed him in the groin, simultaneously pounding his face until he rolled off her.

Clutching his face, the guy got to his feet, his blood blinding him. Wren fixed her sports bra and stormed over to the whip. I held a hand over my mouth, knowing what would come next. Wren wielded the whip and slashed it across the man's head repeatedly. The leather straps marked his body and drew blood everywhere they met his skin.

Her screams pierced the air, and it brought chills to my skin. She reminded me of one of the Amazon warriors in *Wonder Woman*. The man collapsed to the mat in a puddle of blood while Wren circled him, her chest heaving up and down. I thought she was done punishing him, but then she stormed over to his motionless body and kicked him so hard in the face that he tumbled across the mat. It was then that she fell to her knees, clearly exhausted.

"Fascinating," Martin breathed, his mouth gaping as he stared at Wren. I wanted to do the same thing to him that Wren did to that worthless piece of shit lying in his own blood. Martin glanced over at me, his eyes lit with wonder. "I was going to get rid of her after filming, but I think she'll be a

good addition to my staff. The guys might be afraid of her after this.”

He'd confirmed my fears about what they were going to do to her, but it brought me relief that he wanted her alive. The two robed men opened the cage, and one escorted Wren out while the other checked on the guy who still hadn't moved. Martin's walkie-talkie beeped, and a guy's voice came over the speaker.

“Sir, he's dead. She killed him.”

That was the last thing I expected to hear. Did he deserve it? Yes. Was I happy she killed him? *Yes*. I didn't even feel a shred of guilt.

Martin burst out laughing. “Excellent. The people are going to love it.”

The walkie-talkie beeped again. “There's another problem.”

Martin's smile faded. “What?”

“The other two men who were supposed to fight the girl want to back out. One of them even pissed himself watching the fight.”

Martin watched as the dead fighter was pulled out of the ring, his blood leaving a trail. “You know what to do then.” I had no doubt what he meant by that. “Besides, I think Ms. Langston did enough. Have her take a shower and get dressed. I want to talk to her.”

“You got it, boss. We'll get everything cleaned up for the next round of fights.”

Martin pocketed his walkie-talkie and sighed. “That was thrilling, wasn't it?”

I glared at him. “If you're talking about the part where that cocksucker met his end, yes.”

Martin chuckled in surprise, clearly not expecting that comment from me. “It doesn't bother you that you just watched a man lose his life?”

“Not when it’s a man like that,” I replied.

Martin sighed and moved over to the TV mounted on the wall. “Well, now that we won’t be watching any more fights with Ms. Langston, how about I amuse you with something else? There’s some behind-the-scenes footage I thought you might like to see.”

It felt like a rock had plummeted in my gut. I knew it was going to involve Ethan. Sure enough, when he turned on the TV, I saw him on the screen, bound in chains to a chair with blood dripping from his face onto the floor.

CHAPTER 28

ETHAN

My wrists and ankles were bound so fucking tight to the chair that I couldn't feel my fingers or toes. I didn't make it easy on the cocksuckers, though. I knew my time was coming, and I wasn't about to let any of them break me. That was what they wanted. It was clear they knew I had a fighting chance. But still, my thoughts were constantly on Peyton. I didn't know if she was okay or if anyone had hurt her. I was going out of my fucking mind, especially when I watched the fight between the girl and that tool who was her opponent. They chose the right woman to play Gabriella's part, but when they took her away, I had a feeling I'd never see her again.

I'd heard the guys talking earlier. None of the men picked for the movie would see the light of day after tonight. But, of course, I knew that meant me as well, only I didn't know how I would get free. One thing was for sure, I was going to save Peyton, even if I died trying.

The door burst open and Caden strolled in alone, circling me with a grin on his face. "Tonight's the night," he said, his voice echoing from behind me.

"Yes, it is. Although, I think I'm flattered. Your guys see me as so much of a threat that they tied me up."

Caden chuckled. "Them, maybe, but not me."

"Let me go then," I challenged.

Caden stopped in front of me, his gaze narrowed and condescending. "That's not a good idea since I'm about to tell

you how much fun I had with your girl. I don't need a reason to kill you before the fight."

Teeth clenched, I pulled against the chains, my skin turning raw. "Motherfucker. I swear, if you've hurt her in any way, I'll rip off your goddamn head."

Caden moved closer and that was when I got a good look at his wrists. There were bloody gashes from what looked like fingernail marks on his skin. Caden held up an arm and inspected the marks.

"She sure did put up a fight. But it felt good feeling that tight pussy of hers around my cock."

I jerked against the restraints, my body shaking with undeniable rage. "*You fucking piece of shit!*" I roared.

Adrenaline soared through my veins, and my chest pounded. I couldn't get enough breaths in, so I sucked in as much air as possible, my lungs burning like fire.

Caden smirked and licked his lips. "She tastes so damn good too. You'll see my marks around her neck tonight. I'll be sure to fuck her harder once the fight's over. We'll have a lot of celebrating to do."

The guttural scream that ripped from my throat tore out of my body as if he'd just taken away my life. I despised the thought of him hurting Peyton, touching her. She needed protection, and I'd failed her.

I couldn't stop him.

I wanted to kill him with every fiber of my being. Seeing her tonight was going to tear me apart. Caden patted my shoulder and laughed as he walked to the door.

"See you tonight, Jameson."

The second he was gone, I unleashed the pain inside of my soul. My throat burned, and the anguish in my heart consumed me.

"I'm sorry, Peyton. I'm so fucking sorry."

CHAPTER 29

PEYTON

I'd never cried so damn hard in my life. I watched as Caden goaded Ethan, ripping him apart with his words. The screams were the worst. I could hear them all around me and felt his suffering. Caden had succeeded with his plan; he wanted to break Ethan's spirit and his focus. Because now in the ring, Ethan would be driven by vengeance. Mistakes could happen when one loses focus. Deadly mistakes.

I wanted to go to Ethan, to tell him it was all lies. However, I knew the second Ethan saw the bruises around my neck, it'd make him believe it was true. It'd make him angry and impulsive, just what Caden wanted.

I felt numb as I watched the rest of the fights. There were five deaths in total, but as the victors left in triumph, I knew it'd be short-lived. Because once the winners left, they were going straight to the grave. I'd seen more blood in three hours than there was in the entire *Game of Thrones* series.

Eric drove me back to the plantation on Martin's orders so I could take a break from the bloodshed. I was thankful it wasn't Caden. But seriously, it felt as if I was in a horror movie. A part of me kept thinking I'd wake up from the nightmare, but I'd pinched myself a million times and, sadly, I was still here.

When I arrived at my room, there was a silky black dress on the bed with a bag full of expensive makeup beside it, along with a note that said: *Make yourself beautiful for the camera. Be ready to go by seven.* I snatched the letter and ripped it apart, tossing the shreds onto the floor. I had to *do*

something. The only way out was through the windows, but I was on the second floor. Of course, Martin had to put me in a room with no door to the wraparound porch. Still, I had to try. If I could get to a phone, I could call for help.

The windows were too high for me to reach the lock, so I pushed the couch up against the wall and stood on it. I didn't see anyone walking around the yard, but several cars were in the driveway. It was stupid and desperate to try and break free from a guarded fortress, but I couldn't sit idly by.

Before I could push the window up, someone cleared their throat from behind. I slowly stepped off the couch with a heavy sigh and turned around. It was Wren, dressed all in black with her arms crossed at her chest.

"Seriously?" she scolded. "Have you lost your damn mind?"

I waved a hand up and down her body. "I see you accepted Martin's proposal."

Wren's face remained blank. "I did what I had to do."

I looked away. "I understand."

She stalked toward me and pointed out the window. "Obviously, you don't. Martin has his guys everywhere out there. If you got caught, I can assure you that your next set of accommodations won't be as grand as this," she stated, waving a hand about the room. "You'll be locked in the basement where you *can't* get out."

I threw my arms up in the air. "So, what am I supposed to do? Ethan's getting ready to fight, and the only time I've been able to see him today was by watching a video where Caden practically told him he raped me."

Wren flinched. "Yeah, I think everyone in the warehouse heard Ethan's yells after that." She grabbed my hands. "Trust me, if I could get to Ethan and talk to him, I would, but I can't risk getting caught." Her focus landed on my neck, and she snarled. "Son of a bitch! Did Caden do that to you?" She let my hands go and turned my head to the side. Just that tiny movement made me hiss in pain.

“He didn’t like that I told him to go to hell.”

Wren huffed. “I hope Ethan beats the shit out of him tonight. There’s nothing more dangerous than a man wanting to protect the woman he loves. The second he sees you, he’s going to fucking lose it.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I said, my lips trembling. “He’ll be so blinded by his rage that he won’t focus. I’ve been in the fighting world my entire life. I know it’s important to keep a level head.”

Wren nodded. “It is, but this isn’t the UFC, Peyton. The rules don’t matter. Ethan’s going to need that anger to win. It’s how I got through my fight tonight.” I didn’t know Wren well, but I connected to her.

Wrapping my arms around her neck, I hugged her tight. “I’m glad you’re okay. I was so worried about you.”

She returned my embrace and then let go. “Honestly, it all happened so fast. I let the guy pin me down to make him think he had the upper hand, and it killed me to wait as long as I did to strike. It sucked with him touching me, but I knew I’d get the last laugh with breaking his junk. The second I felt him get hard, that’s when I went on the attack.” She looked at me and smiled. “Martin’s men gave me a wide berth after that. None of them have said a word to me.”

“Did Martin give you your phone back?” I asked.

She shook her head. “That’s how I know he doesn’t fully trust me. There are phones throughout the house, but they’re monitored. They’d put a bullet in my head if I attempted to use one. I’ve already seen what they did to the two men who refused to fight me.”

I didn’t have to ask to know they were probably deep in the bayou.

“Are you okay with what happened?”

Wren’s brows lifted. “You mean the part where I killed a man?”

I nodded.

She shrugged and looked away. “Is it bad if I say I’m more than okay?”

“It’s not bad at all,” I murmured. “I’m not gonna lie, it brought me joy when I heard he was dead.”

Wren’s attention turned back to me. “I was afraid you’d see me differently.”

I shook my head. “No. I admire you. I’d give anything to be like you right now.”

Wren smiled down at my stomach. “I’m sure you would if you could. Such a shame because I’d love to see you in action. Any offspring of Gabriella Reynolds has to be fierce.”

“I don’t feel fierce right now,” I confessed. “I wanted to fight Caden with every ounce of strength I had, but I was afraid of what he’d do to me.”

Wren’s expression hardened. “I can’t stand men who put their hands on women like that.” She glanced around my room and stopped at the bed where my dress was laid out. “Eric and I are supposed to escort you back to the warehouse soon. After that, the plan is still the same. You’re headed to Mexico.”

“What am I going to do about Ethan?”

Wren’s eyes met mine. “I want to help him, Peyton, but I can’t. I’ve been assigned to you, and that’s where I’m staying.” She placed her hands on my shoulders. “But I will say this, if we have an opportunity to escape, we should take it. It might happen at a moment’s notice, but I need you to be ready. Can you do that?”

With all my heart, I knew my answer without a doubt.

“Yes. I’ll be ready.”

I’d made up my mind ... I wasn’t about to go down quietly.

Seven o'clock had rolled around within the blink of an eye. I'd put on the skintight black dress just like Martin wanted and covered the bruises on my neck as best as possible with makeup. I was ten weeks pregnant, and you could see a slight bump from the side. Luckily, the black dress masked it.

Eric and Wren were in the front seat while I rode in the back of one of Martin's expensive sedans. My heart pounded so fast, and my palms were sweaty. My mom had trained me to fight, and I had to hold onto that knowledge with all my might. It's been a while since being in the ring, but I remembered every move, every tactic my mom ever taught me.

I can do this.

We pulled up at the warehouse and the sky was already dark, giving the atmosphere an eerie vibe. The place felt and smelled like death.

Eric reached for my arm, but Wren smacked his away.

"I got her," she snapped.

Eric backed off and held his hands in the air. "You know where she goes. I'll be right there."

Wren pulled me toward the door but let me go once Eric was out of sight. "Such a tool. I give him one hand job, and now I regret it. He asked if he could fuck me."

"And you said?"

She stopped at the door and glared at me in disgust. "I'd rather roll around in poison oak or a big mound of horse shit." Mouth gaping, I stared at her, but she waved me off. "Okay, that was a little too much. I thought maybe it'd lighten the mood. But I feel nothing will help with what we're about to walk into."

I shook my head. "No, but *when* we get out of this, I'd love to hear more about your crazy life."

Wren smiled. "Deal." Her face hardened, and she opened the door. "Let's go."

We walked in and it was the first time I'd been in the main room. The cage looked bigger and more menacing now that I was standing right in front of it. Everything smelled like Clorox, and I had to swallow a million times just to keep from gagging. However, nothing could hide the smell of blood. There were stains of it on the mat.

"This way, Peyton," Wren called out.

Tearing my gaze away from the cage, I focused back on her and followed her to a darkened corner where there were two throne-like seats, one a little smaller than the other with a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket off to the side.

"I guess the big one is for Martin Fairchild himself," I grumbled.

Wren stood next to the smaller one. "Yeah, that's what I'm gathering." I sat down and she leaned in close. "He's filming you right now. Your one o'clock."

I could see him skulking in the shadows from the corner of my eye. He'd done the same thing to my mom. She had no clue that a lot of her life had been filmed secretly by the creepy bastard. It wouldn't surprise me if more videos of her were somewhere in his home.

Scanning the room, I counted no less than ten cameras, all stationed in strategic spots. Finally, Eric waltzed in and stationed himself beside the larger chair. A few minutes later, Martin strolled over and took his seat.

"I think we're about ready," he said, smiling at me. He pulled out his walkie-talkie. "Bring everything out."

"Got it," came the reply.

The two men in robes came out, each one pushing a cart. I still couldn't see their faces. They set the carts inside the cage and stood completely still like statues. Martin rested his arm on the armrest and leaned in closer to me.

"I never showed you the video of Ethan's father and twin brother fighting, did I?"

My stomach plummeted. "No."

He chuckled. "You're in for a treat then." He lifted the walkie-talkie. "Bring Jameson out."

Heart racing, I stood to get a better view. Two more robed men walked out with Ethan in between them. Even from a distance, I could see how messed up Ethan was. His eyes were rimmed with darkness, and his muscles were so tense he looked like a caged animal. I'd never seen him look so unhinged, so lethal. Seeing him like that made chills run down my spine, and it scared the living hell out of me. He didn't even look like himself anymore.

He walked into the ring, and that was when he looked over and saw me. I started to take a step, but Martin grabbed my wrist. "I don't think so, Peyton. You're staying right here."

Ethan growled and slammed his hands against the cage, his eyes wild. "When I get out of here, you're fucking dead! You hear me!"

Martin tilted his head back and laughed, but he didn't respond. Instead, he opened the champagne bottle and poured himself a glass.

"I think we need Caden out here," he said to Eric.

Eric used his walkie-talkie and told the others to bring him out. Ethan gripped the cage, his eyes on me. There was so much torment on his face that it broke me. He mouthed the words "I'm sorry," and it felt as if my heart had been ripped out.

Tears clouded my vision, but I placed a hand over my chest and mouthed the words "I love you," to him before the cage door opened and Caden stepped in, followed by two more robed men. Ethan turned away from me and faced Caden head-on. One of the robed guys guided Caden over to one cart while the second one led Ethan to the other.

"What are they doing?" I demanded, turning my glare to Martin.

Martin sipped his champagne and grinned. "You're about to find out."

Ethan and Caden both held out their hands to the robed men. I watched as they were wrapped just like they would be for any competitive fight. But then, they lowered their fists to the cart, knuckles side down. When they brought them back up, their fists were covered in what looked to be a thick, amber-colored glue. They lowered them back down to the cart, and the sound of crunching glass echoed all around me. I jerked my head toward Wren, who was standing and could get a better view.

“Is that what I think it is?”

Mouth gaping, Wren nodded. “I believe so. Their gloves are covered in shards of glass.”

“That is correct,” Martin announced. “Back in the day, Ethan’s father refused the glass. He wanted to fight fair against his twin brother. I knew Ethan wouldn’t make that same mistake.”

I turned to him. “There is something seriously wrong with you! What if he kills your son?”

Martin’s lips pulled back in an evil sneer. “What if my son kills Ethan? *That* is what you should be thinking about.”

Once Ethan and Caden were ready, the robed men packed up the carts and wheeled them out of the cage, locking it behind them with a thick chain. The guys faced off, and the air in the room buzzed with so much electricity that it made the hair on my arms stand on end.

Martin got to his feet and held up his glass. “You know the rules. No one leaves until the other is down.”

Closing my eyes, I dreaded what happened next.

“Fight!” Martin shouted.

My eyes shot open to see Ethan go on the attack first. Caden dodged him, but Ethan was able to slice his shoulder with the glass. Caden laughed but Ethan kept going, swinging his arms left and right. Finally, Caden reared back and kicked Ethan in the shin before slicing his hand across the dragon tattoo on his back, blood pouring out in rivers down his skin. It made it look as if the dragon was bleeding.

Gasping, I tried to get up again, but Martin tightened his grip on me. “You’re only hurting yourself by acting this way. What are you hoping to accomplish? You can’t do anything to help him.”

I seethed. “This is beyond fucked and you know it.”

I tore away from his grip but stood my ground. The world moved in slow motion as I watched Ethan and Caden battle it out. Blood was everywhere. All I could see was red as Caden sliced Ethan’s skin over and over with the glass. Ethan never flinched, just kept striking and kicking like nothing was amiss, like he wasn’t bleeding out all over the mat. My breaths and the pounding of my heart were all I could hear in my ears.

I was in hell.

CHAPTER 30

ETHAN

I wanted Caden to die. I wanted to kill him for what he did to Peyton.

After the first slash to my back, I grew immune to the rest of the gashes marring my skin. Blood poured down my body everywhere I looked, soaking my shorts and getting into my eyes. There was no pain, only vengeance. My anger was all I could focus on, but then out of the corner of my eye, I could see Peyton, her face red and wet with tears. Her dress was tight on her body, but I could see the small bump of her stomach—*our twins*.

The momentary slip of concentration made me stumble and make a wrong move. Caden knocked me down to the mat with his fist at my throat, just like my uncle had done to my dad all those years ago. I held him at bay, my muscles shaking.

“Isn’t this poetic,” Caden snarled. “This is the way your father should’ve died that day.”

Grunting, I pushed his fist back, giving me another centimeter of reprieve. My father got out of this hold, and I’ll be damned if I don’t do the same.

“You’re not going to win, motherfucker,” I hissed. “I’m ... going ... to kill you. That’s a fucking promise.”

Caden laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ll be sure to erase all thoughts of you from Peyton’s mind tonight when I’m fucking her senseless.”

A guttural roar tore out of me as I let the anger and rage take over. It fueled me and gave me the strength I needed.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed as hard as possible, Caden's arm giving way inch by inch. His smile disappeared, and with one swift move, I jerked his arm and heard it crack.

Quickly, he jumped off me, his arm hanging limply by his side. There was no turning back; I was going to fulfill my promise to him, no matter the cost. I powerhouse kicked him in the side and watched his legs buckle beneath him.

As soon as his knees hit the mat, I wrapped my legs around his and my arm around his neck. His blood poured down my arm, but I didn't care. I wanted to see more of it.

"You're never going to hurt Peyton again," I growled low in his ear.

He tried to fight against me, but I had him locked in. I held him harder, jerking my arm up so it would choke him. He tried to speak, but he couldn't. I didn't want to hear another word come out of his fucking mouth.

His fight started to fade, and his skin turned blue, but I wasn't done. I looked over at Peyton, at the bruises on her neck I could tell she tried to conceal. My arms shook with fury.

"You're never going to hurt anyone ever again."

Clutching his neck in my grasp, I jerked it to the side so hard that it snapped, his body falling limp in my arms. It was done. Shouts erupted all around me and I could see Peyton screaming my name, only I couldn't hear her. All the sounds were jumbled together. She tried to run to the cage but was held back by the girl.

Martin grabbed Peyton's arm and jerked her toward the exit. I had to save her.

After pushing Caden's body away, I jumped to my feet. But when I rushed to get out of the cage, three of Martin's men came in and jerked me out, leading me toward the back of the warehouse. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, and I had to find the perfect time to strike.

When they dragged me outside, I knew there were only seconds to react. They were going to kill me if I didn't do

something first. Sucking in a quick breath, I blew it out and made my first move. I slipped out of their hold and headbutted the guy behind me before kicking the fucker to my right in the head. Then, I punched the one on the left with as much force as I could muster, loving the sound of his bones cracking. All three fell to the ground, groaning in pain. However, it wasn't enough for me. My hands shook with the need to finish them off.

I jumped on one and was about to snap his neck when a flashlight beamed in my face. I couldn't see who it was, but someone shouted my name ... someone I never expected to hear.

CHAPTER 31

PEYTON

“We have to get her in the boat!” Martin roared. “Once we disappear into the bayou, they won’t be able to catch us.”

There was so much chaos. Everywhere I looked, there were flashing blue and red lights. Help had come for us ... but how?

Wren held my left arm while Martin pulled my right, forcing me down to the water’s edge where a boat was waiting for us.

Wren squeezed my arm, grabbing my attention. “This is it, Peyton. This is our chance.”

She let me go and lunged at Eric, taking him down. Martin pulled out a gun, but he still held my right arm. Rearing back, I punched him with my left and kneed him in the stomach when he hunched over.

“Stupid cunt,” he grunted, lifting the gun toward me.

There were only mere seconds to react, and I did the only thing I could think of. I kicked his hand, putting as much force in the movement as possible, and the gun flew in the air and into the bayou.

Wren and Eric grappled through the mud and once he freed himself from her, he took off for the boat while Wren came to my side. Martin’s eyes turned wild, and he circled around as if calculating his next move.

Shouts erupted all around us and he took off, but he didn't get far before he was tackled from behind. Ethan punched him, his fists pounding Martin's face, over and over. Relief washed through me, and I fell to my knees; Ethan was okay.

A group of men in FBI uniforms grabbed Ethan and hauled him off, pushing him away from Martin's motionless body.

"He's down, Jameson!" one of the men shouted.

The second Ethan's eyes met mine, he rushed over and pulled me into his arms. I latched onto him, my tears falling onto his skin.

"I'm so glad you're okay," I cried.

He held me so tight I could barely breathe, but I didn't care.

"I'm sorry, Peyton. I'm so fucking sorry." He choked up, and it ripped me open. "I should've been there to protect you. I'll never forgive myself."

"No," I fired back, pushing against his chest, his blood coating my hands. He released me and I grabbed his face, forcing him to look in my eyes. "It was all lies, Ethan. Caden never forced himself on me. He only said it to rile you up. I promise I'm okay."

Tears fell from Ethan's eyes, the liquid turning pink from all the blood. "That fucking gutted me. I didn't want to imagine what you went through." He gently touched the marks on my neck.

"Now that he *did* do," I admitted. "But that's it." I moved my gaze to all the gashes in his skin. "We have to get you to the hospital."

"You're going to need stitches ... lots of them," Wren stressed. Ethan looked over at her, and she smiled. "I know you two need to catch up, but I'm Wren."

Ethan focused back on me, and I glanced over at her. She had a busted lip and was covered in mud. "Wren is a friend. I wouldn't have gotten through this without her."

She shrugged, her expression torn. “I know I said if it came down to it, I’d put myself first, but I couldn’t do it.”

“I’m glad,” I said to her. “And I’m going to keep my promise. You deserve everything I offered you.”

“Peyton!”

My mom’s voice echoed through the darkness, and I gasped. How was that possible? Ethan moved out of the way, and I watched as my mom, dad, and Ethan’s aunt Brooklyn in her FBI gear raced toward us.

Ethan let me go and I ran to my parents, throwing my arms around them. I burst out crying, and so did my mom.

“Thank God you’re okay,” my mom sobbed. “I was so worried about you.”

My dad clutched my face, his eyes blazing when he saw my neck. “What the hell happened?”

I shook my head. “There’s plenty of time to explain. I just want to get the hell out of here. Ethan needs to go to the hospital.” Brooklyn went up to Ethan to inspect his wounds.

“I’m okay,” he said to her, taking my hand. “It’s been a long two days.”

“How did you find us?” I asked, glancing back and forth between them.

My mom cleared her throat and nodded at my wrist. I peered down at the sapphire bracelet she’d given me many years ago; I rarely ever took it off.

“Yeah, about that,” she said, biting her lip sheepishly. “I wanted to always ensure you were protected, so ...” she said and stopped as my dad pulled her into him.

My dad nodded over at Brooklyn. “We had Brooklyn have your bracelet made for us. One of the sapphires is hollow, and inside is a tracker. We knew something was wrong when you didn’t show up in California.”

My mom reached out and touched the hollow sapphire on the bracelet. I’d never noticed it before, but now I could tell it

differed from the other gems.

“We didn’t want you thinking we were trying to control your life,” she murmured. “We just worried about your safety. With my past and who *you* are, we had a good reason to be cautious.”

“And I’ve never been more thankful,” I said. The agents hauled Martin to his feet, and his head lolled from side to side, but he was conscious.

“There’s a lot we have to tell you,” I confessed, focusing back on my mom. “I saw everything that happened at the Dark Side. I watched your fights with those men.” Then, I turned to my dad. “And yours with all those other people.”

His jaw tensed and he turned away, almost as if he was ashamed. I knew the men he’d killed were evil. Yet, I didn’t see him as anything other than the man who raised and loved me.

Understanding flashed in my mom’s eyes. “You’re paying for what we did, aren’t you?”

I looked over at Ethan, and he nodded at them. “We have been a for a while now,” he informed them. “Emma and Carter were first, and then they went after Reagan and Braden. So, they’re not done with us.”

“Who is ‘they’?” Brooklyn asked.

“The Michelsons,” I answered. “They are the ones coming after us. When you all shut down the Dark Side, it was their operation, not Scar’s. He was just the middleman. I know for a fact Nikolai Michelson is a part of what happened here. But finding the proof is going to be difficult.”

Brooklyn nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The agents started to haul Martin toward their cars, but then his eyes locked onto my mother. She glared at him, and I watched her fists clench.

“Hold up,” she called out, making the FBI agents pause. “There’s something I need to do first.” She stormed over to

him, and he barely had time to breathe out her name before she punched him, knocking him right out.

The agents dragged him away, and dad grumbled under his breath. “If everyone weren’t here, I would’ve killed the bastard.”

And he would have. So would Ethan and my mom.

Looking up at Ethan, I kissed him gently. I could tell he was in pain from all the gashes. “I love you.”

He kissed me back. “And I love you. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

We walked away, and I had him by my side with Wren on my other.

We were safe.

We were free.

I could finally breathe.

CHAPTER 32

PEYTON

We spent a few hours at the hospital while Ethan could get stitches and so that I could get checked out. Ethan refused to get fixed up until I agreed to be examined. The twins were fine, which was a huge relief. I was told their heartbeats were strong.

However, I did make sure the doctor didn't mention anything to my family. It wasn't the right time to tell them about the babies. I wanted that moment to be joyous, not while we were in a hospital.

While Ethan was with the doctor, I talked to the FBI and told them everything that had happened, from being kidnapped at the Wilmington house to when they arrived on the scene. The investigation was well underway, and I was curious to see what would be found. Brooklyn assured Ethan he wouldn't be charged for killing Caden; it was self-defense. The same thing went for Wren.

We were only at the hospital for a couple of hours before the doctor discharged Ethan. Luckily, my parents had rented a house when they arrived in Louisiana, just to be prepared to stay a while. They didn't know what was going on with me and Ethan or what was going to happen when we were found. All they knew was that we were in trouble, and they would do whatever possible to find us.

Ethan's parents had arrived a couple of hours ago while Camden and Ripp were on a plane, set to be here in a couple of hours. Our secrets were out. They all knew everything that had happened over the past few months, minus a few gory

details. Needless to say, they were infuriated that we kept it all a secret, but they understood it was because we wanted to protect them. We were told never to keep them in the dark again. Sadly, we all knew that this wasn't over. Nikolai Michelson was making his rounds, and he wasn't going to stop.

But now, we had help.

Brooklyn and her team were going to dig deep to see if they could end the Michelson family once and for all. It brought me hope, but if they hadn't been taken down yet, I had a feeling it wouldn't be anytime soon.

My dad came over to the couch and draped his arm over my shoulder. I rested my head against his chest and closed my eyes.

"Why don't you go to bed?" he murmured, his voice low and calm. "I'm sure Ethan will join you as soon as he's done talking to the FBI."

The sun had started to rise, and I was exhausted. None of us had slept. Ethan was outside with his parents, Brooklyn, and several other agents. We'd all been so busy that I'd barely even spoken to Ethan since we left the hospital.

"I will in a minute," I said, yawning. I wasn't about to sleep without Ethan next to me.

My gaze shifted over to Wren, who was across the room talking to my mother. I couldn't help but smile at how enamored she was being around my mom and discussing fighting techniques. You wouldn't think that we were all fighting for our lives just a few hours earlier. I hadn't talked to her yet about her plans, but I was hoping she'd return to California with us. With her fighting skills, I knew she could become one of the best female fighters in the circuit. And what better way to compete than with the infamous Gabriella Reynolds as her coach?

"Dad?" I spoke.

He rubbed a hand soothingly down my arm. "Yeah?"

“Wren is an amazing fighter. Do you think you and mom could train her? She’s had a hard life and has no family other than a foster brother. I want to see something good happen for her.”

My dad squeezed my shoulder. “I’m sure we can make that work.” Once back in California, I was going to help her get the life she deserved.

Several minutes later, the door opened and Ethan walked in, followed by his parents and Brooklyn. My pulse skyrocketed and I jumped to my feet, hurrying over to him as fast as I could. He pulled me into his arms, and I pressed my face against his chest.

“It’s done. I told them everything I could,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

“You two need to get some rest,” Brooklyn advised, placing a hand on my back. “It’s going to be a media circus when word gets out.”

I had no doubt that if I had my phone, it would buzz like crazy. So maybe it was a good thing it was gone.

“I need to call my agent,” I said, glancing at Brooklyn from the corner of my eye. I didn’t want to let Ethan go. “She’s probably worried sick.”

“I’ll call her,” my mother offered. “I’ve already contacted the lady you rented the Wilmington house from too. Your rental car was still there, so I also got that taken care of. You two just get some sleep.”

Ethan rubbed his hands over my back. “Come on. I haven’t slept since we were drugged.”

We said our goodnights to everyone even though it was morning. Slowly, we made our way upstairs and into one of the empty bedrooms. The comforter was already pulled back, and I slipped under the sheets. Ethan climbed in next to me, grunting in pain. I didn’t want to hurt his wounds, but he refused not to hold me. His body was warm, and I felt my muscles instantly relax.

As I breathed him in, I closed my eyes. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I lost you.”

His body tensed. “It’s a good thing we don’t have to find out. But I *can* tell you this ... I was going to kill them all to get to you.”

“What are we going to do now?”

Ethan touched my chin, gently lifting it so I could look at him. His crystal blue eyes stared into mine. “*We* are going to go on with our lives. Just you and me.” His lips pulled back, and he placed a hand on my stomach. “And our twins. When do you want to tell everyone?”

“Soon,” I replied. “I think I have a good idea.”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “Can’t wait to hear it.”

CHAPTER 33

PEYTON

ONE WEEK LATER

The media was insane. Instead of returning to California, Ethan and I retreated to his family's cabin in Sierra Nevada for a week. His wounds were healing nicely, and I began to have more energy. However, I wasn't ready to deal with the circus yet.

Everyone else went back, and they were bombarded with questions. The FBI had searched Martin's home and found years' worth of videos he'd taken of my mom after the whole Dark Side incident. There were even ones from when I was a baby up to the current year. Needless to say, I was thoroughly creeped out. I knew the paparazzi followed me around, but it was sickening to know there was someone deep in the shadows watching us as well.

Not anymore. Martin was going to be in prison for the rest of his life.

I'd given a statement to my agent which she gave to the media to tie them over until I wanted to do something publicly. I wasn't ready to face the public yet; the ordeal had taken too much out of me. All I wanted was privacy while Ethan and I dealt with it all.

It turned out that the FBI could not find evidence to convict Nikolai Michelson for his role in the abduction or any of the events after that. Did that shock me? No, I had already

convinced myself that they wouldn't. I wanted it to be over, but I knew it was still the beginning.

The FBI had questioned Wren about her meeting with Nikolai at that Charlotte hotel, but they couldn't get clear proof that it even happened. They checked the hotel cameras, but it turned out that all the data had been erased. The Michelsons had so many people in their pockets it was scary.

Nikolai had a vendetta, and he was dead set on seeing it through. Was he done with Ethan and me? That was a question I didn't know the answer to. However, we did know that he wasn't going to stop. He had a list, and there were people on that list we cared about. So, it was simply a question on who was next.

I didn't know how long I'd been standing by the patio door, watching the snow fall outside, when Ethan's voice broke through my inner thoughts.

"Have you talked to Wren?" he asked, wrapping his arms around my waist and rubbing my stomach.

Grinning, I placed my hands over his. "I talked to her this morning. Mom's been working her hard, but I know she loves it. I think she's hoping to be ready for her first fight this summer."

Ethan chuckled. "After what I've seen, I'd say she's ready now."

That was true, she was a fierce fighter. She was staying at my parents' house until things settled down. After that, she was going to move into Ethan's Venice home as soon as we moved our stuff out. It was our gift to her.

Ethan pressed his lips to the crook of my neck, and shivers cascaded down my arms. "You know," he murmured, sliding my shirt down just a tad so he could kiss more of my skin. "I had a hot dream about you last night. It's been on my mind all day."

He pushed his rock-hard cock into my back and I giggled. "Oh yeah? Care to tell me about it?"

Turning me around in his arms, he looked into my eyes and shook his head. “How about I show you?”

I bit my lip. “Sounds good to me.”

Picking me up in his arms, he carried me down the hall and into the bedroom, never once taking his lips from mine. I couldn't get enough of him. The second he set me down beside the bed, he lifted up my sweater and tossed it on the floor while I ripped off my leggings. Ethan's eyes lit with humor as he watched how desperate I was to get undressed.

“I'm loving the pregnancy hormones,” he teased. “Hopefully, you'll always want me like this.”

Grabbing the hem of his shirt, I lifted it over his head. “You have nothing to worry about.” He unbuttoned his jeans and kicked them off before guiding me back toward the king-sized bed. I laid down and he towered over me, my skin trembling with the need to feel his touch.

Sliding down my body, he lowered his lips to my thigh and kissed his way up to my stomach. “If there's one thing I'm looking forward to, it's knowing I can come home and touch you like this every day, that you're fully mine,” he murmured, caressing his thumbs across my peaked nipples. His fingers slowly trailed down to my stomach. Getting into position between my legs, he spread my knees wide, his eyes darkening with need. With a light blow over my sensitive skin, he brought his lips over my center and sucked my clit into his mouth.

“Ethan,” I breathed, gripping onto his head as he thrust his tongue inside me.

I arched my back and gave into his touch, moaning in delight as he explored me with his mouth while holding my legs out to the side with his weight. Then, all too soon, he pulled away, leaving me breathless.

Slowly, he licked a path all the way back up my leg, past the inside of my thigh. Fingers spreading me open, he nuzzled my clit with his nose, keeping his gaze on mine as he fucked me with his tongue. I was getting close to losing control, and

before I could hit my peak, Ethan gave me one last lick and continued his torturous path up to my breasts.

“That’s not funny,” I growled.

He smiled and bit one of my nipples. “I told you I was going to show you what I dreamed of. This was part of it.”

“You’re evil.”

Licking his lips, he stared down at me. “Your orgasms tonight will all be with me inside you, Peyton. Just like mine will all be inside you.”

He wrapped his warm lips around my breast, making everything tighten and throb with need. Ethan lifted his head and gazed down at me with his sensual blue eyes. Pressing his hips against mine, he positioned himself between my legs, grazing his cock along my opening as he swiveled his hips in slow circles.

“Peyton,” he whispered. Taking my face in his hands, he lowered his lips to mine and stayed there, breathing me in with the gentlest of touches.

I closed my eyes and smiled. “Yes?”

When he pulled back, he caressed my cheeks with his thumbs and tenderly pushed inside me until he was all the way in. “There’s something I want, and I’m hoping you’ll say yes,” he said, groaning as he slid in and out of my body.

“Tell me,” I replied breathlessly, opening my eyes.

Even though the room was dim, with the soft lights of the hallway shining in, I could see the sheen of tears misting his eyes. “Being able to look into your eyes and tell you I love you every day is something I look forward to the most. The same thing goes for our twins. I’m going to do everything I can to make sure you’re all happy.”

Tears started to stream down my face, but I chuckled through them. “And I plan to do the same with you.”

His lips closed over mine. “I want you to marry me, Peyton.”

The breath caught in my lungs. I'd heard the words, but it almost seemed like I imagined it. "What?" I asked, hoping he'd say them again.

Ethan kissed me again, his hands so gentle as he touched my face. "I want you to marry me. I know we haven't been together long, but I can't see the rest of my life without you in it. And I'm not asking you because you're pregnant; I'm asking because I love you. I want us to build a life together. So, please say—"

"Yes," I breathed, cutting him off. He smiled and more tears fell down my face. "Yes, I'll marry you. I would've said yes even if we weren't pregnant."

Ethan claimed me again with his lips, his body moving with mine as he made love to me. "I love you so fucking much."

"I love you too."

There was no rushing with our lovemaking. It wasn't the usual heated and wild sex we'd been having; it was something different ... something I felt all the way down to my soul. This was what love felt like, and it was beautiful. It was what I'd always imagined true love would be.

Ethan pressed his lips to mine and slowly caressed my tongue with his, thrusting deep and slow. His torturous pace only heightened my desire, so I grabbed tightly onto his ass and locked my legs around his waist, pulling him into me.

Picking up his pace, Ethan moaned and murmured in my ear, "Let it go, baby, so I can come inside you."

Giving in to the feeling, I gripped his shoulders tightly. My skin tingled and my toes curled as the longest and strongest orgasm I had ever felt exploded across my entire body. Ethan's body jerked almost simultaneously as his cock pulsed, filling me with his release. I loved the feel of him coming inside of me, knowing he felt the same level of ecstasy from my body.

Biting his lip, Ethan leaned down and kissed me firmly. He lifted my back off the bed, bringing my breasts up to his lips. My body trembled and I could already feel myself tightening

around his growing cock. I could see it in his eyes, it was going to be an exciting night, and I looked forward to it.

“When do you want to get married?” he asked, burying himself deep inside me.

“The sooner, the better,” I breathed, moaning with each thrust.

Holding my face in his hands, he kissed me, the pressure hard yet sensual. “Let’s make it happen. I’m ready for you to have my name.”

“So am I.”

CHAPTER 34

ETHAN

TWO WEEKS LATER

Peyton and I arrived in California only a few days ago and signed the papers to our house. It was ours.

Her twelve-week follow-up appointment went smoothly, and we were able to hear the twins' heartbeats. We had the perfect plan for how we were going to tell everyone the good news. Not only about the twins, but our wedding as well. No one had the slightest clue which was what Peyton and I wanted.

Today was going to be full of surprises.

We ended up leaving most of the furniture at my Venice house so Wren could use it instead of her having to buy all new things. It worked out great because it gave Peyton and me the chance to start everything anew. All the furniture we ordered had already been delivered and set up in their respective rooms. Everything was almost done except for one thing.

"Our room looks good," Peyton said, smoothing out the new comforter on the bed. She sauntered over to me and kissed me. "We can christen it tonight."

Snatching her up in my arms, I nipped her bottom lip. "Yes, we will." Laughter echoed down the hall, and I smiled. It was nice having our friends and family together in one place. "Are we ready to get back out there?"

Her green eyes twinkled. “I think it’s time.”

“I do too.”

Taking her hand, I pulled her out of our bedroom and down the hall. My dad, Paxton, uncle Camden, Carter, Braden, and Ripp were in the kitchen drinking beers and talking about their fights, while my mom, Gabriella, aunt Brooklyn, Wren, and my sisters were in the living room, drinking their wine.

My mom and Gabriella noticed us first and came over. “We were walking through the house and noticed that one of the bedrooms is empty,” my mom stated. “Did you not order any furniture for that one? Because you know we have my grandmother’s bedroom suit in storage. It’d look amazing in that room.”

Peyton giggled and looked up at me. “Wow, talk about perfect timing.”

My mom smiled. “So you’re interested? That’s great.”

I held up a hand. “Not exactly. Peyton and I *do* have furniture we’re going to put in there.”

Peyton and I had a whole big spiel planned on how we were going to bring up the empty room, but my mom really did have perfect timing. I walked over to the hallway closet and glanced at everyone over my shoulder. They stared at me in confusion.

“What is he doing?” my mom asked Peyton.

Peyton bit her lip and smiled. “Wait and see,” she said back.

By now, everyone had grown curious as to what was going on. They all gathered in the living room, watching my every move. I disappeared into the closet and grabbed the large box with a picture of a crib outside. When I brought it out, my mom slapped a hand over her chest and the room filled with gasps and gaping mouths.

Peyton came over to me and took my hand. “Do you think they got the picture?”

“I don’t know,” I said, peering around at everyone. “Do you?”

Tears filled my mom’s eyes, and she waved a hand in front of her face. “Oh my God, are you guys pregnant?”

Peyton squeezed my hand and nodded at her. “We are. I’m twelve weeks.”

Reagan threw her arms in the air and burst out laughing. “Vegas. Holy hell, it happened on my wedding night.” Everyone turned to her, and she closed a hand over her mouth. Our parents didn’t know about our hot Vegas night, but they did now. “Sorry,” Reagan apologized, looking sheepish. “Maybe that was too much information.”

I was afraid to look at Paxton because no girl’s father wanted to know when their daughter got knocked up. If Peyton and I were having girls, there’s no fucking way I’d want to know, either.

“Thanks for that,” Peyton said to Reagan. “Not that it matters anyway. Ethan and I are happy with the news.”

“But that’s not all,” I added.

I nodded at Peyton, and we said the next part together. “We’re having twins.”

Cheers of joy and hoots of laughter filled the room, and everyone came up to congratulate us. Then, when the excitement died down, and the many questions were answered, we faced them all again. “Do you want more good news?” I asked.

My mother wiped away her tears. “What other good news could there be? I’m already walking on air.”

Peyton wrapped her arms around my waist, and I kept my eyes on her as I told them the rest. “I asked Peyton to marry me. And she said yes,” I announced, smiling as more shouts of joy ensued. Peyton and I turned to face them and I continued, “And we’ve decided to get married *tomorrow*, right here in our home. We want you all to be here.”

The cheers grew louder, and the guys went into the kitchen to grab some congratulatory beers. The women took Peyton away and bombarded her with talks of the wedding while my dad came up to me.

He hugged me tight and whispered in my ear. "I'm happy for you, son. I wish you and Peyton the best."

"Thanks, Dad. She's everything to me."

"I know how that feels."

My dad and I put together the crib before everyone left. It was the only furniture in the nursery besides the succulent plants Peyton stuck in the corners. I should've known they'd be the first thing she'd put in there.

Peyton stared at the crib with her hands resting on her stomach. "Your mom said that you and Emma shared a crib when you were little. So, I figured we could do the same with ours. That way, they're together."

I leaned over and kissed her. "I think that's a great idea."

She glanced around the room and smiled. "I can't wait to find out what we're having. It'll be nice to paint the room and decorate it."

Pulling her into my arms, I held her tight. "I'm sure our mothers will be chomping at the bit to help you with that."

She giggled. "That they are. It's going to be nice to have their help." She let me go and looked into my eyes, her smile slowly fading as she took my hands.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing. There's just something I wanted to talk to you about." Her eyes averted to the crib. "After the twins are born, I'm taking a long break from acting."

“Peyton,” I cut in, squeezing her hands so she’d look back at me. When she did, I continued, “You don’t have to do that. I don’t want you to give up your dream. I was planning on working my fighting schedule around yours. I want to support you and what you want to do.”

Tears filled her eyes. “What I *want* is to focus on being with you and starting our family. Your fighting is important, and I’m going to be at every one. I’ve had enough of Hollywood life for a while. It’s time for me to step back.”

Cupping her face, I wiped away her tears with my thumbs. I loved her so fucking much it hurt. “I’ll be by your side when you want it back. All I want is for you to be happy.”

She leaned into my touch. “As long as I’m with you, I will be.”

CHAPTER 35

PEYTON

I'd bought a flowing white wedding dress that reminded me of something a Greek goddess would wear; it was simple and elegant. Since Ethan and I decided to get married at the last minute, we weren't going to have groomsmen or bridesmaids. We'd have the whole guest list standing with us if we did.

"I can't believe you're the first of us to get pregnant," Reagan teased, coming over to rub my belly.

"Seriously?" Emma goaded in return, curling the last wisp of my hair. "She's marrying our brother. That's even crazier." She pinned up the last curl and smiled at me.

"No crazier than you marrying my cousin," I said back to her, and then to Reagan, "and *you* marrying my brother."

Wren shook her head and held up her hands. I'd only seen her in flannel shirts and ripped jeans, but now she was in a gorgeous purple dress that showed off her amazing body. "Wow, okay, that is seriously complicated. You all sure are keeping it in the family."

Everyone laughed while my mom and Ethan's mother winked at each other. It was their plan all along to have our families combined.

Reagan's phone beeped and she grabbed it off the bed, her eyes lit with excitement when she read the text. "Braden just sent me a message. The officiant is here, and the guys are all waiting for us." Then, she looked at me. "Your dad is heading back in a minute to walk you out."

I nodded. “Perfect.”

Ashleigh came over and hugged me hard before walking out with Wren, Reagan, and Emma, leaving just my mom and me in the bedroom.

Her eyes glistened as she took me in. “You are so beautiful, Peyton.” She reached down and glided her finger across the sapphire bracelet that had saved my life. “No more secrets. Right? I want you to tell me if you or any of the others are in danger.”

“I will,” I promised her. “And I’m still going to wear my bracelet. I think Ethan’s going to want some made for our twins when the time comes.”

My mother’s face fell. “It shouldn’t be like that, Peyton. You should be able to live your lives without looking over your shoulders.”

“I know,” I murmured. “But it is what it is. I’m happy. I have a wonderful family and a man who loves me. I can’t dwell on the bad things that have happened to me.”

My mom cupped my cheeks. “No, you can’t.” She kissed my cheek. “I guess I’ll be hanging up my bodyguard duties and switching it to grandma, huh?”

“Yep,” I laughed. “I’m going to my premiere next month, and several of the awards shows, but after that, I’m taking a break.” I stared right into her emerald eyes. “It’s what I want. And just so you know, you’re going to be one hot grandma. I’m thinking of having the twins call you Nana.”

“Nana,” she repeated, grinning wide, “I like it.”

A knock sounded on the door, and it cracked just a smidge. “Are you decent?” my dad called out.

“Yes. You can come in,” I called out. He opened the door all the way and beamed. Out of all the years I’d been around my dad, I’d never seen him cry ... until today. I hurried over and threw my arms around his neck. “Don’t you dare make me mess up my makeup.”

He hugged me tightly. “It’s not easy knowing I’m about to give you away.”

“I’m not going anywhere. You’re going to be seeing a lot more of me from now on. My babies need their Poppy.”

Chuckling, he stepped back and smiled. “You know I’m going to have those boys in the ring the second they learn to walk, right?”

“Not unless Ethan beats you to it,” I countered. “And who says I’m having boys?”

He smirked over at my mom, and she took my hand. “Um, your dad and the others all have a bet going. Some think you’re having girls, some think boys, and some say a boy and a girl. The pool is up to ten grand right now.”

Shaking my head, I couldn’t help but laugh. “We’ll find out in five weeks.”

My dad held out his arm. “Are you ready?”

I looped my arm through his. “I am.”

My mom walked out first, and we gave her time to get to her seat before we started down the hallway. We had to go through the living room to get outside by the pool where the arch was set up.

The food smelled amazing and instead of a giant wedding cake, we decided on a cupcake tower with various flavors. I couldn’t decide on what I wanted, so I blamed it on the twins.

Ripp was by the door and when he saw us approach, he opened it. The sound of the violin playing “Salut d’Amour” made my skin shiver as the melodic tune drifted toward us. Ethan’s mother knew a violinist who had offered to play, which was perfect.

Walking down the aisle toward Ethan, I focused only on him. A few months ago, I never knew this could be my life. I thought movies and being in the spotlight was where I wanted to be, but I was wrong.

This was where I needed to be.

This was where I belonged.

With Ethan.

Time seemed to stand still as I stopped before him, my dad giving me away. Ethan took my hands and the officiant started to speak, but Ethan leaned in quick, closing his lips over mine. My breath hitched but I gave into him, relishing in the moment.

Everyone cheered and laughed in the background, but it was muffled to my ears. All I could hear was my pulse pounding like a thousand racehorses.

Ethan pulled back and rested his forehead on mine. "I'm sorry. I couldn't wait."

The officiant chuckled under his breath and cleared his throat. "Are you ready now?"

Ethan and I stared into each other's eyes and spoke at the same time. "Yes, we are."

CHAPTER 36

PEYTON

FOUR WEEKS LATER

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and let it slowly release from my lungs. Tonight was a big night. I was nervous as hell, but also ready for what came next. When I opened my eyes, I looked over at Ethan ... my husband, dressed sexily in a tux with his wedding band shining from the limo's interior lights. We were on our way to my movie premiere at the Village Theater in LA; it was our first public appearance since the abduction.

I'd been asked to do numerous interviews the past month, but I hadn't been ready until now. I only wanted to focus on my and Ethan's relationship, away from the media. No one knew we were married or that I was pregnant. Guess you could say I'd been a hermit since Ethan and I bought our house.

Until the twins were born, I was going to attend the necessary awards shows and parties, but afterward, I was set on my decision. I wanted to take a break.

We'd arrived at the theater, and there was a long line of limos which gave me a little more time to breathe. Ethan took my hand and kissed it, smiling when he focused on my wedding rings.

"I'm never going to get tired of seeing these on your finger. It shows everyone that you're mine."

That made me smile. “The same goes for you,” I said, nodding down at his ring finger. “But I hate to say it, I think everyone will notice this before the rings on my finger.” I pointed at my stomach, which was now bigger than it was four weeks ago, especially since I had on a royal blue gown that didn’t exactly hide the baby bump.

My eighteen-week appointment was coming up soon, and we were going to find out what we were having. Ethan was sure we were going to have girls, but I had a feeling it’d be boys. I could just imagine two little Ethan’s running around the house.

Ethan rubbed a hand over my belly and grinned. “Are you ready for this?”

“Are you?” I countered.

Sliding his arm around my shoulders, he winked at me. “You know it. So, what are you going to say when asked how we got together?”

I chuckled. “I’m going to tell them the truth. That it was a hot one-night stand that changed my life forever.”

His brows lifted. “Seriously?”

“Yep. The world’s going to be talking about us anyway. Might as well make it memorable.”

Was I really going to say that? No, but it would be funny to see the looks on everyone’s faces.

The limo pulled up to the red-carpet entrance, where hundreds of people were lined up, screaming and hollering with cameras flashing left and right. Security was standing by, and one of them walked toward the limo and grabbed the door handle.

Ethan took my hand and kissed me. “Here we go, Mrs. Jameson.”

I loved hearing him say my new name. “Here we go,” I whispered back.

The door opened and Ethan stepped out first, gently pulling me with him. There were so many people it was

overwhelming but also exciting. The second everyone saw my condition was when the questions were fired off. We stopped at the first round of cameras and Ethan slid his arm around my waist while I placed my left hand over my belly, showing off my wedding rings.

The lights flashed all around us, and I smiled.

Roger Stanfield was one of the most widely known Hollywood reporters in the business, and he waved us over. “Peyton, darling. It’s so nice to see you after everything that’s happened. Are you doing okay? We were all worried about you.”

“Hi Roger,” I said sweetly. “It was a rough time there for a while, but we’re doing much better. Thank you for asking.”

Roger’s gaze shifted to my stomach. “If you don’t mind my asking, it looks like you’re carrying some special cargo there.”

I looked up at Ethan and smiled. “That would be correct,” I said, focusing back on Roger. “Ethan and I are expecting twins in August.” The crowd around us cheered and I laughed.

Roger then turned to Ethan. “You are one lucky man, Mr. Jameson.”

Ethan chuckled. “That I am.”

“Will you still be fighting in the circuit?” Roger asked.

Ethan winked down at me. “As long as my wife lets me.”

Roger gasped. “Well, hot damn, the news just gets even better. Congratulations, you two.”

While Roger turned to the camera, I focused on Ethan. “I will never get tired of hearing you call me your wife.”

Leaning down, he kissed me gently. “And I’ll never get tired of saying it. I love you, Peyton.”

“I love you too.”

THE END

Are you curious to know what Ethan and Peyton's twins are going to be? If so, make sure to click [HERE](#) if you want access to a very special bonus scene.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author L. P. Dover is a southern belle living in North Carolina with her husband and two beautiful girls. Everything's sweeter in the South has always been her mantra and she lives by it, whether it's with her writing or in her everyday life. Maybe that's why she's seriously addicted to chocolate.

Dover has written countless novels in several different genres, including a children's book with her daughter. Her favorite to write is romantic suspense, but she's also found a passion in romantic comedy. She loves to make people laugh which is why you'll never see her without a smile on her face.

You can find L.P. Dover at www.lpdover.com.



ALSO BY L.P. DOVER

SECOND CHANCES SERIES

Love's Second Chance

Trusting You

What He Wants (Trusting You Prequel)

Meant for Me

Fighting for Love

Intercepting Love

Catching Summer

Defending Hayden

Last Chance

Intended for Bristol

ARMED & DANGEROUS SERIES

No Limit

Roped In

High-Sided

CIRCLE OF JUSTICE SERIES

Trigger

Target

Aim

In the Crossfire

ARMED & DANGEROUS/CIRCLE OF JUSTICE CROSSOVER SERIES

Dangerous Game

Dangerous Betrayals

Book 3 - TBD

Book 4 - TBD

GLOVES OFF SERIES

A Fighter's Desire – Part One

A Fighter's Desire – Part Two

Tyler's Undoing

Ryley's Revenge

Winter Kiss: Ryley and Ash

Paxton's Promise

Camden's Redemption

Kyle's Return

GLOVES OFF - NEXT GENERATION SERIES

Craving the Fight
Taking the Fight
Wanting the Fight
Desiring the Fight
Longing for the Fight
Loving the Fight
Needing the Fight
Ending the Fight

SOCIETY X SERIES W/HEIDI MCLAUGHLIN

Dark Room
Viewing Room
Play Room

FOREVER FAE SERIES

Forever Fae
Betrayals of Spring
Summer of Frost
Reign of Ice

ROYAL SHIFTERS SERIES

Turn of the Moon
Resisting the Moon
Rise of the Moon
Unleashed by the Moon
Bound by the Moon
Claimed by the Moon
Taken Under the Moon
Awakened by the Moon

BREAKAWAY SERIES

Hard Stick
Blocked
Playmaker
Off the Ice

STANDALONE NOVELS

The Truth About Secrets
Love, Lies & Deception
Going for the Hole
Anonymous
Love, Again

Fairytale Confessions

THE DATING SERIES W/HEIDI MCLAUGHLIN

A Date for New Year's

A Date with an Admirer

A Date for Good Luck

A Date for the Hunt

A Date for Good Luck

A Date for the Derby

A Date to Play Fore

A Date with a Foodie

A Date for the Fair

A Date for the Regatta

A Date for the Masquerade

A Date with a Turkey

A Date with an Elf

CHRISTMAS NOVELS

It Must've Been the Mistletoe

Snowflake Lane Inn

Christmas With You

MOONLIGHT AND ALEENA SERIES W/ANNA-GRACE DOVER

Moonlight and Aleena: A Tale of Two Friends