

Their time is coming.
They just don't know
it yet.

BURNITO
Agh

KC KEAN

BURN TO ASH

KC KEAN

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CONTENT WARNING

This book includes triggering scenes that some may find difficult to read, those of which include; sexual assault, abuse, and human trafficking. It is recommended for over 17 years.

To all the survivors.

*To everyone who carried on through the pain and found the
light.*

To everyone who is still on their journey.

I love you.

You motherfucking got this.

I'm a goddamn fucking survivor, and I'm taking what's mine.

BETHANY ASHEVILLE



PROLOGUE

Featherstone Academy

*With your skillset, we would like to offer you the opportunity
to:*

*Infiltrate the underground criminal workings of Knight's
Creek, California*

By any means necessary

You have six months to complete

Failure to complete is not an option

Good Luck

ONE



BETHANY

I have always taught myself to feel nothing, eventually making myself numb from head to toe.

The doors on the school bus open, the sound of the air brakes making me jump slightly as the vehicle comes to a stop, but nobody notices my surprise because I'm invisible, all the way down to my soul.

I hate it, the invisibility, yet I've somehow learned to find peace in the constant silence. Maybe it's because I don't know how else to live, to be.

My feet hold me hostage at the end of my driveway, while the sound of the bus driving off in the distance is drowned out by the war inside my mind.

Clutching the strap of my backpack tighter, I will myself to move, to take a step toward my hell, but my body refuses to acknowledge the request coming from my brain. Instead, it just wants one more second of solitude before my life no longer becomes my own again.

I look up at the three-story house in front of me. *My home*. It's ridiculously grand but dated, reminding me of the mansion from the classic Casper movie. If only the house could be haunted by ghosts and not my painful memories.

We live on the outskirts of Knight's Creek, and our home is the only one on this long stretch of road. We're twenty minutes outside of town and fairly isolated except for the diner, which is within walking distance. The garden is

trimmed and sculpted to perfection, with a damn evergreen shrub shaped into a teardrop.

Who needs that? Us, apparently—the Ashevilles.

The freshly cut lawn wraps all the way around the house, and with black framed windows, wraparound balconies, and dark brick and mortar making up the exterior of the property, it almost looks enchanting.

Almost.

When I was in kindergarten, I remember one of my classmates saying that their favorite place in the world was their home because it made them feel safe. Even to this day, at eighteen years old, I still ponder what *feeling safe* must be like. My house feels anything but that.

With a heavy sigh, I shake my head. I can't let myself fall down this path today, not again. Not after last night's punishment, that's for sure. I shudder at the memory, my hand falling to my stomach instinctively as my body recalls the pain.

“Beth!” Hunter, my younger brother, shouts, and my heart swells with love as I look up to see him barreling out of the front door and down the perfectly paved path as he hurries toward me. His blond hair bounces around his head as he runs to me as fast as he can, his green eyes sparkling under the sunshine.

“Hey, buddy,” I holler back, instinctively moving toward him, and he grins wide at the sight of me.

It's embarrassing how he's tall enough to reach my shoulders at ten years old. I'm not going to have the height advantage over him for much longer, which is just another reminder of how quickly time has flown by. I remember him being born, and now he's nearly taller than me. It blows my mind.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders, letting him squeeze me back as he leans in close to whisper in my ear.

“You need to hurry up. Standing out here is just going to get you into more trouble.”

I frown down at him in confusion as I pull back. More trouble? What on earth did I do now?

I feel the tremble deep in my bones, but I can't let it show in front of my Hunter. He needs to learn from the example I set. I'm the only role model he has who's worth looking up to, and I refuse to let them break him just like they have broken me. *Never.*

With a simple nod, I let him go and indicate for him to get out of sight like I always do. He nods in return, his jaw grinding as he acknowledges my order, but he listens.

I wait until he rushes around the back of the house before I move toward the front door. It looms in front of me like the haunted gates to hell. Trepidation makes my heart pound in my chest as I school my features, not wanting them to know how much *they* affect me.

Taking a deep breath, I knock on the large wooden door, waiting for my mother or father to appear. It's already open all the way, and I can see the foyer from here, but I'm not allowed to enter until they tell me I can. I have never tested my luck.

Rules.

I start to shuffle from foot to foot. It feels like an eternity passes before my father appears in the entryway that leads to the kitchen.

Instantly, I can see the glaze over his eyes, the telltale sign that he's had far too much liquor for a Monday afternoon, which never ends well for me—ever—and my body tenses in preparation, knowing what will eventually come.

“Bethany Victoria Asheville, do you know what time it is?” he demands, looking at the invisible watch on his wrist as he slowly makes his way toward me, and I try my best not to cower under his harsh gaze.

Hunter has our mother's green eyes, while mine somehow turned out blue, which is probably why his irises—deep chocolate pits of dread—instill so much fear into my veins. His gray peppered hair is cut short, and his six-foot height and

slim frame make him look weaker than he is. I know for a fact my father's looks can be deceiving.

"I'm sorry, Father, I just got off the school bus," I answer, remaining exactly where I stand. I try to keep my tone light, but the huff he offers in response tells me he's not happy. I wince internally. His scowl at my answer, mixed with the vein protruding on his forehead, confirm there's more to his anger.

What could have possibly gone wrong since I left for school? I literally spent the whole day following my schedule and studying as hard as I could while walking the halls like a ghost. I can't hide anything at Asheville High, not when my mother is the president on the board of education, and both the principal and superintendent answer to her. I didn't even stay for any extra credit tonight.

"Do you want to explain to me why you only got an A on your math test today?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest as he struggles to keep his balance as we remain in the doorway.

What the hell?

My mouth falls open, but I quickly slam it shut as my eyes widen in surprise.

I literally completed the test like two hours ago, and I haven't even been told what my score is yet.

"I-I don't know, I didn't realize they'd been graded already," I stammer, scrambling for a response good enough to save me from the trouble heading my way, but he's already shaking his head at me. My grades never slip. Never. I don't know what I could have possibly done differently.

"That's not good enough, Bethany. I warned you. If you expect to live under *my* roof, then you follow *my* rules. There is no in between. Do I make myself clear? Your mother is still on the phone with the school trying to work out a way for you to retake the test," he bites out, never pleased with anything less than an A+. I nod along with his words, trying to portray the fact that I'm listening and processing what he's saying.

Please let that be enough.

Please.

The silence that descends upon us lulls me into a false sense of calmness. My father is actually the best version of himself when he doesn't say anything at all. He likes to voice his opinions loudly for everyone to hear.

But it's like he suddenly knows how to mess with my brain these days, and the second he peers out of the door, glancing over my head to make sure no one else is around, I brace myself.

My eyes slam shut, my hand clenches at my side as the other grips my bag tightly, and my body tenses from head to toe.

A deafening crack rings out around me as the blow from his open-handed slap stings my cheek. My head falls to the side as I freeze, still as a statue, too afraid to look at him. There is a burning sensation behind my eyelids from the hiss of pain cascading across my face while I ready myself for another blow.

"You're an embarrassment to this fucking family, do you hear me? You either follow the rules or you're out on your ass," he growls, spraying spit against my face as he speaks, but I still can't bring myself to open my eyes or wipe my face like I desperately want to.

Once upon a time I would have cried and curled up into a ball on the floor to try and plead with him to stop hurting me, but I know now that it only makes him hit me harder.

I've lost count of how many blows I've taken from this man and my mother. Each one crushes my spirit more than the last, no matter how numb I try to make myself.

"Now get the fuck upstairs and out of my damn sight. I want you to think long and hard about the expectations set for you. They exist for a reason. Never forget that, Bethany."

I stand frozen in place until I hear him retreat, and when I'm sure I can't hear him any longer, I pry my eyes open, my shoulders sagging in relief when I find myself alone.

Rubbing a hand gently over my throbbing cheek, I tuck my chin against my chest as embarrassment floods me.

I worked so hard on that damn test, and yet I still ended up in this situation. No matter how hard I try, it's *never enough*.

As long as it doesn't give my mother and father any excuse to hit Hunter, then I don't care.

I will deal with all of their disappointment and rage if it keeps them away from him.

He never needs to know about the true pain of living in this house. He already suffers enough when he sees the surface damage they do to me or when he's put in isolation. He doesn't need to know the mental pain. I outgrew isolation a long time ago, and I pray that's all Hunter ever has to deal with from them.

Wetting my lips, I quietly step inside, making sure to gently shut the door behind me as I turn to my left and head straight up the stairs. My gaze focused solely on where I'm heading.

If that's what my father has ordered me to do, then that is what I will do. There's no need to add any further repercussions from disobeying his rules.

The dark wooden staircase leads me to the second floor, with the stairs continuing to the third floor. That zone is only for our parents, and it's completely off limits to Hunter and me. My room is the first to the right at the top of the stairs, and as I make a beeline toward safety, my steps falter because something isn't right.

That's when I see it—another punishment for only getting an A on my math test.

Tears prick my eyes as I stare at my open room. The door is completely off its hinges and leaning against the wall in the hallway.

He's taken my privacy away. Again. It is the *only* thing I have.

How am I supposed to live like this?

He made threats about me wanting to live under his roof and I have to follow his rules, but if I could safely get Hunter out of here with me, I would do it in a heartbeat. The only thing keeping me here is my brother. I just need to graduate and save whatever money I can, and then we can disappear.

Where would we go? I have no idea, but that's future Bethany's problem to solve.

Wiping my eyes as I blink back the tears, I step over the threshold of my room and take in my bare lilac walls, my backpack slipping off my shoulders as I drop down onto my double bed.

With the door wide open, the space feels even smaller, so my closet, desk, dresser, and nightstand all make the space feel more cramped.

A heavy sigh falls from my lips as my gaze flicks over to the window where the floor-length mirror sits beside the open curtains, and I catch sight of my red cheek.

I feel completely lost.

I feel broken.

But I am numb to it all.

I just have to pray that they don't have any guests over tonight. I don't have the strength to pretend or feel even more unsafe with my privacy yanked away too.

That would completely tip me over the edge.

TWO



BETHANY

“Girly, take a damn break, otherwise I’ll tell Pete on you,” Linda orders, giving me her classic glare. She places her hands on her hips as we stand by the cash register, waiting to see what I will do. She runs the diner with her husband, Pete, the restaurant’s namesake, and if I ever learn to grow some oversized ovaries and be kick-ass, I’ll have learned every ounce of it from her.

She’s shorter than my five feet, seven inches, with a blonde pixie cut, tan face, and a whole lot of wisdom and knowledge shining in her blue eyes. But damn, if she tells me to do something, I’m going to do it.

Raising her eyebrows at me is her way of saying, “Test me,” and I roll my own in response.

A tiny smile plays on my lips as I toss my dishcloth on the counter, leaving my mini black apron on as I head for the back.

For a small diner, Pete’s is always busy. Sometimes I wonder if this place is open twenty-four seven. I’m not sure whether it’s the stunning view of the ocean the building offers that entices the customers in time and time again, or the fact that Pete is the most amazing cook for miles.

Likely, it’s a combination of both, but mostly the latter. I don’t know what it is about stepping through those glass doors and entering the diner, but it feels warm, cozy, and...safe? I’m not sure, but it could be because I’ve been working here since I turned sixteen and opted to take as many shifts as they’ll

allow. Anything to get me out of that house and away from my parents.

If I'm being honest, my parents allowing me to have this job is the only good thing they have granted me in years.

God, I can't imagine how Linda or Pete would react if they knew about my home life.

The sounds of the customers talking and laughing along with the clattering of plates don't even register in my mind anymore as I push the swinging door open and step into the quiet *Staff Only* corridor. The door to my right leads to the kitchen where Pete is, while the door at the end is for the little staff room where we can sit and have our breaks in peace.

The break room door is propped open, as always, and I smile as I see Pete working through the built-in serving window. As if sensing me, he looks over his shoulder and smiles, holding up a finger for me to wait a minute before turning back to the grill, the radio blasting out some country song as he sings along to it.

I drop into one of the two worn, brown leather sofas, closing my eyes for a moment as I take a deep breath. As much as waitressing keeps me busy and distracts my mind, it also completely knocks me off my feet. It's a total sensory overload, and I grasp for even a second of respite away from it all, even if my reality, my home life, begs me to remember all of my troubles at every possible moment of the day.

Nope.

Not today.

I've managed to keep as much distance from my father as possible since he lashed out on Monday evening. My cheek is still stinging with the memory, even though he's done much worse to me in the past.

It's now Thursday evening, and I've managed to make it through the week unscathed, which I'm taking as a huge win, especially since Hunter said he was having a playdate with his friends tonight. I'm surprised my parents are allowing him to go on a school night, but I think the kid's name is Xavier

Knight. His mom is kind of a big deal, so they are not going to say no to someone with good stature in the community. Not when being friendly with the right people could elevate them along the way.

I haven't been lucky enough to have my door reattached, but I'm taking whatever wins I can right now.

Stretching my legs out, I groan a little as the movement eases my strained muscles.

Thankfully, Hunter has been none the wiser to my father's outburst the other day, and that's all that matters. As selfish as it may sound, I have the reprieve of not having to worry about him tonight, even if it's only for a couple of hours.

"One chicken and bacon club goin' spare, anybody want it?" Pete hollers, and I grin. He knows it's my favorite, and I'm the only person who can hear him over the radio, so I know it was made for me. It always is.

"You're too good to me," I say as I stand, turning to face him as he places the plate in the open window area along with a glass of orange soda.

"You work your socks off, so you deserve the refueling," he responds, tossing his towel over his shoulder before offering me a wink and getting straight back to the grill. It's a little after eight in the evening, which is just after our busiest time.

Grabbing the soda and food, I carefully place them on the coffee table in front of me and drop back down into my seat. I don't want to spend ages eating my meal, leaving Linda out there to deal with all the customers, so I pull the table closer and dig in, not bothering to turn on the old television in the corner.

I can't help but hum in approval, the food as delicious as always. My thoughts replay every interaction with my parents since the slap to my face, despite my promise to myself to set them at the back of my mind.

Everything seems quiet with them, too quiet if I'm honest. There have been no friends around, no intimate parties,

nothing. That's not normal for our home. It feels like there is a constant, never-ending revolving door to our house for "family friends." Even on school nights. I would usually hide away in my room, which is what has kept me on edge the past few nights since there isn't a door standing between me and the predators.

Every single one of my parents' friends are creepy as hell. They are always lurking in the hallways, their eyes perusing my body from head to toe, and it scares me. I can't stop looking over my shoulder, waiting for something to happen.

There's no one in particular or a specific incident that contributes to how I feel, but the vibe in the air with every *friend* that enters our home only leaves me more uncomfortable, particularly with my father's rules and orders. His ridiculous list of dos and don'ts make it difficult to swallow past the lump in my throat.

Dammit.

I swipe a hand down my face before dusting the crumbs off my lap, the plate empty before me as I gulp down the soda, ready to get back out there and escape my own thoughts. Surprisingly, this is one of my safe places. Not home, not school, not anywhere but this little staff room in the back of my favorite diner with the beach right outside. My calm seems to rotate around the vibes from Pete's.

Just thinking about school, as well as my parents, makes me want to break out in hives, and a shiver runs down my spine. My mother's role, as invisible and nonexistent as she is at the actual school, only makes me want to hide from the other students even more. I'm already the loser, so her existence just makes it worse.

Get up, get out, and get on with it, Bethany.

I have to keep putting one foot in front of the other if I ever hope to get Hunter and myself safely out of this town.

Standing, I take a deep breath and repeat my words to myself once more before putting them in motion. Pete is knee

deep in preparing orders, so I don't interrupt him. Instead, I leave my used dishes on the window ledge like I always do.

Tightening my blonde ponytail, I fix my t-shirt and make sure I look presentable before I step through the swinging doors and quickly survey the room.

I look over the twelve tables I serve. Since I've been out on break, two more are now occupied. Combined with the other four either eating or waiting on the check, I now have six groups of customers to please.

A quick glance at Linda tells me they have not been served yet, as she nods toward them. I prepare, pulling my pad and pen from my pocket as I plaster a smile on my face, forcing my shoulders back as I slip into the role of perfect waitress.

I operate the lower area of the diner where tables line the floor and windows, with the television hanging on the wall, while Linda takes the bigger booths up top. When someone else has a shift, they split the lower section with me.

I reach the first table, smiling wide as I talk with the couple, taking down their drinks and food order. I glance farther along the front window to see a guy sitting alone with his back to me.

My steps seem to slow the closer I get. I walk past him slightly so the table is almost between us, and I find myself gaping at him.

His brown hair is swept back off his face, but not in a styled way, more like he's spent far too long running his fingers through it because of stress. His bulky shoulders are covered in a fitted white t-shirt, and his thick, muscular thighs are clad in a pair of denim jeans that look like they have been painted on. I also can't help but notice the veins that run along his forearms, which tense as he leans forward, resting them on the table. He can't be much older than me.

"You just going to stand and stare all week, or are you going to take my order?" he asks roughly, toying with a piece of paper in his hands as I swallow my embarrassment and try to respond all at once.

Clearing my throat, I look down at my pad and ready my pen, but when he doesn't start telling me what he wants, I look up to find his piercing blue eyes staring me down with a hint of curiosity, but with a blink, it's gone. His strong jaw, full lips, and olive skin make him look like a model.

Holy crap.

"Your order?" I blurt, raising my eyebrow as his eyes widen a little in surprise. I instantly feel very self-conscious about myself for responding with that kind of attitude. My body tenses out of habit, readying for the verbal or physical consequence for my sass, but after staring at me for a moment, he sighs and leans back in his seat, crossing his arms.

"I'll take the bacon and chicken club, and a water," he states, and I nod in acknowledgement, jotting it down before rushing away.

How embarrassing, Bethany. Just because a guy looks like that doesn't mean you get to check him out. But there's never anyone around here to actually check out, so you can't ignore such hotness when it does make an appearance.

Internally cringing, I walk both orders over to the window for Pete before I move to the drinks counter and quickly make them.

I pause by the couple first, dropping off their drinks, before approaching the guy again. I place the water on the table with my eyes focused on the ground and quickly slip away before anything can be said.

I busy myself by serving the other customers their food or finalizing their checks, but my gaze keeps trailing back to the mystery guy by the window who continues to play with the paper in his hands.

He was a jerk for sure, but I just can't seem to stop myself. I'm used to people treating me like that in school, at home, and everywhere in Knight's Creek. I've dealt with far worse.

"Hey, girly. Five more minutes, and you need to call it quits so you're home on time, alright?" Linda hollers across the room, making me glance at my watch. I wince when I see

it's past nine o'clock. She has no idea how much she saves me every time she reminds me of the time.

If I'm working at night, I can't arrive home any later than nine thirty. It's really not worth risking my life at this stage, so I nod, acknowledging her words, before I finish off wrapping the freshly cleaned utensils for tomorrow.

There are only two tables left in my section, both of which Linda will take over so I can leave. One is an old man who walked in forty minutes ago, and the other is the douchebag.

Playing my role as the perfect waitress, I always check my tables to let them know of the changeover and ask if there is anything I can do before I leave.

The old man grunts in response to my words, but I smile at his bald head when he doesn't bother to lift his gaze from the newspaper in his hands, leaving me to talk to hot, dark, and douchey.

Approaching his table, I take a deep breath and run my hands over my mini apron as I clear my throat.

"Hi, my shift is over in a moment, so Linda will be able to assist with anything you need. Is there anything I can get you before I leave?" I inquire, repeating the same words I always say. I don't even realize I'm saying them half the time.

"I heard. She wasn't all that quiet about reminding you of your curfew, now was she? What are you, fucking twelve?"

My eyes widen and my jaw drops as I stare at him, completely taken aback by his attitude. However, I remind myself that I will not stoop to his level and respond to people who choose to speak to others like this.

I bite my tongue, forcing a smile to my lips as I meet his eyes. "Have a lovely evening."

I can hear the strain in my voice, but I don't overanalyze it as I move away from his table, untying my apron and folding the fabric neatly on the bar before grabbing my jacket and backpack. I came straight from school, which means I still have a lot of homework to get through when I get home, but

that's a problem for later. Right now, I need to get moving if I expect to walk home in—twenty-four minutes.

“I'll see you tomorrow, Linda,” I call out, returning her wave as she glances in my direction.

Just as I grip the door handle, ready to leave the diner, jerkface shouts, “Hey, where's the nearest—”

“Sorry, curfew,” I retort with a sickly sweet smile as I glance over my shoulder before hightailing it out of there.

I don't need some frustrating, rude, and overwhelming jerk leaving me with another wound because he couldn't ask when I had the time.

Glancing at my watch, I sigh and pick up my speed as the fall's night sky looms above me. I wrap my jacket a little tighter around my body and move into a jog.

Please let this night be over with.

THREE



RYAN

I sit on the end of my bed, glancing down at the assignment in my hand as I squeeze the back of my neck in frustration. I have been a part of Featherstone, the leaders of the criminal underworld, all my life, and during that time, I've been training to be exactly what they want me to be—an informant.

My parents died before I even got the opportunity to remember anything about them, so I bounced around a couple of children's homes before I was able to enroll in Featherstone High, where I got to live in one of the dorms year-round and enjoy my school life and the freedom that came with it.

In September, I started at Featherstone Academy, their form of college, where they train us specifically for our bloodline skills. Just as I was getting comfortable, we were all provided with an assignment, and mine required me moving again. At least I only got one. Some students were required to complete two or three.

Featherstone Academy

With your skillset we would like to offer you the opportunity to:

Infiltrate the underground criminal workings of Knight's Creek, California.

By any means necessary.

You have six months to complete your assignment.

Failure to complete is not an option.

Good Luck

My life and soul—my bloodline, as Featherstone prefers to call it—is dedicated to running and conquering areas of the underground world as they see fit.

Like a well-oiled mafia institute, it's an academy for criminals, and it's my home.

It's standard practice for Featherstone to ensure their students are the best of the best, while putting us through rigorous training to understand the inner workings of the organization. It's all I know and all I have, especially since my bloodline skill set is to infiltrate, secure, and protect.

Apparently they don't mind me missing up to six months of school if I'm on a job assignment, but Lord help me if I showed up to class five minutes late.

My favorite classes are weaponry, combat, and anything that involves getting my hands dirty. No one has beaten me in combat yet, and it infuriates me that I'm not there to defend my undefeated title.

I'm going to find out whatever is going on here in Knight's Creek as quickly as possible, and then I can get my ass back to my friends in Virginia.

"Fuck," I grumble with a sigh, scrubbing my hand down my face. I'm frustrated with the overall situation.

Benji has already been blowing my fucking phone up, but what can I do? It's not *my* fault he had an easy assignment for surveillance. I don't even know what I'm actually supposed to be infiltrating. All I know is it, whatever *it* is, is going on in this town.

Fuckers.

It almost feels like they want me to fail. It's not like I'd be a huge loss to anyone. I may not have any family to miss me, but I refuse to let the Carter name be forgotten.

I drop the assignment, a stark reminder of why I'm here, on the bed beside me before rising to my feet. I need to eat. It's midmorning, and I'm hungry. The thought of burning the

beach house down because I made a failed attempt at cooking sounds like a nightmare I don't need to face right now, which means I'll be heading straight to the little diner I was at last night.

Benji joked about living on cereal, frozen meals, and ramen, and I scoffed in his face. I need to stay in shape, and I can afford to eat out, so why not? I deserve it for being here. I can make eggs and bacon, but that's my limit and I'm happy with it.

The food was good, even if the waitress was questionable, especially her fucking attitude. I wish I could have made her aware of exactly who I am. She would have quivered in my presence instead of throwing her sass my way. But I need to keep a low profile, and that means enrolling in Asheville High School and slipping into the jock role as expected.

I need to stop fucking pouting about the situation and get the fuck on with completing my assignment. Sitting here whining like a bitch isn't going to get anything done.

The beach house I'm living in is courtesy of Featherstone. However, along with my parents' death came a ridiculous chunk of money—money I've barely had to touch as I prepare for my future. The beach house sits on the edge of town, and there aren't really any neighbors which makes me like it even more. Thank fuck the diner is only a ten-minute stroll to my right.

Most homes sit on Freemont Beach, but thankfully this offers much more privacy along Montgomery Beach. There are only two bedrooms and one bathroom upstairs, with an open-plan living room, dining room, and kitchen downstairs. It's ultra modern and sleek, the perfect space for any bachelor pad, but my favorite part is the direct access to the ocean, meaning I was able to bring my surfboard along with me.

Now I just need to find the actual time to get out on the water. It's the only positive thing about this whole trip.

Sweeping my damp brown hair back off my face, I sling my backpack over my shoulder and race downstairs in a blur,

locking the front door behind me before I even realize I'm going through the motions.

I need to get my head in the game, because I only have today and then the weekend before I have to attend school to begin my assignment. I sent in all my enrollment forms yesterday since I'm already eighteen, but I'd like to get a little more of an idea of what in the fuck could be going on in this town that piques Featherstone's interest before I get lost in math and science again.

The sun is bright in the sky as I bypass my truck and begin the walk along the ocean's edge.

My phone vibrates in my jeans pocket, and I place my backpack on both shoulders to free up my hands. With one quick glance, I'm already rolling my eyes at Benji.

Benji: Dude, are you fucking done already? I miss you, man. The party last night was next level. You should have seen who kept me busy. Hot. As. Fuck. His best friend was a hot girl too.

Me: Fuck off, asshole. You know I don't want to be here, so don't tease me with a good time.

I don't wait for him to respond, instead pocketing my phone before he messages me back because I know he'll be going into detail about all the fun he had last night. He's fucking laughable. At first, he's a huge guy who has very little to say, but once he gets to know you, you're going to know every inch of his damn life, right down to how many times he's sucked cock in record time.

Fuck, they aren't details I want to know, but I'm horny as fuck and would even consider listening to a run through at this stage. I definitely need to make some time to get laid while I'm here. I deserve the pleasure as payment for even being in this town.

The trail along the beach is quiet again today, and the lights of the diner stand out in the midmorning sky. Cutting through the diner's parking lot, I'm glad to see only a handful

of cars, and through the windows, I can tell that it's nowhere near as busy as yesterday.

My mind instantly goes to the waitress again, but this time my brain conjures up the image of her blonde hair pulled back from her face, her delicate neck on display as her awkward blush creeps down to her chest. I clench my fingers as I picture the way her waist noticeably curved in, visible even through her loose clothing.

Maybe she needs to spice up her outfits. It might lessen the impact of her shitty attitude. But even still, I'm slightly hopeful that she'll be working again today. I liked the banter. No one at Featherstone would ever approach me or sass back like that, but realistically, I know she'll likely be at school.

She was definitely too young to work here full-time. I could see the innocence in her eyes.

I push through the door, spying the older woman walking toward me with a smile on her face, and I can't help but tilt my lips slightly in response.

I'm an asshole, always have been, always will be. My childhood deemed it necessary, so there must be something about her that brings the spirit out of me, even if it's just for a moment. My armor remains firmly in place, though, even if there is the smallest chink left by her.

"Glad you're back so soon. Another table for one?" she asks casually, and I nod in response, taking quick stock of every patron in here along with a quick glance at the exits, just as I did yesterday.

She turns on her heel instantly and starts walking me deeper into the diner. I follow her lead, and when she stops by a booth overlooking the ocean, I don't complain, removing my backpack as I drop down into my seat.

"What's a growing man want for brunch this morning then?" she asks, not even offering me a menu, and after a moment of staring at her expectantly, I sigh.

"I'll just take a plate of eggs and bacon with a soda," I tell her, lacing my fingers together on the table in front of me, but

she doesn't move, her eyes fixed on mine as I shift slightly in discomfort.

“Son, if you're not going to say the magic word, I ain't gonna get you shit,” she growls, arching her eyebrow at me, and I splutter in surprise at her outburst. I can see the sparkle in her eyes as I chuckle under my breath before clearing my throat.

“I'll take a plate of eggs and bacon with an orange soda, *please*,” I amend with a genuine smile on my lips.

“Of course. Give me ten minutes and I'll have it out to you,” she replies with a wink before going to check in with customers at another table.

Holy fuck, the people in this town really don't care how they speak to each other. Can I say I infiltrated the place and call it a job well done? That's not likely to happen, but a guy can dream.

While I wait for my food to be delivered, I pull my laptop from my bag and quickly connect to the Wi-Fi. I have been searching through news articles or anything I can get my hands on that links to Knight's Creek for days, but there's not a lot to go on, and it's infuriating and suspicious all at once.

I need some suspicious activity, a crime pattern, or a person of power getting away with illegal shit, and if there is anyone who checks that box, they are doing a damn good job of covering it up.

I rub a hand down my face as I sigh, still no better off with my research, when my food and drink are placed on the table. I close my laptop quickly as I glance up at the woman, finally looking at the name tag on her shirt which reads, “Linda.”

Her eyes widen as she flicks her gaze from my closed laptop to my eyes, telling me she saw what I was looking at, but for a moment she says nothing at all. She goes so silent, so still, that I almost think she might fucking tell me something, but my bubble bursts when she blinks rapidly and wipes her hands down her apron nervously before clearing her throat.

“Darling, I don’t know you, but I’m going to give you some advice whether you like it or not. You aren’t going to find shit on this town, and if you do, it definitely won’t be good, so I would just stop looking and enjoy the view.”

Lightning fast, she’s gone, her words lingering around me as she puts more distance between us.

Why does it feel like my whole job just became ten times harder?

Someone *has* to have answers. Hopefully I’ll be able to find someone with looser lips who will be willing to tell me all the deep, dark secrets this town has to offer.

FOUR



BETHANY

The school bus is completely full, well, except for the seat beside me, which isn't a surprise. I'm always treated like a pariah, invisible because of my parents, and this isn't any different. I can hear everyone chatting around me about their favorite song on the charts, who their crushes are, and what they did over the weekend.

It almost feels foreign to me to have trivial conversations like that. The only time I've ever really had a friend was in middle school. Her name was Sarah, and she moved away before we started at Asheville High. I've been the quiet nerd ever since.

I keep my gaze focused out of the window, watching the town pass by, and I'm thankful the sun is out today. There isn't a cloud in the sky, which isn't bad at all for January.

I managed to get out of the house this morning in a pair of fitted jeans and a loose, white V-neck top with sandals. These jeans are part of the clothes I have to wear when my parents' friends come around. They aren't for school, but screw it. Anything that hugs my body is usually a big no-no. A mixture of my father's rules and my own insecurities have me opting for baggy clothes most of the time, but today, for some reason, I felt a little spark of rebellion.

It's probably because I spent the whole weekend with my door still off the hinges, worried and on high alert when I was trying to fall asleep as my parents partied downstairs with their

friends. Thankfully, I was left alone, but I could still use a nap to catch up on the sleep I missed out on.

Asheville High comes into view up ahead, and I sigh. As awkward as the bus ride is, it beats actually being at home or at school, so I always feel deflated when we arrive here far too soon for my liking.

As the bus comes to a stop, I hitch my backpack farther up my shoulder before rising to my feet. A few girls sitting across the aisle from me practically sneer at my existence, but I pay them no attention.

“Look at this loser. When is she just going to figure out that no one wants her around and kill herself already?” one of them comments loud enough for most of the kids on the bus to hear, and it’s embarrassing how many people laugh along with her and her friends.

Whoever made up that rhyme about sticks and stones breaking bones but words never hurting was a liar.

On the outside, I keep my expression impassive, like her words didn’t just gut me, while my insides are torn to shreds for the millionth time as I tug my backpack higher.

I breeze through the crowd, stepping over the foot stuck out in the aisle meant to trip me, all without a raised eyebrow, dirty look, or snippy comment to anyone, because that one saying is true—ignore them, and they’ll go away.

Well, they won’t go *away*, but I learned long ago, at home, that fighting back only makes things worse, so I’ve applied the same principle to school.

The second I step down off the bus, I keep moving forward, the school looming before me. The pathway leading up to the entrance is lined with grass on both sides, with the occasional palm tree, which is where I tend to spend my lunches.

Then there are steps up to the main doors that veer outward and back in on themselves, like a diamond shape, offering a large platformed area at the top before you step inside. The terracotta building almost looks grand with how tall it stands,

but just like the Asheville household, Asheville High is little more than the shell of an illusion it creates—or it is to me at least.

I see the cheer squad and football team up ahead standing like they run the school, which would be plausible if they were actually any good. The stoners and goths hover in groups to the right, leaving everyone in between to huddle in small groups, the classic playground cliques fitting every stereotype imaginable.

“Oh. My. God. Have you seen the new guy? Hot, Brandi, fucking h-o-t.”

I glance out of the corner of my eye as I pass the cheerleaders standing next to the jocks to see the cheer captain, Chloe, gushing over man meat, as always. I almost want to say that I’ve heard her say the same thing about every guy with a pulse, but I think better of it and bite my tongue, focusing straight ahead.

I’ve never understood how the girls in this school fawn over guys all of the time. I don’t have enough time to put trust and love into myself, so how could I possibly offer it up on a platter to others? Much less to boys who don’t even see me? Maybe one day, when I’m out of my father’s grasp, I’ll understand what it means to properly be in love and to be loved in return.

I rush up the steps, avoiding eye contact with everyone on the way, completely invisible as I slip inside the building to find the halls just as cramped as ever.

What does a girl have to do to get a little time and privacy for herself?

Have a bedroom door that actually closes for one, but at least I have a shift at Pete’s tonight, so I can get my ten minutes of heaven in the break room again with a chicken and bacon club and an orange soda.

I have English class first thing this morning, so I quickly make my way to my locker, rushing through the bland beige

corridors to deposit my bag before grabbing what I need for this lesson and heading toward the classroom.

When I step inside, Mrs. Jones is sitting at her desk at the front of the class as usual, and only a few students are already here. I drop into my seat by the window, halfway up the row, and organize my things on the table as I get comfortable.

It's one of the few classrooms where everyone has to sit in pairs, but I always end up alone anyway.

Instinctively, while I'm waiting for the class to begin, I doodle on my note pad. I can't help it. My need to draw and express myself always overwhelms me, even if it's just a basic flower on the edge of my paper. The ink flows before I even realize I'm doing it.

I ignore the sound of chairs scraping against the floor and the increased noise as more students enter the class, talking about random things, until I hear Mrs. Jones clap her hands.

“Good morning. If everyone wants to get seated, we're going to be assigning partners today for the debate teams,” she announces. Her flower print dress floats around her ankles as she brushes her blonde hair back off her face, and I cringe—not at her but at what she said.

I hate group assignments. It never goes well for me, not even a little bit. I always work alone or get partnered with someone who doesn't even attend school on a regular basis, so either way I'm the one doing all of the work because I always get high grades.

Just as she moves to shut the door, my world comes to a complete stop when Mr. Hot, Dark, and Douchey from the diner last week casually strolls in.

His brown hair is swept back off his face, and his blue eyes scan the classroom with a hint of arrogance in his gaze. I can practically hear every girl swooning from here, and I think someone even murmurs about the way his arms bulge under his polo while another deems him fuckable.

How ridiculous, I think to myself as I cough back a laugh.

He was a jackass the other day, and he's for sure going to be one now too, so I turn my gaze back to the front, hoping he doesn't see me and remember the fact that I ran as fast as I could out of the diner when he called out to me.

Thankfully, I didn't see him again on any of my shifts, so I assumed he had left town, but seeing him here... now... I know I was *definitely* wrong.

Another insufferable asshole to contend with, excellent.

"Ah, you must be Mr. Carter," Mrs. Jones says as I hear her shut the door behind him. Why does it feel so clammy in here all of a sudden? Is it stuffy? I feel like I can't breathe. "We're about to start pairing up for debate teams. Do you want to quickly introduce yourself before I assign you a partner?"

I can't help but glance in their direction out of the corner of my eye, and I instantly regret the action when I find his eyes already on me.

Dammit.

I quickly turn away, looking down at my intertwined hands on the desk in front of me as my ears strain to hear his response.

Do not sit beside me. Do not sit beside me. Do not sit beside me, I chant to myself as I feel my cheeks heat and my heart pound in my ears.

"I'm Ryan Carter, and I'll take that seat there."

His words are blunt and straight to the point, just like they were back at the diner. It's like he sees the world in black and white and has no time to mess around in the gray. It's almost intriguing. *Almost.*

"Of course, take a seat and—"

"You don't want to sit beside *her*, she's a fucking loser. You can sit beside me, baby. Brandi will move, no worries," Chloe chirps in a rush, trying to nudge Brandi out of her seat, and I frown. She calls everyone a loser, but she only ever refers to me as *her*.

Internally battling with myself, I don't want to look to clarify who they are talking about, it'll only give them satisfaction, but any questions I have are instantly resolved as a bag drops down onto the table beside me with a thump. The way the chair scrapes back and is filled with his presence moments later has me holding my breath.

He did not just sit beside me.

He didn't. Please, God, tell me he didn't.

"Honestly, bro, I *really* wouldn't," Chad, the douche canoe quarterback adds, and I find myself sinking farther into my seat, trying and failing to make myself disappear.

Please let the floor open up and swallow me whole right now. I do not need this level of attention brought my way. Knowing my luck, it'll only end up getting back to my parents, and I *really* don't need anything else to go wrong in my home life. I'm walking on eggshells as it is, and this will only make it worse.

"I'm not your bro, but I'm good, thanks," Ryan retorts as I lift my eyes to Mrs. Jones who is gaping at everything happening around her. She's probably the only teacher here who doesn't go running to my parents every five seconds, so when I see her gaze shift to mine, her eyes silently asking if I'm okay, I offer the subtlest nod in response.

She claps her hands again, clearing her throat as she moves to stand in front of the board. "That's enough. Whoever you're sitting beside is your partner for the debate teams. I'm going to come around with a hat in a moment. There are slips inside with different subjects written on them. Whichever one you choose will be your argument, regardless of if you are personally for or against it. Remember, this *does* impact your overall grade for the semester."

No. No. No, no, no, no, no.

My nod was to indicate I wanted her to just get on with the lesson and pull the attention away from me, not assign me to this guy.

Is this a goddamn joke?

Ryan clears his throat beside me, and I close my eyes for a moment, trying to calm myself, but it's useless. I can tell he's trying to get my attention, but I refuse to give it to him.

This is all just too embarrassing for me. Having this much attention aimed in my direction makes me feel sick.

When he doesn't get the desired reaction straightaway, he starts tapping his fingers on the table annoyingly, and I have to clench my hands to prevent myself from smacking his to make it stop.

Something black on his arm catches my attention, and my mouth falls open in surprise when I see he has a tattoo on his forearm. How on earth did he get that? Well, I know how, but not *how* how. I didn't think we were old enough for that. Or maybe it's because I would never be allowed to get one. Well, until I run at least.

What even is it?

I turn my gaze a little more in his direction, completely intrigued and unable to stop myself, but just when I think I can see what it is, his hand comes down on top of it, blocking the image from view.

My first reaction is to lift my gaze to his, and I regret it instantly. The smug grin on his lips makes me want to claw his eyes out. Instead, I take a deep breath and turn my gaze back to the front as Mrs. Jones comes to a stop in front of us with a top hat.

Without question, Ryan pulls out a slip of paper and reads it before putting the assignment into his pocket.

"Aren't you going to share that?" I blurt out, my cheeks heating as I gape at him, but he simply shrugs his shoulders without a care, a twinkle of mischief gleaming in his eyes as he folds his arms over his chest and leans his elbows against the table.

"Maybe."

"I need that information. Now." My voice is weak as I start to drown in worry, even though I try hard to speak with a sharp tone.

He doesn't understand that I can't go home without this information.

"Give me your number and maybe I'll text it to you," he responds, and I want to kill myself. Kill myself *now*.

I eye his jeans pocket, trying to determine what would be the worst of both evils. Looking back at his face, I find him frowning at me, and without a word, he slips his hand inside his jeans and pulls the paper from his pocket.

"Give me your number and you can have it, or tell me what that look in your eyes is for and you can have it for that reason too."

My gaze flicks between his blue eyes, and my heart pounds in my chest as I try to get a grip on how ridiculous I'm going to sound, but no one, and I mean literally no one, has ever asked me that before.

"I don't have a phone."

His mouth falls open as he stares at me with a mixture of surprise and shock, and I use that moment to swipe the paper from his hands to see what the topic is.

Sexualization

Ah, crap.

I sigh. That's absolutely fantastic. Seriously, kill me now.

FIVE



RYAN

I watch the clock strike eight p.m. and sigh. Today has been a really shitty day.

Having to go to high school and being the new guy, I had to maneuver my way around all the fucking girls as they chased after me, which drained all of my energy, never mind the classes also.

The only bright spark to the day was watching little Ms. Quiet and Mousy blush while trying to put me in my place. I can tell she doesn't do it very often, if at all, which is why her words didn't really hold conviction and her fingers trembled. There must be something about me that just brings that side of her to life. I have to admit, I love rattling her.

It's not exactly the plan I was going for, but I don't care how I do it. If breaking down her walls will get me the details I need on this town, then that's what I'll do, and my gut tells me she's a sure shot at getting information.

What surprised me the most was when she said she doesn't have a phone. It didn't seem to be the *I broke it and I'm waiting on a new one* reason, it seemed more like she just didn't have one, like, at all. Who wouldn't have a cell phone at our age?

The confession caught me completely off guard, which was how she was able to get the slip of paper from my hand. The way she gaped down at the word scrolled across it, her cheeks bright red as she swallowed past the lump in her throat, had me grinning.

I love watching people get pushed out of their comfort zone, squirming, and she was definitely a squirmer. It was highly amusing.

Glancing back down at the open town records book for Knight's Creek on my coffee table, I slam it shut. It doesn't offer me any clues or any information other than the fact that the founding families of this ridiculous town all have certain, what they consider landmarks named after them. It's frustrating. I've been here for what feels like hours, coming up with nothing.

The most noticeable are *Knight's Creek*, *Holmes Correctional Facility*, *Mount James*, *Freemont Beach*, and *Asheville High*. Clearly the Knights were big ballers if the whole town was named after them, putting them at the top of my watch list, but I wonder if anyone with those last names goes to Asheville High.

The little mouse would be able to help me with that, otherwise I could see if they have a student directory.

Speaking of, I'm starving, and what better place to eat than at Pete's, again. Knowing my luck, she won't be there, but it's worth a shot, and either way, I get to eat.

I search for something clean to wear with my black gym shorts, since I went surfing when I got back from school and threw all my clothes in the hamper. I quickly pull a plain, pale blue t-shirt over my head, before slipping my feet into my sneakers and heading for the door.

Pocketing my wallet, keys, and phone, I go through the motions of locking up before heading down the beach. I can hear the waves crashing in the distance, and other than the sound of the occasional car driving by, that's all that surrounds me as I walk toward Pete's with the sun slowly setting behind me.

Any other time, I would think the sights and sounds were perfect, but the fact that I'm away from my friends and completely surrounded by the unknown outweighs the location. Besides, I'm here for an assignment, which means

this town isn't all it seems to be, so I need to keep my guard up.

As I near the diner, I instantly try to search through the windows to see if the girl from school is working, but the place is packed, so it's hard to make anyone out. I murmur my thanks to the guy who holds the diner door open for me as he leaves hand in hand with his wife, and the second I step inside, I'm overwhelmed by all the sound. I'd been minding my own business in comfortable silence during my journey compared to the chatter and noise inside.

It takes me a moment to desensitize myself to the change in surroundings, and a wicked grin takes over my face as I find the server I was hoping to see.

I really need to find out her name. I can add it to the list of questions I want to ask her.

As I track her movements as she places drinks down at a customer's table, a girl with blonde hair and huge brown eyes stops in front of me.

"Hi, I'm Aimee. Do you need a table for one?"

I cringe internally at how peppy she is, but nod in agreement as she waves for me to follow her. I want to demand to be placed in the other girl's section—it's half of the reason I'm fucking here—but I can see there isn't any space over where I sat last time.

That's fine. Everything happens for a reason, so I'll just bide my time.

Aimee places me in a booth, which seems ridiculous for only me, but since there aren't really any other tables or booths left, she doesn't have much choice.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" she asks as she places a menu down in front of me, and I nod, ignoring the fluttery eyelashes and pouty lips she aims in my direction.

"I'll take a water and the name of the other server," I state, making her frown at me. I glance in the girl's direction, hoping she'll get the hint, and when I turn back to face her, I watch as Aimee glares daggers into the back of her head.

I don't know why it instantly makes me defensive, probably due to the way everyone in school was talking shit about her while she was sitting right beside me this morning, so seeing this bitch do it too instantly sends my irritation into overdrive.

"Oh, her? That's Bethany. She's a nobody, don't worry about it. I'll get your water while you choose what you want to eat," she rambles before spinning on her heel and sauntering off.

Well then.

As much as these fuckers piss me off for being rude to her, I find it highly amusing that everyone has to make sure I know she's nothing. If someone is nothing, I wouldn't need anyone to tell me that, it would be easy to see. So why does everyone feel the need to tell me little plain Jane is indeed a little plain Jane?

Clearly being an asshole to my new debate partner isn't going to work in my favor unless I turn my sights on someone like Aimee. She'd probably give me all the details she knows and a blowjob to go with it.

As tempting as that is, there is just something that swirls deep in the depths of Bethany's blue eyes that tells me she knows her own brand of pain. She's not an airhead like Aimee seems to be, who likely only knows the length of every guy's dick in her class, not the nitty-gritty shit I need to complete my assignment.

I need Bethany, and to get her, I'm going to have to be nicer to the little wallflower.

So I have to be less harsh, less my usual self, I guess. How the fuck do I do that?

I swipe a hand down my face as I mull over ideas in my head.

Maybe I should ask her on a date or something and get her to loosen up a little. Dating isn't really my thing, but the thought doesn't make me cringe.

I glance over to Bethany's section again, but I don't spot her anywhere, and as if knowing my attention has fallen back to plain Jane, the flirty waitress appears beside me, tapping my shoulder.

My back stiffens, and my jaw tenses as I turn a deadly glare her way. I watch as the girl's eyes widen in surprise, and she automatically takes a cautious step back as I speak. "Don't fucking touch me without my permission. Ever."

I can hear the bite in my words, but I don't give a fuck. I have boundaries, and if I haven't told you about them, you definitely don't get to fucking cross them.

"I...I...uh..."

"I'll take the steak cooked medium and a side of mashed potatoes. Thanks," I tell her dismissively, turning my gaze from her, but I feel her eyes on me for a few more moments before she finally leaves.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself, which is always difficult when I'm caught off guard. I try to let the sounds of the other customers wash over me, but it's not much use.

I take a sip of my water, followed by another, as I watch Bethany step out of the *Staff Only* door.

Bethany.

She looks like a Bethany, yet she doesn't all at once.

"Bethany" sounds soft, quiet, and meek, which is this girl to a tee, but in my opinion, a Bethany shouldn't look so broken, like a shell of herself. No, that's two different people altogether.

Fuck, Ryan. Get a grip.

I'm putting way too much thought into this, more than I know is necessary, especially when she could ultimately be a dead end anyway. She might not hold any information to help my assignment.

I sit in silence, thankful when it's Linda who places my food down in front of me without a word. The other waitress,

Aimee, either cried like a baby over my short and curt tone earlier, or by some miracle, Linda knew she was a fucking nuisance. Either way, I don't complain, digging into the amazing food as always.

I don't know what I'll do after I return to Featherstone Academy and have to deal with average food in comparison. A shudder runs through me at the thought. The food isn't all that bad there, it's just not as good as here.

I observe as customer after customer settles their check and leaves, watching Bethany as she rushes around. She must be able to sense me watching, but she somehow manages to avoid my gaze at every opportunity. It's not often I come across a girl who fights the natural pull of attraction I have, and I usually hate a challenge, but she has my interest.

"You have eyes for my girl, huh?"

I startle, glancing to my right to find Linda looking at me with a knowing smirk on her lips and her eyebrow raised. I roll my eyes in response as I push my empty plate aside.

"Please," I scoff, wiping my mouth with my napkin, but I don't fool her, I don't think it's even possible to.

"You sure? Because I'm a badass matchmaker," she responds with a hand on her hip, and it's my turn to show surprise.

I only pause for a moment, considering her words. Right now, I'll take any help I can get, even if I have to put on a fake show of being attracted to this girl.

"Do your thing then," I say with a smile, which she returns.

"If I find out you're a dick to her, I'll put rat poison in your next meal." She doesn't wait for a response before sauntering around the tables until she reaches Bethany's side, who looks like she's going through the tables to say she's leaving, just like the first night I came in here. A quick glance at my watch tells me it's around the same time too.

Linda leans to whisper in her ear, causing Bethany to tense, but the subtle nod she offers has me relaxing back into

my seat.

I don't know what Linda just said, but it keeps me from having to try and come up with a reason to speak with her. I hate shitty small talk.

I keep my eyes fixed on her as she lowers her head and starts walking in my direction. I have no idea what Linda just said, but it sure as fuck worked. As Bethany approaches my table, she still doesn't lift her head to look at me. Once she stops at the side of the booth, she reaches her hand out and grabs my plate.

Shit.

She's going to grab my dishes and run.

Nope. No way.

I rush to grab her wrist, and just as my fingers touch her skin, she manages to slip away from me with a glare as she finally lifts her head.

The way she moved so quickly, leaving the plate on the table, catches me by surprise, especially when I've been trained to move quickly and stealthily. Had she anticipated the move?

"Sorry, I wanted to ask you a few questions before you ran away with the dishes," I say quietly, trying not to spook her, and her frown deepens at my words.

"Did you lose your tongue?" Her question makes me pause and has me looking at her in confusion as she glares at me. Before I can ask what that's supposed to mean, she shakes her head in annoyance. "Maybe next time you should try using your mouth instead of your hands."

She glances down stiffly, and I realize my hand is still frozen in place between us, so I quickly drop it to the table as I clear my throat.

Whoa. Boundaries. Maybe I should consider that she has some too, and if I want to get on her good side, I'm going to have to respect them.

“Okay, well, can you sit and chat with me for a little bit?” I ask, meeting her piercing blue eyes as she starts shaking her head before I’ve even finished asking the question.

“No.”

She gives me her back, walking away from me, and I’m up on my feet and striding after *her* before I even realize it.

“It won’t take long. I just want to get to know you better,” I continue, following her around the tables, but she steps through the *Staff Only* door, and one quick glance in Linda’s direction tells me I’ll be going too far if I barge in there.

Fuck.

I thought she said she was going to help me? This definitely doesn’t feel like it’s working at all. Digging into my wallet, I make my way toward Linda at the cash register, flashing a fifty-dollar bill at her. She takes it from my outstretched hand.

It’s definitely more than I needed to pay, but I don’t have time to worry about that right now. I don’t say another word to her as I head outside. Bethany is clearly due to finish soon, so I can hover around for a little while.

I step outside into the cool night air, but it’s not so bad that I need a jacket. I look up at the sky and take a deep breath. *Be nicer, Ryan.*

I pull my phone out, responding to a few text messages from Benji and a couple of other friends, when someone opens the door, catching my attention. When Bethany finally steps out, she looks like she’s in a rush, and when her eyes find mine, they widen in surprise, but she instantly picks up her pace before I can say anything.

She breezes past me, and like a damn creeper, I follow after her for the second time in less than fifteen minutes.

“I don’t have time to talk to you right now,” she calls over her shoulder, her gaze cast downward as she carries on walking with her backpack firmly in place.

I expect her to jump into a car and peel out of the parking lot, but instead, she cuts through it and heads in the opposite direction of my beach house.

Where on earth is she going?

“Are you broke or something?” I blurt out, cringing slightly at my words.

She spins on her heel, coming to a stop as she gapes at me. “Oh my God, are you always so damn rude?”

I open my mouth to respond, but before the first syllable comes out, she’s already continuing down the road.

There’s not much in this direction except the beach to the left of us and open green landscaping to the right side of the road with a few trees and flowers dotted around. There aren’t any streetlights to illuminate her path.

Why is she walking this way in the dark? Does she do this every night?

I force myself to stay a few feet behind her, but I really want to walk at her side.

Boundaries. Respect the boundaries, Ryan.

“I just mean you don’t seem to have a car, and you don’t have a phone. Is it because you can’t afford it?”

That could be my leverage—money for knowledge. Power is key, and money can always buy it.

“No, jerkface, it’s just because my—wait, why am I explaining myself to you? Please go away,” she says, attempting to give me a death glare over her shoulder, but I pick up my speed so I’m walking beside her.

Fuck the boundaries.

“It’s just because what?” I prompt, falling into step with her, but she shakes her head.

“I asked you to go away.” She keeps her eyes fixed forward, not glancing in my direction as I swipe a hand down my face.

I glance around at how dark it is and think on my feet. “It’s not safe for you to walk home alone at night, you might get approached by dangerous men.”

“What, like right now?” she retorts, her eyes shooting to mine, and I clear my throat.

The moonlight offers little illumination, but I’m used to seeing in the dark, so my eyes adapt far too quickly.

“Well, no. I just—”

“Listen, I don’t know what you want or why you’re even here, but honestly, give up on this,” she warns, waving a hand between us. “I’m a loser for a reason, and now I’m late and that’s a lot more urgent than dealing with you right now.” She groans. I don’t miss the slight tremor of fear coming through her voice before she takes off sprinting down the sidewalk as a house comes into view at the end of the road.

It looks like something out of a horror movie. The architecture is all jagged with sharp edges, it’s in the middle of nowhere, offering the only real light on the road, and even the beach comes to a stop before we reach the house.

I don’t try to run after her, it’s clearly no use, but I continue to follow her lead, watching as she races down the path of the house before disappearing behind the trees that line the property. I guess that’s her home, but I don’t know what all the rush is for. I glance at my watch to see it’s only nine thirty-five.

I can see the sign from here, etched into the stone on the edge of the driveway of the property. I knew I was on the right track with this girl, my gut is never wrong with this kind of thing.

Asheville House.

A motherfucking founding family.

SIX



BETHANY

Please don't be following me. Please.

I try to glance over my shoulder as I turn down the path to my house, but I'm running so fast everything is a blur.

I come to a halt at the wooden door, trying to take a deep breath before I knock. I take another quick look over my shoulder, which has me sagging with relief when I don't see Ryan anywhere. I'm still beyond nervous over the reaction I'm going to get from my father for being five minutes late, but I don't want to add the embarrassment of someone watching me knock on my own door.

A couple of moments go by and no one answers. I rub my hands together nervously, unsure whether to knock again or not, but a sudden cry from Hunter in his bedroom right above me makes me freeze.

My heart rate instantly spikes as adrenaline kicks in, and my thoughts start running a mile a minute.

Staring up at the window like I can see through the wall or something, I panic when I hear him cry out again in pain, followed by what sounds like my father's voice booming around the house.

Hunter must have done something they decided was wrong, and now he's facing the consequences with some form of punishment.

I can't just stand here. I refuse.

If I go inside and break my father's rule, it will definitely pull their attention away from him.

Taking a deep breath, I wrap my trembling fingers around the door handle and silently thank God when it opens. I didn't need that door to be locked right now.

Rushing inside, I quickly shut the door behind me as I focus on the chaos that seems to be going on upstairs.

I feel like I'm going to be sick. My body is quivering, and my heart feels like it just might rip out of my chest, but this isn't about me, it's about Hunter.

Keeping my backpack firmly in place, I rush up the stairs in a blur, frantically trying to get to Hunter as quickly as possible.

I can't bring myself to look at the fake, happy family photos that hang on the walls lining the stairs. They are lies, a figment of imagination, and as I come to a stop at the top of the stairs, my words have never been confirmed more—the real truth lives inside this house.

“Stop!” I shout, my eyes flying to Hunter as my heart pounds wildly in my chest from a mixture of fear for Hunter and the punishment I know is coming my way.

My father's head whips around from where he is standing. He's hovering above Hunter, the smell of alcohol lingering in the air. Hunter lies on the ground with fear etched into his green eyes as he cowers in a ball. There is a bright red handprint across his cheek.

No. No. No. No.

The anger in my father's face has a rock sitting in the pit of my stomach. His eyes are wide as his frown lines deepen and his lips lift in a snarl. If it were me he was taking his anger out on, I would accept the punishment, but I refuse to let him go after my innocent ten-year-old brother.

I slip into my primal instincts before I even realize it, defying my father yet again as I step forward, watching as he stands to his full height. As much as I know the blow is

coming, my body stiffening to brace for the impact, I'll take it because it will give Hunter a moment of peace.

"Run, Hunter!" I yell just before the back of my father's hand hits my cheek, the pain ricocheting through my body and sending me stumbling sideways.

I hit the floor harshly, landing in a heap at his feet on my side, and I wince.

Frantically searching for Hunter, I watch as my father grabs Hunter's arm while he is trying to get away, and I drag myself to my feet even though I feel disoriented.

It feels like the room is spinning, and the ringing in my ears doesn't subside as I try to regain my balance.

With a slight stumble, I don't hesitate to place myself between them, facing my father to protect my brother with my hands up in front of me.

"Bitch, I'll fucking deal with *you* after I deal with this little cunt. You're only making things worse for yourself right now, *Bethany*. Don't you worry though. I've kept track of every wrong move you've made since you missed curfew."

His voice is filled with rage as he practically spits the cruel reminder at me, his teeth grinding together as he glares, but I don't flinch as he gets in my face. I *refuse* to move.

"I'll take his punishment, just leave him alone," I state, feeling Hunter place his hand on my back as he attempts to hide from my father's wrath. His fingers curl into my top, but the yelp that comes from behind me tells me my father hasn't relaxed his grip on Hunter's arm.

"Oh, you can take his punishment," he sneers, and I sag at his words. I'm not thinking about the consequences I'll receive, just thankful to stop Hunter from experiencing this. "After I've taught him a fucking lesson," my father adds, and I realize too late I've let my walls down too quickly.

With his spare hand, my father wraps his hand around my ponytail and yanks my head backward before pulling me to the side by my hair. I stumble over my own feet as I feel Hunter's presence behind me disappear.

I try to glance in his direction, but when I do, I see the fear touching the soul in his dull green eyes, and my heart breaks just before my father slams my head into the wall.

If I thought I felt pain earlier, I was mistaken, truly mistaken.

Luckily, this isn't my first rodeo with this man, and I've learned to keep my mouth shut and glue my tongue to the roof of my mouth so I don't bite down on it. Again.

My head throbs as I lose sense of my surroundings, the pounding pain overwhelming me. The only thing stopping me from shutting my eyes and drifting off into a state of unconsciousness is the fact that he still has Hunter.

Trying to blink my eyes open, I realize I'm lying curled up in a ball on the floor beside the wall with my backpack still on. I'd probably be at a better advantage if I took it off, but I could need it if this goes the way it has before. I don't even know where I am in the hallway, all I know is I can barely focus my gaze.

My vision is watery as I try to roll over onto my knees, my body almost numb as I splay my fingers out on the floor in front of me.

Move quicker, Bethany.

I push up onto my feet and brace my hand on the wall as I try to balance myself, but I don't see anyone. I squeeze my temples with my free hand as I try to lessen the throbbing in my head, and I'm just able to hear the yelling coming from downstairs.

Oh crap.

He's putting Hunter in isolation.

I wobble a little as I rush to the stairs, using the wall and the banister on either side of me to help me get down as quickly as possible. My legs threaten to buckle beneath me, but I refuse to succumb to the pain.

I push past the rising nausea, bile burning the back of my throat as I reach the bottom of the stairs, steadying myself with

a deep breath.

“In future, boy, you’ll learn to fucking do as you’re told!” my father yells before I hear the door slam shut and the key turn in the lock.

My heart sinks. I’m too late.

But he’s safer in the small confinement room than he is out here.

I think we both would be.

Still standing at the bottom of the stairs, I haven’t moved a muscle as I take the moment of peace to try and steady my breathing, but I feel the atmosphere around me change, and I know my father is back for me. The air is suddenly suffocating and tense, and I can’t breathe with the anticipation.

Trying to relax my body, I force myself not to get defensive, not to stand tall, because I know he really doesn’t like that. I don’t need to make him or the situation any worse than it already is.

“Where shall we begin, Bethany?” my father taunts, and I force my eyes open to find him looming above me with a sneer on his lips and a wicked glint in his soulless eyes.

I don’t answer him, not a single word. I’ve learned it’s always a rhetorical question because he’s about to rattle off all of my sinful transgressions.

“You were home late. You entered this house without our permission. You stepped in the way while I was teaching your brother a lesson, and for the cherry on top, you asked to receive Hunter’s punishment. Am I correct?”

With each point, he raises another finger on his hand, all while I stand here, still wracked with pain from the last time he hit me.

“Four offences. Four punishments. You’ve already received two. I am fair, Bethany, but you must face two additional punishments,” he murmurs, stepping closer so I can feel his breath fan against my face. I try not to crumble, waiting for what’s to come. “But I can’t do anything else to

this pretty face tonight, Bethany, not when we have guests coming over in a few days,” he continues, stroking his hand down my face. It takes everything I have not to pull away from his touch, even though the rough press of his fingers makes me want to heave.

I don’t anticipate any movement from him until his fist hits my stomach without warning, knocking the wind out of me. As I lean forward, trying to automatically shield myself from the pain, he grips my throat, stopping me from falling as he begins to move.

I practically let him drag me through the room by my throat, my feet dragging across the floor as I struggle to keep up with him. My head feels like it’s going to pop with the pressure he has around my neck as my hands grapple with his, trying to ease the pain as my eyes water, but without pause, he swings the front door open and tosses me outside.

I land in a heap, *again*, my palms scraping across the gravel as a tiny sob breaks past my lips. I hear the door slam shut behind me as I try to fill my lungs with the night air. I don’t move for a moment as I try to take stock of my body, but I’m not sure where any of the actual pain is coming from anymore. *Everything* hurts.

When I’m sure my father has gone, I slowly force myself back to my feet, adrenaline the only thing keeping me going right now as I stand as tall as I can and straighten my backpack.

Punishment number four is being kicked out of the house for the night—or I hope it’s just for the night—which reminds me about Hunter’s situation.

My eyes immediately go to the right of the house, spying the tiny, frosted basement window. I rush over as quietly as I can and crouch down beside it.

“Hunter,” I whisper, holding my breath as I listen for his response, and the second I hear his voice, my eyes fill with tears.

“Beth, I don’t like it down here,” he responds, but he’s not crying. He almost sounds defeated more than anything, and it kills me.

“I know, buddy, I know. But it’s safer there right now, and if you look under the old cabinet, you’ll find a few treats and a blanket. You just need to make sure you put everything back before morning, okay?”

I hear him moving around, likely checking for the items I mentioned, before he comes back to the window with a sad smile on his face.

“I love you, Bethany.”

“I love you too,” I whisper, trying to hold the tears at bay as I offer him a forced smile through the open window, which he sees right through even at just ten years old.

With a simple nod, I push through the pain and rise to my feet. Feeling dizzy and off balance, I slowly put distance between me and my form of personal hell, but sadly, my reason for breathing as well.

I detest that he’s down there, but he really is safer as far away from *them* as possible. My parents won’t let Hunter out of isolation until morning, which I hate, but at least it stops them from hitting him.

Now, I need to figure out what I’m going to do with myself for the night. Sleeping outside in this state is going to be painful as hell. I can already feel the lump on the back of my head swelling, and my stomach is so sore it still leaves me breathless. My chances of falling asleep are going to be slim to none.

I pull my backpack tighter against me. I never take it off anymore because it has spare clothes, a hairbrush, and a jacket inside just in case. But maybe in the future, I need to start packing medical supplies too. I can just never get my hands on them.

How has my life come to this?



RYAN

My mind wouldn't stop running a mile a minute since I walked away from Bethany's house. The *Asheville* house. I'm definitely on to something with her. I just need to play this carefully so I can get what I want, whatever that is, and then get the fuck out of this town.

That's why I'm out here, in the middle of the night, surfing. It's the only thing that quiets my mind and offers a sense of peace, and since I'm actually so close to the ocean for a change, I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity. I couldn't stop myself from grabbing my board for the second time today.

There is something about the motion of the waves while I'm on my board with the moonlight reflecting off the water that helps me focus.

My legs and arms ache, but the rush of hitting the waves over and over again is everything. I thrive on it.

It's the one good thing I learned from one of the easier homes I was in. I remember the older kids teaching me off the coast of Rhode Island.

Swiping my hair back off my face, after my last plunge into the water, I decide to call it quits. It's likely after midnight already, and my crazy ass has school again tomorrow.

Lifting myself up onto my surfboard, I sit comfortably on the board with my legs dangling off either side, and slowly swipe my hands through the water, heading toward the sandy beach. I'm not far from the shore, but a lot closer to Pete's diner than my beach house.

Now that I'm a little more focused, I need to come up with a strategy for Bethany Asheville. She's not like the usual girls who want to drape themselves all over me, offering me any piece of advice for a little attention. To be honest, every time

I've tried to speak to her, she's practically run in the opposite direction.

I'm going to need to work on the communication part for sure since I'm not going to get any answers if she won't even stand in my vicinity for more than ten seconds. I haven't seen her with any friends that might help me out, and I'm not sure how money will help if she's a founding family member anyway.

Why couldn't I have been given an easy assignment, like surveillance or beating the shit out of someone? I have all the skills for it, I just don't have the patience for such a tedious task.

As my feet skim the bottom of the ocean, I hop off the board and carry it with me as I walk toward the towel I left in the sand in front of the beach house. Thankfully, I judged the tide well, because another foot or two, and it would have been floating somewhere in the ocean by now.

I uncuff my leg and run the towel over my hair, my wet suit barely keeping the chill off my body as I lift my board and head to the steps that lead up to the beach house.

It's pitch-black out here, and the moon and stars are literally the only sources of light. When I get to the bottom of the steps, I pause. The sound of someone or something humming makes me frown as I glance around, my body instantly going on high alert.

Glancing under the staircase, I see the outline of a person hiding under there. My frown deepens as I strain my eyes to get a better look. The outline is shaped like a female, and I can only assume that whoever she is, she has no clue I'm living here now.

What the fuck are they doing under there?

"Hey, what the fuck?" I exclaim, and the humming immediately stops.

A flashlight comes on in the girl's hand, which she points in my direction, blinding me as I try to shield my eyes and get a better look at who it is.

“Bethany?” I ask with confusion in my tone as I lower my board to the sand beside me and look her over. Is it really her?

The blonde hair in a simple ponytail and shimmering blue eyes tell me it is, but what the fuck is she doing here hiding under the stairs? I practically chased her home earlier. This makes no sense.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, and I almost laugh. Shouldn’t I be the one asking that? I almost do, but I manage to hold it back, not that I usually care about my filter.

“I’m staying here,” I respond, standing awkwardly as I look down at her. I watch as her eyes widen, the flashlight casting a glow across her face as realization dawns on her.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize,” she mumbles, scrambling to her feet as she suddenly starts stuffing random items into her bag, discarding the flashlight in the sand as she does. I just watch in confusion.

After a moment, she seems to gather herself, her backpack flung over her shoulder and the flashlight back in her hand. Her eyes flit around, like she’s trying to get around me without any further interaction.

“Bethany, what’s going on?” I question calmly, keeping my voice gentle as her gaze frantically searches mine. “Do you want to come inside? We could chat there,” I offer, but she’s already shaking her head as she walks toward me.

“No, no. It’s absolutely fine. Sorry to bother you,” she mutters, and my mind is beyond trying to understand the whole thing.

“Bethany, I thought you went home. Do—do you have a home?” I feel like a fucking dick for asking the question, but what else am I supposed to think? She’s hiding under the steps of my beach house. Admittedly, I haven’t seen her here before, but something just isn’t right.

“Of course I have a house, I just—I... You know what? It doesn’t matter,” she babbles, stepping away from me like a scared cat.

I swipe a hand down my face as I try to make myself seem less intimidating by moving back to give her more space. “Are you sure? Because I have no idea what time it is, but it’s likely after midnight, which isn’t the most ideal time for people to be outside alone in the dead of night,” I say softly, trying not to spook her any more than she already is.

“Like you?” she counters, her gaze still skittish, and the way she angles the flashlight makes me pause when I see the hint of a bruise on her cheek. *That* definitely wasn’t there earlier. I would have spotted it.

I have lived through enough beatings in foster homes and watched just as many to notice a noncombat injury from a mile away.

“Bethany, I need you to come inside so I can take a look at your face, okay?” I hold my hand out in her direction, watching as her eyes widen in surprise, but she doesn’t run or move toward me, she just stands in place.

“My face is fine,” she whispers, not lifting her hand to cover it or draw attention to what I mean. It’s a telltale sign she’s been through a beating or two before, and it leaves me even more startled.

I’m trying to imagine what could have happened between now and when I followed her home. What am I not seeing about this girl?

I don’t know what to say or do to ease her mind, but my childhood traumas make me want to offer her a helping hand for nothing in return. It’s an unspoken agreement.

“It’s completely up to you. You don’t have to tell me anything. I won’t ask you any questions, and you can head inside where it’s warmer. Or I can follow you around until you’re safely inside somewhere, a friend’s house maybe? I don’t know, but I can’t leave you like this.” Her eyes close as she likely runs through every possible scenario in her mind, and I feel the need to continue explaining myself. “There’s a second bedroom. You could head straight to it, no questions asked.” I force my voice to remain calm and gentle, wanting to

make sure she not only understands how serious I take this, but how much I mean my words too.

Her eyes find mine, swirling with a mixture of exhaustion, curiosity, and uncertainty. She rubs her hand across her lips nervously as she searches my gaze, but I don't know what she needs to see to know I'm being genuine.

"No questions asked?" she finally responds, suddenly losing the confidence to meet my gaze, and I take that as a win. It's just a tiny chip in her armor, but if it means I can get her inside where it's safe, I'll take it.

"No questions asked," I repeat in confirmation, finally dropping my hand to my side because I know she isn't going to take it.

I wave my hand for her to take the lead up the steps, and it feels like an eternity before she does, indecision still playing in her mind. The second she starts moving, however, I'm right behind her, trying not to crowd her space, my surfboard long forgotten as I let her lead the way. The sway of her ass makes me pause, but I shake my head, knowing now really isn't the fucking time for that.

When we reach the top, I lean around her to open the patio doors, and she still refuses to make eye contact as I switch on the light. Bethany's gaze remains on the floor. The bruise on her face is larger than it originally looked. It's slightly purple and oval across her cheek, although it doesn't look like it'll take too long to heal.

I clench my hands at my sides as she brushes her hair off her face, and I see her wince when she touches the back of her head.

It's on the tip of my tongue to demand answers from her, but I just promised I wouldn't, and if I want to gain her trust, I need to keep the questions to myself. Someone has laid their hands on her, and my gut tells me it happened when she stepped inside that house.

Fuck. What if I'd stayed around longer? Could I have stopped it?

“Where’s the bedroom?”

Her meek voice breaks through the thoughts running through my mind as we stand awkwardly in the doorway, and I clear my throat as I focus on the layout of the house.

“Top of the stairs, second door on the right, my room is directly across from it.” I’m not sure if I add the location of my bedroom to make her feel comfortable or safe, but the words are out there now regardless.

“Thank you,” she responds, her eyes finally meeting mine.

I nod in return, using all my restraint not to grill her to find out who laid a finger on her. I could tear them apart, limb by limb, but I don’t think that’s what she wants to hear right now, and I’m only supposed to be here to do my assignment and leave, not defend or protect people’s honor.

Fuck.

Tonight, I will offer her the safety net she needs, and tomorrow, I’ll get back to digging.

SEVEN



BETHANY

Prying my eyes open, I feel a little disoriented as I take in the space around me. It takes all of five seconds to remember I'm not in my own bedroom, but in a guy's house. Not just any guy's house, but *Ryan Carter's*—the new guy who seems to want to ignore everything I say and ask of him and refuses to respect physical and mental boundaries. In fact, when I ask him to leave me alone, he does the complete opposite.

Taking a look around, I find the room is very bare, apart from the double bed I'm in with the ridiculously soft sheets. There's a nightstand with a lamp, and a dresser against the far wall by the window. Thankfully, a pair of brown curtains covers the window in this magnolia painted room, but I purposely left them open so the sun would wake me.

I was in a state of shock last night when I was discovered hiding in my usual spot under the abandoned beach house, which apparently is not so abandoned anymore. My heart pounded rapidly in my chest when he mentioned the bruise forming on my face, and fear coated my skin as I scrambled to think of a lie, but I've never felt such a sense of relief like I did the moment he promised not to ask me more questions.

Of all the freaking people to live here, it had to be him.

Now, I have to face an awkward morning of being in someone else's house. I've never done this before, not even a sleepover. I don't know where my parents think I go when they kick me out, but it always confuses me. Their rules state

no sleeping over at a friend's house, but then they discard me on a regular basis.

Gently sweeping my hair back off my face, I groan as I sit on the edge of the bed. When I got in here last night, all I did was kick my shoes off and lie down. I have fresh clothes in my bag for today, so it wasn't too much of an issue to sleep in what I had been wearing. I would have done it outside anyway, it's where I always go.

I glance at my watch, checking the time. I have a little over an hour before I need to head toward the school bus. My body clock woke me up like it routinely does. I don't want to overstay my welcome. Ryan probably felt sorry for the little homeless girl under the steps, and I don't want to make this more uncomfortable than it already is.

I know he won't completely ignore the situation and not ask me questions, even though he said he wouldn't last night, and I don't know if I'm ready to give him any answers. No one has ever paid enough attention to me to know something isn't right, and since someone has figured it out, I'm not sure how to feel about it or how I'm *supposed* to feel about it.

Now I just need to make myself a little more presentable for the day. Grabbing my backpack that I placed beside the bed, I throw it over my shoulder as I go in search of a bathroom. I open the door as quietly as I can, hoping to avoid Ryan, and my eyes widen when I see a piece of paper stuck to his door across the hall.

Gone surfing.

Use whatever you need.

I'll be back in time to drive us to school.

I blush with embarrassment as I read his note. No one, and I mean no one, has ever offered me a helping hand or tried to take care of me, and this doesn't sit well. My mind instantly wants to know what the catch is, but deep down, I could really use a hot shower, so I hope he meant it when he said "*Use whatever you need.*" I'll just have to leave him my own note declining the drive to school once I'm done.

The door to my left leads to a bathroom, so I slip inside and lock it behind me. I think that's what I like most about this house—working locks and doors in places they are meant to be. It's a huge contrast to home.

Hunter.

I hope he's okay. My heart sinks a little as I look at my surroundings, guilt running through my veins. I hope he got everything put away before he woke up, because we really don't need more trouble right now.

They leave him down there, in the basement, with only blankets and no food. It was the same cruel punishment I felt until I turned fourteen, before they upped the damage.

The bathroom is clean, not a single thing is out of place, and it's impressive that it's not a dump. It's simple enough, with a vanity and a large mirror to my right, the toilet straight ahead, and a shower to my left. It looks like every surface is made out of marble, all expensive and stuff, and it makes me wonder who paid for this. Where are Ryan's parents? I should have probably asked all of that last night.

I'm clearly trusting this guy far too easily. Dammit.

I guess I have my own questions too, but I can hold my tongue and forever be curious if necessary.

Turning the shower on, I strip out of my clothes and place my clean outfit on the vanity. My father didn't comment on my outfit yesterday, but that's probably because he was so focused on all the other mistakes I made.

I step under the spray, letting the hot water cascade over my body, and relax under the pressure, my muscles easing enough for me to take a moment to look myself over. I never really got a chance yesterday, but looking down at my stomach, I find a dark, fist-shaped bruise where my father punched me. At least I can cover this one up without any issues.

I avoid touching my injuries and make sure the water doesn't catch the bruises so it doesn't hurt. I'm just thankful I

don't have PE today and can wallow in the art department instead, nursing my wounds.

I use the watermelon body wash on the side, which hasn't been opened yet, and gently cleanse my aching body before moving on to my hair. When I run my fingers over the lump on the back of my head, I wince but continue to work the strawberry shampoo into my scalp.

One day I won't feel pain anymore. It'll either be because I got free of this town or because I'm dead. Either way, I dream of the day when I'll know what it feels like to be pain free.

Stepping out of the shower, I grab a fluffy white towel off the shelf and wrap it around my body as I come to stand in front of the mirror. I don't know what kind of coating it has, but there is zero steam on it. Nice.

I turn my head to look at my cheek, spying the bruise that caught Ryan's attention, and I cringe at the dime-sized purple hue on my cheekbone. I don't have any makeup to cover it. My father usually does a better job of hitting me where people can't see it. The last blow to my face had thankfully not been hard enough to leave a mark the next day.

With a sigh, I dig into my backpack, pulling out the clear bag I carry around with a spare toothbrush and an almost empty tube of toothpaste. I hurry up and brush my teeth before I quickly dress in a pair of black yoga pants and a loose-fitting lilac t-shirt, braiding my hair back off my face so it doesn't pull too tight on the lump.

Emerging from the bathroom, I slip back into the guest bedroom to put my shoes on and then head for the stairs. Maybe if I can sneak out without him noticing me, I won't have to face his questioning eyes.

My heart pounds nervously in my chest as I tiptoe down the stairs, my gaze focused on the back door that leads down to the beach. I hope he left it unlocked.

I only make it halfway to the bottom when I hear my name and jump on the spot.

“Bethany.”

My eyes go wide as I find a shirtless Ryan in the kitchen making breakfast with a small grin on his face.

I gape at him. I can't miss the six-pack, tan skin, and perfectly sculpted body, but I quickly remember myself and glare at him.

"Don't do that," I chide, feeling my cheeks heat as he stares me down with raised eyebrows as he simply shrugs in response.

"Sorry, I could see the need to run in your eyes as you eyed the back door, so I wanted to make sure you knew I was here," he replies, which just makes me feel even more self-conscious.

Was he trying not to scare me or stop me from leaving without talking? I'm confused.

I continue down the rest of the stairs, actually taking in the open space on the first floor. I didn't have a chance last night, everything was a blur, but it screams bachelor pad, with the large sofa layout and big television on the wall opposite the white kitchen. I love how it is all open and cozy at the same time.

"Where are your parents?" I finally ask as I step farther into the room and closer to the patio doors I came in through last night.

He clears his throat. "Dead."

I almost join them as the one word sinks in. My blood turns to ice in my veins as I scramble to apologize, my eyes widening as I swallow past the lump in my throat.

"I'm so so—"

"Don't say you're sorry. Honestly, it's fine," he interrupts, but his voice is calm and relaxed, like he's come to peace with it. I nibble nervously on my bottom lip.

I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I can feel the slight tension around us. The memory of last night hovers like the cliché elephant in the room as I look anywhere but at him. I

feel like I've completely overstepped a boundary, and now I feel obligated to offer...something.

"Bacon and eggs? It is literally the only thing I can make. Not even toast. That burns," he says, and my gaze flicks to his in confusion for a moment until I realize he's offering me breakfast.

"Uh, no, no thanks. I'm going to head out now anyway," I murmur, adjusting my backpack, and he frowns at me.

"Don't worry about school, I'll get us there...unless you need to go somewhere beforehand?"

He stares at me, patiently waiting for my response with his hands on his hips and a towel over his shoulder.

I sigh. "Honestly, I'm just going to head to school. I really don't want to have an awkward breakfast where you badger me with a million questions," I ramble, losing my filter for a moment as I tighten my grip on the strap of my bag.

"How about we make a deal then?" he says, turning to remove the pans from the heat then facing me properly with his ridiculously hot body on display, making me blush again. "We eat breakfast in silence, and I won't ask any questions until the car ride to school."

I'd rather not have any questions at all, but the smell of bacon is admittedly too good to pass up. Surely my parents won't find out about this *one* time I didn't take the bus to school.

"I could agree to this, but I feel like there should be a limit on the questions asked, and I get to ask some of my own too. It's called a compromise," I counter, moving closer to him and pulling out a seat at the breakfast bar.

"Okay, how many?" he asks, his back to me as he plates the food, and I try not to look at how muscular he is. There is just something about him that gets under my skin and makes my heart pound.

"Five."

"Or we could—"

“You asked how many, I said five, we’re not bartering on that,” I state, interrupting him, and the grin on his lips as he looks over his shoulder makes my palms sweat and my cheeks blush.

“Oh, she’s got fire, huh?” he teases, raising his eyebrow at me. I shake my head, opting to look through the patio doors at the ocean instead. “Fine, five questions it is then, but you have to answer them honestly.”

I sigh but nod in response, not checking to see if he noticed my silent acceptance, but when he doesn’t ask me again, I take it he saw and understood.

Moments later, a plate is placed in front of me, followed quickly by a glass of orange juice, and I murmur my thanks. He sits across from me, and I happily fall into the silence he promised as we eat.

I occasionally feel his gaze on me, but I don’t look up from my plate until every bite of food is gone.

“I’ll be ready in two if you want to grab my keys and wait in the truck,” he offers, and I finally lift my gaze to him.

Do I really want to get in a vehicle with him?

I mean, I know I stayed here last night, except that was a moment of weakness, and no one was around to see, but people would notice me pulling up to school with him. It’d either get back to my parents or cause a lot of gossip in school. I feel like admitting any of that out loud is far too deep, however, and running on hopes that none of that happens.

A quick glance at my watch tells me I’m out of options because breakfast took longer than expected, and I’ll never make it to the bus now.

“Are you sure you want to show up to school with me? It won’t be all that good for your image,” I admit, trying to flip my reasoning, but he just rolls his eyes at me.

“Just get in the truck, Bethany,” he mumbles, placing his keys in front of me before leaving the table and rushing upstairs.

Well then.

I slowly reach out and grab the keys, playing with them in my hand for a moment before taking a deep breath. I expect to see a key ring, an insight into the kind of guy he is, but there isn't one, and that unfortunately gives me nothing.

I don't care about the gossip. They already ignore me or toss insults my way, which I can deal with. And my parents... well, screw my father for kicking me out in the middle of the night again.

With my mind made up, I head for the door, my backpack firmly in place as I step outside to see a parked truck. Glancing down at the keys in my hand, I press the button to unlock the vehicle and slide into the passenger seat.

I place the keys on his seat so he has them before fastening my seatbelt and waiting nervously for him. Thankfully he appears moments later, wearing a white t-shirt and jeans with a bag slung over his shoulder.

That's a shame. His body is way too hot to be covered up like that, but what do I know?

Ryan climbs in beside me and puts his keys in his pocket before starting the engine. The radio blasts through the speakers, catching me by surprise. He quickly turns it down, murmuring an apology before I can even figure out what he is listening to, as he puts the car in drive and starts heading toward school.

I almost think he's forgotten about asking questions when a few minutes pass by silently, but apparently I'm not that lucky.

"So how about I ask something a little easier to start off with? You have to answer me honestly, remember?" he begins, and I glance at him out of the corner of my eye to find him glancing at me.

I sigh, nodding reluctantly. "Fine." I shift uncomfortably in my seat, and nerves tingle over my skin as I prepare myself for his next words.

"Do you really not have a phone?"

My eyes flash to him properly this time, and it takes me a second to remember our conversation in English yesterday. I can deal with this line of questioning. It's not at all what I was expecting. "No, I *really* don't. Next question," I respond, relaxing into my seat a little as I wait for Ryan to continue. I want him to ask all of his questions first before I even attempt to try to understand the guy sitting beside me, and the fact that I even want to confuses me more than anything else.

"Was that your house last night?"

Ah, that's a little deeper, but still something I'm comfortable answering.

"Yeah, I've lived there my whole life," I tell him, brushing a loose tendril of my hair behind my ear as I watch him nod, trying to process my words.

"So you're an Asheville," he states, looking at me out of the corner of his eye as he continues toward school, and I sigh.

"Yes, I'm Bethany Asheville. Is that important somehow?" I ask, taking his statement as one of his questions, because it damn sure feels personal, but he shakes his head.

"No, I just saw the carved sign yesterday and wanted to clarify."

Silence falls over us for a moment, and I think he's done, but I really need to stop assuming with him.

"Who hit you last night, Bethany, and if you have a home then why were you trying to fall asleep under the steps of my beach house?" His tone is soft, gentle almost, but it still hits my gut the same.

And there it is, the *deeper* questions I was hoping he would bypass, and now I feel like a fool because I really don't know how to answer any of this while being honest. Being truthful about the situation is not something I've ever done before.

Wetting my lips, I release a slow breath. "Things are... difficult," I hedge quietly, stalling because I don't know this guy. I really don't want to tell him my deepest, darkest secrets. This feels completely different than the trust I put in him last

night, sleeping in the same house as him and letting him feed me.

This is...more.

“I guessed that,” he replies, and I glare at him, fucking asshole, but he continues. “My parents died when I was a child, so I’ve traveled around a lot from place to place, dealing with a lot of my own shit. I’m not saying I get it, because I don’t think anyone ever really can, but I know some dark places exist in this world.”

I let his words sink in as I spy Asheville High coming up in the distance.

“I was under the steps of the beach house because on the nights I can’t be at home, it’s the safest place I’ve found,” I admit, my voice shaky as bile burns the back of my throat and I offer some form of truth.

“You don’t ever sleep under those steps again, do you hear me?” he growls, and my heart sinks as I turn to gape at him, but he’s not mad at me, he’s mad at the *situation*—I can tell the difference—and that’s the only reason I’m not shaking with fear. Digging a hand into his pocket while driving, he produces a key. “If you ever, and I mean *ever*, need to go somewhere, you unlock the fucking door to the beach house and climb into that bed, okay?”

I continue to stare at him in surprise as he carefully places the key in my lap so he can focus back on the road, but I’m too stunned to say anything.

This is a first—a first I don’t know how to react to.

“It’s not safe out there, Bethany. Not even a little. But that room can be your safe place. I won’t ask questions, I won’t even say a word if you don’t want me to, just *use the key*.”

I find myself nodding slightly, and tears well in my eyes as I let the current situation wash over me. Ryan pulls into the school parking lot, choosing a space at the back so there’s a fair bit to walk, but it still beats the bus, and hopefully news won’t travel back to my parents.

As he puts the car in park, he looks my way, and I can hear the question in his mind almost before he says the words out loud. “Just please put me out of my misery and tell me who hit you.”

My palms sweat as I’m pinned by his gaze, the key digging into my skin as I try to take a calming breath while his blue eyes swirl with an emotion I can’t quite put my finger on.

“I can’t,” I whisper, the feel of my anxiety and panic rising inside of me as he searches my eyes.

“Is it an adult, Bethany? Just give me that for now,” he murmurs softly, almost like he’s pleading as he turns toward me.

I offer one nod in response before scrambling to open the car door and get the hell out of there. I don’t look back, and he doesn’t try to chase after me. I just admitted half of a fact to someone, a fact I’ve never shared with another soul except Hunter.

Ever.

Please don’t let it be a mistake.

EIGHT



RYAN

I don't know if I'm allowed to be off campus during lunchtime, but I couldn't really give a shit. Something has been nagging at me all morning. I had to figure it out, and I wasn't waiting until after school, since that would delay it even longer. I'm mad that it's taken me away from digging into this town, but my mind just won't settle.

Besides, I can't stand being at school and having all of those fucking girls follow me around all day. If I have to socialize and pretend to give a shit when some Barbie steps in front of me wanting to get to know me, I'm probably going to explode. I've reached my social limit. People seem to know no boundaries.

Back at Featherstone Academy, I'm notorious for being a dick. A dick that gets pussy whenever he wants, but a dick all the same. If I want to blend in here, I have to act *nicer*, and that fucking infuriates me.

Usually, I would find myself in the food hall with Benji and a few other friends from our dorms, and a simple nod or wink would let the girl know I was interested, but they would never approach me on their own. They knew it was a sure way to go to the bottom of my list of fuckability.

Climbing into my truck, I place the bag on the passenger seat beside me. I stare down at it for a moment before I shake my head. There's no going back now, and the longer I stare at it, the more confused I get with myself. I refuse to spend any

more time wondering about what-ifs. I've bought it now, and I'm not taking it back.

I put my seatbelt on and shift the truck into drive. I have fifteen minutes to get back to school, find *her*, and then pretend like nothing happened. Thank God there was a hotdog stand on the sidewalk near where I parked, otherwise I would have gone without eating.

Heading toward Asheville High, I let my mind drift back to Bethany, and I try to wrap my head around my own damn actions. She bewilders me. Completely. I don't act like this, and I'm more than fucking confused.

On the surface she's the wallflower, the nerd, the quiet mousy girl who happily hides away from the world and prefers it that way. But it seems like no one has looked deeper. I can see the pain in her crystal blue eyes. How has no one ever noticed that before?

She refused to give me much information, but the way she reacted tells me someone in her home is beating her, and she either ran out of there in fear or was thrown out. Just thinking about it has adrenaline running through my veins again.

Picking up on people's social cues, body language, and being perceptive is part of my training. It's paramount to being a member of the infiltration side of Featherstone, and I take it very seriously.

But either way, it placed her back in my path last night, a situation I hadn't tried to orchestrate, and I can't help but feel protective of her.

It makes my own past and traumas want to come to the forefront of my mind, but I can't bring myself to go there right now, preferably not at all, yet it's as if a part of me just can't sit back and watch it happen.

Statistically speaking, the man in that house is the one most likely hurting her, and that's what riles me even more.

I don't condone domestic violence in any variety—children, husbands, wives, none. It only tells me someone is

desperate for power and control, neither of which they deserve.

I'd like to see that fucker take me on, but I have to remind myself that this isn't my fight. I might want to make it my fight, but I have to understand the situation better, and I can't do that if Bethany keeps her mouth locked up tight.

I take the turn to pull into the school parking lot, and the memory of giving her a key to the beach house this morning flashes in my mind.

A. Key. To. The. Fucking. Beach. House.

I don't know what came over me, but when I sent her to get into the truck then ran upstairs to throw on a shirt, I found myself instinctively reaching for the spare key. And now there's the bag beside me too.

Fuck.

I glance at it out of the corner of my eye and sigh as I park the truck, swiping a hand down my face in frustration.

What is it about this girl that has me doing all of this? Damn if I know, but I know it'll all be worth it when she spills some truths about Knight's Creek and puts me on the right track to getting the fuck out of here.

Or that's what I tell myself at least. Guilt threatens to ooze through me at the thought of using her for my own personal gain.

Settling down, or even getting attached to someone in general, let alone in Knight's Creek, feels surreal.

Sighing again, I grab the bag and climb out of the truck, heading straight for the steps with five minutes to spare. There are a few people sitting on the grass out front, but everyone else will either be in the cafeteria or on the way to their next class.

I glance down at the bag, trying to decide whether I should search for her now or just head to the locker room. My slight twinge of doubt over this whole thing has me striding for the locker room instead.

When we go to the locker room back at Featherstone Academy, we change into our workout gear to practice combat, which has us all performing skills ranging from jujitsu to Krav Maga. Here, it means they are going to try to get me to participate in some kind of sport. No fucking thanks. Not unless surfing is now suddenly acceptable.

I think I've made it through the crowds of people unnoticed until I hear my name.

"Ryan! Hey, Ryan!" I hear some girl calling out, and it annoys me that I can tell by the pitch of her voice it's the same bitch who was rude to Bethany in class the other day.

Despite what I actually want to do, I pause and turn to glance over my shoulder to find her marching toward me. With my body stiff, it's as if everyone walking by me can sense my *don't fucking look at me* vibe, giving me a wide berth as they move around me.

I watch as she straightens her white skirt and adjusts her tank top so it makes her boobs look bigger, and I refrain from rolling my eyes.

"I've been calling your name for ages," she complains as she comes to stand beside me, moving to stroke her hand down my arm. I manage to shift away before she can touch me, disguising it as a shrug.

"What do you want?" I ask, getting straight to the point, and it makes her pout. Pity it doesn't actually look cute on her. She keeps trying to move closer, but I make sure to keep at least a foot between us. The smell of her perfume is like repellant, far too fake, and I have zero time for it.

"Are you going to the game this weekend? I'm cheer captain, and I thought you—"

"No. Thanks, but no," I interrupt, watching her eyes widen in surprise before turning and continuing toward the locker room without a backward glance.

I can hear her grumbling behind me, but I just ignore her. She doesn't seem like the type to take no for an answer no matter how many times someone says it, so I'm not going to

give her even an inkling of hope. Her panties are probably up and down more than a hooker's.

I don't give a fuck if I'm stereotyping her, she judged Bethany too.

Fuck.

Stop defending her, dickhead.

I just can't seem to help myself.

Making a quick stop at my locker, I place the bag inside and grab my duffel just as the last bell rings, but I don't pick up my speed. I'd rather be late than be chosen to play on a team. Pulling my schedule from my pocket, I have a quick glance at which sport I actually have since I can't remember shit from enrolling, and I'm content to see it's the basketball class and not the football one.

I guess I can deal with that. It's my preferred sport between the two, and I've heard how awful the football team is here. No thanks.

Pushing through the doors of the men's locker room, I'm surprised to see most of the guys still lingering around and joking. It looks like all gym classes are mixed together at Knight's Creek, which means that asshole from the other day, Chad, who I've learned is the quarterback of the Asheville High team, is here.

I silently move to the left where there's a free spot, happy that the guys are ignoring me enough to let me go about my day, while they continue to talk shit about the girls.

"Bro, Chloe sucked my dick like a vacuum last night. I swear, a solid fucking seven out of ten," one of the guys says, and I roll my eyes. I guess my stereotyping was accurate.

I tune them out as a few more step forward, ranking the same girl's skills, my own maturity standing proud as I don't engage.

God, at what age are they going to get past this? I guess these guys have no real reason to grow up yet. Living their carefree lives without worry or death hanging over them

makes things much easier I suppose. Being a part of Featherstone doesn't guarantee a tomorrow.

Either way, it's fucking embarrassing.

Pulling my clothes from my duffel bag, I swipe a hand through my hair as I give my back to the rest of the room.

"Hey, new guy, Ryan, right?" someone hollers, and I sigh before turning around to see who is talking to me, and to my delight, it's my *bro*, Chad.

"What's up?" I respond, pulling my t-shirt over my head and replacing it with my black sports top before doing the same with my pants.

"Just wondering what your type of woman is since you openly opted to sit next to the loser the other day instead of Chloe with the tits," he remarks, laughing along with his friends as I take a seat on the bench to tie my sneakers.

"Does the place where someone chooses to sit determine where they want to shove their dick?" I counter, raising an eyebrow. A lot of the guys in the room bark out laughter, which seems to annoy Chad because it gets more of a response than his comment did, even though he tries to hide it by laughing along with everyone.

"Nah, man, but you should be careful, image is everything at Asheville High and you're new, so..." He trails off, moving closer toward me with a smirk on his face, and I nod as he tries to intimidate me.

"Chuck, right?" I respond, purposely getting his name wrong just to piss him off as I sense everyone watching and waiting to see what happens between us. His eyes flare with anger, but he manages to smother it well.

"Chad."

"Right, Chad," I murmur, rolling my eyes and rising to my feet as someone in the crowd snickers. "You don't know who the fuck I am, and I really couldn't give a shit who you are, but just so we're clear, I don't give a fuck about my image. I won't be here long, and I definitely won't fall in line with whatever social rules you seem to have. I'll talk to whomever I

want, sit with whom I want, and fuck whom I want,” I state, meeting him in the center of the room as I goad him. Everyone moves in closer, consumed by our exchange as I watch his hands clench at his sides. “And I’ll do it all without needing *your* approval, but thanks for the heads-up.”

I pat his shoulder a little harder than necessary, and I don’t miss the slight flinch as I do, before moving past him and heading for the other door. Everybody steps out of the way with wide eyes.

I don’t stick around to hear what comes next, but a lot of the guys follow me out the door. The few right behind me are mumbling about how it’s about time there was someone willing to knock that asshole down a peg or two.

With motherfucking pleasure.

It had been on the tip of my tongue to say she’d spent the night at my place last night, and I’d brought her sweet ass to school this morning, but I refrained, not lowering myself to their mind games, knowing that would likely hurt her more than them. Schools like this are gossip mills.

Across from the locker rooms are the indoor sports facilities, so I head in there while the track, football, and baseball teams go outside.

As soon as I step inside, the coach has us running drills, which I don’t mind. It’ll help ensure I go back to Featherstone in good physical condition, and when it comes time to play a few games, I do my best to be present enough without being a pile of shit or a fucking star at the same time.

Blending in is all I need to do, and no one seems to complain when I dunk a few shots while I’m here. I don’t have the time or patience to listen to them trying to recruit me for an actual team today.

By the end of class, I’m dripping with sweat and ready to shower. I step into the locker room to find the others are still outside on the field, and the tension that was building inside me in preparation for dealing with these assholes leaves my body.

I make quick work of showering and changing before heading back to my locker without interruption. One quick glance at my schedule shows me I have English next. Perfect.

I switch bags again at my locker, and the guy who has a locker next to mine is there for the first time. I can practically smell the marijuana on him. I think he might be turning into a plant himself, or he just became a walking advertisement for his dealer.

I grab the bag with my purchase from town earlier and close my locker door, then an idea comes to mind as I turn to face the guy beside me.

“Hey, I’ll give you twenty bucks if you tell me where I should go to get information on people and this town,” I say casually, reaching into my pocket to pull out my wallet.

He grins, pushing his floppy brown hair out of his face as he meets my gaze with bright red blazing eyes. “Deal,” he agrees, holding his hand out for the cash before giving me an answer. I place the twenty in his hand, which he pockets instantly with a nod before moving to lean back against his locker. “I’m assuming you want everyone’s dirty, dark secrets?” he clarifies, and I just raise my eyebrow at him. That’s an obvious question. If I wanted any other information, I wouldn’t be offering the stoner guy money for it.

“I haven’t got all day,” I tell him when he continues to look around the hallway. I’m not sure if he’s trying to make sure no one can hear us or if he’s looking for someone in particular. His paranoia is likely getting the better of him.

“If you want to tear every student apart, the secrets are all kept by Brandi. She’s a fucking vault of knowledge, man. Sketchy dealings involving the school will likely be in the main offices, and surprisingly, the Knight’s Creek Town Hall holds all of the contracts, deals, and deeds if that helps at all.”

I nod once before walking off. That was a general overview, and I’m sure if I’d have offered more money, he would have gone more in depth, but he said enough to help me get started. I need to venture to the town hall, the offices here at Asheville High, and talk with Brandi, whoever the fuck that

is. That sounds like an excellent checklist, but first, I need to get rid of this bag and the item inside it.

With my mind focused and back on track with what I'm actually here for, I make my way to English where I find Bethany sitting in the exact same seat as last time.

Wordlessly, I drop into the seat beside her and place the bag in front of her on the desk. It takes her a moment to look up from the piece of paper before her, and it's only then that I realize she's sketching.

It's a small phoenix, but the detail is phenomenal, showing the fiery bird rising from the ashes. I love it. I can't believe she can draw like that.

"What's that?" she asks, cutting off my observation of her drawing as she covers it with her arms and crosses them over her chest. Blinking, I lift my gaze to hers.

It's on the tip of my tongue to compliment the stunning piece of art, but the emotion swirling in her eyes begs me not to, so I take a moment to bite my tongue before clearing my throat and remembering the question she just asked.

"It's for you," I answer, nudging it closer to her as she puts her drawing away and shakes her head.

"I don't want it."

"You don't even know what it is," I retort, ignoring the rest of the classroom as I feel a little bubble form around us, like it's just the two of us. A frown forms on my face, and she shrugs her shoulders, side-eyeing the bag.

"Gifts always come with a price," she states matter-of-factly, and it leaves me stunned as she uses the very tip of her finger to move it back toward me. I watch her visibly swallow past the lump in her throat, but I push on.

"Not this one," I finally say, making a show of pushing it back, and she gives me a pointed stare as she shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

"I don't—"

I cut her off by grabbing the bag and pulling the box from inside it. I watch as her eyes practically fall out of her head as she takes in the packaging and starts to shake her head immediately.

Panic flashes in her eyes. “What on earth...” Her words trail off as she stares at the cell phone box as I place it on the table. “Why did you...”

She turns her gaze to mine, and I try to act like I can't see the tears welling in her glassy blue eyes as I shrug my shoulders. I don't know the meaning behind it, I can't explain it, but I also won't try to delve deeper in my mind to give her the God's honest truth either.

I rub the back of my neck as I clear my throat nervously and push the box toward her. “So we can arrange our debate on Sexualization,” I murmur, which is the biggest motherfucking lie if I ever heard one, but I keep my mouth shut so I don't dig myself any further into a hole.

I hear the door shut as Mrs. Jones addresses the class, but my focus is still on Bethany as I watch her eyes storm with internal conflict, flicking between me and the bag.

“Ryan, I can't accept this,” she whispers, and I shake my head. “No, really, I *can't* take this home. It would definitely just make things a hell of a lot worse for me.”

The ache in her expression is mixed with fear as she tries to get me to understand. It feels like she's burning my soul, and I don't know why.

I lean in close, knowing my words are likely going to be harsher than I mean them to be, but fuck it, she needs to understand.

“Figure it the fuck out, Bethany, because one day they are going to hurt you so badly you're going to need to call for help, because it'll get to a point of life or fucking death. Do you really want to risk that? Your life?”

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip as she ever so subtly shakes her head.

No, I didn't fucking think so.

NINE



BETHANY

My fingers tremble as I face the dark oak door before me. The lump at the back of my head throbs, and my stomach tenses as I remember the pain I felt on the other side of it only yesterday.

Why does it feel like so much has happened since then? Since I was thrown out like a rag doll? I'm nervous because for the first time, I slept in a safe place, and since I didn't take the bus to school, I'm scared they are going to know.

I don't know, but I can't process any of that right now, not when I have no idea what's going to come from being back here. I just want to make sure Hunter is okay. I know they'll have let him out of isolation, they wouldn't dare let him miss school, but I just need to see him with my own two eyes.

Guilt settles in the pit of my stomach again when I compare how my night ended to his, but I swallow it down.

Lifting my hand, I knock on the front door and stand in silence as I try to strain my ears to hear movement on the other side. The sound of footsteps has my heart pounding wildly with anxiety in my chest as I hold my breath, but if I'm right, those footsteps are too light to be my father's.

When the door creaks open slowly, revealing my mother's face, I almost let my shoulders sag in relief, but on occasion, her wrath is worse than my father's, so I don't want to let my guard down too quickly. Standing before me in a brown pantsuit with a cream silk blouse underneath, her blonde hair

straightened to perfection just to her shoulders, she looks every inch the board woman she is.

We stand in silence for a moment as she looks me over from head to toe, and when she finally meets my gaze, she huffs in disapproval.

“Do you think it makes you clever to leave a bruise like that visible for everyone to see, Bethany?” she hisses, grabbing me by the arm and pulling me quickly inside as I try to keep up. “Did anyone question you about it?”

“No, Mom, no one even noticed,” I respond quickly. I mean, Ryan did, but he doesn’t matter to her. She likely doesn’t even know he exists anyway. I’m more surprised by the fact my lie didn’t burn my soul as it passed my lips.

Spinning me to a stop in the middle of the foyer, her green eyes glare down at me with disgust. “That better be the case or there *will* be hell to pay. You should have used some makeup to cover it,” she continues, digging her nails into my upper arm, and I know there will be crescent-shaped marks later, but I refuse to let her see me wince.

“Father kicked me out last night, and you only allow me to use the makeup you gave me when you say so,” I counter, trying to keep the bite out of my tone, but I’m damned if I do and damned if I don’t, and it leaves my head spinning.

“There are always excuses with you, Bethany, always, and I don’t want to hear it.” With a sigh, she tightens her grip even more and begins to drag me upstairs. I try to wiggle my arm out of her grip, but it’s pointless. Her nails are like barbed wire, and it only hurts me more to do so.

My heart pounds wildly in my chest as I try to appear calm, but the memory of my father’s rage last night as he beat me *again* leaves another lasting scar in my mind.

One day, I will never have to look at this house. All my painful memories will remain locked behind closed doors that I will never have to enter again for as long as I live.

I try to listen for Hunter’s laughter or voice, but over the pounding in my ears from my damn heartbeat, I can’t hear a

thing, which leaves me even more frustrated.

Reaching the top, I stumble a little when I notice my door is back on, and hope rises in my chest.

Please let this be a sign things are calming down again.

My mother pulls me into her dressing room, which is lined with a variety of business suits to the left, cocktail dresses to the right, and a full wall of heels and handbags on the back. The entire bedroom was converted into her own personal dream dressing room.

She comes to a stop at the center vanity where all her makeup is perfectly lined up and opens the top drawer to reveal the bag of makeup she allows me to use when we have guests to impress.

“Here. Keep it in your room, and make sure you cover up any noticeable marks in the future. I will explain to your father how important appearance is when it comes to punishing disobedience.” Her words are harsh, but no surprise. She’s under no illusion as to the type of man she’s married to. If anything, once she’s had a bottle of wine or two, she can give him a run for his money.

Disobedience will not be tolerated in this house.

“Okay,” I answer, taking the bag from her as she finally releases my arm.

I lick my dry lips nervously as I wait for her to dismiss me, but as she turns her full attention to me, clearing her throat, I know she hasn’t finished.

“Your door is back on because we have guests coming this weekend, which means you need to be on your best behavior, and on Saturday, you’ll be required to wear a cocktail dress. Your father will choose which one and leave it in your closet.” She gives me a pointed glare, leaving no room for argument. “He’s away on business for the next few days, so I recommend you make the most of this time to think about your actions and how you’ll work better at not being an embarrassment to the Asheville family name. Your bratty attitude is ridiculous, and you really must learn to handle the consequences of your

actions.” Brushing her hands down her blazer, she practically sneers at me as I stand frozen in place. “Needless to say, I have been advised of you *not* taking the school bus this morning, and I will be passing that information on to your father. He’s going to want to know how you got there, so be prepared for that.”

With that, she shoulders past me and storms from the room, leaving me to mentally spiral as I try to wrap my head around how this is actually my life. I’m all too familiar with it, since this is the only kind of interaction I have with my parents, but after being in Ryan’s quiet and safe home last night, it only makes it that much more noticeable.

Of course the damn bus driver is keeping tabs on me as well. *Douchebag*. It’s a good thing I took the school bus home then I guess, but I know nothing good will come of me skipping the bus this morning once my father finds out.

Any opportunity to punish me and put me in my place is never denied. Never.

As I hear my mother retreat downstairs, I exit her dressing room and close the door quietly behind me. My eyes flick to *my* closed bedroom door, which desperately calls out for me to take some form of sanctuary behind it, but I know I won’t settle down until I’ve seen Hunter.

Quickly adding the makeup bag to my backpack while I stand in the hallway, I go in search of my little brother. I knock on his bedroom door, and the moment it swings open, I release the breath I hadn’t even realized I was holding in.

“Hey, bud,” I murmur, wrapping my arms around his shoulders as he hugs me back. Even at ten, he tries to act like the man of the house, so it’s during moments like this, while it’s only the two of us, when we bare our souls and allow ourselves to feel, and I get to see the real him. He’s already better than me at hiding his emotions.

“Hey, Beth,” he whispers back, and I fight back the tears that threaten to spill like always. Every time we have a rough night like that, seeing him the next day makes all my emotions boil to the surface.

Releasing my hold on him, I place my hands on his shoulders and hold him at arm's length so I can check him over. Knowing exactly what I'm doing, he shakes his head.

"I'm fine, Beth. I promise."

"Do you have a bruise? A scratch?" I ask, wanting to clarify, and he shakes his head, rolling his eyes in annoyance, and relief rushes through me. "Okay, did you find the treats alright?"

"Thank you," he mouths, which I take as the answer to my question. I won't ask if he managed to hide them again, because the state of him would be very different if he hadn't, but I need to add restocking to my to-do list because we both know he will be placed in isolation again.

My parents also know that punishing him hurts me too, so he sometimes feels their wrath because of that, and that always guts me more than anything.

I used to go to isolation as punishment, until my father felt it was no longer enough and opted to start tossing me out for the night without a single place to go.

"What are you doing now?" I ask, releasing his shoulders and glancing around his room as he shrugs.

"I'm just reading through a music book on how to play the guitar," he responds, not meeting my gaze. He's loved music for as long as I can remember, but my father uses it against him all the time, which is why I know his guitar is kept at his friend's house, so my father can't break it. Again.

One day, I'm going to give this guy all the music in the world. Whatever instrument he wants lessons in, I'm going to figure it out. Hell, I'll give him his own damn music store if that's what he wants.

I hate that I really focus too heavily on *one day*, but it's what keeps me going, and it reminds me why I put up with all this—so I can make a better future for the both of us.

"I'll let you carry on reading then. But if you need me, Hunter, just shout, okay?" I say with a smile, loving seeing him like this, even if it is just for a moment.

“Sure,” he replies with a nod as I step out of his room and close the door behind me.

With a heavy sigh, I slip into my room, beyond relieved when I get to close the door. I wish it had a lock to offer an extra layer of protection between my parents and me. I lean back against it, my eyes falling closed as I take a moment to relax. If I had anything of value in here I’d be checking to see if they took something else in place of fixing the door, but I guess I’m at least thankful I don’t have that level of paranoia to contend with right now.

Today has been...something, that’s for sure. Between Ryan’s sudden need to help on top of my family drama, I need a nap.

Pushing off the door, I drop my backpack on the floor beside my bed and flop onto the comforter as my body sinks into the mattress.

I don’t even know where to begin with Ryan right now. If I thought it was beyond strange that I slept peacefully and soundly at a guy’s house last night, it is even more mind boggling that he buys then forces me to take the cell phone.

“Figure it the fuck out, Bethany, because one day they are going to hurt you so badly you’re going to need to call for help, because it’ll get to a point of life or fucking death. Do you really want to risk that? Your life?”

His words still bounce around in my head. It’s a hard truth, but a truth all the same.

I had no argument at all when he said that, not one, which is why the cell phone is sitting in my bag right now. It’s *still* in the box, but it’s there, in my possession, just like Ryan wanted.

Thankfully, so far, my backpack is safe. They never question what’s in there or search it since they ensure I have no social life with all of their rules. Let’s hope that doesn’t change.

After he growled those words at me, anger lacing his voice, I noticed it didn’t cause me any distress since I could feel it wasn’t directed toward me, but more...*for me?* He

didn't look or speak to me once after his final statement, and when the bell rang, he was on his feet and out of the classroom in no time.

I feel embarrassed that he suddenly felt the need to buy things to protect me, as if my survival is dependent upon it. This isn't his battle, and I have no idea why he wants to involve himself. No one else ever has.

There must be a reason why. What does he want from me? What does he want in return?

People always want something in return, especially since no one gives gifts out of the kindness of their own heart, at least not to me. I've learned nothing is *ever* free, but the worst part is not knowing what price I'll have to pay. That is one unfortunate lesson I've had to learn from living in this house.

Swiping a hand down my face, I remain lying across the bed as I tilt my head to look down at my backpack. Lifting it up onto the mattress, I reluctantly unzip it and pull out the cell phone.

No one can find this, especially not my parents, and I don't want Hunter to know because that will only put him in harm's way too.

I had a phone once before, but it was quickly confiscated when they realized I could contact other people, including the authorities—like they'd listen to me anyway. The whole reason it was taken away was because I called a doctor's office to ask how to help heal what felt like a dislocated shoulder. Within hours, I was receiving another beating because the doctor was one of my father's friends.

It won't happen again. I'm not thirteen and stupid anymore.

I'm wiser to how my parents work. At least my father is away for a few days, since he's a lot more intrusive than my mother. She'll be too busy pampering herself or fucking the lawyer in town. She thinks no one knows, but she's not as smooth as she thinks she is. I don't want to get caught up in that drama, though, not when my father is messing around too.

Maybe they know, I have no idea, but I'm not getting involved.

Sitting up with my back to the door to block the phone from view in case anyone walks in, I pull the cell from the box and turn it in my hand. It's the latest white iPhone, which I know is top of the line.

Turning the phone on, I watch as the loading screen goes through the motions, and it almost feels exhilarating to have a phone again, one that's mine that no one knows about. It's freeing, and it makes my emotions go all crazy inside of me with a mixture of fear and nerves, happiness and excitement.

I really should say thank you the next time I see him. It feels rude to have accepted the phone from him under such awkward circumstances. I'll pay him back again one day.

There are those words again.

It makes me smile to find the home screen set as a sunflower field, all cute and inviting, like I could get lost in their magic instead of the cruel reality that surrounds me.

The phone pings, startling me, and I rush to set it to silent before seeing what the noise was about. There's a text message waiting to be opened, and I eagerly click it.

Ryan: Here's my number in case you ever need someone to call or text. Remember the key. I've known danger, Betty, I can see it around you. I mean it when I say USE IT.

Ryan: Shit. Autocorrect.

Ryan: I meant Betty.

Ryan: For fuck's sake. I meant Betty.

Ryan: You know what? You're Betty from now on. Deal with it.

A burst of laughter breaks past my lips as I read his words, and my chest warms as I cover my mouth, trying to muffle my amusement.

He really is crazy, and despite knowing nothing about him, I can't help but feel safe when I'm near him. I don't know why, but I need to calm down, because I have gotten this far without losing myself over a guy, and I can't do it now.

No matter how hot he is.

Dark, hot, and mysterious is never a good combination.

TEN



RYAN

I slam the door shut behind me before walking into the beach house with purposeful strides just to flop down on the sofa. It's Saturday morning, and after a trip to the town hall yesterday, only to find it had closed early, I tried to scope out the exterior of the building today. I might have found an entry point, but I had left all of my equipment to infiltrate the building back here.

It would look suspicious for me to be seen around the town hall again today, and I can't search it properly when I'm trying to keep up appearances at school during the week, so that's going to have to wait until next weekend.

Fuck. This is a juggling act.

I did some searching into who Brandi is, another check on the stoner guy's list of options, and since I really don't need playground gossip, I've opted to put her at the bottom of the follow-up list for now—which leaves the offices at Asheville High. I need to figure out a way to get in there, either with my equipment when no one is around or by being invited in, even just to get the layout the first time around to avoid getting caught.

Most of the students I saw going into the office this week were called down to see the principal, so I'm going to have to do some rule breaking. That would get me in there for a look at the layout of the main office. If not, I can call Benji to help me out, but I'm trying to prove myself first, and asking for help is *not* the way to do it.

But that still leaves me with absolutely nothing to do today.

My mind instantly goes to Bethany, and I roll my eyes at myself, swiping my hand down my face in frustration.

I haven't seen her, except in passing in the school halls, since I gave her a key to this place and the phone. She sent me a text message to say thank you, but otherwise she's been radio silent, and we haven't had any classes together, which is exactly what I needed.

She was getting under my fucking skin and distracting me from why I'm here—to complete my assignment—but now, sitting here alone without Benji and my other friends back in Virginia, I don't have anyone else around to occupy me. And as much as she annoyed me, I didn't want to strangle her for being in my presence, and that's always a positive sign.

Fuck it. I have nothing else to do, and besides, she needs me to check in on her. She's been back at that house for days, and I'd never forgive myself if something was going on, knowing it's not safe for her.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I quickly open the messaging app and tap on Betty. Fucking autocorrect made me give her a damn nickname too, and that's probably half the reason I've made sure to avoid her. That's the kind of shit I don't do. If Benji ever found out I'd nicknamed anyone, especially a woman, he'd likely die from laughter and say they are a liar.

Me: Hi.

Lame. But this is not the general chitchat shit I do, so I'm rolling with it.

When I don't get an instant response, I cringe at myself, thinking maybe I should just get back on my surfboard, but I've already been out surfing this morning, and going out alone when there are so many people out on the water always makes me feel awkward for some reason.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and when I glance down to see her name flashing on the screen, I grin.

Betty: Hi.

Me: Everything okay?

Betty: Yeah.

It feels like it takes an eternity for her to respond, but the fact she's able to respond means she's okay and not around the person causing her issues.

Me: What are you doing today?

My leg bounces as I wait for her response, and when it comes through, I'm surprised to find more than just one word this time.

Betty: I'm hiding out. My father gets back from his business trip with some of his friends today, which means there will be a big dinner event tonight. So until I need to get ready at five p.m., I'm being scarce.

Something fucking swells in my chest at the stark honesty in her message, and I almost feel guilty, like I'm luring her into a fake sense of security. It's not fake, my protective instincts go into overdrive with her, just like they did when I first met Benji, but I won't be here for her forever. This is only temporary.

The fact that she's hiding also makes me frown. It almost sounds like she's avoiding getting into trouble, but her father isn't home yet. Is her mom the problem? Or both of them?

Fuck. Why do I want to find out and gut them with rusty fucking tools?

I need a distraction, and apparently, so does she.

Me: Do you want to get out of the house and do something until then?

Betty: I mean I could. Hunter is spending the weekend with his friends, so it just depends on what you want to do.

Who. The. Fuck. Is. Hunter?

And *why* the fuck am I so angry right now? My jaw is tight as I grind my teeth together, and I can't stop my fingers from flying across the screen.

Me: Who the fuck is Hunter?

I tap my foot expectantly as agitation starts to flood my body, and I have to stand, slowly pacing in front of the sofa as I watch the three little dots on the screen. If she has a fucking boyfriend, why the hell is he not stepping in and taking care of her?

How fucking ridiculous.

Betty: My brother.

Oh God, thank fuck. Now I look like a dick.

Betty: Why?

Swiping a hand down my face, I glance out of the patio windows to the ocean to calm the rage that had just been building inside me. I have no idea why it fucking mattered, it just...did.

I respond quickly, trying to change the subject.

Me: Never mind. You in or not?

Betty: You still haven't said what you're doing, so I'm not agreeing if it's something boring.

I frown at the phone, shaking my head at the fact she always manages to sass me somehow.

Me: Nothing I do is boring. EVER.

Me: I saw a pamphlet for riding horses at Mount James. We could do that.

That probably sounds ridiculously lame to suggest, but I'm really not into bowling and shit like that. There are far too many people involved or nearby for me. Besides, I like being outside in the fresh air, it's calming.

Betty: Uh...

Betty: I can't do horseback riding.

Me: Have you ever done it before?

I hate sitting here desperately waiting for her answer, but I can't help myself. Putting the ball in her court makes me feel out of control. I just want to demand she do it and make it happen.

Betty: Once, and I got in a lot of trouble because...

Betty: It doesn't matter why, I just got in a lot of trouble, and it was added to the list of rules and restrictions I have.

She has a fucking list of rules and restrictions? Call me curious, but I'm highly interested to know why she still has one at her age. I want every piece of information I can get, because if I need to kill these motherfuckers, I will.

Me: Tell me why, Betty.

Betty: It's something completely ridiculous, honestly, so don't worry about it.

Me: You either tell me why you can't go horseback riding, or you show me the list, it's up to you.

I place my phone on the coffee table and move to the kitchen, pulling a bottle of water out of the fridge so I don't glare down at my phone, waiting for her to respond. When I find her messages still open on my screen, I drop my bottle to the floor in shock, oblivious to the water as it splatters around my feet.

Betty: If I show you the rule list, you'll see that and all of the other aspects of my life that are restricted, so that'll be a hard no.

Betty: I can't ride horses because I have to protect my hymen.

Protect her hymen?

Protect. Her. Fucking. Hymen?

Why? Who? What the actual fuck?

Am I reading this right?

Anger burns through my veins as I try to process the fact this has been added to a rule list. This isn't Bethany choosing

to protect herself like that, someone is *forcing* her to.

An adult. A parent. One of her fucking parents.

Why? Why does it matter to them so much?

Why are they protecting her hymen? Her virginity?

Taking a deep breath, I try to push all my questions down because I know if I throw all of this at her at once she'll run, and there's a part of my soul, linked to my own childhood trauma, that wants to hold her tight and protect her.

Me: No horseback riding then.

Me: We could go surfing?

I look at my words and how calm I appear, when in actuality I'm close to fucking burning this whole damn town to ruins. Featherstone Academy forced me here to complete an assignment I didn't want, and then I arrived in Knight's Creek to find Bethany Asheville, a meek, pretty, blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl who is a complete shell of herself because she's too scared to be anything other than what *they* expect her to be.

Betty: I've never been surfing before. Do I need anything? Because I have literally nothing.

I glance out to the water, excitement flooding my veins as I distract myself from the shit storm that is Bethany's life.

Me: I'll have everything we need.

Betty: Okay. But I really do have to be back by four.

Me: I'll have you back by three thirty. Come to the beach house.

Betty: On my way, boss.

There's that little bit of snark I can't help but like. How do I get her to give me more of that?



BETHANY

I look at myself in the mirror, standing in what is now deemed my room in Ryan's beach house, taking in the black knee-length wet suit I have on. When I got here after giving my mom the slip and telling her I was going to the library, Ryan pulled into the driveway at the exact same time, and I watched as he tugged the price tags off this brand-new wet suit before handing it to me.

I wanted to argue, to tell him I couldn't accept it, but he literally placed it over my shoulder and ran off, telling me to go get changed with a ten-minute countdown, and like the good girl I am, I did exactly as he asked because admittedly, I'm excited too.

I've been on edge since the moment he first messaged me. I don't know why, but it made me nervous, and then when I explained the horse riding situation, I wasn't sure how he would react, so when he brushed over it, I almost died with relief. If he actually knew all of the rules I have to abide by, I'm sure protecting my hymen by not riding horses would seem like nothing at all.

The suit fits me perfectly, and the lilac stitching around the edge is ridiculously pretty too. How the hell did he get my correct size? It's crazy.

Scooping my hair into a bun on top of my head, I brush invisible lint off the wet suit one more time before I open the door.

I startle when I find Ryan leaning against his doorframe, waiting for me in a matching wet suit of his own, except his has blue stitching instead. I try not to let my eyes give me away, but I can't help but look him over from head to toe. He is so different from the other guys at school. He's way more rugged for our age, and his blue eyes seem to tell a story of pain as well.

The wet suit clings to him perfectly, his arms and pecs bulging under the material, and I am in awe.

It's like he's angry at the world with a massive chip on his shoulder, and he's quite happy being an asshole about it.

“Let’s go,” he says when I finally meet his gaze, and I try not to blush, worrying he caught me looking him over, but he doesn’t say a word.

Following his lead, I leave my belongings on the bed and head down the stairs. It’s weird how familiar this place feels already. It’s only my second time here, but I never go to other people’s homes without my parents, yet I still feel at ease.

He doesn’t hover inside the house, instead heading straight for the patio doors and out onto the deck where there’s a surfboard waiting.

Crossing his arms over his chest, he looks expectantly from me to the surfboard, then out to sea. I clear my throat as I feel the sun beat down on me, then I lift my hand so I can see him without the glare in my eyes.

“Are you sure you have the patience for this?” I ask, raising my eyebrow as I watch him suspiciously, and he turns to look at me in confusion.

“I have loads of patience,” he replies quickly with a frown, and I try to cover my smile with my hand, but the expression on his face tells me he saw it.

“Of course you do. You know I’ve never been near a surfboard before, right? I almost had to call you in to get your help with the damn wet suit because I didn’t know how to put it on,” I admit, and his eyes heat, making my cheeks do the exact same thing. I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

I’m no good with words as it is, and especially not with boys who aren’t completely mean to me—or men, I should say. Ryan Carter is *definitely* not a boy.

“You should have called out to me,” he says before turning and grabbing the white and blue board. I don’t respond as I follow him down the steps, and he leads me toward the water’s edge.

I can’t help but glance under the stairs, my usual hiding spot looking very different in the daytime. Knowing I don’t have to resort to sleeping under there if my parents kick me

out again fills me with some form of hope in the world, even if it isn't really my own doing.

The beach stretches out a little here, but it's smaller and quieter than Freemont Beach, which I like, because everyone from school is likely to be there instead of here.

There are a handful of people already on surfboards in the water, and a couple of families dotted around on the sand building sandcastles and relaxing in the sun. It almost feels... normal, which is not something I get to feel very often. If I ever go out on the weekend and it isn't for work, then I actually go to the library, which is why it was so believable today too. My mother didn't even bat an eyelash when I said I was going out.

Placing the board down on the sand, Ryan pulls what looks like a piece of chalk out of nowhere and draws a horizontal line down the middle of the board, then another farther up.

"Okay, so this is the center of the board, this is where you'll get natural balance when standing, and we position you off of this mark, alright?" he asks, glancing back at me as I nod, trying to take in what he's saying as I step closer to him.

"Yeah."

"The line higher up is where your eye line should be so you have the perfect paddling spot, which will help conserve your energy. Lie down on the board so the spots line up," he instructs, and I nibble on my bottom lip as I nervously glance down at the board.

He moves out of the way, letting me get into position like he said, and after a little shuffling on the hard surface, I think I have it right. I glance up at him, but his eyes aren't on my face, they are focused farther down the board. I tilt my head to see what has his attention but completely miss it.

"Am I lined up?" I ask, but he quickly shakes his head and nods in confirmation.

"Perfect," he mumbles, clearing his throat before crouching down beside me. "This is your perfect paddle spot, but from here, we have to practice sliding to your knees so

your body remains centered on the board to give you natural balance so you'll remain on your feet, ready for the wave," he explains before lying down beside me in the same position on the sand.

I watch as, in the blink of an eye, he goes from being in my position to standing on his feet with his knees bent and his arms out for balance like a complete pro. I just gape at him like an idiot. When he looks down at me and sees my face, he grins before lying down beside me again.

"Show off."

"Don't worry, Betty, I'll teach you how to do it as awesome as me," he teases, his grin turning into a smirk as he continues. "You're going to want to have your hands on the middle line so you can slide yourself up the board into a standing position. I want you to go through the motions with me as I call them out, and I'll do them slower beside you this time."

"Okay," I murmur in response as he glances at me for confirmation. I replay his movement in my head, trying to figure out where my limbs should go.

The sound of the waves calmly lapping at the shore makes me relax, so I'm not worried about who might be watching or if I'll make a fool of myself. This actually seems like it's going to be a lot of fun.

"So, hands in the middle, then push your chest up off the board," he says, doing the movement himself, which I copy. "Then you're going to want to bring your right knee up to your chest and bring your feet to the center of the board."

I stare in awe as he does the move again, but slower this time, and I take my time copying him. Without glancing at him, I practice doing it a few times on my own before I finally look his way. He's nodding in approval, which fills me with a hint of pride, but I'm still far too nervous to bask in it.

"Excellent. Obviously the water is going to add an extra element to the whole thing when we get out there, but your placement is great so far. When you're lying on the board,

make sure to keep your knees and feet together. Otherwise, your balance will be off, making the tail lift and the nose go under, and nobody wants that,” he explains so matter-of-factly that I just nod in agreement like it makes total sense to me.

Stepping off the board, I glance around to see the other people on the beach minding their own business as the cool winter sun tries to warm us. When I glance back at Ryan, I find the board under his arm as he turns in the direction of the sea.

He doesn't stop where the water laps at the shoreline, instead trudging straight into the water until it's up to his knees before he turns to look at me. He doesn't say a word or motion for me to follow, he just stares at me expectantly, and I roll my eyes before following him in. The water isn't as cold as I expected, but it still sends a shiver up my spine, which somehow makes me smile.

He continues deeper into the ocean now that he knows I'm following, and when he seems happy enough with the water at his waist, he stops and waits for me to join him.

“Are you ready?” he asks, and I shrug my shoulders, because I honestly have no clue.

He moves the board between us and nods at it, making my eyebrows crinkle in confusion. “Get on then.”

“Just like that?” I question, a little dumbfounded as I tense, and he grins.

“Just like that.”

Bracing my hands on the board, I try to lift myself up, but it turns into a slide as I try to get myself into position while Ryan stands patiently beside me.

Don't fall in yet. Don't fall in yet.

“Now, you want to paddle toward the whitewash and get a feel for the board on the water,” Ryan says, standing back from the board and walking toward the direction he was pointing to moments ago.

Doing as he says, I put everything into my arms to follow after him while lying on the board with my legs and knees together like he mentioned earlier. I head in the direction he pointed in since I have no freaking clue what whitewash is, but I'm assuming it's where the waves start to crash, creating little white bubbles in the water.

It's a weird feeling, rocking above the waves, and when I get to his side, he helps turn me around so I'm facing the beach.

"Use the power and momentum of the waves to carry you forward and then lift yourself up as quickly as possible with the motion I showed you earlier," he instructs, gripping the board beside my arm to hold me in place as I nod in understanding, feeling how close he is. A shiver runs down my spine.

"Aren't you going to get a board too?" I ask, feeling bad that he's having to coach me nonstop.

He grins as he shakes his head. "Nah, this is fun. Besides, we're just practicing here. We can still go farther out in the water, but you're not ready to do that on your own today."

I don't say anything in response, but the thought of progressing and coming out another day fills me with a sense of hope and purpose I've never really had. I can't really rely on that *or* him to get me through my life, especially right now. I need to stay alert with my parents. Today is just a little break in the bigger picture, where I get to attempt to have a little fun... even if it is only for a few hours.

"Let's get a move on then," I say, smiling up at him as I let myself enjoy this moment for now, and he looks pleased with my response.

"Always watch over your shoulder for the waves behind you, that'll help give you an indication on when to stop paddling and stand," he advises, continuing to show me what to do. "When I shout 'now,' you get to your feet in the middle of the board, alright?"

“Yeah,” I reply. Excitement builds inside of me as I glance over my shoulder, watching for the waves and preparing for him to shout.

“Now!” he hollers, and I make quick work of trying to get to my feet, but with the roll of the uneven water underneath me, the process is nowhere near as quick and simple as it was on the sand, and I instantly lose my balance, falling straight into the water.

Plunged under the water, I sink to the bottom for a moment with surprise, before slamming my feet down onto the ocean floor and breaking through the surface of the water, taking a huge breath.

When I swipe the water from my face and my wet hair out of my eyes, I find Ryan standing before me with his face contorted so much I have no idea what’s wrong.

“You scared me when you went under the water,” he grumbles, rubbing his chest without even realizing he’s doing it, but the smile trying to curve his lips tells me he thought it was funny that I fell off.

Unsure how to handle him like this, I do the only thing I know how—I move on.

“Let’s go again,” I say, letting my smile naturally take over my face.

He grins in response, nodding in agreement as he playfully splashes a little water in my face, and I pout, refusing to lower myself to his level and do it back.

Time passes as I continue to try standing up on the board, and once I’ve managed it a few times, letting the waves carry me closer to land, Ryan takes me out a little farther.

It’s hard to explain what it does to me. Feeling the wind swirling around and the water under my touch is exhilarating. The high praise and the excitement on Ryan’s face only heightens my joy.

We continue until my body is worn out and I’ve watched Ryan have a few goes too, showing me how it’s really done. Sitting on the board with my legs hanging off of each side, I

startle when Ryan climbs on to sit facing me, his knees touching mine as he swipes his brown hair back off his face.

My heart thunders in my chest as I relax under the afternoon sun and take in what we've actually done today.

"This has been fun," Ryan remarks, his eyes searching mine, and I smile in response, unable to relax my cheeks with how happy I've been.

"Agreed," I admit as I try to control my straggly wet hair as it clings to my face. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but it was amazing."

I meet his gaze, and I find my brain short-circuiting as he leans forward and brushes a strand of hair off my face and behind my ear. He leaves goosebumps in his wake, and I shiver at his touch. My lips part slightly as he stares straight into my eyes, and it feels like my soul is awakening, wanting him to see some part of me.

My mouth feels dry as he cups my cheek, his calloused fingers rough on my skin as his eyes track his movements.

"What time is it?" I whisper, my mouth and brain completely ruining the moment as he glances at the waterproof watch on his wrist and curses.

"It's a little past three," he murmurs before pulling away from me, and I instantly miss his touch. Me and my damn mouth, but I really can't be late.

Ryan slips off the board and starts pushing me toward the shore. When he stops suddenly, I glance down at him and see a serious expression on his face as his brows furrow.

"We better do this again," he states, and I stumble over a response, but inevitably, I say what my heart wants.

"For sure," I agree, swallowing past the lump in my throat. I can't worry about the what-ifs right now, I deserve this moment.

"You know, before my mom died, she always made me pinky promise her. Do I need to do that with you?" Ryan asks, holding his little finger out to me, and my body makes the

decision for me, reaching out and slipping my pinky finger around his. “You can’t break a pinky promise, Betty,” he murmurs, his eyes heated, and I nod in response.

What the hell am I in for with this guy?

ELEVEN



BETHANY

I close my bedroom door behind me before flopping down on my bed. My eyes naturally fall closed as my brain tries to process how much fun I actually had today.

Me. Fun. With another human being. And a hot one at that.

I mentally roll my eyes at myself as I feel my cheeks heat from just thinking about him. *Ryan*. Who knew he could be less growly and actually patient? I had the best time, and then I spoiled the nearly intimate moment by asking for the time when my brain was begging for him to lean closer and press his lips against mine.

I've never cared for any of that before, but my body was reacting to him without effort. Then I had to open my mouth and remind us of who we are, like I'm Cinderella with a curfew to get ready for the ball instead of leaving it.

He's a mysterious new guy with the ability to do whatever he pleases, while I'm...me, restricted to this town and controlled by my parents.

Why would he choose to move here to begin with? Maybe someone needs to be honest with him and explain this town is not the place to be. Knight's Creek is a curse, not a fresh start or an adventure. It's a hellish nightmare, a gateway straight to the devil himself.

I toss my arm over my eyes, hiding my face as I groan at myself for interrupting our moment, when my bedroom door flings open unexpectedly.

“Don’t just lie there, Bethany. We have a lot to do before everyone arrives. I told you to get straight in the shower,” my mother orders, and I quickly pull myself up to sit at the bottom of the bed.

Oh yeah, *tonight*.

It’s the whole reason my day was cut short. I already hate it. I don’t want to be here. I *never* want to be here for these parties they throw, but I have no choice.

Sometimes, it feels like I’m on display. I’m paraded around while the leering eyes of my parents’ friends touch every inch of my skin as I stand tall and proud, just like they tell me to.

The way some of the men stroke a hand down my bare arm or palm my ass makes me want to gag, and acid always burns the back of my throat, but I *let* them. The first time I slapped one of them away or protected myself, I was beaten hard by my father when everyone left while my mother stood by and watched.

I earned a broken wrist and a few cracked ribs. Of course it was documented as a clumsy fall down the stairs, but I’ll always remember how bad that night was.

“Get in the shower. You can use these products tonight. The girls will be here soon to do our hair and makeup,” she states, handing me the designer products I get to use when we’re really putting on a show for their friends. I bite back my sigh as I rise, taking them from her outstretched hands.

She only calls in the big guns to do our hair and makeup when people of importance are coming, and that never ends well for me.

As I move to walk past her, she grabs my arm, making me pause as I turn to look up at her. She’s midway through getting ready herself, standing before me in just her silk nightgown as she glares down at me with a sneer.

“Tonight is important, Bethany, and unfortunately for us, you play an important role in the success of the party. Do. Not.

Let. Us. Down,” she hisses, releasing her hold and pushing me toward the door so I can use the bathroom.

“What does that mean?” I ask, frowning at her as I glance over my shoulder, but she shakes her head.

“It’s nothing for you to worry about. Just stay in line, look pretty, and do as you’re told,” she commands before heading to her dressing room and slamming the door shut.

Well then.

Moving into the main bathroom, I close the door behind me, making sure to lock it before I place the products on the vanity and turn on the shower.

I should just be thankful my mother didn’t ask how or why my hair was wet, because I’m sure they would find a reason to disapprove of surfing too, never mind with a ridiculously handsome guy as well.

Standing under the spray, I feel a small loss as the salt water is washed away and replaced by the floral scent of the body wash and shampoo. I didn’t realize how much I was clinging to the smell of the ocean until I had to wipe it from my skin.

But I can’t focus on that right now. All of my attention needs to be on tonight. I have to be on high alert around the people who attend these parties, but at least I’m not worrying about Hunter being here too. Although when he does go to stay at Xavier’s home, his mother isn’t there either. There’s always some nanny or caregiver around, but they’ll be doing a better job of taking care of them, and that’s all that matters.

It’s a shame I’m not closer with someone so I could go and stay there and be exempt from these *events*, but like my mother said, I have an important role to play. I just don’t actually have a clue what it is, but I’m sure being paraded around will play a huge part for me.

I turn the shower off and wring my hair out before reaching to grab a towel off the shelf. It’s nowhere near as fluffy and soft like they were back at Ryan’s house, but they are all I’ve ever known.

Turning to face the vanity, I pause and lower my hands to my sides, clutching my towel as I look at myself.

What is it about a bare body that makes people go crazy with desire?

I once read in a magazine that men love the curve of a woman's neck, the swell of her breasts, and the shape of her hips. Comparing that to me, I try to find the appeal in my own body. I mean, my neck is a neck, and I do have an hourglass figure, but my B cups leave a lot to be desired.

Tonight, these men are going to be undressing me with their eyes, they always are, but for the first time, I wonder what it would feel like to actually *enjoy* having someone looking at me in that way.

Someone like...*Ryan*.

I slowly trail my fingers from my collarbone and over the swell of my breast, and the chill from my touch makes me shiver and my nipples tighten. As I ghost my hand over my hips, I watch as goosebumps line my skin like they did earlier when Ryan brushed the hair back off my face.

Was that desire?

It feels like need. Like I *needed* him to keep his hand on me, like I *needed* him to pull me closer, but the whole sensation is just so foreign to me.

I use the mirror's reflection to look at the apex of my thighs, which is completely bare as always. The second I hit puberty, my mother paid for me to have laser hair removal, stating something along the lines of being bare was worth more. I'm not sure if that was her attempt at self-worth, but at least it means I don't have to worry about shaving or waxing like everyone else.

I tentatively drag my finger over my folds, catching the tight nub begging for attention, and my cheeks redden as my body feels light, almost floating at the touch as a gasp falls from my lips.

"Bethany, the stylists are waiting for you. Get your ass out here!" my mother yells, causing me to snap my hand away

from my body. I quickly wrap the towel around myself as she rattles the door handle.

Hastily unlocking the door, I find her standing right in my space, her eyes sweeping over me as I blink up at her, praying my little exploration isn't written all over my face. She sighs after eyeing me from head to toe and waves me forward to her dressing room without saying a word.

I make my way down the hallway, and the second I step into her room, everything becomes a blur. I have no choices or options given to me. Beverly and Ruth follow my mother's orders and treat me like a doll for what feels like forever and a day.

I hate every second of my face being covered in makeup, my hair being brushed within an inch of its life, and having tanning products layered on the rest of my body. I've learned to just lie back on the table they bring and let them do their job, trying to not think about all the effort I have to go through to get this stuff off at the end of the night.

Nobody's around to help me with that though, and I would likely be much more compliant with all of this if I was given assistance.

"She can wear this dress this evening, it's what Bernārd sent," my mother says, and I finally pry my eyes open as Ruth steps back from applying a little extra blush to my cheeks. My eyes almost fall out of my head at the small scrap of material she dangles before me.

I don't get a chance to look at myself in the mirror as Ruth helps me to my feet and lets me lean on her as Beverly holds out the dress for me to step into. There are so many cutout sections on the damn thing, it takes me a minute to get my arms in the right position.

I look down at myself. If I were going to a party with friends and feeling good about what I was wearing, I would love this dress. It definitely implies an element of confidence, but I'm not wearing it for *me*, I'm wearing it for *them*.

Beverly offers me a gentle smile as she turns me around to look in the mirror. The black dress is tightly fitted, almost painted on my skin, with the midriff cut out into sections across my stomach, and another piece of material missing from the thigh. I look like a badass, that's for sure, but under all of their scrutinizing eyes, I feel uncomfortable.

My blonde hair is pulled back off my face with gel, so it will stay perfectly in place, and is twisted into a perfect bun at the nape of my neck. A black choker wraps around my neck and silver earrings dangle almost to my shoulders. My makeup consists of red lips, smoky eyes, and long, false eyelashes. I look much older than eighteen.

“Step into these, hun,” Ruth murmurs, placing a pair of heels beside me. The heel and sole are black, but the strap across the top of my toes is clear, and I notice when they painted my nails they went for a red that perfectly matches my lips.

“Perfect,” my mother murmurs in approval, and when I turn to glance her way, I find her dressed in a floaty golden dress that clings to her upper half, making her breasts look like they are about to pop out, but I don't say a word. I'm too busy mentally choking on her support for all of this. “The party has already begun, Bethany. Your father will be here anytime, so let's start mingling, shall we?”

I'm not given a moment to process her words or even gather myself as my mother wraps her arm through mine and drags me toward the stairs. It's only then, when my mother prods my back to make me stand taller, that I hear the classical music playing gently in the background. I hadn't realized my mother had ever left the dressing room, but when I reach the bottom of the staircase, I see at least twenty people hovering around in the foyer who definitely weren't here earlier.

It's like being under a microscope. Everyone's eyes turn in our direction, and people even step into the small foyer from the kitchen and the living room to catch sight of us—to catch sight of *me*.

Something isn't right here.

My spine tingles as I try to assess the situation around me.

There are usually people here, couples or at least more women than there are right now, but apart from my mother and me, there are no other females that I can see.

As I gulp past the lump in my throat, my mother squeezes my arm as she leans closer to whisper in my ear. “Smile, Bethany,” she demands before standing tall and beaming at everyone. “Good evening, gentlemen. My husband, Bernārd, will be here very soon. Please get a drink, relax, enjoy the hors d’oeuvres available, and we will have a fabulous evening.”

I do as she says, forcing a smile to my own lips as I feel myself instinctively standing taller too. It looks like a gray-haired man in a tailored brown business suit is heading toward us, but before he reaches our side, my mother turns us toward the kitchen.

Thank God.

As we maneuver through the crowd, a hand strokes my thigh where the material is missing, and when I try to pull away as discreetly as possible, I learn the guy behind him is much more brazen as he strokes the bottom cutout on my stomach.

My heart pounds wildly in my chest as tears prick my eyes, but I keep moving with my mother as fear coats my skin, making me tremble. I don’t know a single man here, and their touches...hell, they are nothing like the sensations I want to feel. It’s nothing like how I felt from my own touch earlier.

Just as we’re about to step over the threshold of the kitchen, the front door swings open, slamming into the wall as my father strides into the empty space, and he’s not alone. Standing beside him is a doctor, who is literally wearing a white surgical coat and a stethoscope around his neck.

The noise and chatter around the room instantly quiets. My father is always the hostess with the mostest, or whatever the male equivalent of that is, and everyone bows to him when they are here. Since he’s home now, I hope everyone stops touching me, although the thunder in his soulless brown eyes

as he searches the crowd tells me the situation isn't going to calm down. Not even a little bit.

My father's gaze falls on his prey, and his face reddens as he storms toward me, ignoring the greetings from everyone in attendance.

"What have you done now, Bethany?" my mother growls under her breath as she turns us to face my father. "Bernārd, we've missed—"

"Shut the fuck up, woman," he snaps as he wraps his hand around my upper arm and pulls me from her side. I stumble over my heels as he drags me toward his office. I try to keep a smile on my face, but it proves to be difficult as I try to keep up with him, especially when his fingers dig painfully into my arm.

My steps falter when I see Bruce, my father's closest friend, open the door to the office so my father can usher me inside. He releases his hold on my arm as he storms to his desk and swipes everything from the surface as I stand frozen in place. Paper flies everywhere, and I hear glass shatter, but I keep my focus zoned in on my father.

My heart has either stopped working or it's beating so fast I can no longer feel it, because suddenly, I feel winded and lightheaded. Dread floods my veins, and all I can hear is ringing in my ears.

Either way, I feel like I would rather die than deal with his wrath tonight. He never makes a scene when people are here. *Ever*. It's all part of the illusion we offer as a wholesome, perfect, suburban family to the outside world.

Glancing over my shoulder, I watch as the doctor steps in, along with a man I don't recognize, and Bruce closes the door behind them, leaving just the five of us—four fully grown men and me. There is zero safety in this room, even with my father behind me. It's me who will feel his rage, not them.

Which means this will only play out how they want it to.

"This is her?" the man beside Bruce asks, and my mouth goes dry as I watch him look me over from head to toe.

His brown hair is scraped back from his face with far too much gel, and although his navy suit is clearly pricey and perfectly tailored, it doesn't make him look classy. He looks like a wolf in sheep's clothing. I don't like him, not even a little bit, and the way he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip as he stares at me makes me want to gag.

"It is, Mr. Manetti," Bruce responds as I turn to glance at my father who is pacing on the other side of his desk behind me.

I can hear the chatter and music on the opposite side of the door, but the sound of my own heart beating in my ears drowns out everything else. My skin almost feels cold with the fear dripping from me, but I keep my mouth shut.

"What the fuck were you doing today, Bethany?" my father demands, his voice filled with anger as he looks at me in disgust.

My eyes widen as I stare at him in surprise. He couldn't know about the beach, and besides, even if he did, all I did was surf. It wouldn't equal this kind of outcome, would it?

Guilt swarms me at the lie I told my mother, but I try to swallow it down.

"I-I didn't..."

"Bruce fucking saw you at the beach in the water with a boy," he growls, interrupting me. My heart plummets as I clench my hands at my sides and try to calm my breathing. I need to respond calmly and carefully, otherwise he will tear me to shreds even more for being foolish or too sassy, and I can't handle that side of him tonight. I never can.

Taking a deep breath, I glance over my shoulder to steal a look at Bruce who wets his lips as he raises his eyebrow at me. I'm never allowed to swear or curse someone out, but that man is a...is a...motherfucker. He's the biggest bag of dicks I have ever met.

"I was surfing," I finally say softly, trying to play on my innocence a little, which never usually works, but I'm hoping

in the presence of others, the manipulation might be worth a shot.

“Are you sure that was all you were doing, little girl? Your father seems to think you can’t be trusted around men. That you’re all too eager to feel a man, any man, inside of you,” Mr. Manetti murmurs, his sickly voice making me cringe as he moves closer and strokes his fingers down my arm.

What on earth is going on? And why the hell is that even being brought up in conversation?

“I-I...” I stumble over any kind of response to that, trying to step back out of this man’s way, but a body moves behind me, suddenly making it very difficult, and I turn to find Bruce purposely plastering me between them.

“I already told you, Rico, the doctor is here to make sure she’s still pure,” my father states firmly as he opens the liquor cabinet and pulls his favorite whiskey out, filling a tumbler and downing the liquid quickly before doing it again.

“What does that mean?” I ask, my voice barely a whisper as I turn to look at the doctor. My hands clench as I feel Bruce press against my back.

I want to scream. I want to cry. I want to beg them to give me some space. But I know it’ll only make things worse for me, so I do what I always do when my father is angry with me, and that’s take a deep breath and slip into the docile, submissive persona he always wants from me.

“It means I hope your body can prove me wrong, Bethany,” my father answers as the creepy guy leans closer.

“It means the good doctor here is going to make sure that pretty little hymen of yours is firmly intact because you’re not worth the money without it,” Mr. Manetti says with a sleazy grin on his face, and I gape at him in surprise.

He can’t mean...He’s not going to...

My gaze flicks between every man in this room, and the atmosphere instantly shifts around me. I feel like I’ve been dipped in ice-cold water. No one confirms or denies this man’s

words, but they all stare expectantly, and that's how I know he's not lying.

What is he expecting to do to me?

"Will the desk do, Doc?" Mr. Manetti asks as I remain frozen in place, and the doctor clears his throat.

"It will, yes," he mutters in response. I hear him moving around to the table, but my eyes are drilling holes into the side of the creepy guy's head. For a man I've never met before, he sure seems to have a lot of control in this room right now.

What did he mean when he said I'm not worth the money without it?

I finally tear my gaze from his so I can see my father, and I find him looking between us already, but his eyes are cold, calculating, and completely devoid of anything more than a monstrous businessman. There's no emotion visible, not even anger, irritation, or annoyance toward me.

Before I find any words, Bruce grips my waist and lifts me clean off the floor as he steps toward the table. All at once, my fight-or-flight instincts take over.

I need to get out of here.

My brain is exploding with warning signals.

"Let me down!" I yell as I try to swing my legs and arms around, but I have little weight behind me as I scramble to get out of Bruce's hold, pushing against him.

"Shut up, Bethany," my father growls as I swing my legs out in front of me, managing to hit the motherfucking instigator, Mr. Manetti, with my heel to his thigh, but he just sneers with delight, and his eyes sparkle like he almost enjoys the thrill of me putting up a fight.

I see my father's stance change, but I'm not quick enough to block the blow as he hits me across the face with the back of his hand.

My head whips to the side from the force as Bruce lowers me to my father's desk in my weakened state. My cheek throbs as a sense of dizziness washes over me.

No way.

No freaking way.

“No, please no,” I beg as Bruce grabs my wrists, lifts them above my head, and pins them to the wood beneath me. My chest tightens as panic sets in. “Please,” I sob, my emotions getting the better of me as I swing my legs out again with everything I have until a vise-like grip wraps around my ankles before roughly pinning them down too.

As I frantically search to see who has a hold of me, I find Rico restraining one leg to the table as my father grips my thigh and pushes my calf down.

I’m completely immobilized as the doctor hovers over me, pulling a pair of latex gloves over his hands, and I feel tears fall down my face as I cry uncontrollably.

Another backhand from my father takes me by surprise, and I struggle to open my eyes as I hear him growl, “Shut the fuck up, you stupid bitch.”

I try to calm my sobs, but it’s too hard as I try with everything I have to fight and push against them. The playing field isn’t even, but it was never going to be.

“I’ll do the two finger test first, and if necessary, I can do a visual examination to confirm,” the doctor explains casually, like this is a routine checkup, but he refuses to meet my eyes which tells me he knows what he’s doing is *wrong*.

“Please don’t do this to me. Please!” I cry louder, and this time my face is met with my father’s fist as he punches me straight in the nose.

Pain ricochets throughout my face as I feel blood trickling in all directions, but my eyes seem to seal shut, leaving it impossible for me to see anything but the back of my eyelids as tears pour out of the corner of my eyes.

“Let’s just get to it, yeah? You’re knocking all the pretty innocence out of her, and Totem isn’t going to like that,” I hear Mr. Manetti say, and I thankfully feel my father’s presence disappear.

I lie blindly as I feel someone lift the hem of my skirt up over my hips and pull my tiny panties down my legs. My cries become louder and nasally as blood continues to pour from my nose. I can't hear any of them, my screams blocking out any more trauma than I can handle, leaving all of my focus on the doctor's touch. When I feel him slowly insert two fingers inside of me, I think I die.

I try to take a deep breath through my mouth as my mind goes numb, along with every inch of my body. As he violates me, I try to use every bit of available brain power I have to imagine the ocean, the surfboard, Ryan, and everything we did today.

I attempt to envision a better place, but the circumstances make it much harder than I anticipate as the doctor drags his fingers inside my opening for a few moments, and my blood turns to ice as I lie frozen in place until I hear him speak above my cries.

“She's a virgin.”

I could have told you that.

I could have fucking told you that.

I feel broken, ruined, and completely shattered into a million pieces all so they could confirm I was a virgin.

A virgin.

“Nice work, Bernārd. Your daughter is going to bring in a pretty penny at the auction. Although it may be worth your while to push it back a week or so, otherwise her battered face will lose you a ton of money when the event will be just for her.”

I feel the hands on one side release me, but I burn on the inside as Mr. Manetti strokes his fingers up the inner part of my thigh until my father knocks his hand away.

“You don't get to touch without payment, Rico. Remember that,” my father growls as he releases me, but I don't move an inch, not even when Bruce releases me too.

Moments later, I hear the door open and close. A quick snippet of the party taking place on the other side of the door can be heard for just a moment before there's a snick of the lock sliding into place, but then it goes quiet again, and I assume I'm left alone.

I slowly curl myself up into a ball, completely exposed on the desk but unable to see with my face swelling from my father's beating.

How do I try to process all of this information? I'm swimming in fear and uncertainty for the future, since *Rico* clearly has a loose mouth and was quite happy to drop details my father had been privy to.

I don't know how long I lay and cry for, it feels like an eternity, but before I drift into a state of unconsciousness, I promise myself one thing.

They don't get to pay a man for something that never belonged to him.

Never.

TWELVE



RYAN

I'm done with this school and these boring-ass subjects that I've already completed. I mean, it may have been less than a year ago, but I'm over it already. I miss cleaning my weapons for weaponry, I miss sparring in combat, and I even miss fucking business classes.

As I make my way from the science labs to English class, I make sure to take the long way around so I can stroll past the office area. The door into the waiting room where the secretaries are is left wide open, and it seems like there are three doors branching off from the main office space.

I need to get in there today. It's Monday morning and I'm being proactive, starting the week as I mean to go on—with purpose.

No more messing around. I need to be focused, and until I can scope out the Knight's Creek Town Hall again, this is my next best option.

I'm sure I can get myself into a bit of trouble so I can get a closer look. I've been desperate to swing a punch and relieve some tension.

With determination in my stride, I make my way to English, and I remember this is the only class I seem to have with Bethany.

My mind instantly goes back to Saturday and the fun we had. Watching her listen intently to my instruction and continuously get back up on her feet to try and try again until

she was able to ride a wave showed me just how fucking awe-inspiring she is.

I was impressed, and that never happens. Then, like a fucking asshole, I sat up on the surfboard with her. Unconsciously reacting to Bethany's strong magnetism, my body moved on its own accord, and before I even realized it, I was brushing her wet hair off her face and leaning closer. I could almost feel her breath fanning against my lips as she stared at me with wide eyes while I watched her pulse pound in her neck.

It was overwhelming, intense, and confusing, even for me. I still can't place my feelings.

At that moment, I realized just how stunning she is. Bethany Asheville has always been quiet, timid, and overlooked. But in reality, she is a product of her surroundings, and someone needs to help this girl flourish.

That's my side agenda. While I'm here, for the short time that I am, I'm going to make it my mission to make her *feel* anything other than the drama she is obviously surrounded by. I don't know why I've taken it upon myself, it's so far beyond my character that I'm not sure I'm alright, but every fiber of my being tells me to do it.

Besides, we pinky promised to surf again, and that shit was only ever reserved for my mother.

Swiping a hand down my face, I mentally step back from my thoughts. I can do all that, for her, for Bethany, but right now, I need to focus on getting into the main office, and to do that, I need to be my usual angry, arrogant self, not the lighter, fluffier version Bethany seems to bring out of me.

I take a deep breath, completely ignoring every other student around me as I step inside the classroom. I can hear the two girls right by the door gossiping about me the second I enter, but I don't bother to even glance in their direction. My focus is on one girl and only one girl in here. It's the pretty girl who fucks with my head, so it isn't helping my current state of mind.

I should be focusing on causing trouble and getting into the office, not her.

Fuck, my priorities are a damn mess.

Looking around the room, I spy Chuck, I mean *Chad*, and the other members of the football team at the back of the class acting like this is their show and we're lucky to be in the same room as them. It makes me want to laugh, because these motherfuckers wouldn't last two minutes in Featherstone Academy.

They think they are strong and cool, but they wouldn't make it through the initial sparring session in combat at Featherstone. No way.

They sprawl across the desks, laughing louder and talking over everyone around them. I can barely hear myself think.

But these guys are the key to getting into that office. Their ego will definitely force them to put up a fight.

Contemplating going straight in for the kill now or taking my seat, I flick my gaze to the table, and I find Bethany sitting quietly in her spot. I pause as I look her over from head to toe. Something feels off. Her posture is stiff as she sits hunched over on herself, and her blonde hair is down today, covering her face.

"Did you see the state of the loser's face? She definitely had a run-in with someone, and she got what she deserved," someone on the football team says to their friends beside me, and I frown.

"Hey, Asheville, show Brandi your face." Chad chuckles, and I can feel the confusion in my expression as I move toward her, deciding on my course of action. I'm not going to start shit until I know she's okay.

Dropping down into my seat, I place my backpack by my feet as I glance in Bethany's direction. She must feel my presence, because she shifts slightly in her seat but doesn't look my way. If anything, she curls tighter into herself, and my heart starts to pound in my chest as I slowly reach my fingers out to move her hair.

She remains motionless in her seat as I pull her hair back, trying to tuck the blonde strands behind her ear, she doesn't move an inch, but her eyes are squeezed shut.

Anger and rage pound through my veins when I see her face, and I grip the edge of the table as I try to contain all of the emotion building inside of me, my jaw clenching as I grind my teeth.

She was fine on Saturday, but then she had to go home to get ready for the party her parents were throwing, and I didn't hear from her at all yesterday. What the hell fucking happened during that time?

Her nose is bandaged, and from here it looks like she has two black eyes that have started to turn yellow.

I have no words right now. Someone fucking hurt her.

Hurt. Her.

While I was at the beach house, completely unaware, and she didn't reach out to me, didn't make the phone call I would have expected her to make. *The call I had asked her to make.*

Fuck.

I can feel myself spiraling with every inch of her hurt face I take in, but I can't be selfish, this isn't about me, it isn't. But fuck if I'm not going to tear someone limb from limb for doing this.

Bethany Asheville... She's, fuck...*She's mine.*

Someone touched what is mine because they didn't know I'm a player in the game, but I will protect her with everything I have because I can't see her like this again, not ever. The pain written over every inch of her face will haunt my dreams, and I dread to think how I would have reacted if the bruises were fresher.

Clearing my throat, I rub the back of my neck as I try to keep myself as calm as possible, but my face continues to heat with anger and my attempt at a deep breath is pointless.

"Bethany, who did this?" I ask, trying to keep my voice low and even, so I don't startle her any more than she already

is.

I stare at her expectantly, ready for her to drop a name for me to kill, but to my surprise, she simply shakes her head, and I watch as tears well in her eyes as she looks straight ahead, which only makes me angrier.

“Bethany, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me who fucking did this to you.”

I can’t keep the bite out of my words. It isn’t meant for her, but she winces at the stark, raw anger I can’t contain. Someone has to pay for this.

“I don’t want your help,” she whispers, and that only angers me more.

“Hey, Asheville, I said show Brandi your fucking face!” Chad hollers as Mrs. Jones steps into the classroom, her eyes wide in confusion, but it’s too late.

Some fucker needs to feel my rage right now, and this asshole just signed himself up.

With my hands braced on the table in front of me, I rise to my feet, but I feel the touch of a small, delicate hand on my left wrist. I pause, my body tingling at her touch.

Looking down, I see Bethany shaking her head at me with wide blue eyes, but even her angelic touch can’t dampen my need to fucking hit something or someone. My body feels numb as if my mind and muscles are running on autopilot. I shake my head back at her and turn around to catch sight of Chad.

He’s not paying attention, too busy laughing and joking with his friends at Bethany’s expense to even see me fucking coming, and that almost makes it worse. I don’t want to catch this fucker by surprise. I want him to see me coming. I want him to know who fucking beat the shit out of him.

All I can see is red, my brain going full hunter mode as my breathing comes in slow bursts. Shaking my hands out at my sides, I stalk in his direction, and I notice it’s one of his football player friends who is sitting beside him at the table. Thank God, because I reach out and grip the edge of the desk,

and when he finally turns to look at me, I shove the solid wood in his direction.

It screeches across the floor, and I watch as it connects with his stomach. The force of my movement and strength alone knocks them both off balance and sends them hurtling backward.

“What the fuck?” someone shouts as I watch them land on their backs on the floor. I feel no sympathy, not a single ounce. These motherfuckers deserve it. I don’t know how they both manage to prevent smacking their heads on the floor, but it leaves me highly disappointed. At least they are completely winded. *Motherfuckers*.

“Ryan, stop,” I hear Mrs. Jones call out as the class erupts at my fury, but there’s no stopping me.

With my grip still on the table, I roughly push it to the side, out of the way, giving me better access to Chad as he lies sprawled across the floor, and I smirk.

He gapes up at me with surprise in his eyes, and I watch as the anger filters in when he realizes who knocked them down and embarrassed *him*, but I move quickly, placing myself on top of him in a full mount. With my knees pressed into his arms as I sit on his chest, I rear back and punch this fucker straight in the face. Someone screams, but it doesn’t make me pause as I continue to pound my fists into his face over and over again, blood splattering over my knuckles and Chad’s face.

The cloud of anger in my mind breaks when someone hits the side of my head and knocks my momentum, forcing me to the side and giving someone else a chance to pull me off Chad, who is coughing and spluttering on the floor.

He doesn’t look so big and tough now. It’s still not enough damage, but he looks broken enough.

Someone pins my arms behind my back, making it difficult for me to move, but I can’t see who it is, so I refrain from breaking into any advanced dislodging moves I’ve been trained to use.

Fuck.

The ringing in my ears eases as I take stock of the guy standing over Chad while he shakes his hand out. Clearly that's the motherfucker who hit me. I commit his face to memory as I pay no mind to everyone else watching me.

Looking back over my shoulder, I find Mrs. Jones is actually the one holding me in place. She has an expectant expression on her face as I try to calm my breathing and the rage still burning through my veins.

"Have you got a grip on yourself, Mr. Carter?" she questions, her eyebrows raised. Her voice doesn't sound all that sad or angry about the situation, almost more like she's simply disappointed in me, and I offer a simple nod.

I have my rage a little more under control now, so I'm not going to fly off the rails.

Slowly, she releases me, and I shake my hands out, and that's then I see the blood on my white t-shirt. I flick my gaze in Chad's direction. He has blood dripping from his nose, and the bruises and swelling on his face are prominent, but I feel nothing toward him.

Just like Featherstone trained me.

Remembering what started the whole fight, I turn my attention to Bethany, but when I run my eyes over her, I pause.

Looking at her, and I mean *really* looking at her, I see fear in her eyes, and the embarrassment at how the situation unfolded is written all over her face. She doesn't like attention, that's nearly impossible for me to miss, and this kind is only making the situation worse.

But what hits me the most is that it was *my* fucking rage that put the uncertainty in her eyes.

It helped the situation for *me*. It made *me* feel better.

But Bethany, I made her feel a whole lot worse.

"Mr. Carter, get out of my classroom and go to the principal's office, now," Mrs. Jones orders, thrusting my

backpack at me, and when I pull my gaze from Bethany's, I toss the strap over my shoulder and head for the door.

Fuck.

I got what I wanted. I secured a way to get into the office, but not like this, not at Bethany's expense.

Not when I've left her fucking hurting like that.

I need to make her forgive me, but how do I do that when I don't even know how to forgive myself?

THIRTEEN



BETHANY

If sheer embarrassment doesn't send me to an early grave, I may need to look at quiet ways to unlive myself after that. The floor didn't magically open and swallow me whole like I had hoped, instead leaving me gaping in a classroom full of gossiping students as Ryan left.

Where did that side of him come from?

I just...I knew he could be short and abrupt, but I never expected him to be *violent*. That's my fault for thinking I actually know him. I don't know a thing about him at all. The rage that burned bright in his blue eyes was unreal, but I felt... safe? Like I knew he wouldn't hurt *me*, but he also didn't hear a single plea coming from my lips as he focused on destroying Chad.

The rest of the lesson was spent awkwardly sitting in my spot alone, with Chad being carted off to the nurse's office while everyone talked shit around me.

"Is he fucking her?"

"Who would fuck that virgin loser bitch?"

"Honey, I'd let him defend me forever, but my opinion of him has changed now that he stepped in to defend her. She must be putting out. What a slut."

Girls are the worst, but I refuse to lower myself to their level. Mrs. Jones doesn't make the situation any easier when she hears the whispers and threatens detention.

Please just leave me here to rot. I don't need anyone else defending me and making it worse.

The second the bell rings, calling time on the day, I already have my bag packed, so I slide out of the room before anyone can stop me or mutter another word in my direction. I keep my head tilted down, avoiding everyone's stares.

I tentatively sweep the loose tendrils of hair back off my face, trying not to touch it at all, but I still wince in advance of accidentally brushing one of the bruises or the swollen skin too hard.

It's crazy how so many people have commented on the state of my bandaged nose and two black eyes, but not a soul has asked what happened...*except Ryan.*

I was so close to running to his house on Saturday evening, but I was in no state to flee, plus my mother sat on my bed watching me so I couldn't go anywhere. I don't even remember how I got from my father's office to my bedroom, but I did wake up when the doctor cleaned up my face when I was in bed. It didn't go unnoticed that the doctor who showed up the second time definitely wasn't the one from earlier in the evening.

Hopefully he was off feeling every ounce of guilt known to man for what he did to me.

Now my parents are away on a business trip for the evening, and Hunter is spending another night at his friend Xavier's house, and as much as I miss him, that also works in my favor because he doesn't have to see my face like this. I want it to clear up as much as possible before he comes home.

Even though they are out of town, I'm not given a minute of peace. Instead, I'm left without a house to go back to tonight. But the best part is, there are no worries or fears about having to return home. Although it makes me temporarily homeless and puts me out in the cold, it also fills me with relief knowing I won't have any drama from them.

I want to ask Ryan if I can use the key he gave me so I can seek shelter instead of roaming under the beach house like

usual, but I don't want to listen to him ask all of those questions about my face. It seems like it's a little too late for that now though.

Lost in my own mind, I stumble as someone shoulder checks me as they barge past, sending me into the wall. I fling my arms out to brace myself, catching my head before it hits the wall.

I don't bother to look over my shoulder to see who it was, it's not worth it. Besides, I'm not going to call them out or make them apologize, that's not how this works. I don't stand my ground, and I don't fight back.

I'm a weak bitch—to them at least. What I wouldn't give to push back, fight back, and stand taller, but I have much bigger things to worry about than their high school drama.

Taking a moment to catch my breath, I focus on the here and now instead of being lost inside my mind. Overthinking does not help in any situation. I just need to keep focusing on the bigger picture.

Pulling my backpack strap tighter, I keep to the side of the hallway and focus on making it to the exit. The second I step outside and feel the fresh air on my skin, I sigh in relief. I practically skip down the steps, getting out of here as quickly as I can, and walk as fast as possible down the pathway so I don't have a run-in with anyone else.

Rushing past the school bus, I start heading toward Montgomery Beach. There's no reason for me to take the bus home when I'm not staying there tonight. I don't have to work until Thursday, but I'm going to go sit in the sand near Pete's with my sketchbook and let the world go by. Hopefully I can decompress a little.

Then, I might be able to take a minute to really comprehend what happened to me on Saturday, but more importantly, the *why*. I don't want to relive it or hash it out in my brain, but the *why* is paramount to my future, and I need to understand that.

This afternoon, no matter the circumstances, is about me doing something for me to make me smile. I have my favorite pencils and a variety of colors that I managed to scrape together some money for a while back.

I stick to the path. A random car passes me here and there, but otherwise, it's a pleasant, quiet walk along the paved sidewalk. The tightness in my chest eases with every step I take. When I see Pete's in the distance, excitement bubbles in my belly.

After I'm worn out from drawing, I'm going to go in there with the money I have and eat something to warm me up. I can't afford much, likely just the soup of the day, but anything is better than nothing. Then I'll have to decide if I'm going to reach out to Ryan or not.

At first it was pride that stood in the way, but now, after what happened in the classroom, embarrassment coats my skin too, and I think I'd rather sit out here in the night air than have him get angry at the situation.

The sun is out, keeping me warm with just my denim jacket, yoga pants, and white t-shirt, but I have a blanket in my bag too. Right before I step off the path and onto the sand, I kick off my sneakers, roll up my socks, and sink my toes into the cool sand beneath me.

My eyes fall closed as I take another deep breath, tilting my head back slightly to let the heat from the sun warm my face as the salty sea air surrounds me.

This. This right here is peace, serenity, and my safe place.

Nothing matters here but me and doing what makes me happy, so I should get on with that.

Moving farther down the beach, I stop a good couple of feet away from the water's edge and drop my bag in the sand, quickly sitting beside it with my legs crossed.

I dig into my bag, pulling out my sketchbook and pencils when I see my cell phone at the bottom of my backpack. It's been a nightmare trying to charge it at home, but I've managed to stay on top of it.

Maybe I could play some music in the background while I draw.

The thought alone fills me with excitement. Creating my own little bubble just for me gives me hope that one day I can do this all the time. I will have a place just for Hunter and me, where nothing or no one can hurt us, and we'll just make ourselves happy. I'll draw and he'll make music.

Unlocking my phone, I notice three text messages and two missed calls from Ryan, but I'm not ready to deal with any of that yet, so I open up a free music app and scroll through the playlists until I find one I like. It seems to have a good mixture of indie and pop rock which is just perfect.

Setting the phone down on top of my backpack, I look out at the ocean, trying to decide what to draw. I usually use whatever is in my mind at the time, but since Saturday, I've had nothing but nightmares, and there's no way in hell I'm going to make them look pretty on this paper.

Instead, I opt to pull from a memory that made me smile before everything became even more chaotic—Saturday afternoon.

The surfboard on the water, and a faceless girl learning how to surf as Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome guides her through the steps.

I can't lift my pencil from the paper, the memory vivid in my mind as I gaze farther down the beach to where it all happened. Page after page, I sketch different parts of the day in my sketchpad. The colors I use getting brighter as I go, eventually coming to the moment we were both sitting on the surfboard, face-to-face, with Ryan's hand on my cheek and the water lapping beneath us.

My heart pounds in my chest just thinking about the way Ryan affected me, and I bet he never even realized the impact he had.

I run my fingers over the sketch, my eyes watering as I try to feel the rush and joy like I did only days ago.

I left here feeling like a new person, or maybe the same person, but I was...*alive*.

I startle when the music from the phone suddenly cuts off as a call comes through, and when I glance at the screen, I see Ryan's name flash across it. I contemplate whether I should answer or not, wrinkling my nose, but it doesn't really matter when I hear a voice to my left.

"You going to answer that?"

Wetting my dry lips, I glance to my side to find the caller himself standing beside me with his phone to his ear and my ringtone still playing out around us.

His knuckles are wrapped, his clothes are fresh and no longer covered in Chad's blood, and his hair is a mess like he's been running his fingers through it nonstop.

As I go to answer him directly, he shakes his head and points down to my phone, making me roll my eyes, but I pick it up anyway.

"Hello?" I murmur, watching as something shifts in his piercing blue eyes as he stares down at me.

"Hi." He continues to look at me for what seems like an eternity, and when he doesn't say anything else, I go to put my phone back down again, but he speaks. "I'm sorry for overreacting and causing a scene earlier. I just...I—"

"It's okay," I whisper, keeping my eyes fixed on his, and I watch as they widen in surprise at my words.

He takes a step closer. "It's *not* okay. I saw your face, I scared you, but I just couldn't let them say shit like that, not when you were sitting there like this," he rambles, talking far too quickly while gesturing to my injuries, and I shake my head.

"I wasn't scared or afraid, and I don't know why, but what I do know is that you won't hurt me," I admit, and my words must do something to him because he finally ends the call, pockets his phone, and takes a seat beside me on the cool sand.

“*Really?*” he asks with uncertainty in his voice as his brows knit together, and I nod.

“I walked around that school all day today, just like this.” I wave a hand in front of my face. “And not a single soul asked me if I was okay or tried to find out what happened. A few teachers gave me a sympathetic look, almost like they knew my damaged face came from the hands of an adult, but they just didn’t want to get involved.”

“That’s fucked up,” Ryan states as his gaze continues to search mine, and I can sense the questions on the tip of his tongue again.

“Can we not talk about it here? Actually, I don’t want to talk about it at all, but this has been my safe haven since I finished school, and I don’t want to tarnish it,” I tell him, and he eagerly nods, likely thinking that’s a sure way to take me somewhere else and get all of the details from me.

“Whatever you need,” he answers as his gaze flicks down to my lap. I’m too busy watching the slight breeze tousle his brown hair around his face, and wondering what time it is since the sun is close to setting to realize what caught his attention until it’s too late.

I feel the weight move from my lap as Ryan pulls my sketchbook away from me and slowly starts scanning the pages. I’m in too much shock to respond, and the flood of embarrassment has caused my cheeks to heat. It’s too late to take it back from him, so I gape as his fingers skim over the drawings in a soft caress.

My palms begin to sweat, and I can hear my heart pounding in my ears as I watch him look over my work, his jaw slightly loose as he gapes at it.

“These are incredible, Bethany,” he says, glancing over his shoulder to look at me, and I feel my blush deepening.

“Those aren’t for you to see,” I mumble, finally finding my voice as I reach out to take my sketchbook back from him. Thankfully, he offers the pad to me without hesitation.

“Is that what you want as a future career? To be an artist of some kind?” he asks, folding his legs and bracing his forearms on his knees as he side-eyes me.

It’s a personal question, one that feels too uncomfortable to answer. That’s like giving him insight into my soul, but surprisingly, I find myself nodding, offering a small piece of myself to Ryan Carter. *Again.*

“I like it. You definitely have the artsy vibe going on now that I think about it,” he comments with a soft smile.

I roll my eyes, tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear as he rubs his lips together. I force myself not to ask what he means by that.

As if my life couldn’t get any more embarrassing right now, my tummy grumbles, a stark reminder that I haven’t eaten since lunch. Ducking my head, I try to hide my pink cheeks as Ryan clears his throat.

“If you haven’t eaten yet, we could hit up Pete’s?”

My eyes fly to his, my hesitation making me hold my position as he looks at me expectantly, waiting for my answer.

We could go to Pete’s. We.

“Are you sure you want to be seen with me after today?” I ask, avoiding his gaze as I rise to my feet and brush the sand off my legs and butt.

“What the fuck does that mean?” he retorts.

I take a deep breath, shouldering my backpack before turning to face him with my eyebrows raised. “If you haven’t guessed already, I have a lot of drama in my life. I really don’t need to add to it, like, at all.” I search his gaze, but I only see understanding in his blue eyes, which makes me continue. “I don’t know what brought you to Knight’s Creek. I know very little about you overall, to be honest, except that you like surfing and can throw a nasty right hook.” He grins at me, which only makes me flustered over my own words. “But I’m trying to survive here. I don’t know whether you’re trying to help or not, but either way, I can’t rely on anyone but myself.”

I don't mention what my escape plan was, since that's now out the window after the bomb Rico dropped on Saturday. Now everything has changed, leaving me with no plan at all, and it hurts my soul.

Ryan stands up beside me, nervously rubbing the back of his neck like he's trying to decide whether he should say something or not, but he quickly shakes his head, and I feel the slightest tinge of disappointment.

"How about we go and get some food and we can talk? I don't handle abuse well, Bethany, like not at all, and before you say it, that's exactly what this is," he says, pointing at my beaten face, and my eyes close tight with defeat.

I hate that he's calling me out on it, but he's not wrong, and for just a moment it feels kind of nice to have a sounding board. I just need him to calm his reactions whenever something happens to me.

"Okay," I murmur, hitching my bag higher up my shoulder as I nervously turn toward Pete's, but Ryan's gentle hand on my shoulder makes me pause.

"I've got you, Betty, pinky promise."

Looking into his eyes, I see nothing but the truth there, but he doesn't really understand any of this, only what he can see on the surface. *If* I tell him everything, he'll likely run for the hills, completely regretting ever offering to be here or help me.

"Sure," I agree, linking my little finger with his before taking off toward Pete's.

I glance out at the ocean one last time, but I don't look back at Ryan, letting him fall into step with me as we climb up the small bank and across the quiet, well lit parking lot. I glance at my watch, surprised to see it's already past seven in the evening, the sun hitting the horizon in the distance as Ryan walks quickly to hold the door open for me.

It's a quiet Monday evening at Pete's, which makes me feel better because the fewer people to see us together, the better, but the second I step inside and find Linda staring in my direction, I instantly regret coming here.

The anger gleaming in her blue eyes and etched onto her face makes me cringe as she completely forgets she's taking someone's order and starts to storm toward me. Her eyebrows almost touch her hairline as her jaw grinds, and her hands fist at her sides.

I did not think this through.

"How likely is she to think I was the one to do this to you?" Ryan mutters under his breath, and my mouth falls open in surprise because I didn't even consider that, but she's probably going to go straight for him.

Looking back at Linda, I see her gaze focus on Ryan as she gets a few steps away, and without thinking, I step in front of him and lift my hand to stop her.

I brace myself for whatever she's about to do, but thankfully she manages to keep her arm back and not release the swing that was about to hit Ryan. I freeze in place, taking stock of the situation as Linda looks at me expectantly with rage in her eyes and her hands on her hips.

My back is pressed right against Ryan's chest and I feel his hands on my hips. It's like he stepped forward into my space to move me out of the way from protecting him, but couldn't move me in time.

Linda slowly shakes out her arms, glaring at the pair of us as she waits for an explanation, and I realize this is truly the first time my father has hit me hard enough in the face to leave such a blatant amount of physical evidence for everyone to see. Linda has never seen a single injury before, but I can't tell her the truth, that'll only make my situation worse.

"Somebody better start talking," Linda practically growls, and I force myself to swallow down the lump in my throat as I panic for a response, finally remembering there are a few people in here tonight.

"That's why we're here, Linda, but she's not going to tell me anything if you act like this," Ryan says calmly yet firmly all at once, and my body tenses as I wait for Linda's response.

Her gaze flicks between the two of us, and I stand awkwardly before her, pleading with my eyes for her to let it go.

“Fine. But I want fucking names, because I will slaughter the motherfuckers who did this and paint the whole damn town red with their blood. Do you hear me?” Linda spits out, hands on her hips as she glares at Ryan in warning, while I simply stare at her, anticipating everyone else’s thoughts and feelings so much I can’t even process my own actions.

I’m too embarrassed to look over my shoulder at Ryan’s expression, but by the looks of Linda’s, they seem to be having a private conversation just with their eyes. It leaves me feeling a little uneasy because I can’t understand what they are not saying out loud.

“I promise you, Linda, I’m going to beat you to it,” Ryan finally says, squeezing my hips in response, and I shudder under his touch.

Holy hell, I can’t stay this close to him. He’s doing things to my body that I’m not ready to face, even though I’m just as desperate for him to touch me in any way possible like I was on Saturday afternoon.

As if sensing my inner turmoil, Ryan moves his hands to squeeze my shoulders in a silent stand of support as he speaks to Linda.

“Do you have a table for the two of us? She needs to eat.”

Linda’s eyes go wide as she remembers where we are, and when she turns to glance around the diner, I do the same, finding almost every pair of eyes fixed in our direction. It’s at that moment I remember Bruce’s evidence against me, and I quickly jump out of Ryan’s hold.

“Get back to your damn food or get the hell out,” Linda shouts, and the customers quickly avert their gazes, making me blush with embarrassment.

Not waiting to be directed to an open seat, I make my way to the booth in the far back corner of the diner, out from under everyone’s noses. No one ever really wants to sit here because

it doesn't come with a view of the ocean and is kind of tucked away, but that's exactly what makes it my favorite table.

Dropping down onto the leather seat, I shrug my backpack off and place it beside me before clasping my fingers together and placing them on the table. I refuse to look at either Linda or Ryan as I sense them getting closer to the booth. Shame and embarrassment bounces around in my head now that I have a second to process my emotions, but I refuse to cling to either of them.

"I'll grab two orange sodas and two chicken and bacon club sandwiches with extra fries," Linda says quietly before retreating. I feel bad for avoiding her gaze, but this is all a bit much for me.

Ryan takes the seat opposite me, murmuring his thanks to Linda but not saying a word to me as he gives me a little time to calm down so I can take a few soothing breaths. My heart was literally in my throat moments ago, and for once it wasn't because someone was going to hurt me. That feeling was because people *cared*.

I don't know how to respond to that type of emotion.

My mind has been trained to read a person's emotions, assessing their mood to figure out how to tread carefully, but here, with Ryan and Linda, I feel completely taken aback by their emotional reactions. They feel almost foreign to me.

Tucked away in the corner, I feel better not being surrounded by other customers, the booth offering the perfect barrier between myself and reality. I can hear soft music in the background and the clattering of plates and people chatting in the distance, but it doesn't distract me.

"I'm sorry, you seem overwhelmed, and I didn't mean for that to happen," Ryan murmurs quietly, and I peer up at him through my lashes. He rakes his fingers through his hair for what looks like the hundredth time as he offers me an apologetic smile.

"This is the second time you've apologized. Why are you being nice to me?" I ask softly, finding the question just flies

off the tip of my tongue before I can stop it. I watch as he swipes a bandaged hand down his face, his fitted blue top tight around his biceps, and I really see the size of him.

He was just a hot guy before today, all toned and tan, and then I watched him lay into Chad as he defended me, and it's only now when I see the real muscle on him. If he was standing at my father's side, I would be quivering away from Ryan, but here, like this, just the two of us, I'd let him use those arms to shield me from the world.

"Honestly?" he questions, waiting for me to clarify before he continues, so I nod my head. "I have no fucking clue."

My eyebrows rise as I look at him in surprise, waiting for him to provide more of an explanation when Linda appears with our sodas. She places one in front of each of us without uttering a word, but the atmosphere feels tense until she sighs and turns on her heel to give us the space we need.

I expect him to happily sink into the silence that surrounds us, so it shocks me when he clears his throat.

"I don't want to explain why I'm here, it's not something I care about. I've spent far too long having to explain myself to others, and it honestly doesn't matter in this instance," he states. If anyone else said those words in that exact order, I would take offense or feel hurt. But the way he says them, like the words help toughen his heart, resonates deep within me, and I find myself understanding.

"I would love to live in a world where I didn't have to do that as well," I agree, and his shoulders sag in relief.

"I don't care about people. I look after number one, it's what has worked for me so far, except my old friend Benji—he's an exception. I'm not going to be here long, school's almost over, but there is something about you that sends me into a primal state that I can't control. I want to protect you from whatever is causing you so much harm. I want to make sure you never step foot out in public with black eyes and a potentially broken nose."

My mouth goes dry as he stumbles to find the right words, speaking them in a choppy, panicked rush. His mind is in just as much of a mess over me just as much as mine is with him.

“I can’t lean on you when it’s not forever, that’s something I’ve learned *not* to do,” I answer honestly, taking a sip of my soda as he nods. “That’s not me asking for more or anything at all really. That’s just a part of my truth. A lot happened with this,” I say, pointing at my face. “A lot of words were said that I don’t understand, and I need to focus on making sure I know what they mean *before* I try to come up with some form of plan for Hunter and me.”

“And this isn’t something you can tell me?” he asks, his eyes filled with a plea. I don’t know how to answer his question.

How am I supposed to say, *Oh yeah, my father gave me this absolute disaster on my face, while pinning me down on his desk and completing an intrusive hymen check? Two men watched it happen, one of whom made my skin crawl, giving me leering looks and clearly spying on me while I learned to surf, all while the other guy made comments about my virginity upping my value...like I’m for sale, to the man trying to protect me?*

My skin prickles with fear as I remember *his* words in my head.

Nope.

This is *not* where I spill my truths to this guy.

His touch on my hand startles me as it pulls me from the thoughts running through my mind.

“We all have secrets, Beth, some just aren’t worth the erosion of your soul,” he mutters, stroking his thumb across my knuckles. I bite back the emotion I feel at his words as tears try to escape as I compose myself. I want to believe what he’s telling me.

“I wish I could tell you everything. I do. But I just...” I trail off, shrugging in defeat as I look up at the ceiling and sigh.

“You don’t trust me enough right now,” he states, finishing the truth in my incomplete sentence, and I nod. “I’m going to change that, Bethany.” He leans back in his seat with determination in his gaze, and I almost roll my eyes at the challenge in his voice.

“Please do,” I whisper, meeting his gaze and letting my defenses down a little. I see the appreciation in his blue eyes.

“Do we need to get you back to the house of terrors by a certain time?” he asks, changing the subject, and gestures like *that* continue to chip away at my walls. He can read my needs so well most of the time, and that’s why this feels so natural.

Clearing my throat, I sweep my hair off my face as I shake my head. “No, I, uh, they are away for the night, so I’m living my best life in the crisp air on the California shore,” I respond, pointing down at my bag, and his eyes widen before he quickly tamps down the rage that begins to burn in his eyes.

“You mean staying at the beach house with me, right?” he clarifies, and my cheeks blush as I try to find a response, folding my arms over my chest.

Where is Linda to interrupt us now? She’s nowhere to be found when I actually need her. How convenient.

“Uhm, I didn’t know how to ask after earlier today,” I confess, and he frowns at me.

“I told you to use the key, not to ask. Ever. I think your ears are broken along with that nose, Betty,” he teases with a grin, trying to lighten the mood, and I can’t stop the giggle that escapes my lips as I absorb his lightheartedness.

“Not quite. But I haven’t been able to sleep very well lately, so it sounds perfect to me,” I whisper, and a look of understanding transforms his face as he chews his lip.

“You’ll be safe for the night, I promise. How about we eat then head back? You can shower, relax, and have an early night. I’ll stand guard outside of your door while you sleep,” he offers, and I think I really might cry this time. “But, Bethany, I need you to know that I’m serious when I say I *will*

end whoever has done this to you. All you have to do is say the word.”

The venom in his voice as he bites out the words makes it crystal clear I damn sure better believe he means every ounce of that sentence. I want to tell him everything now and give him my whole story, but there is the smallest part of me that holds back—for how long, I’m not sure.

Is he a monster? Possibly.

I’m surrounded by them apparently, but for *him*, I think I can make an exception.

FOURTEEN



RYAN

I pace back and forth in front of the patio doors that look out over the beach as I wait for Benji to text back. Bethany is fast asleep in the guest bedroom while I'm out here going fucking crazy.

I tried to act all cool and easy with her not being able to trust me with what's going on with her, but on the inside, it's eating at my soul, and I'm about to explode with the need to fucking fix this situation for her.

I could see it in her eyes as we sat facing each other at Pete's. There's more to this situation than just the beating her face took, and I *have* to know what else is going on. It's no longer a want, it's a need, because I feel like the secrecy is suffocating me.

It's a little after midnight, and I really should sleep, but I bit back my pride and reached out to Benji to help me figure out what's going on with this fucking town.

Before I left Featherstone Academy for Knight's Creek, Benji offered to help me with my assignment since he knew how fucking broad it was, but being my prideful, dickhead self, I refused. I wanted to do this by myself, but it's no longer just about me.

My gut tells me everything I need to know links back to Bethany and her family, or if I at least dig into her parents, I feel like I'm going to be heading in the right direction. For the first time in my life, I feel the most selfless I have ever been.

Bethany Asheville's safety is worth more to me than completing this assignment unassisted.

My hand clenches at my side as I glance out over the ocean, the moon the only light as it shines down on the water rippling below.

I beat the shit out of Chad earlier, and I'd do it all again if I had to, although I know it's not the satisfaction I really want. No, I *need* to get my hands on the person hurting her. I'm only going to be able to contain my anger for a little while longer before it takes on a mind of its own and goes on a killing spree for her.

I did manage to get into the main office though, except my attention to detail could have been a little better since I was too focused on Bethany and her being alone in class with those fuckers. No one cares, not a single soul in the school is decent enough to see a broken, beaten girl and ask if she's okay or if she needs help. They are mandated reporters, for fuck's sake.

Is this because she's an Asheville? Because her parents are a founding family that holds more control over this town than the general eye sees?

I glance over my shoulder as if I have X-ray vision so I can confirm that Beth is okay, and the fact that I can't makes me sigh.

Everyone wants to sit around with their rose tinted glasses on and believe Knight's Creek is a halfway decent place to live.

If I thought Featherstone was bad, I was wrong. At least at Featherstone you know what to expect—blood, violence, and sly motherfuckers. But here? Here you expect the small-town sense of calm, like the fucking *Gilmore Girls* or something. Instead, it's just full of hidden truths, lies, and narcissists, and I know this because that's the whole reason I'm here.

I should sleep, but my brain just isn't ready for that at all.

The sound of someone crying out suddenly makes me pause, hands on my hips, I glance around the beach house in

confusion, and when I hear it again, I know the sound is coming from upstairs—Bethany.

I race up the stairs in a mad dash, taking two steps at a time, trying to get to her as quickly as I can. My heart pounds in my chest and my palms sweat with fear as I push open the door to her room to find her writhing with terror in her sleep.

Faltering for a moment, I panic as I consider how to address the situation as I near the bed. Her blonde hair is fanned out over her pillow, her arms are pulled tight against her chest, like she's protecting herself, and her eyes are scrunched shut in pain as sweat beads on her forehead.

"Please, please, please," she chants, and my blood runs cold as the need to protect her takes over.

I lean toward her as she wriggles in the sheets again, defending herself from the attacker in her nightmare. I try to approach her the safest way possible, not that I'm sure what that really is for her. I know what it feels like to be woken from a night terror, and I don't want to add to her pain and discomfort by jolting her in the wrong way.

She's going to be disoriented. I don't want her to think her night terror just became her reality too.

"No, please, God, no. Don't check, please don't check," Bethany continues to ramble, and I frown with concern as I glance over her body, watching as she pulls her knees up to her chest.

"Bethany," I murmur, trying to stroke her arm, but she flinches at my touch, so I move back slightly.

"I promise I'm a virgin, I promise. Just please don't check." Her cries become hysterical as she moves to cover her face, and my blood turns to ice as I process her words.

Who the fuck would be checking to see if she's a virgin?

Please tell me this is just a dream and not her reliving a real-life nightmare.

I can't deny the tremble in my hands as I stand and gape at her. I'm at a complete loss as to how to protect her from her

mind, but as her cries get louder, I know I just need to bite the bullet and wake her, no matter the consequences for either of us. It'll still be better than what she's going through right now.

“Bethany? Bethany, I need you to wake up, Bethany!” I shout, gripping her arm tighter than before and rocking her, but her mind is fighting against me.

“Please don't sell me, p-p-please.” I can barely make out her words as her face becomes blotchy from her cries. Her body shivers with pure fear, and I know, *I know* in my gut this isn't just a dream.

Anger boils beneath the surface as I grab both of her shoulders and shake her a little harder. “Bethany! Fuck. Betty!”

All at once her cries stop as her body slowly relaxes, and her eyes blink open as I stare down at her with concern.

“Ryan?” Her voice is meek as she quickly wipes her tears away, and I release my hold on her so she can wake up without me being completely in her personal space.

“Are you okay?” I ask, trying to lose the frown on my face so I don't concern her more. She glances down at herself like that will give her the answer she needs. “You were having a nightmare,” I add, wanting to clarify why I'm in the room right now.

She untucks her knees from her chest, slowly pushes the covers off, and moves to sit upright as she swipes her hair back off her face. Her pajamas are soaked with sweat, which is likely from her dream consuming her.

I want to help, but I don't know how, and my mind is filled with the words she was crying out just moments ago. It's on the tip of my tongue to confirm my suspicions, but I know deep down that isn't going to help her at this moment, so I swallow my questions and desire to know the truth so I can comfort her.

“I'm sorry I woke you,” Bethany finally says, her voice hoarse from all of the crying she was doing, and I shake my head before she's even finished as she looks up at the ceiling.

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t asleep. I heard you cry out and wanted to make sure you were okay,” I respond, and she finally looks at me. Her usually bright blue eyes appear almost black, and the pain written all over her face is enough to answer my earlier curiosity, but I know I can’t broach the subject yet.

I want to smooth the wrinkle on her brow, kiss away her tears, and *fuck*, obliterate all of this pain from her life.

“Thank you,” she whispers, trying to offer me a smile, but it’s far too watery and weak for it to be genuine.

“Are you going to be okay?” I ask awkwardly, rubbing the back of my neck as I try to be who she needs me to be and do whatever she asks, but this really isn’t my area of expertise.

The only time I’m ever in a woman’s bedroom is to fuck her, not console her, so I’m not used to being in this scenario.

“I-I think so,” she mutters, looking away from me to straighten the sheets before trying to lie back down again, but her movements seem very stilted.

“Okay, well, if you need me, you know I’m just across the hall, alright?” I murmur, propping my hands on my hips as I struggle with what to do. I cast my gaze over her one more time to make sure she’s okay, and she nods.

With that, I turn on my heel and head for the door slowly, and just as my hand wraps around the handle, I hear a sob break from her chest, stopping me in my tracks. I glance back over my shoulder to see tears pooling in her eyes again. I stand and stare helplessly at her.

“Can you stay with me? Please, Ryan,” she begs quietly, and my heart breaks as she pleads with me.

Without question, I turn back to the bed, watching as relief washes over her face and she scoots over, making room for me. I glance down at my t-shirt and black jogger shorts. This will have to do.

As I slowly lay myself down on the bed beside her, she catches me by surprise when she rolls into my arms and places her head on my chest.

I lay still, frozen in place with the delicate touch of her hand on my stomach, and I find myself struggling to breathe.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why does this feel... different? Likely because I never do this, but why does it feel so...nice?

She snuggles in close, her body pressed against mine, and I slowly lower my arm around her, which makes her moan softly in contentment in the back of her throat as she gets comfortable.

Without a word, she falls straight back to sleep, leaving me gawking down at her.

In the silence of the night, lying beside her, I have a moment to process the words she cried out in her sleep. First thing in the morning I'm messaging Benji again, because it'll be over my dead body that someone will fucking sell her, and I need to know if someone *has* actually checked to see if she's a virgin, because I'll rip their motherfucking throat out too.

Lying beside her, knowing she is safe for the time being, I find myself growing sleepy, but my last thought before I fall asleep is that she's just put me another step closer to completing my assignment, yet I'm nowhere near ready to leave her side.



BETHANY

Making my way downstairs, the smell of bacon encouraging every step, I nervously nibble on my bottom lip knowing I'm going to have to come face-to-face with Ryan after last night.

My nightmare was so real. Saturday's events replayed in my head once again, and I clearly cried out so loudly Ryan came in to make sure I was okay. Then, like a damn fool, I pleaded with him to stay with me, and to my utter surprise, he did.

I fell back to sleep without any concerns and didn't wake up until this morning. The bed beside me was empty but

warm, and my heart sank a little. It's completely crazy to me how a guy can offer such a sense of security, especially because men have been nothing but demons to me. I hate myself for going against my own code and leaning on him, knowing he won't be here forever.

Taking a quick shower and changing into the spare outfit I had in my backpack, I feel fresher. A good pair of leggings and a sweater will do that.

As I reach the bottom of the stairs, I find Ryan in the kitchen plating the food, and I pause to look at him. I almost see him in a new light after everything he did for me last night.

He's wearing a pair of straight cut jeans that mold to his ass perfectly, and a navy polo top that makes his tan arms look amazing. With his damp brown hair swept back off his face, I can get a good view of his profile. The shape of his full lips and the glint in his blue eyes has my body thrumming with nerves.

There is something about him that just captivates me, and I don't want to step out from under the protective wings he seems to have wrapped me in.

"Morning, Betty. You ready for some bacon?" he asks casually, using his newfound nickname for me that has me rolling my eyes, but it instantly eases my nerves. I take the seat across from him while he places a plate before me filled with bacon and eggs.

"Thank you," I mutter, trying not to meet his gaze as I pour some fresh orange juice into a glass from the pitcher he set on the table.

It feels like he's trying to take care of me, which is beyond foreign, but I can't deny that I like it. I just need to get over it so it doesn't hurt so much when he leaves.

He moves around the breakfast bar to take the seat beside me, and we both eat in comfortable silence, at least until I feel the anxiety start to build inside me. I prepare myself to broach last night with him. Finishing my bacon and eggs, I place my cutlery down and clear my throat.

“I’m sorry about last night,” I whisper, finally looking to my left to meet his eyes, and I find him already looking at me with a grin.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, Bethany,” he answers sincerely, and it calms my concerns and worries.

“Well, if I didn’t thank you last night, thank you. I feel like a whiny brat,” I admit, taking a sip of my juice, and he frowns at me.

“You don’t remember thanking me last night?” he asks, looking for clarification, and I shake my head.

“Apart from waking up and falling asleep on you, I can’t remember the rest.” He rubs the back of his neck in a nervous tic, and I can’t decide if disclosing that I don’t remember causes him more pain and stress. “Is everything okay?” I question anxiously, and he quickly drops his hand and nods to appease me.

“It’s all good,” he assures me, clearing his throat. “So do you actually have a car? I haven’t seen you with one, but I can drive us to school. Last time I asked, you ran away, and when you stayed here the first time I forgot to ask because I’m a bossy asshole,” he says, changing the subject as he grabs our dishes and walks over to the sink.

“Uh, no, no car. I can’t even drive,” I reply with an awkward chuckle, and he turns to look me over in surprise.

“You’re joking, right?”

I try to find words to respond, but my embarrassment has my cheeks reddening, and I gulp like a fish with no words coming out of my mouth.

“No,” I manage to spit out, and he instantly cringes.

“Sorry, I didn’t...You know what? I’m going to fucking change that,” he states very matter-of-factly, and I raise my eyebrow at him.

“Is that so?” I ask, sitting taller in my seat, my interest piqued as he claps his hands.

“Yeah, it is. How are you ever going to run away from this place without the ability to drive, Betty?” he responds almost excitedly as he walks toward me, and I shake my head.

“City bus, overnights, there are lots of options,” I counter, reeling off a few that I’ve actually considered. He rolls his eyes as he leans on the countertop beside me and places a hand on the back of my chair, almost caging me in, and my heart pounds in my chest at his proximity.

“How are you going to get away from here as quickly as you can?” he asks, standing almost nose to nose with me, adjusting his prior sentence as I swallow down the dry lump in my throat.

“By driving,” I whisper in response, and it makes him grin, causing my heart to ring in my ears.

“Exactly,” he says, leaning in to kiss my forehead before stepping back and tossing the towel I hadn’t seen in his hands over his shoulder.

He walks off, leaving me to gape at his back while he does the dishes. Does he even realize what he just did? I can’t breathe with the emotions swirling through me right now as I freak out.

He just kissed my forehead. I can still feel the press of his soft, full lips where they touched me. That is...No one has ever...Why do I need him to do that again? My body trembles with the need to feel him press his lips to mine.

I know my Saturday was worsened because of my time with Ryan, but I’m drawn to him, consequences be damned. I need this guy in my life.

Holy f.u.c.k.i.n.g *hell*. What is he even doing to me?

FIFTEEN



RYAN

Red tape.

All I'm fucking getting is red tape.

I rake my hands through my hair in frustration as I take a deep breath, annoyed at the whole situation.

Benji is getting no more than me either, and it's really starting to piss me off.

Featherstone wasn't wrong, there's something going on here in Knight's Creek, and whatever it is, it's suspicious as fuck. I came here to find out everything I can to complete my assignment, but after Bethany's haunting words in her sleep, this has become motherfucking personal.

I don't know why I want to protect her and hold her close, but I'm not going down that road right now. There are more pressing issues.

Like whether or not I tell her about the Featherstone assignment.

I put on a happy face the morning after her night terror woke her up. Instead of rehashing the night before, I focused more on the fact that this girl hasn't even learned how to drive, but her words still haunt me.

I promise I'm a virgin, I promise. Just please don't check.

Please don't sell me, p-p-please.

Now, two days later, I still have no new information. Realistically, I don't think I'm going to find what I need at school or even at the town hall. Not if this is darker than I initially thought.

But what did I even think I would be here for to begin with? I'm more naïve than I want to admit, clearly.

If they are into selling young girls or trafficking people...

Just thinking about it sends a shiver down my spine, and it reminds me I'm in math class, doing none of the work required and spending all my time worrying about my—

Fuck. Get a grip on yourself, Ryan. You can't go around calling her your girl, even if it is only in your head.

I clearly need to get laid, but the thought of anyone other than Bethany beneath me instantly makes my dick soft. The heavy baggage that surrounds her should be a huge warning sign, but I can't help how much I'm drawn to her. I can't even figure out when things shifted in my mind. I've always found her attractive, but knowing her on a deeper level and relating to her abusive situation does something to me too.

It looks as though no one has ever had her back, just like no one ever had mine as a child, and I want to be that for her. We all deserve someone to pull us through the storm.

"Mr. Carter, are you going to answer the equation on the board or stare aimlessly at the blank pages in front of you?" Mr. Bellows asks, calling me out in front of the whole class. I have to fight back the eye roll I want to give him, but my mouth moves without a filter as I respond.

"The blank pages are holding my attention, Bellows, what can I say," I answer with a shrug, meeting his gaze as I slouch back in my seat, and I watch as his face reddens in annoyance with me. "So, no, I'm not going to answer the equation," I clarify, tapping the table in front of me as I raise my eyebrows in challenge.

A few snickers ring out around me, reminding me I'm not the only student in this class, but I don't really know anyone, and honestly, I couldn't give a fuck.

I watch as Mr. Bellows stammers and stutters over a response, but nothing comes out. He eventually turns on his heel and calls on another student in the class. It's fucking riveting to wield control over a teacher like that without consequences.

Fuck, if I did that at Featherstone Academy, I'd probably have a weapon aimed at my head. It's a bonus for attending a normal school for a change, but it's not the response I wanted.

I was kind of hoping he'd kick me out of the classroom to give me an excuse to get out of here, but he apparently didn't get the memo.

As class continues around me, I glance at my watch, noting there's only ten minutes of this shit left anyway, and my mind instantly wanders back to Bethany like the crazy addiction she is.

It kills every fiber of my being to watch her climb on that school bus every day after classes end, taking her to the place she calls home. Not that home is what I'd call it.

Hell.

Prison seems much more fitting.

It's anything but an actual home, because a home represents safety, love, and contentment, and she gets none of that at the Asheville house, none of it. She hasn't admitted that to me, but it's clear in the bruises that have thankfully almost healed on her face.

I can only beg so much about stepping in and helping, but she point-blank refuses me every time. It seems like she is a huge protector of her younger brother, Hunter, and shielding him appears to be coming at a price.

Fuck.

Grabbing a pencil, I scribble carelessly on my paper, trying to occupy my mind as I wait for class to end.

I need to get in that house. There must be an office in a place that big, and if they are happy to beat their daughter and send her to school in that state, then I can't imagine them

being too bothered about hiding any dirty dealings they are involved in.

That will probably give me something the town hall won't as well. That's where I need to focus my attention.

If I can do this, I have the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone—complete my assignment and potentially save Bethany along the way.

Determination settles over me as the bell rings to confirm the end of class. I scrape my unused notepad and pen into my bag, darting from the room before Mr. Bellows fully dismisses us. I can't help but leave in a rush. Bethany has work tonight, so I can take her pretty ass over to Pete's in my truck without the fucking bus driver informing her parents that she wasn't on it.

It's fucking disgusting and barbaric. The thought alone has me clenching my hands in annoyance as I pull myself back from the edge.

I really would like to gut these motherfuckers with a rusty blade. My training and skilled techniques would make them unrecognizable within minutes, but I'm following her orders... for now.

As I walk through the school halls, girls whisper and giggle as I pass, while the guys either love or hate me for beating the shit out of Chad. He hasn't shown his face around me since it happened, and everyone else gives me a wide berth.

I got a fucking warning. No detention, no suspension, just a warning, which is laughable, but I guess that's what happens when someone in the main office knows you're from Featherstone. But my concern now is that all of this revolves around the Ashevilles, and if the school is named after them because they are a founding family, how much input and information do they hold over Knight's Creek?

I don't know who at Featherstone chose this assignment for me or arranged my placement, so maybe I need to do some digging into that too. Our assignments are given dependent on

our skill set, but to be this far away on a long assignment? I'm not aware of anyone else who has one that's similar.

It seems I happily followed orders that led me here without pushing like I know I should have. It wouldn't have gotten me anywhere, but I could have put up a fight.

Scanning the hall, I spot her instantly. She's walking out of her science class, trying to blend in with the wall as groups storm past her like she's invisible.

How do they not see her?

The shine of her soft blonde hair that sits perfectly in her ponytail, her cute button nose which wrinkles when she sees or hears something she doesn't like, or even her full lips that beg to be kissed.

Fuck. My cock stiffens in my pants, but I tamp that down. She's not ready for me to maul her, not if her nightmare was some kind of resemblance of real life, which I believe it was. I have to be patient and not lead with my dick for a change.

But I still want to press my lips to hers and taste her on my tongue as she curls her fingers in my hair. Hell, on Tuesday morning I fucking leaned forward and unconsciously kissed her forehead, my body taking on a mind of its own. But the worst part? I didn't ask for her permission, and it's left me stressed ever since.

I saw the stunned look in her eyes as I did it, but she said nothing, and I opted not to bring up the spontaneous kiss since I didn't want her to speak her truth about me pushing boundaries. I don't want any more distance between us than there already is. The fact I have to let her go back to that hellhole every night makes me feel like an embarrassment of a man, but I have to remind myself that I'm following her wishes.

I just need to get into the Asheville house, snoop around, and ideally place some surveillance cameras. That way, if she's ever in danger, I'd fucking know about it right then and there. I could take action and not see the devastation on her

face days later instead, or the bruises that mark her delicate skin.

“Hey, Betty,” I murmur, forcing myself to focus on the girl who stands before me, lighting up my world as she grins at me. She rolls her eyes at my nickname for her, but the fact she doesn’t argue shows me she doesn’t mind it.

“Hey,” she whispers, ducking her head as I fling my arm around her shoulders before walking down the hallway with her.

God, I love having her this close. It was instinctive to do it, but I can’t help but notice the stiffness in her body since I touched her. Reluctantly, I pull my arm from her shoulders, watching the mixture of emotions run over her face as we step outside. Not many people are out here yet, the cool air keeping everyone in.

Confused and wanting to understand, I grab her arm lightly and pull us to the side, positioning us out of the way of the stream of students all exiting the school building.

She frowns up at me as I box her in against the wall, placing my hands above her head. I notice a hint of her white lace bra under her pale blue shirt, and I have to fight back a groan.

“Are you okay?” I ask, stroking her arm as I look down at her, and she gapes up at me. “I’m sorry. I need to stop touching you without your permission,” I add hastily, removing my hand, and it makes her eyebrows knit together, her blue eyes sparkling.

“No, no, it’s—that’s fine, I just...” I watch as she struggles to find the words to explain what’s going on in her mind, and I don’t want to cause her any more stress than she’s already dealing with. “I can explain, just not here,” she mutters, her eyes trying to tell me what her mouth can’t, and I find myself nodding in agreement.

Taking a step back, I sweep my arm out for her to lead the way, and she does, cutting back into the crowd to head down the steps unnoticed by the students around us.

We say nothing as we walk toward my truck, a slight tingle of tension building around us in the silence. I can still feel it even when I unlock the vehicle and we climb inside.

I don't push, knowing she needs to say what's on her mind in her own time and at her own pace, but patience really isn't my strong suit.

"I need to be able to be honest with you without you going all caveman," she hedges, continuing to look forward, and I both hate and love how she knows how I'll react. But that reaction is only for her, and I don't think she realizes that.

"Okay," I respond, a hint of uncertainty in my tone as I brace for her words. I glance in her direction.

"I need you to not touch me in public. My father has eyes everywhere, it seems, and I don't want to feel the repercussions of someone informing him that I was walking down the hallway in some guy's arms."

Her words surprise me as she continues to avoid my gaze, and I feel my heart pound in my chest.

That's probably the only time I've touched her in public, right? The way she says that makes it sound like she doesn't want history to repeat itself, and a hint of jealousy courses through my veins until my brain slowly pieces a few facts together.

I touched her on Saturday when we were surfing, but more so just as we finished, when I leaned forward on the surfboard and cupped her cheek, captivated by her swirling blue eyes and the soft touch of her delicate skin.

Saturday, I touched her.

That's also the weekend she was battered and bruised when she came back into school.

Was that...

Fuck.

My body moves on its own accord, and I hope that my truck doesn't count as public at the back of the parking lot

with no one else around as I softly hold her chin and turn her toward me.

The unshed tears in her eyes as she cringes at me is answer enough.

She was beaten because of me.

Me.

I'm going to kill someone.

Rage boils under the surface as my eyes storm with the anger I feel inside.

"You said you wouldn't act like a caveman," she whispers, and I shake my head.

"No acting, Betty. Tell me who I get to fucking murder. Now." I bark the words out, unable to control the venom lacing my tone, but surprisingly, it doesn't make her shy away from me, instead it brings her closer.

She tentatively reaches out, cups my jaw, and runs her thumb over my cheekbone as her eyes plead with mine.

"Why can I see that you mean every word you just said in your eyes, and more importantly, why the hell am I not scared of you?"

I don't know how to answer those questions when she's touching me and looking up at me like this. Remaining still so I don't disturb her, I try to take a calming breath, but it does little to relax me.

"Because I mean it. With every fiber of my being, I want to slay every soulless monster who has fucking touched you, Bethany Asheville, family included. And you're not running for the hills because I would *never* harm you, but the ones who hurt you? I'll fucking destroy them."

Her chest heaves as she looks me over, her blue eyes frantically searching mine while I sit here and beg for her to give me the go-ahead to kill a motherfucker. Someone. *Anyone.*

She must be able to tell I'm not calming down, because she moves toward me in slow motion, still cupping my cheek as she leans in so we're nose to nose.

Our breaths mingle between us as my gaze flits between her eyes and her mouth.

My heart pounds even more crazily in my chest as I watch her stare at my lips for what feels like an eternity before she moves, ever so slowly, and her mouth is suddenly pressed against mine. My brain short-circuits as the plush flesh of her soft lips timidly molds to mine.

It takes me a second to kiss her in return, my hand moving to her neck to keep her close, and I force myself to hold back, letting her take control as she feels my lips with her own.

When her lips pull from mine, leaving *me* breathless, I watch as a blush creeps up from her neck to her cheeks, and it makes me smile.

"Fine, no caveman today, but I need you to either tell me how I can break into your house to dig into your father or tell me what actually happened over the weekend. I need something, Bethany," I say earnestly as she blinks at me a few times. "Please," I add, hoping that it'll make her more agreeable.

She sighs, making me desperate to press my lips to hers again. "You're never going to give up on trying to save me, are you?" she murmurs, her expression giving nothing away.

I never really looked at it like that, but she's damn right. I want to save her from *every* ounce of pain this town and her parents have caused her.

"Definitely not," I answer with a shrug, and she nods.

"Then I won't tell you that my parents are never home on Thursday afternoons and the back door is always unlocked because my father believes no one would dare come at him. There are no cameras either, but you don't really need to have cameras for the bad guy when you're the bad guy, do you?" Her tone sounds resigned, but I'll take that snippet of information and roll with it.

It's going to have to wait until next Thursday now, since I missed my opportunity today, but it'll give me time to come up with a plan.

"I will tell you sooner rather than later, but I'm scared, Ryan, really fucking scared." It feels like I dreamed the words because they are spoken so quietly, and a lump forms in my throat as I realize just how startlingly real this is for her.

"We're going to get to a stage, Bethany, where I'll no longer be able to hold myself back and go at the pace you need. We're going to get to a point where it gets so out of hand I'm going to have to step in whether you like it or not, and I need you to be prepared for that," I tell her honestly, and it's like my words settle on her soul. Her eyes fall closed for a moment as she sighs, but when she opens them again, I only see peace.

"I don't ever want blood on someone else's hands because of me, but I'm coming to realize that they really *do* deserve it."

With that, she turns the radio on, letting some indie rock band that I actually really like play through the speakers. This is Bethany's way of stepping back from such a heavy conversation, and I let her.

She doesn't know anything about my past, my history, and that Featherstone put blood on my hands long before she did.

SIXTEEN



BETHANY

“I won! I won!” Hunter cheers, jumping to his feet with his arms in the air. He runs around his room like a lunatic, his blond hair floating around his face.

I can’t help but smile at his carefree joy, even if he did just beat me at Monopoly. I didn’t even go easy on him or make moves that would encourage him to win. He just destroyed me.

“Winner, winner, chicken dinner,” he sings before flopping down on the bed beside me.

“You crushed me, Hunter. I’m not playing this game with you ever again,” I say with a pout, and he rolls his eyes at me as I put the pieces away.

“Bethany, you’re too soft on me to never play a game with me again,” he states, and he’s not wrong. Jerkface.

“Don’t make me put you in a headlock,” I threaten, pulling myself to my feet and stalking toward him with a smile on my face.

He quickly scrambles to his feet with a chuckle. “Don’t you dare,” he grumbles with a smirk on his face as he assesses the room and how to get around me.

His bedroom door suddenly swings open, smashing carelessly into the wall.

I don’t even need to look to know it’s my father. With an entrance like that, he wants to make his presence known.

“Hunter, your friend is here for your sleepover, and you’re nowhere near ready. I’m in the mood to cancel your sleepover for this kind of shit. I don’t—”

“His bag is packed,” I quickly interrupt, grabbing the item from beside Hunter’s bed. I’d purposely had him pack it before we sat down on the floor to play the board game, knowing our father could come in and start ranting at any given moment.

I hold the bag out to Hunter, and he takes it without a word, his green eyes reflecting his gratitude as he remains silent, not wanting to say or do anything that will enrage our father. It breaks my heart to watch his personality dull, all so we don’t get beaten, even though it sometimes happens for simply breathing. I offer him a reassuring smile.

Turning my gaze to my father, I find him glaring at me as I nudge Hunter to get past him. Thankfully, he doesn’t stop Hunter from leaving, and the pressure in my chest eases a little, even though I can tell I’m not off the hook for interrupting him.

My father says nothing, his gaze fixed on me, not saying a single word until the sound of Hunter slamming the front door shut behind him rings out around us.

I bounce nervously on my feet and wring my hands in front of me as I wait for him to speak. There’s no use trying to get by him, that’ll only make him lash out quicker.

In his striped polo shirt and jeans, he almost looks like a relaxed, hands-on dad, but it’s a prime example of how looks can be deceiving, because the dark glint in his eyes shows me he’s ready to make his mark. Seeing his hands clenched at his sides only solidifies my concerns and confirms what I already know will happen.

“Follow me,” he finally demands, turning on his heel and heading for the stairs, not bothering to wait for my response.

I don’t linger and wait for him to tell me twice, that’ll only make things worse for me. So, with a heavy sigh, I follow after

him, my mind drifting to the conversation I had earlier with Hunter while we were playing.

“I don’t want to keep going on sleepovers and leaving you here, Bethany.”

“I know you don’t, Hunter, and that’s because you’re a good brother, but I promise it’s safer when you do.”

The look of uncertainty hadn’t shifted in his gaze after I said that, but he seemed to understand enough not to argue or worse, stay.

I follow my father down to his office where he leaves the door open for me, and when I pause on the threshold with uncertainty, he signals for me to enter. I step inside, and I’m surprised to see Bruce in here too. I hadn’t heard anyone arrive earlier, but I must have been too involved in the game with Hunter.

It irritates me that I’m trying to have as much awareness of my surroundings as possible, but then I become easily distracted. I need to work harder if I want to stay safe.

My father sinks into his leather seat behind his desk, and I force myself not to break at the sight of it and the memories it brings forward. It disgusts me that both of these men were present when they outright brought someone in to...*check me*.

Do my words not hold any conviction? Does my voice not work?

My hands clench at my sides as I feel my own anger bubble inside of me, but I lock it down, knowing full well it’ll only get me hurt even more.

“Strip out of your clothes, Bethany, we need to update your measurements,” my father orders casually, his posture relaxed. My heart stops as I process his words. I glance between them in fear as I wait for someone to shout, “Just kidding!” but I should know better by now.

“We haven’t got all day, Bethany,” Bruce snaps, holding out a tape measure as his eyes drag over every inch of my clothed body, making me even more certain that I don’t want him to catch another glimpse of me naked.

“What do I need to be measured for?” I ask, stalling instead of heading straight in with a resounding no.

“That’s completely irrelevant,” my father retorts, glancing at his watch with a sigh as we hear the sound of the front door opening. “I’ll keep Maggie busy. Sort this out for me, will ya, Bruce?” my father says, and Bruce nods eagerly with a sly grin.

My father stands from his seat and heads in my direction to leave. I turn to try and block his path.

“No, no, we don’t—”

The crack of his hand against my cheek should have been expected, but I really don’t want to be left alone with this man right now. My father has hit me harder before, but it still causes me pain as nausea burns in my stomach.

“You’ll do as you’re fucking told, Bethany. Now strip,” he orders before returning his attention to Bruce. “We need measurements of her hips, waist, sides, and her little titties for the outfit. Don’t forget the pictures.”

With that, he turns on the spot, and leaves, slamming the door behind him as I gape at the door in his wake.

“Whatcha waiting for, little missy? You heard your daddy. Strip,” Bruce says with a grin as he licks his lips, looking me up and down.

I want to die here and now on the spot.

Or I want to tell Ryan that I’ll get the blood on my own hands if it gets me away from these people.

I’ve spent the past few days replaying his words in my head, trying to figure out how different my life would be if they were just dead. My dad, my mom, Bruce, Rico—all of them. But then there’s the money aspect and the fear of being separated from Hunter that weighs heavily on my mind, so I’m at a standstill.

Taking a deep breath, I meet his gaze as I shake my head. “No. I don’t need to strip for those measurements, they can be

taken above clothing,” I respond, keeping my voice firm, but he tuts at me as he slowly walks in my direction.

“That’s not how this is going to work, princess. Take off your top, unbutton your pants, and let me see what God gave you.”

I think I’m going to be sick.

Trying to run through my options in a state of panic, I edge away from him, but he doesn’t stop moving toward me. My back hits the far wall as he comes to stand in front of me with an expectant gleam in his eyes.

“I’m waiting,” he states, undoing the top button of his shirt, and a spike of fear runs through my veins.

“Get away from me,” I hiss, but he leans closer, planting his hands on the wall beside me as I clench my fists, trying not to touch him.

“Strip,” he demands, completely ignoring me. I squeeze my eyes shut as I battle with myself on how to handle the situation.

Before I can even consider an escape route, my eyes fly open as I feel him cup my breast through my white tank top. His gaze is fixated on his hands, and on instinct, I lift my hand and bat him away, except it does nothing but make him squeeze my breast painfully hard.

“Get off me,” I order, trying to push at his chest, but he’s a big guy, and I have little to no strength.

It’s like my words make him more excited as he presses the full length of his body against mine. The feel of his hard cock against my stomach instantly makes me want to be sick.

“Try harder, Beth. Make my dick scream for you,” he whispers in my ear as I shove against his chest again and again, but he doesn’t budge.

I bite my lip, refusing to cry out in anger because I won’t spur him on, but his hand suddenly wraps around my throat and pins me to the wall. My eyes widen in surprise as I circle

my fingers around his wrist, trying to loosen his grip, even digging my nails into his skin, but to no avail.

He looks at me for a moment, searching my face, and I think he's going to stop, but I'm completely wrong. Bruce leans in and places his lips on my cheek as he slowly drags kisses down to my neck. I refuse to take any more from him.

With all of my strength, I manage to steady myself on one foot and raise the other hard and fast, so my knee connects with his dick. He stumbles back, cursing as he releases his grip on me and keels over in pain.

“Get over here, you little bitch,” he growls as I take a second to make my brain work. I rush for the door and grip the handle just as his fingers tangle in my hair, yanking me back.

“Let me go,” I plead, my heart pounding so hard in my chest I think I might vomit, but he doesn't release me. I'm completely disoriented as he pulls me by my hair and suddenly slams me into the desk so I'm bent over it. Fear coats every inch of my skin as he presses against me, shoving me firmly to the wood by my hair as the rest of his body makes it very difficult for me to move.

“You need to be taught a lesson,” he snaps as he suddenly yanks on the back of my tank top with his other hand, which almost strangles me, but to my surprise, the fabric tears, the sound making my heart sink as I try with everything I have to swing my hands behind me. When that doesn't work, I try to thrust my head back, hoping to connect with *something*, but he's too far away.

“Please get off me,” I beg, but he doesn't hear me in his fit of rage. My tank top rips all the way down my back and falls loose at my sides as I try to hit his hip, but nothing. I'm helpless, useless, and completely nothing right now but at his fucking mercy.

No one can save me here, no one but me, but how?

“You're going to regret this,” I growl, but he simply grunts in response as I feel the clasp of my bra come undone, and my

face pounds along with my heart that threatens to shatter in my chest.

I continue to try to hit him, the edge of the desk digging into my stomach as I blink my eyes open, not realizing I closed them, and try to focus on the room around me.

His hand moves from my hair to clasp my wrists together in a painful grip. I try to predict what he's doing with the other as the door to my father's office slowly opens. Relief washes over me until I spot both my mother and father standing in the doorway with their arms crossed, watching the scene unfold before them.

Bruce tilts back slightly, and the sound of his groan instantly fills the room. My eyes widen as I realize what he's doing, and my soul shatters as my parents stand by and simply watch.

I'm unable to get out of his hold like this. Tears burn my eyes as the fight drains from me, and my arms fall limply at my sides until I feel it. Bruce hisses and groans as ropes of cum land all over my back.

My head swims as I see my parents' mouths move. Bruce releases his hold on me, likely talking to them, but I can't hear a word over the beating of my heart ringing in my ears.

I remain frozen as my mother gives me a disapproving look. Tears track down the side of my face, creating a puddle beside me on the desk. My father and Bruce leave the room, and my eyes gloss over as shock kicks in.

My mother grips my hair, just like Bruce did, and pulls me to my feet with the tape measure in her hand.

She silently takes the required measurements while I just stand here and let her, hiding away in my own body until she's done. I can see her lips moving, but I can't hear a single sound.

Once she's done, she pushes me out of the office, my tank top and bra long discarded, and swings the front door open before nudging me outside in just my yoga pants. My breasts are exposed, and there are no shoes on my feet.

I look over my shoulder, but she shakes her head in censure without saying anything as she tosses my backpack at my feet, a sign that I'm not allowed home tonight. I quickly move to clutch it to my chest as she slams the door in my face.

My body moves on its own accord, ambling down the pathway and out onto the derelict street, and when I'm far enough away from the house, I do the only thing my brain can manage.

Me: Please save me.

SEVENTEEN



RYAN

Betty: Please save me.

No three words have ever made me move so quickly in all my life. Ever.

I was in my truck and driving well over the speed limit within seconds of throwing my surfboard on the deck of the beach house and charging out the door.

I didn't even fucking lock it.

I didn't even fucking respond to her text.

But now I'm here, frantically searching the roads for her as I remember the way she walked home when I followed after her.

Glancing out of the windows, I reluctantly slow my speed so I can actually watch what's happening around me, and that's when I spot a girl—not just any girl—and the state she's in is unbearable.

Bethany stands on the beach, looking out over the water, with her back to me as I pull my truck over. Her backpack sits just behind her as the water trickles over her toes. I don't see any shoes beside her bag, so I'm hoping they are inside it, but I know it isn't likely when I see her in nothing but her panties. Her hair is pulled into a bun on top of her head, and a pair of yoga pants float in the water in the distance.

My heart pounds in my chest as I jump out of my truck, leaving the key in the ignition, and make my way over to her. I

instinctively slow my steps as I near, not wanting to startle her at all, so I call out her name, and to my surprise, she turns in my direction.

It takes her a moment to recognize me, but the second she does, her shoulders sag in relief. Her eyes are red and raw, and her skin is blotchy, but I force myself not to check her over until she says so, keeping my gaze fixed on hers as she shivers.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and my heart lurches for her. I don’t know what she’s thanking me for, and I’m not going to ask. I’m going to do exactly as she requested—I’m going to fucking save her.

Without thought, I take a step closer and stretch my arms out, not wanting to touch her without her permission. She immediately steps into my hold, pressing her body against mine, and I wrap my arms around her tight.

It’s as if she crumbles at my touch, letting me catch her like a safety net, and I’m a fucking goner. Whatever blood has to go on my hands, so be it.

My blood rages, and the instinctive Featherstone part of me that has been trained to attack first, think second, has me desperate to place her in my truck, hightail it to her house, and kill every single one of them.

But it seems my heart knows better. I need to be here for her right now, it’s more important.

I stand with Bethany pinned against my chest, her arms banded tightly around me, I don’t know how long we stand here, the sound of the waves crashing at our feet as she sobs against me. I commit every snuffle, every cry, every sound of her despair to memory as I vow to get her justice or revenge, whichever way you want to look at it.

She eventually leans back and meets my eyes as she murmurs, “Can you get me out of here?” Before I respond, she continues, “Not out of town like your eyes are asking, just here. Like, can you take me to the beach house?”

I nod in response, unable to find my tongue. I'm surprised at her ability to read me so easily. No one ever reads me, not at all. Benji says it's one of my worst traits because I come across as coldhearted and unsympathetic. If only he could see me now.

Pulling my t-shirt over my head, I don't wait for her approval before I place it over Bethany's, and then I grab her backpack and slip it over my shoulder before turning back to her.

"You can either walk beside me, or I can carry you. There isn't anyone around here right now and no one has even driven past, but it's your choice."

She glances from me to the truck a few times before she shrugs her shoulders, straightens her spine, and takes off toward the truck. She keeps her hands at her sides as she determinedly walks the entire way before slipping inside the passenger seat, while I just fucking stand here in awe of her like an idiot.

The strength Bethany has hiding under her soft smile and shy eyes is unbelievable, and with my hand on my heart, I know no one will ever truly be worthy of this woman.

She lowers her window and looks at me expectantly with her eyebrows raised. I shake my head, focusing on the present as I rush to the truck and climb into the driver's seat. The second I do, I remember someone must have done something to her to make her text me, and it instantly makes me ready to wage war again. I quickly drop her backpack at her feet, put the truck in drive, and head for the beach house before I do something reckless.

It only takes a few minutes for us to pull up outside of my house, and when I glance in Bethany's direction, I find her eyes closed and tears trailing down her cheeks again.

This is not how I expected my Saturday afternoon to go.

I need to get this woman inside and plead with her to tell me everything. Now.

Jumping from the truck, I round the front and open her door, watching as she slowly pries her eyes open. I offer her my hand and she immediately takes it, grabbing her bag with the other as I lead her into the house.

I hear the front door click shut behind us as I walk her straight up the stairs and into her room. A part of me regrets the second room in this place, as my body begs for her to be closer to me when she's here, but I also love that I get to give her a quiet and safe place that's just for *her*.

Walking over to the closet, I slide it open to reveal my most recent purchases, and I feel her eyes burn into the side of my head as a gasp falls from her lips.

"Ryan?" she asks, puzzled by all of the clothes hanging from the rod. I ready myself for an argument as I glance down at her. I bought her a mixture of leggings, t-shirts, jeans, and sweaters with a few pairs of shoes. She's not going to take this well.

"You left your clothes here the last time you stayed, so I checked the sizes and ordered a few things in case you ever needed to be here and didn't have alternative outfits. I don't like you living out of your backpack, Bethany," I admit as I watch her turn back to the clothes and run her fingers over the material as I stand nervously beside her.

"I don't know what to say," she murmurs, and I shrug my shoulders even though she can't see the action.

"I don't want you to say anything. I feel like this is more for my peace of mind than it is for you," I state, still stunned that she's standing beside me in nothing but my top and her panties. I feel like it's because she trusts me, and I can't break that, not at all. "But I need to know what I'm up against here. I can't protect you if I don't know what the situation is."

I hold my breath as I wait for her to respond, worried she's going to just run from me and the conversation we need to have, but to my surprise, she nods, swiping a loose strand of blonde hair back off her face.

“Do you mind if I shower first? Then I can take a minute to process my thoughts before I even attempt to put them into words,” she says quietly, and I nod eagerly, willing to do anything to get her to open up. When she does, I can help with it all. Whatever she’s battling, she doesn’t have to do it alone anymore, and the fact she trusts me fills me with relief.

“Whatever you need, Bethany. I’ll go make us some drinks. Please see if I actually bought something you’d like to wear as well,” I reply as we walk out into the hall, and just as she wraps her fingers around the door handle of the bathroom, she meets my gaze. Little did I know, her next words would break me.

“What I *need* is to get that fucker’s cum off my back.”

With that she slams the door shut behind her. Her anger is not directed at me, but I’m still stunned as I stare at the closed door.

One, she just fucking swore. I’ve never heard a curse word fall from those pretty lips so forcefully. But more importantly... Two, some fucker is going to choke on my motherfucking Glock as I blow his goddamn brains out.



BETHANY

I stand in front of the mirror for a moment, finally feeling clean as I look at myself in a pair of skinny jeans with frayed cuffs and a cute, peach colored frilly tank top. I’ve never worn anything so casual and carefree that feels so good all at once. The variety of clothes Ryan stocked the closet with is unbelievable, underwear included, and I need to figure out a way to repay him. *One day.*

My first instinct was to ask what I had to offer in return, but the storm in his blue eyes told me he was more than ready for me to argue with him over the purchases. It was at that moment I realized I trusted Ryan Carter more than I’d ever trusted anyone else in my life.

Did I want to be protected? Safeguarded? Cared for? Yeah, yeah I did. What I didn't want was to continue to live my controlled life that left me in such danger.

I didn't want to rely on anyone, not a soul, but with Ryan, it only felt like he was enhancing me, offering me a chance to become the person I was meant to be without smothering me.

Shaking my head, I try to prepare myself for the conversation I am about to have, because I know it isn't going to be easy no matter what, but I have to contain his desire to simply wipe everyone out, although that does sound like an excellent option.

Leaving my damp hair to fall around my face, I make my way downstairs to find Ryan sitting at the breakfast bar, his head in his hands and his shoulders slumped, with two mugs of hot chocolate at his side. My heart instantly pounds in my chest.

Something is wrong.

"Ryan?" I call, nervously waiting for him to respond as he slowly lifts his gaze to mine. His blue eyes swirl with pain, rage, and darkness, and I frown in confusion as I try to understand what caused this change in such a short amount of time.

"Bethany, you can't say shit like that and then slam a fucking door in my face. I know this isn't about me, okay? I really do, but I'm hanging on by a thread here. I know you don't want me to go in there guns blazing, but I'm fucking ready to, and I can deal with the consequences from you later."

Holy hell.

I gape at him as he clutches the countertop until his knuckles turn white, his leg bouncing as he tries to keep himself seated.

My mouth tries to form words, but I continue to fall short. I know what I said, I blurted it out in anger at the situation, but I didn't think it'd leave such an impact on him.

"I'm sorry. I'll try my best to explain everything to you," I offer, gulping past the lump in my throat as he nods, grabs the

mugs, and walks over to the leather sofa to my left.

It's dark outside, and the light glow coming from the spotlights makes the open space feel calm and relaxing, which is exactly what I need right now.

He places the mugs on the coffee table before falling back into his seat. He braces his arms on his knees, which bounce anxiously as he waits for me. I feel my heart lodge in my throat as I realize just how much he cares.

He might be bossy as hell, and a total douche back when we first met, but this side of him, the man sitting before me with pain in his eyes, is someone I was never expecting to meet. I'm not even sure if he is familiar with this version of himself.

Taking the seat beside him, I close my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath as I try to figure out where to start with my hands clasped together in my lap.

“So you already know I have rules set by my parents that not many other people my age do. I didn't realize this until maybe two years ago, when I saw classmates from my school doing things I couldn't—driving a car, riding a horse, even having a cell phone. There were also other rules that didn't apply to anyone else, like no friends, no sleepovers, no boys, no nothing. It felt like I was cut off from the rest of the world. It still does, I guess, except for you,” I admit, wringing my hands together in my lap as I glance down, avoiding his gaze.

It's never easy to admit that you're eighteen yet treated like a preteen.

“I never questioned their decisions for fear of being beaten, or worse, them hurting Hunter or sending him down into isolation in the basement. So I carried on, trying to play by their rules. I've done everything they have asked of me. Everything. But things have gotten worse recently, and that's where things are starting to make more sense, and I'm fucking scared.”

I try to wet my dry lips, but it does nothing as I continue to tremble with a mixture of fear and anger. I see an outstretched

hand offering me a mug of hot chocolate, and I smile in appreciation before I take a few sips.

“Take your time, Bethany. I’m not trying to rush you, I just...want—no, *need* you to tell me your full story,” Ryan murmurs as I meet his intense gaze, and I nod in understanding. I’ve pulled him into this. Whether I want to admit it or not, he’s here now.

“The day you taught me how to surf, my father’s best friend, Bruce, had taken a picture of the two of us sitting on the surfboard with your hand on my cheek. That night, the party was completely different from any my parents have thrown before—it was filled with men only. Literally, as I walked down the stairs, the only females were my mother and me, and it frightened me, but things got much worse.”

I feel his eyes on me as I pause, gulping down some of the hot chocolate as I try to find the strength to explain how far things went that night and what happened today too. It’s a lot.

Every fiber of my being is trembling, the nerves vibrating under my skin as I push past the barrier I’ve built around myself and spill the truth for the first time.

“My father stormed into the party, grabbed my arm, and literally dragged me to his office where Bruce, a doctor, and a guy I’d never met before joined us.”

“I’ll fucking kill them all,” he growls, fisting his hands in his lap, and I swallow back my initial refusal, pushing myself to continue.

“They didn’t, uh, you know, but, uh, the doctor was there to...” I scramble for the words, my pulse beating rapidly as I swallow the saliva building in my mouth with the need to be sick, but I need to just blurt it out. “The doctor was there to confirm I was still a virgin.”

I let my statement hang in the air as I stare down into my mug. I expected to feel embarrassed about still being a virgin, but really, I only feel anger and shame at the situation I was forced into.

“What did that exactly entail?” he asks, his voice raspy, and I answer him honestly, even if my voice is barely a whisper. I explain how I was pinned down, beaten by my father for struggling, and physically checked by the doctor, my skin crawling with each word.

When I get it all out, he cups my cheek and brings my gaze to his, and my eyes fall closed, a single tear tracking down my face.

“That isn’t all, is it? What aren’t you telling me, Bethany? What did they do?” he questions, grinding his teeth together, a complete contrast to his gentle touch, and I sigh.

“It’s not what they did, it’s what the guy who I’d never seen before said,” I reply, wetting my lips as I try to find the words again, but I scoff at myself. “It sounds ridiculous, I swear, but I believe it, I really do,” I ramble, fearful he won’t believe me.

“Then tell me, and I’ll believe it too,” Ryan states like it’s just as simple as that, and when I meet his eyes, all I see is the truth behind his words.

“He said, ‘Nice work, Bernārd. Your daughter is going to bring in a pretty penny at the auction. Although it may be worth your while to push it back a week or so, otherwise her battered face will lose you a ton of money when the event will be just for her.’” I repeat the words exactly as they were said, watching as Ryan’s face pales. “I think my father is trying to sell me, or more importantly, my virginity, to the highest bidder.”

Ryan continues to stare at me in shock, but his thumb automatically caresses my cheek, somehow calming the pair of us as I wait for him to speak.

“What happened today?” he asks, his voice rough as he tries to remain calm until I’ve said it all. I clear my throat, trying to look away, but he grips my chin firmly enough to hold me in place. It somehow gives me strength I didn’t realize I needed, allowing me to take the pause my mind desperately requires before I carry on.

“Today, Hunter went to stay at his friend’s house for the night, and my father ordered me to follow him to his office after my brother left. Bruce was waiting for us in the place that has been the location of my night terrors. They wanted to measure me for something, I’m not sure what, and they wanted me to strip bare, but I refused.” The closer I get to the painful part of the story, the quieter my voice gets, and I have to take a minute as I struggle to say the rest out loud. I scrub subconsciously at my skin as if trying to rid their touch from me again.

“I’m sorry. I’m pushing. I’ll stop,” Ryan murmurs, moving his hand to squeeze my shoulder, and I offer him a sad smile.

“No, I need to say it, and I don’t trust anyone else in this town except for you,” I admit, and he nods in understanding. “My father left the office to meet my mother, leaving me with Bruce, and one thing led to another as I struggled. I kned him in the balls, but it wasn’t enough. I don’t know how or why, but he managed to get me in a vulnerable position, pinned over the desk. He tore my tank top off and unclasped my bra.”

I think I’m going to be sick. Ryan’s not going to look at me the same way. I know he isn’t. I feel dead inside as I remember every second like it’s on repeat in my mind, but in the same breath, it almost feels therapeutic being able to voice it, making it real and not just a figment of my imagination.

“I didn’t realize what he was doing at first, I only heard him moan, but I saw my parents at the door as they watched him jerk off and come all over my back.” My eyes slam shut as my emotions get the better of me, making me rush out how I wound up on the beach in just my panties. “Then my mother grabbed me by my hair and tossed me outside like a rag doll in nothing but my yoga pants. I tried to use the spare t-shirt in my bag to get it off of me, but it was useless, so I threw it all in the ocean.”

There, I said it. I had been about to toss myself into the cold ocean to rid my body of the stains they left behind too, but Ryan showed up just before I could.

I try to take a deep breath, struggling a little as I fight the panic and anxiety manifesting inside of me.

“I’m going to tear them limb from limb, and cut their fucking cocks off and make sure they choke on them before I put a bullet through their brains,” Ryan says in anger. I flick my gaze to him, seeing the truth in his eyes, and it leaves me wondering who this guy is. “I don’t want you going back there, Bethany.”

I pause, taking a moment to catch my breath and relax my heartbeat.

“I can’t leave Hunter, I can’t. And as much as I trust you, you said it yourself, you won’t be here forever. I can’t rely on ‘just for now’ when it is literally my life, my freedom, and my choices that hang in the balance. But I have to do something quick, I just don’t know what. I have to catch them by surprise, or it’ll never work,” I admit, determination lacing my tone as I stand from the sofa and swipe a hand down my face.

“It’s a good thing I’m full of surprises then, isn’t it? I refuse to stand by and watch as they try to break you like this, Bethany, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

I shake my head, unable to look at him as I speak the truth I know. “You can’t break what’s already broken, Ryan.”

“Like fucking hell, Betty. I saw the strong-ass woman on the beach earlier. You’re not broken, cracked maybe, but you’ve learned to piece yourself back together with your own glue and survive. I won’t let any of that be in vain, Bethany. Not a single ounce. We’re going to figure all this out for you and for Hunter.” Taking a deep breath, he says the words I have silently been desperate to hear. “I’m not going anywhere.”

EIGHTEEN



RYAN

“Bro, I feel like you have enough information there to safely ride it out until the end of the year,” Benji states through the phone, and I sigh, having explained the kind of findings I’ve come across.

He’s not getting it, I know he isn’t, but that’s because he doesn’t understand the whole story and how deep I am. I haven’t really told him, and I won’t. It’s not my story to tell, but he’s not reading between the lines.

“I know what you’re saying, Benji, I just... There’s a lot going on here, and I need you to do some research. Yes, it’s not our thing, and we don’t usually associate with the students who meddle in sex trafficking, but I *really* need more information,” I explain as I continue to pace outside on the deck overlooking the ocean, the sun setting in the distance.

Featherstone is the underworld network for the entire criminal world. Every crevice is delved into, even the parts we want nothing to do with. We need something, anything at all, just more information in any shape or form.

“So you want me to talk with students we’ve never spoken to before to see if they are aware of sex trafficking in where? Knight’s Creek, California?”

I roll my eyes at him even though he can’t see me. “Yes, or more specifically, sex trafficking that involves a Bernārd Asheville, that’s the important part,” I confirm, sweeping my hair back off my face as I wait for him to respond.

“Wait, is this about some girl?” he asks, catching me by surprise, and it’s my turn to pause. I turn to lean against the railing to look out at the water, the sound of the waves calming me enough to formulate an answer I’m happy with.

We don’t tend to do real talk unless it’s because I’m fucking drunk or something. He’s the only person who knows the struggles I had in the system growing up, so my lips do get loose around him on occasion.

“Honestly, Ben...yeah, yeah it is.”

Surprisingly, those words don’t weigh heavily on my tongue like I expect them to. It almost feels refreshing to say them out loud without the fear of her hearing and being scared off.

“Ryan Carter, have you caught feelings?” His voice is light, but not condescending or judgmental, thank God. Otherwise, I’d definitely catch him the next time we’re sparring together. “Video call me. I need to see your face as you say those words again,” he adds, and I shake my head.

“Fuck off, Benji. She’s just...I just...I don’t fucking know. She’s in danger, and I *pinky promised* I would protect her. You know I have to keep that promise.” I’m not sure if I’m trying to convince myself or him, but either way, my words are true.

“You *never* help anyone,” he murmurs, slowly realizing how fucked I actually am over this girl as I turn and head back inside the house, closing the patio door behind me.

“Well, this is kind of some next-level shit, Benji. Shit I really need you to feel around for, but you’re also right. It could be enough to pass my assignment, so I’m going to call it in and see. Maybe they will send enforcers to at least help me protect her,” I admit, placing him on speakerphone as I pull my top on.

“Does she know what you’re a part of?” His solemn tone catches me off guard. It almost feels like he cares for her because I care for her, and that’s exactly why he’s my best friend.

But the reality of it is too damn crazy to get into. “No, I haven’t told her anything. She doesn’t know about Featherstone, what I’m trained to do or training to be, nothing. And none of that matters right now, her safety is paramount,” I reply, hating the words on my tongue.

She’s told me so much, opened up the darkest parts of herself, and I’ve told her nothing. Not a fucking thing. But there was no need before, and now I find myself falling to my knees for her without any warning. She trusts me. How can I shatter her faith in me by sharing my backstory?

I don’t even want to think about it.

“Okay, man. If you’re sure, but this girl must be someone special to have you all twisted up like this. I hope omitting your shit doesn’t backfire on you. I’ll call if I get anywhere.”

The call ends abruptly, leaving me staring at the blank screen as I curse him. He better not having fucking jinxed me. That is not what I need.

Fucker.

I glance at the time. I need to leave for Pete’s soon if I want to see Bethany for a bit before her shift ends, but there’s enough time for me to make a call to the office at Featherstone. I haven’t been able to shed any light on this by myself since Bethany told me her stark reality three days ago. Even though I’m doing everything in my power, it just isn’t good enough.

She had to go back to that house Sunday, against my better judgment, but she refuses to leave Hunter there by himself, and as much as I’ve offered for them to both come and stay here with me, she still doesn’t truly believe me when I say I’m not going anywhere.

I get it. I don’t fully understand the extent of what I meant either. I know I’m giving her whiplash, but things have changed between us, I can feel it.

I have my academy to go back to and commitments I must fulfill there, but she is my sole priority right now, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her safe.

I have the money from my inheritance that I got when I turned eighteen, and I can set her up wherever she likes—with or without me.

My gut clenches as I listen to the phone ring on speakerphone as realization of how deep I actually am with her slowly creeps over me. I don't know what I feel for this girl, but I know it's all or nothing. After she cracked herself open, showed me her emotional, bleeding wounds, and told me what her own family has done to her, I vowed to spend the rest of my life protecting her, even if she never sees me doing it.

I've become obsessed.

It's almost embarrassing. The smell of a sweet floral scent floats around her, and when I do get to see one of her rare, natural smiles, it melts my icy heart.

“Hello? Hello!” someone yells down the phone, and I scramble to grab it off the countertop as I slip on my sneakers.

“Hi, it's Ryan Carter. I need to speak with Barbette Dietrichson,” I say, going straight to the head of Featherstone Academy with regard to the assignment, even if she is a fucking bitch.

“Can I ask what it's regarding?” the secretary responds, and I take a deep breath to stop myself from getting annoyed with having to explain myself.

“It's about my assignment,” I state bluntly, grabbing my keys and heading for the door as I hear her tap away on the keyboard.

“I've just checked your assignment, Mr. Carter, and you're required to infiltrate and report back on Knight's Creek, California. This is simply expected in report form after your time period is up,” she replies very matter-of-factly, and I grind my teeth together as I slam my front door shut and lock it.

“I know that, but I am very concerned for someone's safety, and we need to be looking into this section immediately if someone isn't already. I need the names of who operates this

kind of business within Featherstone to shift them in a different direction,” I growl down the line, wanting to move them away from Beth, but she simply sighs in response as I make my way along the beach toward Pete’s.

“That’s not what your assignment is about, Mr. Carter. We just need you to infiltrate the town to see if it operates alongside Featherstone’s rules and regulations.”

Is this woman not fucking listening to a word I’ve said? Someone I care about is in danger. The best way to stop that danger is at the source, then I can fuck her father up myself.

“You’re not—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Carter, we can’t help you any further,” she states before ending the call.

What a fucking gremlin.

I seethe at their complete dismissal of the situation. If this was actually my area of expertise, I would be much fucking better at understanding things, but instead, they purposely fucked me over. My gut tells me there’s a reason for that, but I’m not stressing over it right now.

I’ve never questioned my role in life until now. This is the life my bloodline offered me, but do I really fucking want it when they don’t look after their own?

We’re raised to obey Featherstone’s code, follow them blindly, and run the criminal world accordingly, but the moment I ask for something in return? Nothing.

Fuck them.

I stop at the edge of the parking lot at Pete’s, raking my fingers through my hair as anger consumes me. I swear to God, some people are so fucking incompetent. I just want to gouge their eyes out with a fucking knife.

I can’t go in there looking all riled up. She’ll know something is wrong, and I can’t explain any of it to her. Pulling out my phone, I tap a message to Benji before pocketing it again.

Me: Absolutely fucking useless. If you get a minute, could you off the fucking secretary? I'm not even sure if I'm joking, but I need you to try for me, 'cause these cunts don't care about looking after their own.

Taking another deep breath, I crack my neck as I stalk toward the door of Pete's, willing my rage to ease when someone calls out my name.

"Excuse me. Ryan Carter, correct?"

I glance over my shoulder to find a woman standing beside a blacked out SUV. Dressed head to toe in a black fitted suit, she looks every inch a businesswoman, even with her black aviator shades considering it's almost dark outside.

"Who's asking?" I retort, turning to face her properly as I try to see who I'm up against. My mind instantly goes on the defensive.

"I've been watching and following you for some time, Mr. Carter. It's a little late to avoid confirming who you are. I was just being polite," she states, taking a step toward me. I don't see anyone move out behind her, but my body is stiff with anticipation.

"How can I help you then?" I ask, confused how someone has actually been watching me for *some time* without me realizing it. I want to bombard her with questions and demand she explain everything to me, but instead I remain calm, clenching and unclenching my hands as I wait for her to speak.

"Do you know why your parents are dead, Ryan?" she asks, taking me by complete surprise. I almost choke on my own tongue as my eyebrows furrow in confusion.

"What the fuck does that have to do with anything? Do I know you?" I retort, anger filling my veins at the mention of my parents. She shakes her head, and a chill washes over me.

"They died because they refused to stand by and let innocent people get hurt, because some were too power hungry to *stop* hurting others. It's a tricky world we live in, Ryan, but there is still right and wrong, wouldn't you agree?"

My palms sweat as my heart pounds in my chest. I've never been told a single thing about my parents' deaths, nothing at all, and here this woman is talking cryptically about why they died. By tricky world, does she mean—

“Who are you?”

“I'll tell you who I am, but first, answer my question.”

She comes to a stop right in front of me, slowly pulling her glasses from her face and hooking them over the collar of her blouse. She waits for me to acknowledge her order, and I reluctantly nod for her to go ahead and ask before glancing behind me to make sure Bethany can't see us.

“If an innocent girl is up for auction, her hymen still intact, and you know she's not safe, what do you do?” she questions casually, and I bare my teeth at her as anger roars through me.

“Quit talking in fucking riddles. If you know something, spit it the fuck out, but do not stand there and talk about the sensitive situation I'm fucking juggling like it's worthless. Like her life isn't important,” I snarl, somehow managing to refrain from grabbing her. To my surprise, my outrage only makes her smile wider.

“Ryan, my name is Maria Steele,” she says calmly, and it takes a moment for my brain to click. *Maria Steele*, as in a member of The Ring, the elite part of the Featherstone organization that runs and oversees everything in the underground world?

What the *fuck* is she doing here?

“Why are you here?” I ask, managing to filter my words, knowing the power she holds, but if she fucks with Bethany, then I'll have no option but to stake my claim.

“Because I believed in your parents. They died alongside my husband, Ryan. I've watched and waited, biding my time until I saw the person standing before me. I have to admit, I nearly walked right by you and your outlook on life until you came here, until you met her,” she explains with a knowing grin, but it spikes fear in my bones that she knows about Bethany.

I'm not a fool, I know I fucking let myself walk straight into a trap when I met Bethany. She became my weak spot, and there's nothing I can do about it now.

"You're still not telling me what you want from me," I remind her, rubbing the back of my neck nervously, and she rolls her eyes.

"You're as impatient as your mother always was," she remarks, and my eyes widen a little in surprise. It's the first time I've ever heard those words, someone comparing me to one of my parents, and I have to admit, it hits me square in the chest. "I think I have a job I can trust you with, one that would completely pull you from Featherstone but would still have you using your skill set. In return, I will help with your Asheville situation."

How do her words sound so appealing after they just fucked me over on the phone? I'd do anything to keep Bethany safe, even if it means giving up everything I've ever known.

I glance over my shoulder again, spying the woman herself through the glass as she serves a couple of sodas to a table, and my heart lurches in my chest.

"How do I know I can trust you?" I ask, turning to face her again, and she offers me a soft smile.

"My family has been at the center of Featherstone gossip for the past four years. Do you recall why?" she questions, and I rack my brain, trying to think.

Realization washes over me. I remember the rumors and murmurs about her son and granddaughter dying in a shoot-out at their home. Many have always believed their murders were a Featherstone job, someone taking them out in the hopes of gaining more power, but to this day nothing has been confirmed.

"I do," I respond, but she quirks her eyebrow at me, waiting for me to expand. "The death of your family."

"Who in my family?" she prompts, and I place my hands on my hips as I stare her down.

“Your son and granddaughter,” I answer with a sigh, hating how insensitive it sounds. I know how it feels to be on the other side.

“Excellent,” she murmurs, reaching into her pocket and pulling out her phone, which she turns in my direction after tapping on the screen for a moment. “You can trust me, because I’m willing to trust you too,” she states, a warm smile on her face. “This is my granddaughter, Luna. Does she look dead to you?”

I gape at her in shock, surprised that the rumor mill isn’t as true as it seems, and it feels a lot like Featherstone in general.

The longer I’ve been away, the more I question the life I’ve been living, and now, here’s a woman standing before me, offering me an out, one that will protect Bethany in the long run too.

“Tell me what you want, and I’ll do it.”

NINETEEN



BETHANY

I'm so tired I could nap on any table here at Pete's. It wouldn't even matter if someone was still eating their food. I'm physically and mentally exhausted, the dark bags under my eyes making everyone aware of it.

I promised Ryan I would be on high alert and on guard while at home. He's making plans to sneak in on Thursday to place surveillance cameras and listening devices when my parents are both out, and I'm not going to stop him.

I'm in constant fear, going against my parents' orders, but their commands and rules have *never* been there to keep me safe. I need to protect Hunter and me, and I'll do whatever it takes to get us out alive. But right now, I need to focus on being a happy waitress for my customers.

Wrapping the cutlery as quickly as possible, I watch as Linda seats a guy in my area. I give him a few moments to glance over the menu. It's almost eight thirty, and a little quieter than usual for a weeknight, but I'm thankful for a change of pace.

Every penny Linda and Pete pay me for working here goes directly to my father, except the tips, since he has no clue about them. He thinks they are worked into my overall pay because I'm eighteen, so I've saved every coin as best as I could since I started. I'm going to store it in my backpack, so the next time I'm kicked out for the night, I can hide the money in my room at Ryan's.

I usually work my ass off for every tip I can get, which always helps when it's busy, but tonight I just want to sleep, money be damned.

Plastering on my waitress smile, I leave the cutlery station and pull my pad and pencil from my apron as I approach the new customer by the window.

I approach from behind and turn to face him when I get to the table. Something about him has me instantly on edge, making tingles creep up my arms. His slick blond hair is gelled back off his face, his piercing green eyes remind me of a snake, and the oversized brown suit he's wearing is far too big for his body size. Something about him is definitely off.

I've never seen him in here before, or even around town for that matter, and since the only unfamiliar people I've come across lately have some connection to my father, it immediately makes me want to back away.

His eyes sweep over me as I clear my throat, forcing myself to relax. I can't think the worst every time someone or something is unfamiliar.

"Hi, welcome to Pete's. What can I get for you today?"

I sound far too chipper, but that means nothing to this guy. He has no clue as I shuffle uncomfortably from foot to foot.

He doesn't answer for a moment, continuing to look me over from head to toe, and I get a sick feeling in my stomach until he finally speaks.

"I'll take a coffee, black, and the salmon." His voice is gruff, harsh around the edges, but I focus on the order, nodding as I jot it down.

"Perfect, your food will be served as quickly as possible," I tell him before rushing away from the table so I can place the order for him and make his drink.

There's only one other occupied table in my area, and they are still eating, so I don't bother to disturb them just yet, leaving me to focus on Mr. Slimy.

I glance at my watch, and my eyes flick through the window out to the parking lot as I try to catch a glimpse of Ryan, but he's not here yet. He said he would be here around this time, and the thought of seeing him naturally perks up my mood.

I'm completely and utterly obsessed with him. I've had crushes before, loved boys from afar when I was younger, but Ryan Carter? He's just something else entirely.

I let myself space out while I'm going through the motions so I can properly think about him. There's a level of darkness to him, a part of his soul that I can connect with, just like he did to me. He hasn't told me about his past, except that his parents passed away, and as much as I want to know more, I won't push him. I dumped all my crazy shit on him and he hasn't run, and if he means it when he says he'll stick around longer, then I'm not going to do anything that'll push him away, even if it means staying in the dark.

My eyes close as I picture him in my mind. I'm completely captivated by him in board shorts or a wet suit. Whenever I see him like that, he always looks happy. The glimmer in his blue eyes and the natural smile that falls over his face is heartwarming.

I've told myself a million times to stop wanting and needing more from him, but it's inevitable. I want to feel the press of his lips against mine again, I want to feel his touch on my skin, and I want him to erase everything anyone else has ever done to me, emotionally and physically.

It's a tall order, but one he's doing so easily without even trying. I can't help but be drawn to him.

In books, I've read different examples of experiencing the *like a moth to a flame* feeling, and it usually describes how the guy is drawn to the girl, but in my case with Ryan? It's the other way around. Even if he doesn't want me or feel the same, I'm just glad to have him in my life whether as a friend or someone...*more*.

Shaking my head and pulling myself back to the present, I finish making the customer's coffee and head back in his

direction. I'm so lost in thought over Ryan, I don't even realize that the sleazy guy is sitting in the first booth where I met Ryan, when he was a total douche to me.

He's still an ass now, but there's a softer center to him as well that makes his blunt, assertive side bearable.

Wordlessly approaching the table, I place his black coffee down with a smile. "Here you are, it won't be much longer for your salmon," I say politely, without making eye contact since he gives me the creeps. As I move to walk away, a hand wraps tightly around my wrist.

My heart rate spikes as I freeze in place, hating that I tremble at his touch. Grinding my teeth, I look over my shoulder to find him sitting perfectly still in his seat, his grip forcing my arm partially over the table. He wets his lips as he looks me over from head to toe—again—and I cringe.

"Please remove your hand," I say as calmly as I can, my voice hitching as he completely ignores me. "Excuse me," I call out louder, not caring who can hear me, and he finally brings his gaze to mine. "Remove your hand. Now," I repeat firmer this time as anger and annoyance consumes me, but he smirks like I just told a joke.

"Miss Bethany Asheville, correct?"

My eyes widen as he speaks my name, and I swallow past the lump in my throat, refusing to answer, but there's no need, he already knows who I am. The question is *how* and *why*.

"Let go," I demand, trying to pull my wrist from his grip, wanting to put as much distance between us as possible instead of interrogating him, but his hold on my wrist only tightens. I wish I could reach the fork, I'd stab the fucker in the hand.

I clench my free hand at my side as I will myself to remain calm, but it's difficult after the past couple of weeks where situations like this have only gone from bad to worse.

"Don't worry, Bethany. I'm only here to check out the goods and see what's on offer before the actual auction. You're

safe for now,” he sneers, and my heart pounds wildly in my chest as my stomach drops at his words.

“Motherfucker, if you don’t remove your hand from my server, I’ll break your little dick and shove it up your ass.”

Linda’s voice thunders around us, and I sag in relief, even though I know we now have the attention of everyone in the diner.

To my surprise, Mr. Slimy actually releases my wrist, and I quickly step away from him to make sure he can’t grab me again without warning.

Pulling my gaze from his, I look to Linda who stands to my right with her hands firmly on her hips, a glare on her face, and a growl ready to rip from her lips.

“As I just told your server, I don’t mean any trouble. *Today*,” he says with a fake smile, and bile burns the back of my throat as embarrassment courses through my veins. Linda is for sure going to have questions after this, and I really don’t have the answers she wants, because I don’t truly understand myself.

“What the fuck is going on?”

Ryan.

Looking past Linda, I find him storming toward us before coming to a stop between Mr. Slimy and me, blocking me from view of this jerkface.

“This fucker had his hand on our girl without permission,” Linda supplies, and I gape at her as she encourages Ryan’s anger. It looks like a vein is going to pop out of his forehead, he’s that angry. I scramble to try and defuse the situation, not wanting to cause more of an issue for those around me who actually care, but I have no clue what to do.

Lightning fast, Ryan grips the guy by the throat and slams his head against the cushioned seat behind his head, and a small squeal pops from my lips.

“I’m going to make you regret the day you were born,” Ryan snarls in the guy’s face, and I turn to Linda for help, but

she's only nodding along with him.

I throw my arms out wide in distress. I feel everyone in the diner looking at us, but I just can't turn to face them. *I can't*.

"Please, can we just get this guy out of here?" I plead, and my voice thankfully breaks through Ryan's cloud of anger as he wordlessly pulls the guy to his feet by his throat and pushes him toward the door.

I stand frozen in place as the guy chuckles like Ryan's reaction is funny, and I dread the thought of what Ryan is going to do out there, especially after how he reacted in English when Chad mouthed off, and he didn't even touch me. I turn my pleading eyes to Linda again, desperately trying to get her to step in. Instead, she nods at me to follow after Ryan, but before I move, her words cut through my brain.

"I know there's a lot going on with you that I have no clue about, Bethany, and I understand you may not see us as the right sounding board for you, but *that* boy cares. He cares enough for me to trust him with you and your best interests, but please remember Pete and I are *always* here for you, too, whenever you need us. Now, get out of here for the night, I've got it from here."

My skin tingles with emotion at the truth I hear in her voice as I nod in thanks, unable to find the words to express my gratitude.

Pulling my apron off quickly, I rush into the back to grab my bag before racing through the door to find Ryan punching the sleazy guy in the face, and it doesn't look like it's the first time he's hit him. The guy is covered in blood. It's splattered across his face, down his neck, and all over his suit, but he's still grinning like a maniac. Thank God no other patrons can really see over here.

"Ryan, stop!" I shout, but he doesn't hear me as he pulls his fist back again and smashes it into the man's face once more. "Ryan," I yell, and he looks over his shoulder at me before dropping the guy to his ass.

“What the fuck did this guy say to you?” he growls, but his anger isn’t aimed at me. I sweep my hair back off my face as he approaches, waiting expectantly for me to respond, and I sigh.

“He said he was checking out the goods before the auction,” I whisper. The reality of those words settles over my soul and hurts my heart as Ryan’s face completely morphs into an expression of true rage. I panic, reaching out to touch his arms. His eyes are completely black from his irises being blown, his jaw is tense, and the veins in his forehead stick out.

“Let go of me, Bethany. I have no control right now,” he bites out, but he doesn’t move, so I step closer.

“You do, Ryan. You do have control, and I need you to cling to it. For me. Please.” My voice gets quieter as a lump lodges in my throat, and he squeezes his eyes shut. I’m completely lost to him.

“I can’t let them hurt you. Not a single one of them gets to hurt you like they have tried to in the past. Do you hear me? I won’t allow it,” he rasps, gripping my hips as he holds me close. I gape up at him, unable to offer a response. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” I answer without pause, and my palms sweat because of how much I actually mean that. For the first time since I could ever remember, I truly trust someone, and the thought alone has my heart racing even faster.

“Then I need you to go home.”

“But—”

“Please, Bethany. I think you know I’m a fucking monster underneath. Just not to you. I know you know nothing of my past, and I promise you, I will explain one day, but today isn’t that day.” He sighs, placing his forehead against mine, and my eyes fall closed for a moment before I nod in response.

“Okay,” I whisper, kissing the corner of his mouth, and he lifts his bloody hand to cup my cheek before stepping back.

“Go home, Bethany,” he repeats, and I nod, nibbling on my lip nervously as I glance around the almost empty parking

lot in search of Mr. Slimy. To my utter surprise, he's on the ground, smiling up at the sky like he doesn't have a care in the world. "Go," Ryan insists, and I find myself shaking with adrenaline as I start to walk through the parked cars toward my house, trying to process everything, when I hear Ryan call out my name again.

I glance back over my shoulder to see him standing over the guy while his eyes are fixed on me. "Message me when you get there, okay?" he asks, his voice calmer than his tense stance, and I nod in agreement before turning on my heel and running.

I sprint all the way home without slowing a single step.

God finally sent me a guardian angel in the form of a dark, mysterious guy who seems happy destroying the world to keep me safe. I don't know to what extent he's willing to go, but it's as if my heart already knows that disgusting excuse of a man won't live to see the morning, and I don't feel an ounce of sadness over that.

Not a single drop.

So what does that make *me*?

TWENTY



RYAN

I watch as the high-end Audi SUV peels out of the driveway, forcing myself with every inch of my being not to shoot the motherfuckers here and now with the gun at my hip, but I somehow manage to remain hidden behind the trees.

It's Thursday, and just like Bethany said, her father left the Asheville house right on time. She knows I'm infiltrating her dad's office today while she's at school. Other than that, she has no idea what else I have planned.

She hasn't asked any questions, apparently happy to turn a blind eye to this part of me, but I think what concerns me more is she hasn't mentioned the guy from the diner at all. Not a single question, and I don't know if it's because she's too scared to ask or she has accepted that I handled it.

It was two days ago when I got my hands on that fucker, and I hate myself for acting so rashly when I could have interrogated him for information on this apparent auction Bethany is up for.

My skin crawls at the thought as his leering face enters my mind.

Watching Bethany run without a backward glance settles my soul, but it doesn't dampen the rage burning inside of me, especially since she's going back to the Asheville house, but she can't be here for this.

This motherfucker touched what's mine, and he thinks it's hilarious by the grin that still plays on his lips. I'm about to

teach him how far from funny this is.

I glance back at the diner to make sure we're not putting on a show for everyone, and thankfully find no customers looking in our direction. The quiet rumble of an engine in the far corner tells me my new friend is still here.

Closing my eyes, I crack my neck from left to right, focusing on the task at hand as I turn my attention to the fucker sitting mere feet away from me.

"Are you done, boy? There ain't shit you can do to me," he says with a chuckle, spitting saliva mixed with blood at my feet, and it only spurs me on to bring this asshole down.

I lean forward and grab him by his collar as I yank him to his feet. I easily stand four or five inches taller than him, and I sneer, letting my anger wash over my facial features as I growl in his face.

"You have no idea who the fuck I am or who you just messed with," I growl as he casually stands before me, unshaken, with droplets of his blood staining his suit.

That's when I hear footsteps approaching.

"I can take you to a safe location to...dispose of your little problem, if you'd like?" Maria Steele offers, disgust heavy in her tone, and it makes me wonder if she already knows why I want him dead.

It makes me want to ask her a hundred questions, but after what she just confirmed, along with the secret she shared, I have to trust her.

With a simple nod, her security team approaches in their SUV and she climbs in, leaving the back door open for me. I glance at the piece of shit in my hands and opt to make this easier for myself. Pulling my arm back, I clench my fist and punch this motherfucker square in the face, watching as his eyes dim and his body goes slack. I don't miss the tinge of fear coating his face when he realizes this just got a whole lot worse for him.

Good.

I drag him to the cargo area of the SUV, which one of the security guys opens for me, and I toss him inside, choosing to sit up front with the driver rather than get in the back with Maria Steele and her three other bodyguards as they zip tie him and render him useless in case he wakes.

I don't need her and my bigger situation getting in the way right now, I just need to focus on him.

Thankfully no one says a word as I remain lost in my head, and within ten minutes, we're pulling up to an old, abandoned warehouse in the middle of fuck knows where. My shoulders instantly relax, but my legs bounce as I wait impatiently to get my hands on him.

The SUV comes to a stop by a door that sits slightly ajar, and I jump from my seat and out of the vehicle quickly. As I round the rear of the car, I hear him gargling and cackling to himself, and it riles me up more. I both hate and love it when they don't realize the danger they are actually in, but I also love the greasy rag Maria's team put in his mouth.

This guy clearly has no idea who Featherstone is and the fact that the organization trains us young. He thinks he's up against a standard eighteen-year-old jock or something. Not a trained mercenary.

Opening the trunk, I find him lying curled up in a ball as he continues to cackle, and I bite my tongue as I drag him from the SUV with my hands under his arms. This motherfucker has no room to move on his own, but he doesn't try to pull on the restraints because he doesn't believe he's in real danger.

Continue to underestimate me. Please.

"Do you need any assistance or a weapon maybe?" Maria asks, stepping out of the SUV, and I shake my head, lifting my t-shirt to reveal the Glock secured in my gun belt. Ever since Bethany told me her story, I've carried it with me, except at school, my mind realizing the fucked up situation we're actually in. "Very well. We'll wait to give you a ride back, and as a gesture of goodwill for our agreement, I'll dispose of the body," she states casually, and when I turn to stare her dead in

the eye, I only find truth and openness there as she stands tall with her arms folded over her chest.

With a simple nod, I push the guy toward the door, watching him stumble over his feet as he laughs. “She thinks you’re going to kill me too? That’s fucking hilarious. You don’t know who I am, boy, who I work for—”

“You’re right, and I really couldn’t give a fuck,” I interrupt as we step through the door into a small room, completely wiped of any furniture, but it’ll do. I don’t need to go into the main part of the warehouse for this.

It’ll bring me more pleasure to get it over and done with quicker, instead of dragging it out. This cunt doesn’t get to live longer just so I can simply torture him a little. He needs the consequences for his actions right now.

No one touches my girl, especially when it’s to “check out the merchandise,” and gets away with it. I need to make examples out of these fuckers, and I’ll start here. Even if none of the other dickheads interested in her find out, I’ll know I gave him what he deserved.

I’m feeling testy tonight too, so I quickly pull my keys from my pocket and snap the zip ties restraining this guy. I want him to think he has a fucking chance.

Slamming the door shut behind me as he rubs his wrists, I pull my gun from my holster while I keep my eyes fixed on him, watching as he grins. “You’re not going to use that thing on me, boy,” he sneers. His body is a little tense compared to a few moments ago, when he still thought he had a chance of leaving here alive.

I really wish he’d stop calling me boy, it’s grinding on my fucking nerves.

Feeling the weight of the gun in my hands, I ignore him and aim it in his direction.

“Look at yourself, you don’t even know what you’re doing,” he says with a laugh, flinging his arms out wide, and I arch an eyebrow at him. “Is this because my boss wants to buy your girlfriend or something? Her virginity is still intact, her

father's confirmed it, so it's not like we're really taking any pussy from you, right? You can just move on while we defile every inch of her—"

I pull the trigger so fucking quick, wanting to stop his mouth and the shit falling from it, that I don't quite hit him square between the eyes with the bullet, watching as it enters his skull just above his right eye.

It happens in slow motion. The bullet exits his skull at the back of his head and lodges into the door behind him, then this fucking weasel crumples to the floor.

Blood splatter paints me and the walls as a pool of red instantly forms around him, yet I feel nothing. No remorse, no sympathy, no second thoughts. Nothing but calm and silence.

If I have to take out every motherfucker like this who comes near Bethany, I fucking will.

I swipe at my face, making myself focus on what I need to do now as I put that memory into a little box at the back of my mind.

I murdered someone. It isn't the first time I've done this in the name of Featherstone, and it won't be the last. Not if I take Maria up on her offer, which is highly likely at this rate. I'd be crazy not to take a deal from a member of The Ring, especially when she's a half decent human being who sees right from wrong, even if she's a little scary.

Taking a step out from behind the trees, I put my baseball cap in place. I know Bethany said there aren't any security cameras, but just to be on the safe side, I'm going to hide my face. By the time I'm done here, I'll either have information on the Ashevilles that'll help me protect Bethany, or I'll have my own security set up inside so I can find more information about her father's shady dealings and the auction. Either way, it's a win-win.

I make my way to the rear porch, surprised by how quiet and calm this place actually feels. The second I twist the doorknob, letting it swing open just like Bethany said it would, I can't help but feel a sense of darkness in this place. I can't

put my finger on what, exactly, but it's evil, and gives me a soul crushing sense of déjà vu from when I was a child.

From the outside, it looks and feels quaint, even though the dark wrought iron decor makes it seem almost haunted. Stepping inside, I'm surprised to find a completely different design and the kitchen highly modernized.

Everything in here is white and chrome with all the high-end appliances, but when I slowly and quietly make my way through the house, I find other parts that are beyond dated. Like the small living room at the front of the house, which has a pea green colored carpet and dark wooden walls.

It becomes apparent that any rooms their guests may enter are done to a high standard, leaving the unused rooms to stay frozen in time, completely untouched. It's eerie but telling.

Bethany said her father's study is downstairs, and that'll be my main focus, but I want to quickly set up security feeds outside Bethany's room too. I don't want to invade her privacy, but I need to know when fuckers are going near her, especially her parents.

My jaw grinds as I remember her saying that her parents watched while that cunt Bruce pinned her to the desk and came all over her back. He's at the fucking top of my hit list too.

When I'm sure the house is clear after checking every room with a scanner to ensure no other security systems are set up, I get to work installing them outside of both Bethany's and her brother's rooms. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I peek inside her bedroom.

I'm completely taken aback by how much it doesn't resemble her at all. The furniture is old, a complete contrast to her lilac walls, and she hasn't been able to make her own mark on the space that is supposed to be her safe haven. For some reason, it fucking destroys my black heart.

Not wanting to intrude on her personal space too much, I turn to leave, and that's when I notice the worn hinges on her

door. I'm familiar with the reason why this happens—the constant removal of the door leaving its mark.

These motherfuckers.

I grip my hat, frustration building inside of me at what they have done to her, and I vow here and now to move fucking quicker so she doesn't have to come back here. If that means I'm going to have to handle a fucking ten-year-old boy too, then so be it.

Slamming the door shut behind me in annoyance, I trudge downstairs to her father's office. My blood boils when I see the desk that only brings Bethany pain, and I want to burn the fucking thing to send a message, but I promised her I wouldn't make my presence known.

It takes everything I have to work around it. I place my camera on top of the bookcase that sits in the corner, offering me a perfect view of the entire room, and with its range, I should be able to hear the sounds from the dining room too.

Once I'm happy with the layout of my equipment, I move toward the desk, refusing to glance at the top of it as I rifle through the drawers.

Bethany was right, he really doesn't give a fuck about leaving his stuff out. This man thinks he's hot shit, untouchable, and I'm going to make him choke on that thought when I ruin him.

Debt letter after debt letter is stacked high in his top drawer. His debts even have debts, there are some from loan sharks scrawled on top.

This must be why he's choosing to sell his fucking daughter's virginity—to get himself out of debt.

Unbelievable.

Un-fucking-believable.

I want to rip him limb from limb. I want to have some fucker pin him down and find his fucking prostate with a steel crowbar. Let's invade this cunt's body against his will. And

then, only then, will I get the pleasure of seeing his brain splatter all over the walls after I put a bullet through it.

I move to the second drawer, my nostrils flaring as a curse falls from my lips.

Notes, printed emails, and other documents fill the small wooden drawer, all of which discuss Bethany's value.

Millions, she's going to bring in millions for her parents, and it makes me sick.

How can they not see that she's invaluable? A fucking priceless treasure?

I'll fucking buy her myself if I have to, but I think that'd only hurt her more.

With a heavy sigh, I close the drawer. I have what I need for now, and I'm scared if I dig any deeper I'm going to find photos or something of my girl that'll turn me fucking crazy and cause me to go on a mass hunt, and as much as I hate it, I pinky promised.

It doesn't matter anyway. Their time is coming. They just don't fucking know it yet.



Two days. It takes this fucker of a man two days to step into his office, and the second I get a notification that someone has entered, I rush to my setup, wanting to see him in real time. I didn't get a full glimpse when I watched him leave the house the other day. I want to see how he fucking manages to live with himself and what he's doing.

I'm all ready to get out on my surfboard on a sunny Saturday afternoon, but that can wait. I was hoping to take Bethany out with me, or even take her for a spin in the truck to start teaching her how to drive, but she didn't respond to my messages.

I guiltily checked the camera footage earlier when she hadn't responded, the one outside her room, and cut back a

couple of hours to check the movement. The last motion was an hour ago when she quietly slinked into her bedroom. I'm just glad she's getting some privacy and is away from them.

I hope she's drawing. After seeing her sketches of us on the surfboard, I saw her raw talent, her passion, and what could be her future if she wanted it. I love that she has an outlet to escape from her reality for a little while.

I wanted to pester her to find out why she hadn't messaged, but then I realized how much of a needy dick I was being, and that's when I grabbed my surfboard. It seems like the only time I get to see her pretty blue eyes is when her father or mother throws her out, and as much as I don't want her to be anywhere near him, I feel guilty for wanting him to toss her out again.

I'm selfish as fuck.

But now here I am, with three laptops lined up on my breakfast bar, wearing only my board shorts. If she was in any danger, I would still run there like this, so I'm not worried.

I turn up the volume on the laptop, and the room comes to life on the screen. I see her father sink down into his leather chair with a slight curve to his lips as he gets comfortable, stretching his legs out like he's a goddamn king.

I fucking despise him. Despise isn't even strong enough of a word. Hate? Nope. Either way, I know I want to dismember him one piece at a time. I'll cut his slimy little cock up into salami slices while it's still fucking attached and make him feel all the pain and fear his daughter has felt for so many years.

That's the other realization I've come to over the past two days. As much as he's in debt, he's been priming Bethany for this for years.

No horseback riding.

No phone.

No driving.

No life.

Nothing but satisfying their fucking pockets.

All of this adds up to him having one use, and one use only for her—to bring in the big money.

Fucker.

My hands clench on the countertop as I take a deep breath, trying to curb my anger, but watching him only fills me with rage.

He picks up his phone and dials a number. I'll play it back later and try to decipher the digits or send it to Benji. Either way, we'll look at it.

“Yes, it's Bernārd. No, I can't wait...The bruising is fully gone from her face, so I'm ready to set a date and time for the auction...I thought that would get your attention...” He slides his hand through his thinning hair as a sinister smile twists his lips.

“Two weeks' time...On Saturday, yes...I know it's a fast turnaround, but I need the fucking money now,” he growls down the phone, thumping his fist on the desk as my heart pounds rapidly in my chest, waiting to learn the location.

“I fucking know that...Ilana's offered me the use of her banquet hall at the casino she owns. She has no idea what it's for, and she charged me a lot of fucking money, but it's huge. Plenty of room for buyers, and there'll be enough room for my daughter to work the floor as well as take the podium at the end of the evening in the center of the room.”

Bile rises in my throat as I watch his excitement play out across his face. His eyes light up, and his grin is a mixture of glee and menace. This fucker is *loving* the idea of putting Bethany up on a sacrificial altar for everyone to see.

He says very little else before ending the call and leaning back in his chair as I send the location to Benji, asking for blueprints of the casino here in Knight's Creek. I know he'll find it quicker than me.

I want to get her out of there now, bundle her up and never look back. A part of me doesn't even want to ask her permission and just do it, but then in her eyes, I'd be no better

than the rest of them for not giving her the opportunity to make her own choices.

I might not know how to feel or really show my emotions, but that's my issue to deal with.

I'm going to give her everything she's never been offered, including love.

TWENTY-ONE



BETHANY

Me: Hey, my father is away on business until Tuesday. Are you doing anything today?

Nope that sounds needy.

Me: Hey, sorry I didn't message back yesterday. It was actually quiet here for once, and I spent the afternoon drawing.

Oh my God, gross, Beth. Stop being so lame.

Taking a deep breath, I swing my legs over the side of my bed, delete the message, and try again.

Me: Hey.

I hit send, not wanting to word vomit into another message, and I see he opens it instantly which only makes embarrassment heat my cheeks.

Ryan: Hi.

Ryan: Everything okay?

I rub my lips together nervously as I try to think of a cool response but fall short, opting just to spit out what I'm messaging for.

Me: I'm okay. My father is away on business, and I can finally leave the house.

Me: Are you free?

I think I might be sick with nerves, but I want him to see me as a grown-ass woman, and that involves reaching out first

on occasion. It just pulls me out of my comfort zone and makes me anxious as hell.

I haven't seen him properly since he stopped the man who was harassing me at the diner, and even then I didn't really get to see him. He swept in as my knight in shining armor then demanded I go home as a way of protecting me, and *I listened*.

I have no idea what happened to Mr. Slimy, but my gut says he's definitely dead. I don't think Ryan will bring it up unless I ask, and I just don't want to know. I've found myself in a world filled with twisted dark corners, and I know for sure I'd rather be standing in Ryan's corner than my father's.

Wanting to spend time with someone who has killed another person should frighten me, but he did that for me. Surely I shouldn't run from him, right?

I toss my arms over my face, my brain going into overdrive as I think about him, but I can't escape it.

I've always been a sucker for the villains in TV shows and movies, but I don't think someone is ever *truly bad*, just never properly loved, and I want to give that to him. I want to continue to melt his harsh, dark heart, but I don't really know how or if he'll even let me. But my crush has kicked up a notch now, and I'm infatuated with Ryan Carter.

The real villains in my story can rot in hell—Bernard Asheville, Maggie Asheville, Rico Manetti, Bruce Langwood, and anyone else interested in buying an eighteen-year-old virgin.

There is no coming back from wanting to sell a person and give away a sacred part of them. To take control from someone and wear them down, trying to force them to think what you're doing to them isn't wrong on all levels. I'm done being a victim. I want to be what Ryan said I am—a survivor.

Fuck. Them.

I glance at my phone to see a message waiting.

Ryan: Betty, why are you even asking? Get your pretty ass over here.

I smile like a fool as I read his message, shaking my head in disbelief as I grab my bag from beside me on the bed and hitch the strap over my shoulder. I quickly glance in the mirror, hardly recognizing myself in a pale blue summer dress that sits just above my knees. Pairing it with my denim jacket and white sandals, I feel amazing.

It's what my father always wants me to wear when we're trying to impress someone, and today, I have someone I want to impress on my own.

Ryan: Never mind, I can't wait that long. Tell me where I can come get you.

A giggle falls from my lips as I swing my bedroom door open. I quickly bite it back, not wanting to draw attention to myself, but then I remember my mother is somewhere with her lawyer lover and Hunter is at Xavier's again. Between those two and their other friend, Tobias, they are going to be a force to be reckoned with, I can already tell. They are all far too broody at ten years old. God help us all.

Me: Around the corner should be good. No one's home.

I rush downstairs and head straight out of the door like someone is chasing me. I don't mind being alone, I'm used to it, but in this house, I'm terrified that someone is going to jump out and take my happiness away, dulling my excitement to spend time with Ryan.

It's been happening far too much lately, and I don't want to have that anxiety hanging over my head today.

Shutting the front door behind me, I slow my pace as I make my way to the end of the road where I pocket my phone and wait for Ryan to arrive.

He messaged me a few times yesterday. I was just too scared to pull my phone out and have my parents catch me, but the last one piqued my interest.

Ryan: I have some important information regarding your situation. I need to see you when I can.

My throat dries just from thinking about the message again, but I feel mentally stronger than I ever have. If I was auctioned off six months ago when I turned eighteen, I would have crumbled, and I would probably be sprawled across someone's bed against my will with chains around my wrists. But now? Now I want to fight, and that's all because of Ryan.

He's given me the ability to see inside of my soul and focus on what *I* want. And that's to get as far away from these messed up people as possible with Hunter by my side.

As a legal adult, I should have my own rights, but I've been sheltered and held back on purpose to make me weak. The unfortunate outcome for me is that they are actually trying to sell me, but I won't allow it.

The sound of a vehicle approaching makes me glance up, the sun warming my skin, and I see Ryan's dark blue truck heading toward me. He doesn't hit the brakes until he's almost reached me, like he didn't want to wait the extra seconds to see me if he slowed like a normal person, and it makes my heart leap in my chest.

The aviator sunglasses shielding his eyes, combined with his ruffled brown hair, almost has me melting into a puddle right here and now with how hot he is. But when he jumps from the truck, a grin taking over his lips as he tilts his glasses to look me over, I think I may die and go to heaven.

I want someone to look at me like that forever. I'm used to scowls and grunts, not *this*, and I want it all from him. He makes me feel special, worthy, and...sexy. I just don't know how to get what I want.

"Get back in the truck before my luck is blown and someone sees me with you," I mumble, the threat real in my voice, but the smile that takes over my face lessens the blow.

This guy is worth all of the risks.

"Hurry up then, Betty!" he hollers over his shoulder as he does exactly as I asked, and I waste no time climbing into the passenger seat.

As I clip my seatbelt, I recognize the indie rock music playing on the radio, and I turn my gaze to Ryan's.

"I love this song," I murmur. Every time it comes on the radio at Pete's, I get goosebumps. The way his eyes widen and his lips curve slightly tells me he's impressed.

"Same. I saw these guys live last year when I had a rare five second break," he responds, and it blows me away. I would love to see them live.

"I bet that was amazing," I say in awe, and as he puts the truck in drive, he pauses to glance my way. The look in his eyes tells me he remembers just how sheltered I am, but it quickly changes to determination.

"I'm going to take you to see a live show. When all this shit is over with, I'm taking you to see all the live bands you want to go see."

His words leave no room for argument, and I find myself nodding in agreement. Excitement pools in my stomach at all the possibilities he offers me, and I can't help myself. Leaning across the center console, I press my lips to his, swooning at his full, soft mouth, and then I pull back before he can even respond.

I feel the heat creeping up my neck as I sense his eyes burning into the side of my head as I look ahead, but with a stern pep talk I turn to face him.

Take what you want, Bethany.

All I can see is heat in his gaze as he wets his lips, his tongue sweeping across where I just kissed him, and a shiver runs down my spine. Ryan cups my cheek as he leans forward, while my heart pounds in my chest.

"You're so beautiful, Bethany Asheville. So *fucking* beautiful," he rasps, and I can tell he wants to say or do more, but he blinks and pulls back. I find myself staring at him in shock as he releases me and starts to drive without another word. He stopped. He just outright...fucking stopped.

It's because I'm too delicate, too sheltered, too inexperienced, and a virgin.

I'm so angry at myself. I shouldn't have done that. I keep my gaze focused on my lap as we travel through town. Disappointment floods my veins, but I feel his gaze repeatedly flick in my direction.

I don't think I'm ever going to be more than the damsel in distress he wants to save. There is so much about him I don't know, most likely very dangerous things, and I was stupid enough to think he'd notice any flirtatious attempts from me. Maybe I'm just a way for him to flex his savior complex.

My life is crazy right now. People want to buy me to use me and take my virginity. It should make me cower away from every man in existence, but instead, it makes me want to give it *all* to him. Ryan makes me feel safe and cared for, plus it would be *my* choice, no one else's, and that makes *me* feel empowered—until my feelings aren't reciprocated.

F-u-c-k.

“What's making you frown like that?” Ryan asks, breaking through the fog in my mind. I swipe a hand down my face, trying to clear the expression away, but it's more difficult than it seems.

“I'm fine,” I answer bleakly, looking down at my hands. I don't have the strength to be honest right now, not when my feelings and emotions are so close to the surface. I'll make a fool out of myself.

Ryan pulls the truck to a stop, and I realize we're outside his beach house, but the uncertain energy in here has me remaining in my seat. “Oh my God, is this the female ‘I'm fine’ Benji's always warned me about?”

I gape at him as I look to my left, only to find him wide-eyed as he frantically searches me from head to toe with panic.

“Please tell me what I did wrong so I can fix it. I don't want to handle one of those situations right now, if ever, preferably.”

I stare at him in bewilderment, his facial expression matching my own, and I release the breath I've been holding.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” I tell him honestly, keeping my face neutral as I watch his brows crinkle, and he shakes his head.

“I don’t want you to say anything specifically, I just want to understand what caused you to frown so hard, Beth. That wasn’t my intention.” His voice is softer than usual, and it makes me mad at myself. I feel ridiculous for making an issue out of this.

“It’s nothing, I just...” Words betray me as I try to find the rest of them, but I fall short and gape at him.

“It’s just what?” he prompts, pushing for more, and I hide my face in my hands from embarrassment.

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” I admit, peering at him through my fingers.

“Now you have to tell me,” he says soothingly. The heat of his hands on my wrists calms me as he tries to move them entirely from my face.

“I’m embarrassed,” I mutter, and he looks at me like I’m crazy, clearly having no clue what’s going through my mind.

It’s here, in this moment, with my heart pounding like it’s about to burst out of my chest, my palms sweating against my face, and my cheeks burning under my touch, that I curse under my breath, and I say *fuck it*.

“I like you,” I mumble against my palms, keeping my hands over my face as his eyebrows rise while he waits for me to say more. I shake my head and pull my hands from my face as I put on my big girl panties. Looking him in the eyes, I tell him, “I like you. I kissed you. I want...fuck...You confuse me. You tell me I’m beautiful, but you hold yourself back. You make me want to explore things, but in the same breath I feel like I’m just a damsel in distress to you. I want—”

My rambling confessions are cut off as his lips meet mine, and my brain short-circuits as his hand cups my head, holding me in place as our mouths dance together. My body heats from head to toe as he sweeps his tongue along my bottom lip, and a

groan falls from my mouth, making Ryan moan as I move my hands to his hair, desperate for more.

Holy. Freaking. Hell.

I think I might die from pure bliss right now.

Ryan pulls his lips from mine, leaning back ever so slightly to meet my gaze as I blink my eyes open.

“Bethany Asheville, you make me fucking crazy. Do I want to protect you? Hell fucking yeah I do. Do I want to explore you? Every inch. Do I want to take everything I want from you? Without question. But I also know what you’re going through, and I will never take a single choice from you. *Ever*. That’s my promise to you. I only want to go at your speed, and as much as I wanted to devour you back there, I wanted to discuss the information I learned from the surveillance system I set up in your father’s office first, since it’s sensitive,” he explains as he cups my cheek, leaving me to gape at him in surprise.

That was a lot of logic and a lot of words—words that make my heart swell, yet make me want to screw whatever he has to tell me and get back to the kissing, but the look in his eyes tells me I want to hear it.

“Tell me,” I whisper, wanting to get it over with so we can get back to all of the good stuff.

He sighs. “A date has been set for the auction.” His statement is like lead in my stomach, and I swallow the bile rising in my throat as I wait for him to say when. “Two weeks away, on Saturday evening, at Knight’s Casino,” he finishes, his empathetic gaze searching mine as I try to process that information, but my brain refuses to let the words sink in.

“I-I can’t handle that right now,” I admit, closing my eyes as I take a deep breath. The thought of the auction threatens to crush me. “I can’t handle my father controlling every aspect of my life like this. I just want to let go, forget for a minute, and pretend I’m just a normal teenage girl in a car with a normal teenage guy,” I mutter, forcing myself to blink my eyes open

and look at him, praying he can see the meaning behind my words.

The glimmer in his ocean blue gaze tells me he does, and he swallows hard as he continues to search my eyes. “Bethany, I don’t want—”

“Help me take control of my body, even if it’s only for a moment, Ryan,” I whisper, the plea evident in my tone as desire still burns through my body from minutes ago.

“Let me get you inside,” he responds, reaching for his door handle, but I can’t break the bubble we are in right now.

“No. Here,” I state, gripping his hand to stop him, and he laces our fingers together.

“Bethany, I don’t know what you think is going to happen here. I’ll do whatever you want, except I’m not touching you for the first time in my fucking truck,” he grumbles, his tone harsh, but I let it wash over me. Knowing he understands how important it is only solidifies how much I want this with him. *Only him.*

“You just said you’d do whatever I want. This is what I want,” I retort, my need thick in my voice as he looks me over. “Please, Ryan.” The feel of my nipples drawing tight and my thighs rubbing together to create friction sends a shiver down my spine.

Without another word, he presses his lips to mine as he unclips my seatbelt and pulls the lever under my seat, sending me flying back until my chair hits the back seat, and I gasp. It almost feels like I’m sitting in the back of the truck like this.

“You, Betty fucking Asheville, are bossy as hell,” he murmurs against my lips as he moves into the space he just created at my feet. “And I *fucking love it*,” he growls before crashing our lips together again.

My fingers wind their way into his hair as I give him everything I have, needing to feel and touch him everywhere, but not moving from this position since I have no idea what I’m doing.

“Tell me what you want, Bethany,” he says, leaning back with his hands on my thighs, and I simply stare at him as I try to figure out what I actually want from him.

“I want you to touch me,” I reply, my voice barely audible as his eyes flicker to the hem of my dress and back to me.

“You’re going to have to be more specific than that,” he responds, slowly trailing his fingers up my thighs as he studies my face for my reaction.

My mouth falls open as he inches my dress up, revealing my plain white cotton panties, and if I wasn’t so turned on, I’d likely blush with embarrassment, but I need him more than anything right now. I’ve never felt like this. I’ve never felt this desire, this need to feel someone’s touch, and it’s all on my terms, leaving me brimming with exhilaration.

“I’ve always wondered what an orgasm would feel like. I’m not ready for your…” I point a finger toward his cock, and he grins at me. “I just want to feel,” I add, hoping that makes sense, and he nods in understanding.

“If you want me to stop, just say the word and I will, immediately. Understand?” His heated gaze burns into mine as I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and nod.

Without a word, he grips my butt and pulls me to the edge of the seat as he tries to maneuver around in the small space. He stares down at my panties for a moment, and I don’t know where I get the confidence from, but I lift my hips and pull my panties down my thighs, letting them fall at my feet as his eyes remain focused between my legs.

“Holy fucking shit,” he murmurs, wetting his lips as he flicks his gaze to mine once more as if needing confirmation, and I nod.

“Please,” I beg, not knowing what I actually need from him, but when he slowly drags his thumb over my clit and between my folds, I hiss, my back arching off the seat as I shudder under his touch.

“You’re so responsive, Bethany, I’m going to come in my fucking pants,” he mutters, adjusting his bulge before focusing

back on me.

I stare, transfixed, as he circles my tight nub, shivering with every passing stroke, and I instantly understand why girls are obsessed with this. I've heard rumors. Girls at school say once you've felt the rush of an orgasm you become addicted, and I'm addicted to this right now.

He leans forward in slow motion, and before I can question it, he sweeps his tongue over my folds, from my entrance to my clit, and I can't control the volume of the moan that falls from my lips as my body tingles.

"More, please, more," I say, running my fingers through his hair. I'm on the cusp of something amazing, I know it, and he doesn't disappoint.

There's a sly grin on his lips as he looks up at me for a moment, clearly loving the desperation in my voice, before he slowly teases my entrance with his finger. I gasp at the touch, feeling him circle around gently, leaving me craving more, but the second he brings his lips back to my nub, it doesn't matter, none of it does.

It starts at my toes, and my words lodge in my throat as my body shatters into a million pieces. The tingles spread through me all the way to the pulse in my neck. I feel like I'm high, floating on a cloud of bliss, as Ryan continues to play me perfectly.

As I come down, feeling little ripples of pleasure still bursting against my skin, I blink my eyes open, not having realized they'd closed, to find Ryan looking up at me in awe.

I'm *speechless*, completely blown away, and nothing else matters but this moment. My brain doesn't understand anything but the amazing tingles running through my body, and it feels like utter perfection.

I don't know how to return the favor, and the thought alone sends a spike of doubt surging through me, but he simply grins at me like I hung the moon as he pulls the hem of my dress down.

“I want to claim you as mine, but that goes against everything I said earlier, and I—”

“I’m yours,” I interrupt quickly, leaning forward so we’re face-to-face as he rises on his knees. Lost in each other’s gaze, I almost feel dopey with the languid smile on my lips and the joy bursting from my soul as I stare at all the possibilities in his blue eyes.

“I was supposed to take you for a driving lesson. We could still do that if you like,” he offers quietly, like his mind and soul are content. It almost feels foreign on him, but I like it.

“I—”

A knock on the glass startles me as a tall, muscular guy with a bald head wearing a black hoodie and jogger set smiles at us as he continues to rap his knuckles on the glass.

“Homeboy, surprise!”

What on earth?

“Ah, fuck,” Ryan grumbles, resting his forehead on my shoulder for a minute as he tries to hide from this guy, but my gaze is fixed on him as confusion replaces my desire.

“Introduce me, motherfucker,” the guy adds before opening the door and leaning inside.

Ryan sighs. “Benji, this is Bethany. Bethany, this is my fucktard of a best friend, Benji,” he states, leaning back and putting a little distance between us, and that’s when I remember what we were just doing and I blush like a fool.

“Pretty lady, I can see why my man is hooked on you,” he remarks with a grin, which I can’t help but return as Ryan grumbles for him to, “Shut the fuck up.”

His demeanor instantly makes me relax, and the fact Ryan said it’s his best friend puts me even more at ease.

“Uh, nice to meet you,” I murmur, and he stands tall and pats the door.

“I’ll wait inside,” he says with a wink as Ryan swipes a hand down his face.

“I was about to teach Bethany how to drive,” he replies feebly, and his friend barks out a laugh.

“My friend, if that’s what you call driving, you’re doing it wrong.” Turning on his heel, he heads for the beach house, leaving the pair of us to gape after him.

Clearing my throat, I fight past my embarrassment as I voice what’s on my mind. “This feels like a big part of you I don’t know,” I tell him, not angry or untrusting, just honest.

“I know, Bethany,” he murmurs in response, stroking his thumb over my cheek as he meets my gaze. “Soon, I promise. I just need you to let me protect you right now,” he says, and as much as I hate not knowing, I nod.

I hold my hand out for him to take, which he does willingly, and the connection settles my soul.

We may not know everything about each other, but it feels like we’re in this together, and that is more than I’ve ever had.

TWENTY-TWO



RYAN

Motherfucking Benji Dereks and his goddamn fucking timing.

I want to kill him with my bare hands, but that would only make the asshole laugh more. He'd have me chasing him around the beach house like a fucking child first, and I refuse to give him the pleasure.

Sitting across the breakfast bar from him, I can see the gleam in his eyes which tells me he knows exactly what we were doing before he got here, but he doesn't know the significance of it. I feel like I'm bouncing on the edge of my seat, waiting for him to ruin what was a special moment for us.

She trusts me.

She trusts *me* enough to caress the most sacred parts of her body, and watching her orgasm under my touch was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Her first one, and it was all *mine*. I didn't think it would feel this good to claim it, claim her.

Her father holds so much control over her, and a lot of it is down to Bethany remaining untouched. Watching her ask for it and feeling the heat of her pussy against my fingers was like fucking ecstasy.

She's stronger than she knows, braver than she realizes, and a true force to be reckoned with. She just doesn't recognize it.

Bethany Asheville is the most beautiful person I have ever met.

I glance to my left, watching her as she listens to Benji talk about some shit, and my soul calms as I take her in. I can't put my finger on anything specific about her that makes me feel or act like this, completely captivated, it just seems to be *her* as a whole.

Trying to keep myself under control and not whip my dick out earlier took a lot of strength. Every time I am near her now, my cock instantly hardens in my pants, and I don't need to scare her with expectations.

Back in the truck, that was all about her, *my girl*.

She said I could claim her, so I stand by it.

Turning my attention to the conversation, I hear Beth giggle, and the sound instantly places a small smile on my lips.

"See? Look at that, little miss, just hearing your giggle makes him smile, and let me tell you, this fucker here is as grumpy as they come. Am I right, Ryan?" Benji teases with a knowing grin and a cocked eyebrow as I roll my eyes at him.

Always so fucking extra.

"I'm not always... Fuck, it's true. I really am a grumpy asshole," I admit, looking at Bethany sheepishly, who also arches an eyebrow at me.

"I know. Do you not recall how rude you were when we first met?" she questions, placing her hand on her hip as Benji smothers a laugh, and I swipe a hand down my face.

"Yeah, but that was *before*," I counter, stumbling over my words as I wave my hand dismissively.

"Before what?" she asks, and my heart pounds in my chest. Those two words require a deep answer, one I'd prefer not to delve into in front of Benji. But fuck it, for her, anything. It would be worse if I said nothing like earlier and made her think the worst instead. Not again.

"Before I knew who you were to me. Before I knew how important to my life you would become," I say, keeping my gaze trained on hers as I speak the truth, watching as she blushes at my words.

Before she can respond, Benji interrupts. “Girlllll, what have you done to my boy? He’s all... *nice*? Is that the right word to use? I don’t know, I’ve never seen him so hooked on anything or anyone. Ever really,” Benji rambles, and I glare at him out of the corner of my eye, but it does nothing to shut him up.

“Apart from unloading all my trauma on him and pulling him into a lot of crap he shouldn’t need to deal with, not much, if I’m honest,” Bethany replies, answering Benji’s question with honesty while wearing a grin on her face. I return her smile, leaning in close, not caring if Benji is watching us like a real-life sitcom.

“That’s not true and you know it, Betty. Everything happens for a reason. I never believed that saying until now, but I was meant to be in Knight’s Creek, in this exact beach house, waiting for *you*,” I say quietly, sure Benji can still hear, but thankfully he says nothing, although I watch him put a hand over his mouth in surprise out of the corner of my eye. I press my lips to her forehead, feeling her relax under my touch, before I turn my attention to Benji. “So why are you here?”

“You were stressed yesterday when you updated me on the situation,” he murmurs. Fun Benji has officially left the building, leaving Business Benji in his place. “I decided I wanted to come down and help outline a game plan before I had to be back at the academy tomorrow.”

The mention of the academy instantly freezes the blood in my veins as I scramble to move the conversation away from it. That’s on my list of the many things I need to talk to Bethany about, but right now, we need to be all hands on deck for getting her and her brother safely out of here.

“You mean me?” Bethany asks, wetting her lips nervously, and I lean across the breakfast bar to lace our fingers together. She sits taller, waiting for us to answer.

“Yes. We need a plan before they can even get you to the casino, and I called Benji to help,” I tell her, suddenly panicking because we never discussed me mentioning her

situation to others. It's not like I went into detail about what's happened or been happening to her, I just said there was a price on her head and I wanted it eradicated.

"And you're here to help us?" she asks, turning her gaze to Benji, and he nods in response. "But why? You don't even know me." There's a slight quiver to her voice. It almost feels like she can't believe people she doesn't know are willing to help her, and it makes me hate her parents even more for making her feel so uncared for.

"I know Ryan, he's my best friend, and if he says I need to help a pretty girl out of a situation, then you bet your ass I'll be here," he states with a shrug, and she stares at him in shock for a moment before clearing her throat.

"Thank you," she mutters, flicking her gaze between us as I squeeze her hand in support.

"No thanks necessary. Not until we have a job well done, okay?" I say soothingly, and she smiles weakly but nods in agreement.

"So my boy here tells me we have a ten-year-old brat to deal with too," Benji comments, bracing his hands on the breakfast bar as he smiles at Bethany, moving the conversation along, and she rolls her eyes.

My two favorite people are in one room, at the same table, getting along. I can't help but smile as I glance out of the window to the beach, feeling ridiculous at how calming it is.

"We do," she replies with a slight sparkle in her beautiful blue eyes as she realizes I meant it when I said we would help them *both*. I pray that it adds to the trust she's finding in me.

"I think we need to make our move to get you out on a Thursday when no one is home. You'll both be at school, but if you can have your things packed and ready to go, I can sneak in to get them, and when you finish school, we can hightail it out of here," I tell her simply.

"The issue with that is I'm not allowed to pick Hunter up from school, which means the best time to get him would be a Friday when he goes for a sleepover at his friend's house. If I

disappear the day before, they'll likely go into full lockdown mode and not let him go. Unless...I got in trouble on a Thursday evening or something, then he'd kick me out for the night anyway," she says quietly, trailing off at the end because she knows I'm never going to allow that.

"No way. You're not getting yourself into trouble. We both know where that can fucking lead, and there won't be another mark on your body from that man. Over my dead body," I exclaim, catching sight of Benji's surprised expression.

"Little miss, who the fuck do *I* have to kill?"

Benji's hands clench at his sides as he flicks his gaze over her, and she blushes, casting me a sideways glance. I already killed for her. The look in her eyes tells me she knows and doesn't want to question it. But the anger in Benji's voice shows how much we're both willing to do to protect her. This is why he's my brother, he always has my back without question.

"No one yet," she says quietly, stroking a loose tendril of hair behind her ear. "I don't know enough about you guys to know how true of a statement that is. My gut knows, and I don't want any unnecessary blood on anyone's hands," she adds, squeezing my hand this time, and it feels like acceptance.

She knows I'm my own type of monster, one willing to protect her honor and follow her into the darkness, but she also knows she's safe, and that's all that matters to me.

"No blood... *yet*," I reiterate, swiping a hand down my face as I try to think. "Will you be working on Friday before the casino night? We could leave from work and get Hunter from his friends," I think out loud, and she nods eagerly.

"I work alternate Fridays. I'm off the next one, but I'm working at Pete's the night before."

Fuck, that's cutting it close. Uncertainty settles in my stomach. I wish she would just let us go in there guns blazing and be finished with it all, but this isn't about me, it's about her, and we're doing this her way or no way at all.

“It can work. We just need to be precise and not miss a single move,” Benji muses, reassuring himself as much as me, and I nod in agreement.

“Okay, and where do we go from there?” Bethany asks, clearly wondering what the next steps are.

I take a deep breath. “Do you trust me?” I ask, knowing she does but needing to hear it all the same.

“Of course I do,” she responds instantly without question. “I trust you, Ryan.” Finally hearing her say those words out loud warms my soul.

“Then I have that all taken care of, I just need to make a few calls,” I say, taking my phone from my pocket and standing from the table.

We don’t have the time to waste on this. Besides, Maria Steele said I could confirm at any point.

Now is the time.

TWENTY-THREE



BETHANY

I can't control the sigh that falls from my lips as I make my way to the school bus. My mind can't keep up with the fact that I have my version of a normal life to live when I'm not with Ryan trying to figure out how to save myself.

It's like two completely different worlds battling against each other as I figure out how to keep my head above water.

Without Ryan, I'd be sinking in the quicksand that is now my life faster than ever before.

I have less than two weeks to work myself free of my family, and the plan can only be executed the day before, which leaves me far more stressed than I care to admit. I haven't uttered a word to Hunter yet, because what would I say?

Oh, sorry, Hunter, we have to leave Knight's Creek and your friends forever so our parents can't sell me and my virginity to the highest bidder because they owe so much money.

I'd rather spare him the trauma, but I know deep down this will impact him too.

Ryan talked me through all the debt he'd found in my father's desk as he set up his surveillance, and it doesn't really surprise me. On the surface, my parents put on a wealthy front, with their expensive SUVs, designer wardrobe, and fancy parties, but behind closed doors we are nothing more than the material on our backs.

Someone barges past me as I stand in line for the bus, making me stumble, but I manage to stop myself from falling flat on my face as I glance around to see who it was. No one stands out, so I turn back toward the bus, focusing on the line instead of my life issues.

I'm at the back of the line, trying not to get irritated with how long it's taking everyone to get on, when I'm suddenly swept off my feet and my back is pressed to someone's chest. A scream burns my throat as it remains trapped, unable to break free.

My body stiffens as I go on high alert. Arms are banded tightly around mine, pinning them to my sides as I'm carried toward the back of the bus. Nobody pays me any attention or even glances in my direction as my brain wills my body into action. I can't hear anything, and all I can see is the yellow of the school bus. My mind is acutely focused on touch as I slowly kick myself into gear and swing my legs back into the shins of whoever is holding me.

"Ah, fuck, Beth." A grunt sounds from behind me, blowing through my hair, and it takes me a second to realize it's Ryan.

"What the hell, Ryan?" I gasp, trying to calm down as he slowly lowers me to my feet behind the school bus, my body sliding over the length of his as the smell of the engine fumes fills my nose, making me cringe. Whirling around, I give him the best glare I can muster, which falls short when I take in his ocean blue eyes and chiseled jawline. *Damn*, I'm a sucker for this guy.

The slight lift of his lips reminds me of how he looked just before he tasted me between my thighs, and that thought alone has me instantly blushing.

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Betty," he teases with a wink, placing his hands on my hips as he blocks me from everyone else's view, and I look up at him.

"What are you even doing here?" I ask breathlessly, and he shrugs, wetting his lips.

“You’re not working tonight, which means I won’t get to see you, and I have wanted to feel your lips against mine all day.” I practically melt at his words, sinking my teeth into my bottom lip as I think about the same thing, and before I can respond, my mouth does it for me.

Rising up on my tiptoes, I press my lips to his, gripping the front of his gray t-shirt as I pull him closer.

I feel alive. It’s exhilarating feeling his body pressed against mine, but the stark reality settles in my mind. I remember all too quickly the reach my father seems to have, so I reluctantly pry myself from him.

Ryan presses his forehead against mine as I take a moment to catch my breath. I’m desperate to run off to his beach house with him instead of following my father’s usual order of returning straight home, but I’ll have plenty of time on my hands for Ryan once the plan is followed through. I just have to hold onto that.

“I’m sorry. I’m worried my father has eyes around here,” I murmur as I blink my eyes open, and he nods in agreement.

“I know. I just hate it. I want you to truly feel what it’s like to be mine, Bethany. To feel protected and cared for no matter what,” he admits as he respects my warning and takes a step back.

It’s funny how he’s put distance between us, but all I see is him.

“I want to feel all of that too,” I respond truthfully, and he offers me a tight smile as he brushes a hand through his brown hair.

“Soon,” he mutters, placing a final kiss on my forehead like he’s sealing that promise with the touch of his lips, and I swoon again. “Go, quickly, before I change my mind,” he grumbles, and I squeeze his arm before I turn on my heel and climb up the steps of the bus just before the door slams shut behind me.

I manage to grab an empty seat at the front, luckily able to sit by myself, but it saddens me that I can’t catch one more

glimpse of Ryan. *Soon*, I think, repeating his words in my head, and it fills me with hope. It's funny how *one day* turned into *soon*, but I'm not complaining.

It's not a long drive to my house, and I'm always the first stop in the afternoon since we're on the edge of town. My mind plays through the motions of the plan again, and my heart rate increases as my nerves begin to creep up, getting the better of me like they have every time I've given myself the time to think of every aspect of the plan.

In theory, it's simple. I just have to make sure my and Hunter's major belongings are available for Ryan to grab on Thursday. Then, on Friday, Hunter will go to Xavier's for a sleepover as always, and I'll act as though I'm going to work, but I may not go at all, because saying goodbye to Linda and Pete will hurt too much. From there we can grab Hunter and go. The last part feels far too blasé for me, but I'm trusting Ryan to guide me toward the light.

Things are too quiet with my father, and that should be a huge warning sign for me. He's left me alone, not looking to pick an argument or finding any excuse to hit me, and he's clearly not as drunk as he usually is.

My heart sinks as my house comes into view, and I instinctively rise to my feet, ready to get off. In a blink, the bus is long gone and I'm slowly making my way down the path to my front door. A rock settles in my stomach.

Knowing I have an opportunity to leave this messed up reality behind has me desperate to finish already, but I don't have to put up with this much longer and it fills me with more strength than I ever knew I had.

I rap my knuckles on the wooden front door. I'm not ready to face my father and his hot and cold anger right now. Even if he has toned it down at the minute, he's still far too unpredictable.

The door swings open, and my father stands before me with a glare burning in his eyes. With a nod of his head, he invites me inside, quickly averting his attention, and I immediately go on high alert.

Hunter.

If my father isn't harboring that look for me, it has to be my brother. I would prefer to suffer at his hands than let Hunter feel the pain of his punishments.

I quickly follow him inside, shutting the front door behind me as I search for Hunter.

"Boy, what do you have to say for yourself?" my father growls as he storms into the kitchen, leaving me to chase after him. I skid to a halt when I step inside to find Hunter holding his left cheek with tears pricking his eyes.

I can already see the shape of my father's hand on Hunter's cheek peeking out through his fingers, and my own clench at my side.

My mother sits at the small oak dining table by the window, and Hunter stands at her side, but her focus is on the paperwork in front of her as my father falls into the seat opposite them.

"I'm sorry," Hunter mutters, trying to act unfazed by my father's earlier attack. My heart breaks as I try to keep my distance from my father and move closer to Hunter.

"You're lucky I have far bigger issues to deal with than your lack of attention to detail. Otherwise, you'd find yourself down in isolation again for the next fucking week. Do you hear me?" he sneers, and my own anger rises inside of me as I move to pull Hunter behind me, taking his place at my mother's side.

"Hunter, go," I murmur, keeping my eyes fixed on my father to watch for any movement. He arches an eyebrow at me before shaking his head.

"He can stay," my father counters. "He'll make good leverage for you," he adds, wearing a touch of a grin on his lips, and my blood runs ice cold in anticipation. "Do you want to tell her, dear, or should I?"

My mother clears her throat beside me as I adjust Hunter, leaving a little more space between us and the parents from hell. She gazes over at us, and the glassy look in her green

eyes tells me she's already had a couple of shots of brandy tonight. *Excellent.*

She's the fuel to my father's fire when she's like this.

"You can tell her, Bernārd, I just want to reap the rewards, not deal with the fucking mouth on this stupid bitch," she says nonchalantly as she waves her hand dismissively. Her words might have hurt once upon a time, but I became numb to both of their insults long ago.

"I've had to deal with all the big shit, Maggie. If you want any rewards, you'll pull your fucking finger out of your ass and do at least *some* of the fucking work," my father retorts, but then he turns his attention to me. "We're going to sell you," he states casually, shrugging his shoulders like he just asked me to pass the milk.

Even though I already know this, it still hits me square in the gut. I want to drop to my knees in emotional pain, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction.

"You're going to what?" I ask in shock, my voice barely more than a quiver as my hand covers my racing heart and my eyebrows raise.

I try to act like I don't know, but deep down I'm more stressed that Hunter is hearing this. His body tenses behind me as I try to offer his arm a reassuring squeeze.

"Sell. You," my father repeats slower, like I'm a damn idiot or something. I just gape at him for a moment as I try to muster a response, but he continues before I have a chance. "We've been intentionally molding you to fit the role well. A week from Saturday, you will be sold to the highest bidder, and you will *do nothing* but represent the Asheville family with pride."

With pride? Is he for fucking real?

"There will be a full event in your honor. If anything, you should be fucking thankful," my mother interjects as I just blink between them.

I wet my lips as I take a deep breath. "And if I say no?" I ask calmly, not wanting to appear too weak, knowing we

already have a plan in place, and my father's grin turns even more wicked as he shifts his gaze to Hunter.

“If you say no, I'll kill your brother.”

There's no room for joking in his threat. They are the truest words my father has ever spoken to me, and I feel Hunter take a step closer.

Over. My. Dead. Fucking. Body.

Rage and anger burns deep inside of me, and it must reflect on my face, because the smirk on my mother's lips tells me they are misjudging my reaction as fear. Let them. *Let them* think they are continuing to bury us in the ground with their own brand of cruelty. They'll be the foolish ones next weekend, not us.

I swallow down my anger, making sure not to rile them up and put Hunter or me in any more danger. As I try to edge us away, my father leaps to his feet and has his hand around my throat quicker than I can react, but to my surprise, my hand wraps around his wrist, challenging him.

“If you don't do as you're told, what Bruce did to you will be nothing in the grand fucking scheme of things. I'll line up every man in this town and let them take a piece of you until there's nothing left. Do you understand me, Bethany?” His veins protrude on his forehead as his voice rises in anger. My fingers dig into his skin, but I nod with what little room I have.

“I understand,” I rasp, and his hand flexes around my throat once more before he tosses me to the side. My hip slams into the countertop as I search for Hunter, who has managed to get himself near the door to the foyer, but his panicked gaze is fixed on me and not my father who's charging toward him. “No, please,” I beg, but my father already has him by the collar and is dragging him toward the basement door.

As I race after them, I make it to the kitchen entryway when glass shatters against the wall on my left. A piece cuts my upper arm, and I turn to find my mother glaring at me with her palms flat on the table.

“Keep the fuck out of it and shut your mouth, you stupid bitch. This is what we’re talking about. Play your role of being quiet and obedient, Bethany, or everything we’ve worked toward will go to shit,” she hisses, and my eyes drop to the shattered glass at my feet.

She must be angry if she’s willing to throw her favorite brandy glass at me.

The sound of the basement door slamming shut tells me Hunter is down in isolation and I was too distracted by this bitch to stop it.

Rage claws at my skin, begging me to show them what I’m truly made of, but instead I do exactly as she asks. With heavy steps, I slowly take the stairs up to my room, my heart breaking every step of the way knowing Hunter is alone. My gaze remains fixed on the basement door for a moment, wishing I had the power to open it.

Soon, I repeat again and again with every step, but it doesn’t warm my soul like it did earlier.

Slipping into my room and shutting the door, I quickly pull my phone out and send Ryan a message before hiding it again, knowing I’ll be too scared to pull it out for the rest of the night.

Me: They openly told me they are going to sell me. I have to play along nicely or they will kill Hunter. This plan can’t go wrong, Ryan. I trust you, I just... Putting Hunter at risk breaks me.

Hiding it among my books, I organize my bag and pull out the homework I need to do, but I can’t focus on it right now. I need a minute. *I need a fucking minute.*

I step out of the room and listen for either of my parents, but the house is quiet again as I move to the bathroom and shut the door behind me.

Turning on the shower, I don’t wait for it to warm up, nor do I bother to take off my jeans and t-shirt. Instead, I stand under the spray as I let the pain rack my body while I sob, tears falling uncontrollably down my cheeks. Knowing Hunter

is down there in isolation while I get a slice of normalcy breaks me more than anything.

I'd rather have been thrown out for the night, but I know that's only because I could make my way to Ryan's, and that only causes more guilt to course through my veins. Either way would have me leaving Hunter here while I enjoyed myself, and I hate how selfish that makes me feel.

I need to be a better sister.

I need to make it all work, then we'll never have to feel like this again.

I fucking swear and pinky promise to make this work.

TWENTY-FOUR



BETHANY

I tuck my math homework away in my backpack and make a mental note to discuss the English assignment we have to do with Ryan, but then reality smacks me in the face—I'm not going to be here for that. *We're* not going to be here for that.

It feels so odd, but I can't deny the excitement that buzzes through my veins at the thought of leaving. Then my brain kindly reminds me that my brother is in isolation, and I have a mental jolt of whiplash. Damn, my mind is all over the place.

Fighting back takes more strength than I anticipated. Being constantly swarmed with guilt, fear, and determination makes me tired.

My tummy grumbles as I pull back the sheet on my bed, but I ignore it. If Hunter can't eat a real meal down in isolation, then I can't eat either, it's as simple as that. My body just wants some fuel, and I'm punishing myself out of guilt.

I climb into bed in my white and pink pajamas that are covered in clouds, and I instantly wish I was at Ryan's, lying in one of his stolen t-shirts, but that'll have to be another day. *Soon.*

The silence of the house washes over me as I get comfortable on my side. My parents must have passed out drunk after yelling at each other earlier when I was trying to get my work done, but it didn't get brought to my door, so I was happy to stay out of it.

With a sigh, I close my eyes. My mind instantly thinks about what the future has the potential to look like, but a tap rattles my window, breaking me from my thoughts.

I frown in confusion, squinting one eye open, but when I don't hear it again, I settle back down. The moment my eyes fall closed again, a succession of taps comes from my window, and my heart starts to pound wildly in my chest.

What on earth?

Slowly rising to my feet, I tiptoe to the window and try to peek through the closed curtains from the edge, but it's too dark to see much.

I'm just about to move away when I hear it, or more specifically, *him*. "Betty?"

What the fuck?

"Ryan?" I murmur as I pull the curtain to the side to find him sitting on the sloped roof of the dining room below.

I quickly but *quietly* open the window, and the second I do, he's climbing inside, not giving me a moment to process what's going on.

"Ryan, what are you doing here?" I ask, watching as he comes to a stop in the middle of my bedroom, his gaze focused solely on me as his chest heaves. The glow of my lamp makes him look far too delicious.

"You didn't reply to my message, and I needed to see that you were okay," he tells me, arching his eyebrow at me like I'm crazy. I gape at him, willing myself to find the words to respond, but now I feel lame. He got all worked up and worried over my safety, when in reality, I just hid my phone in case someone came in.

"I'm sorry, my father was on a tirade. He placed Hunter in isolation, so I've been hiding up here the whole time. I didn't want to tempt fate by looking at my phone because I was afraid of getting caught," I admit, and he swipes a hand down his face.

“Isolation?” he asks, and my heart jolts that he wants to know what that means for Hunter. It warms my soul that he’s taking my responsibility for my brother seriously.

“He’s down in the basement. I couldn’t get between him and my father quickly enough,” I murmur, guilt burning my chest again as I rub it unconsciously, and he squeezes my arm in comfort.

“It’s not your fault, Betty,” he murmurs, pulling me into his chest. I go willingly, letting him hold me close. His citrus scent envelops me as I plaster my face to his chest, feeling his fingers run through my hair as I sigh.

“I just keep repeating ‘soon,’ but it doesn’t feel like we’re getting any closer,” I mumble against his t-shirt, and he squeezes me tighter.

“It’ll all be worth it, I promise. I wish I could take you away now and have it all over and done with,” he replies honestly, and it makes me feel even more guilty that I can’t bring myself to just let him end it. *End them.*

But in reality, that route would get social services involved, and I could be separated from Hunter, which makes me feel even more sick to my stomach.

“Soon,” I repeat, and he steps back, stroking his hand down my face in comfort. “You should go. If my parents find you here, I don’t want to imagine what will happen,” I say, but he’s shaking his head before I’ve even finished speaking.

“Forget it, I’m not leaving yet. Get in bed, Bethany. I’ll be here with you until you fall asleep,” he mutters, lacing his fingers with mine and pulling me toward my bed.

I follow him wordlessly, letting him lay me down between my sheets and tuck me in before lying beside me on top of the covers.

He maneuvers us so his chest is plastered against my back and his arm is banded tight around my waist, and I feel like I’m floating in his arms.

“Go to sleep, Betty,” he whispers in my ear, and I close my eyes, steadying my breathing as I relax in his hold, feeling

safer than I ever thought possible. Just as I'm on the brink of sleep, I think I hear him murmur, but it must be a dream as I slip into darkness.

"I would do anything for you, Beth, anything, and call me crazy, but I think it's because I love you."



RYAN

"I would do anything for you, Beth, anything, and call me crazy, but I think it's because I love you," I admit to her sleeping form, unable to explain the feelings deep inside of my soul any other way.

After she left the beach house this weekend, Benji gave me some bullshit talk about being besotted with her and all those *feelings*, but I couldn't even bring myself to argue. I feel something for her, something strong that has me willing to upend my whole world to be with her.

Is that love?

Honestly, I don't know, but I want more of it, and I want it all with her.

I would creep down the hall, up the stairs, and slit their fucking throats right now if she asked me to.

Then my main concern would be explaining my life, my background, the things I know, and the darkness I've already seen. That would be a bigger stressor than the actual murder, and that confuses the hell out of me.

When I'm sure she's asleep, I press a gentle kiss to her forehead and climb from her bed. Making sure the window and curtains are closed properly, I head for the door. It takes everything I have to close the door behind me and silently make my way down the stairs.

I searched all the windows on the ground floor before I located Beth's room, and her parents are definitely in bed too.

As much as I want to kill them, that's not what I'm here for now.

After rushing across town in fear, even though I could see from my security feeds that she was in her room, I just had to see her with my own eyes. She had to know that I cared, that I needed her to be okay.

I reach the bottom of the stairs, remembering the layout from last Thursday when I broke in. I keep to the edge of the rooms, where the floorboards don't creak, and head for the basement.

It's about time I met the boy we were risking it all for.

I come to a stop in front of the door, the golden globe handle beckoning me to twist it, but it will definitely be locked. I pull a credit card from my wallet and jam it into the small opening, working over the latch gently until I hear it click.

I pause to make sure the house is still quiet before pocketing my card. I let the door creep open to reveal complete darkness, so I flick the switch to my left and illuminate the basement in light. I have to blink a few times as I stand at the top of the stairs looking down at the open space. It looks like a huge storage area for old furniture.

"Who the fuck are you?" someone demands, and I look past the dresser at the bottom of the steps to find a small boy with messy blond hair and a frown on his face as he glares at me with his arms folded over his chest.

Attitude. I like it.

I don't say a word as I make my way down the stairs, noticing the slight bruising on his cheek which I can only assume came from his father. I can't stop my hands from clenching at my sides as a memory of the home I was in when I was ten flashes in my mind.

I have to take a deep breath and push past the invisible hand on my throat as I remember being tossed in the closet, covered in bruises, and left to starve.

Fuck.

Swallowing it down, I shake my head, refusing to let it consume me once more, and focus on the boy standing in front of me.

His eyes are the same shape as Bethany's but green instead of blue, and his nose wrinkles in the same way too. As he continues to stare me down, I know I'm going to do everything for him also, just like his beautiful sister.

Apparently, I'm a fucking sucker for the Ashevilles.

"I asked you a question," he states as I come to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, casting my gaze around the space.

There's a small window above him, and at his feet is a small blanket or two. It pains me to see how the adult Ashevilles deem it appropriate to inflict this type of treatment on their children.

"I'm Ryan Carter," I finally tell him, settling my gaze on him as I speak, and he raises an eyebrow at me.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me, *Ryan Carter*?"

"Nope, but it will," I reply, not rising to his bait as I continue to assess him. "What do you know about your parents, Hunter?"

"They are assholes. How do you know my name?"

He glares at me, shuffling from foot to foot, and I can tell I'm making him nervous as he nips his bottom lip. I need to shake my usual standoffish persona and let him feel comfortable around me.

"I'm a friend of Bethany's. Did you happen to hear what they said to her tonight?" I ask calmly, relaxing my shoulders, but my attempt to smile falls flat as he nods.

"What's it to *you*?"

It's funny he asks that because I asked myself that so many times, but it's simple. I need her, and I hope she needs me. But I don't say that, instead I focus on the truth.

"I'm not going to let them do anything to her, do you understand?" I question, taking a step toward him, but he

instinctively moves back, so I freeze in place, not wanting to make him uncomfortable.

“My sister doesn’t have friends,” he says quietly, ignoring what I asked and focusing on what I said earlier.

I shrug. “She didn’t until now, and I plan to get her as far away from here as possible. She says we have to take your ass too. Is that going to be an issue?” I ask, clearly revealing more than Bethany already has, but he talks a big game with his attitude, and Hunter needs to know what he’s getting himself into just by breathing.

“You think you can save us from them? I think you’re either a liar or a dreamer,” he scoffs, and it almost has me questioning his age. He has seen and felt far too much for a ten-year-old, that’s the issue. He reminds me of a younger version of myself, and I know that no words I offer him right now will make him understand.

It feels like this is a side of him Bethany never has to see, him standing his ground and fighting back. The glint in his eyes tells me he allowed his father to hit him, luring them into an assumed pretense because this boy is older than his years with the ability to defend himself.

His stance and broad shoulders show me he’s building his strength, and I only see that after being trained to watch for these things, which is why his parents haven’t noticed.

He’s a fucking genius.

“I only prove myself with actions, Hunter, so don’t worry about that,” I murmur, trying to find a way to help him right now. “Is there anything I can do to help you out now?” I ask, unable to come up with a solution on my own, and he shakes his head.

“Don’t worry about me. Prove yourself. Save my sister from being sold, that’s all I need,” he says as he meets my gaze, and I smile with a nod.

He and I are going to get along just fine.

TWENTY-FIVE



BETHANY

As I make my way through the school halls, I can't stop the slight bounce in my step as I head to the cafeteria. I cried last night, mourning the sliver of hope I had that my parents wouldn't sell me. Falling asleep in Ryan's arms helped ease some of the pain, but that was yesterday.

And today?

Today I refuse to let them bring me down.

Today I'm going to be happy, and they have no say in the matter.

School has been quiet so far, no issues or idiots trying to antagonize me, and when I left for school this morning, Hunter waved to me through the window as he was driven to his school, and my soul felt settled.

I fell asleep in Ryan's arms last night. It felt like a dream when I woke up alone, but his citrus scent lingered ever so subtly on my pillow, and it made me smile. I'm utterly consumed by him, but I'm not even sad about it. I feel hope and desire for the first time ever, and it's all because of him.

Ryan Carter is... *everything*.

And I'm totally that lust-struck girl I never thought I would be. Under the circumstances, I'm loving every minute in his presence. I'll love it even more after next week, even if I don't know the full plan.

Trying to look over everyone in the hall and search for the man on my mind, I spot Ryan at the far end of the corridor, and my footsteps become lighter as I try to cover the distance between us as quickly as possible.

After Ryan beat the crap out of Chad, he went from being the hot new guy to the bad boy no one wanted anything to do with, and that works completely in my favor since no one pays either of us any attention at the moment.

Just as I near Ryan, a smile growing across my face, I find my path suddenly blocked, forcing me to stop as someone stands right in front of me. Not just someone, but my mother, while everyone else gives her a wide berth.

What is she doing here? My heart pounds in my chest as I keep my gaze focused on hers and her disapproving look that's directed at me. She looks as put together as always when she's in school, in her tailored navy suit and silk blouse.

"Bethany, office, now," she snaps, giving me her back and slinking inside the offices to my right. I follow her, a sigh playing on my lips as I force myself not to search for Ryan. I don't need to draw any attention toward him right now. I just pray he doesn't charge in after me.

Stepping into the open space reserved for the secretaries, I follow her to the office labeled "Asheville," which she rarely occupies, but the area always offers a quiet spot for my mother when she decides to grace the school with her presence.

She leans back against the mahogany desk as she waits for me to close the door behind me, and I instantly stand taller, fear flooding my veins as I try to figure out why she's here.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, remaining by the door instead of taking a seat on the black Chesterfield sofa to my right.

"I had to drop in to pick up some documents, and your father agreed it would be easier to tell you now rather than wait around to tell you later when you get home from school. We'll be out of town," she says flippantly, and I nod slowly as I process her words.

“So I can’t come home tonight?” I ask, trying to fake my sadness, but either way she doesn’t notice as she shakes her head and glances down at her phone.

“No, when has that rule ever changed, Bethany? Hunter will be with us since the Knights are fucking useless, and we’ll be back by tomorrow afternoon,” she informs me casually, and my panic instantly spikes for Hunter’s safety as she clearly doesn’t care that her precious *merchandise* will be left out in the cold. She doesn’t know about Ryan, and the fact that she doesn’t care what happens to me, whether selling me or leaving me abandoned on the streets, hurts me more than I care to admit.

If they are somewhere public, Hunter will be safe, I know it. I convince myself, knowing exactly how they operate.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask her if she’s really going to let me be sold, but it’s not worth the backlash or pain her truthful response would offer. I panic a little over Hunter being alone with them, but when they are out of the house, they are the perfect parents to him, or at least they give the illusion that they are.

Not waiting for a response, she taps away on her phone for a moment before lifting one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows at me.

“You can leave now,” she says, not even wanting to look at me. Running my hands down my jeans, I swallow past the lump in my throat, not responding as I turn for the door. “Oh, actually, Bethany, I just have to clarify that you’re on your period right now, yes?”

I frown as I look over my shoulder at her, shaking my head even though she’s not looking. “No, my period isn’t due until next Tuesday,” I murmur in response, and she curses under her breath.

“Fuck, of course not. Get the fuck out of my sight,” she hisses, glaring at me over her phone. I quickly obey, rushing back out to the hallway. I find Ryan waiting against the opposite wall and my shoulders sag.

“Everything okay?” he asks, searching my gaze. I nod, glancing over my shoulder again to make sure my mother isn’t nearby before indicating for him to follow me down the hall.

There are a few people chatting in the hallway in their little groups, but no one glances in my direction as I keep going until we’re outside. I race down the steps, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand. When I find a large oak tree to the left that isn’t completely surrounded by people already eating their lunch, I head in that direction.

When I reach it, I place my back against the trunk where no one can really see me, the bark biting into me as I face the parking lot. A moment later, Ryan is standing in front of me with a concerned look on his face.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip as I take a moment to appreciate him. His brown hair is swept back off his face, and his chiseled jaw is tense with worry.

God, even when things are tense he can’t help but look so goddamn hot.

“What did she want?” he questions, standing toe to toe with me, skipping the pleasantries to make sure I’m okay.

I shake my head. “To tell me no one will be home for the evening,” I reply, my chest heaving slightly from the rush of getting outside, and his stance relaxes when he realizes I’m okay.

“So we could move tonight? Grab you and Hunter and go?” he asks, and my heart stops at the realization, but it’s short lived as I swipe a hand down my face.

“They are taking Hunter with them because the Knights were unable to, apparently,” I mutter sadly, and Ryan sighs.

I almost feel like I’m disappointing him, but I refuse to leave without Hunter, and he seems to understand that.

“That’s okay, we can have a sleepover at the beach house. We can relax and unwind a little among all the madness,” he says, stroking a loose tendril of hair behind my ear, and excitement courses through my veins as I get goosebumps from his gentle touch.

“That sounds like a really good plan,” I reply quietly, squeezing the strap of my backpack to stop myself from reaching out for him too, remembering where we are and that my mother is somewhere nearby.

“Excellent.” He quickly glances around, leans forward, and places his lips against my forehead for a split second before taking a step back.

I gape at him, trying to figure out if I just made it up, but the grin on his lips tells me he knows how he affects me, and I can’t stop the smile that takes over my face in response.

With a simple nod, he turns on his heel and heads toward the parking lot, leaving me all on my own, and I scramble to find my tongue and shout his name.

“Ryan! Where are you going?”

He glances back at me, his grin still firmly in place as he winks. “I have a girl to impress. I’ll pick you up when school finishes,” he replies as I remain frozen on the spot.

Just like that, he’s gone.

He wants to impress me. *Impress me.*

Hot damn.

Yes please.



RYAN

I drive toward the beach house with Bethany beside me, our fingers laced together between us. I feel so relaxed yet nervous at the same time as I slow the truck and park in the driveway.

After leaving Beth at school earlier, I rushed to the store to pick up a few things and spent the rest of the afternoon planning. Now that she’s here, I feel nervous and worried about my plan.

My heart leapt out of my chest earlier when she said her parents were going away, thinking we had a window to run

and get the fuck out of Knight's Creek, but the second she said they were taking Hunter with them, I knew it was a no go.

Instead, my mind instantly went into distraction mode, focusing on making my girl smile and feeling calm and relaxed. She deserves it, especially since she seems to live the rest of her life on pins and needles, always walking on eggshells to protect herself and Hunter. I want to give her a glimpse of what is to come. What *our* future will look like.

The truck has barely come to a stop before Bethany is jumping down and heading for the front door without a backward glance. Her comfort in being here makes me smile. We've come a long way in the short amount of time since I first found her hiding under the stairs.

Following after her, I unlock the door since she refuses to use the key I gave her, and then she wanders inside, pulling her backpack off and dropping it on the sofa as she moves closer to the window to look down at the beach—another sign she's comfortable. If she feels uncertain, that black bag is plastered to her back.

I take a moment to look Beth over. God, comparing the girl I first bumped into at the diner to the girl standing before me, I would have never guessed it's the same person.

She's finding herself, her pace, her beautiful glow, and I'm a lucky fucker to even have her sunshine cast over me.

"So what's the big plan that had you leaving me to deal with school on my own this afternoon?" she asks with a grin, having been quiet on the drive over here.

I shake my head as I tuck my hands in my pockets. "If I had asked you to skip with me, what would you have said?" I respond, already knowing the answer but needing her to acknowledge it too.

"I would have had to say no," she admits, and I give her a pointed look which makes her roll her pretty blue eyes at me.

"Am I going to be able to finish my education?" she suddenly asks, and it takes me a moment to understand that she means when we're gone. I nod.

“One hundred percent. I’m not sure what that’ll look like, possibly online courses at home or something, but we’ll figure it out,” I answer, moving toward her and enveloping her in my arms.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, relaxing as she glances up at me, wrapping her arms around my waist. I don’t respond, looking at her blonde hair shining under the sunlight streaming through the window. She’s said thank you a million times already, and I’ll answer when I finally get her and Hunter out of here.

“Are you ready for some relaxation?” I question, changing the subject, and she nods eagerly, the smile growing on her face. I move us so she’s under my right arm, and then I guide her toward the stairs. “Excellent, then follow me.”

I can see the confusion on her face as I march her upstairs, and it only deepens when she sees the pull-down steps for the loft positioned in the middle of the landing.

“What on earth am I walking into?” she says, raising her eyebrows, but the soft smile on her lips tells me she’s not afraid, and she shouldn’t be. This beach house doesn’t have an actual loft, and as I release her hand to climb the steps, pushing against the metal latch, she soon sees for herself.

“Get up here,” I call out over my shoulder, the sound of the wind swirling around me as I step up onto the sunken roof to reveal the perfect little secluded spot with the most flawless views of the ocean.

“Oh my gosh,” I hear her murmur behind me as she pauses to look around, and I try to see it through her eyes.

A white wall protects the entire space, which I’ve lined with fairy lights. There was already a Bali bed up here, which I moved to the back left corner, and I placed a picnic blanket beside it with a cooler.

Instinctively, she moves to the other end of the roof, looking down at the ocean and the beach below, the wall coming up to her waist. I find my feet moving toward her before I even realize it.

I'm like a magnet, completely drawn to her without any say-so, and I don't even want to try and stop it.

When I come to a stop beside her, she instantly intertwines our hands and leans her head on my shoulder as she takes in the view.

"This is so pretty, Ryan. Thank you," she murmurs, and I smile, glad that it makes her happy. Making her feel like this fills me with pure peace, and it's addicting.

"I thought you'd like it up here. It's private, secluded, and no one can see us, so we don't have to be cooped up inside," I explain, remembering the photo someone got of us on the surfboard and what it led to last time, but I refuse to let the rage consume me again today. Right now, this is for us, not for anyone else.

"I love it," she whispers, looking up at me through her lashes, and I feel like I'm frozen in time as I stare into the depths of her blue eyes, peeking at her beautiful soul.

Without another word, she presses up on her tiptoes and places a soft kiss on my lips before turning back to everything else.

It leaves me desperate for more, but I deserved that, the thought making me internally roll my eyes since I did the exact same to her earlier.

I remain in my spot for a moment, just watching her as she takes it all in, before she drops to her knees on the blanket and peers inside the box. My nerves suddenly fall away.

"Oh my God, these look so good," she squeals, pulling out two wrapped chicken and bacon club sandwiches, and I move to join her.

"Of course they do, I had Linda wrap them for me," I tell her as I take the seat beside her, and her smile widens.

She places them back inside with the array of snacks I brought for later and climbs onto the Bali bed, lying back on the fresh sheets I draped over it. A smile curves her lips as she closes her eyes and tilts her face toward the sun.

Heaven. She's my slice of fucking heaven.

Not wanting to waste any time, I move to lie down beside her and pull the blankets over her. Since we're higher up and so close to the water's edge, it's cold up here from the ocean breeze.

"What are your dreams?" she asks, accepting the blanket as I pull it over her shoulders. We still have our jackets and shoes on, and the sun's out, so we don't really need the blankets too, but she looks so cute I have to join her as I consider her words.

"Honestly, I have no idea anymore. I thought I knew what my future and my life would look like, but in reality, it's completely different, and I'm not sad about it," I answer truthfully without mentioning a word about Featherstone, and another sliver of guilt runs through my body, but I don't want to taint this moment with her. "What are your dreams?" I question, and she turns onto her side to face me so we're nose to nose.

"I feel like I'm just stealing the words right out of your mouth, but the thought of actually getting out of this town fills me with a new sense of life. I thought it was all wishful thinking, and I'd never get away from them. Now I don't know where to begin once I'm free, but I'm excited to find out," she says with a smile, and I like her thought process.

We talk for hours, far too many hours, eating our food and watching the sunset off in the distance. It feels like magic, like our own little bubble of happiness, and I'm excited to have more of this with her when we leave Knight's Creek.

It's a little after nine in the evening when we find ourselves snuggled completely under the blankets again, her head against my chest as we look up at the stars, and I can tell there's something weighing on her mind. It has been for the past hour or so. There's a vibe coming from her that seems to be thickening around us, but she hasn't voiced it, and I'm too impatient to give her the time she needs.

"Is everything okay? It seems like something is on your mind," I murmur, glancing down at her, but she doesn't move

her gaze from the stars, the fairy lights illuminating the space around us as a soft blush creeps up her neck.

“How can you read me so well?” she grumbles, shifting to her elbows so she can look down at me, and concern rises within me. “I want...”

Her voice trails off before she’s even begun, her eyes swirling with intense emotion. I have to force myself to remain lying down and let her find the words she’s trying to say without forcing it out of her.

“Take your time, Bethany. You can tell me anything,” I whisper, and she smiles nervously as I stroke her cheek.

“You say that, but this is, like, huge,” she warns, and my eyebrows rise as I try to understand what’s wrong.

“Try me,” I manage to say, and I watch as she takes a deep breath.

“I don’t want them to have it,” she rushes out, and I continue to stare at her, dumbfounded, as I wait for her to complete her sentence, having no clue what she’s actually talking about. “I don’t want to give them a chance of offering it to someone, and I want to screw them all the way to hell by taking it off the table,” she states, her tone becoming more determined with each word she speaks, but I still frown up at her in confusion.

“Then don’t let them have it,” I reply, fully supporting her but having no clue at the same time. “What is... *it*?” I reluctantly add, and she rolls her eyes at me.

“My virginity,” she says casually, and I almost choke on fresh air as I gape up at her. “I want it to be my choice with someone I want, not the person who paid the most money,” she explains, continuing to look down at me as she moves to an upright position and laces her fingers together in her lap.

“It should be all of those things,” I murmur, my heart pounding in my chest as I look up at the beautiful, strong woman who sits before me.

“I want it to be with *you*.”

Her words bounce around in my head as I stare at her in shock, and I'm unable to school my features quickly enough. My cock hardens beneath my jeans at the mere thought, but this is very serious, and I know how much she has been through already.

"I want all of that with you," I tell her, pushing up onto my elbows as I keep my gaze fixed on hers. "But I need you to think about this more, Bethany. This is something that can never be taken back. When you're ready, I'm all in, but always on your terms, okay?"

My dick throbs in protest at my words, and the semi I've been sporting all night turns into a full-blown mast, but I ignore it.

I watch as she wets her lips, her eyes searching mine as she strokes my cheek. "I'm ready now."

My heart practically stops in my chest as I move to face her properly, and when I focus on her eyes, I see the truth behind her words.

"I haven't pushed you, have I? I don't want—"

"Not even a little bit, Ryan. I want this. I want this for me. I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since you touched me in the truck," she admits. I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, remembering the taste of her on my tongue, and I can't deny I'm desperate for her again. "Please, Ryan, I want to feel everything, and I want to feel it with you."

My mind is at war with itself. Do I want her? More than my next breath, but I need her to know this isn't something I take lightly. Not even a little bit.

Meeting her gaze again, I swallow the argument on my tongue when I see the need in her eyes. It melts my restraint, and in one swift move, I have her pinned beneath me as I hover over her.

Bethany gapes up at me, and her blush creeps over her cheeks, making her even more desirable than ever. Her hands find my chest as I remain frozen in place for a moment. Unable to stop myself, I slide a finger through her hair tie and

gently pull it from her hair, letting her blonde locks fan around her.

With her soft blue eyes and delicate features, she looks like an angel.

My angel.

“You’re so beautiful, Bethany,” I whisper, lost in her gaze, and she smiles up at me.

“That’s cute, but please touch me,” she responds, and I love the confidence radiating from her even when she lies so innocently beneath me.

“I’m going to take good care of you, Beth. You’ll never regret this moment,” I vow, rising to my knees so I can pull my jacket and shirt off. She does the same, the blankets long forgotten at the bottom of the Bali bed.

“I know,” she whispers before stroking her hand up my chest to the back of my neck, pulling my lips to hers as she falls back on the bed.

I go willingly, restraining myself so she can set the pace and take what she wants from me. The press of her lips against mine is like heaven. Placing my hands on either side of her head, I revel in the feel of her fingers dragging along my skin, but the focus right now needs to be on her.

Reluctantly pulling my lips from hers, I drag them down her neck, shivering at the feel of her pulse pounding beneath my touch. The moan that falls from her lips goes straight to my cock, and it encourages me to move farther down.

I meet her gaze as I find the top button of her cute blue button-up shirt, waiting for confirmation, and she nods eagerly, so I waste no time discarding the fabric barrier between us, revealing nothing but her pebbled pink nipples beneath.

My mouth falls open in surprise as I find no bra, and the grin on her lips tells me she took care of that at some point. Knowing she really has been thinking about this only fuels my desire for her.

I keep my gaze fixed on hers as I lower my mouth to her breast, gently sucking her nipple between my lips, and her eyes roll into the back of her head.

Perfection.

I'm not a guy who wants her cries and moans. I want those unsolicited moments where there is no control. With her eyes rolling back and her spine arching, she is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, bending with need for me.

"Oh God," she groans, lifting her hips from the mattress below us, and I continue to tease her with my mouth as I slowly trail my fingers down to her yoga pants, desperate to touch her again.

Our moment in the truck was interrupted by my asshole best friend, but this, right here and now, is for us and only us.

I swirl my tongue around her taut nipple before releasing it and crushing my lips to hers again, loving the way her lips vibrate against mine as she moans.

"Let me see you, Betty," I murmur, rising onto my knees as I move to the side and look down at her, and she instantly begins to remove her clothes.

Before me is the most stunning person I will ever see. I don't see her trauma nor her baggage, just my sweet girl, and I'm going to make her all mine.

The second she discards her panties, lying bare before me, I move to lie between her thighs, seeking her sweet pussy with my tongue as I drag it from her core to her nub, and her back really arches this time.

Her hands fist the sheets, and it makes my cock push against my waistband with need. Her legs rise and wrap around my head, and I'm a fucking goner.

Dead.

Killed by a confident woman and an innocent pussy all at once, and it'll be the best way to go.

I squeeze the globes of her ass as I tilt her, fucking her with my tongue, and she writhes beneath me in pleasure.

“Please, Ryan,” she begs, but I don’t think she knows what she’s asking for.

Keeping one hand on her ass, I slide the other to her core as I lap at her clit, slowly inserting a finger, then two, inside of her. She’s so hot, so inviting, and my dick is desperate to replace my fingers, but I’m going nowhere until she comes on my hand.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she chants, and when I look up, I find her gaze fixed on mine, watching what I’m doing as she grips the sheets tightly.

I want to demand she come right now, but I can’t bring myself to pull away from her pussy, so instead I double down my efforts, swirling my fingers inside of her as I suck on her clit. I give her a little tap on her ass, and it’s like I just found her secret password.

She falls apart beneath me, shattering into a million pieces as her thighs tighten around my head, and I grin against her sensitive skin.

When she releases her grip on me, I continue to tease her, watching as she gapes down at me with a shiver.

“Please, Ryan,” she repeats, and I hear the plea in her voice. I slowly kiss my way back up her stomach and neck until our lips melt together again.

Beth’s legs remain spread, and my cock begs for the material between us to be gone, and apparently so does she, as she tries to undo the button on my jeans.

I force myself to pull away from her lips and rise to my feet. She looks up at me with hooded eyes, and I drop my jeans and underwear all at once, revealing my cock. I watch as she visibly swallows at how tall and proud he stands.

“Oh God.” She gulps, and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry as my own need pounds through my body, but she doesn’t run and hide from my size, instead her knees fall open a little farther as her teeth sink into her bottom lip.

“Are you okay?” I ask, slowly climbing back on the bed in case she’s changed her mind, but she smiles up at me dreamily

as she nods.

“I’m perfect.”

“Yeah you are,” I say with a grin, and she rolls her eyes at me as she crooks a finger for me to come closer.

Not wanting to rush, I plant my elbows on either side of her as I look deep into her beautiful blue eyes, and the smile on her lips matches my own. I brush a few loose strands of hair off her face as I kiss the tip of her nose, taking a moment to bask in her presence.

“I’m ready, Ryan,” she whispers, blindly reaching for my cock to align it with her pussy. I move on my own, lining us up, keeping my eyes fixed on hers as she digs her nails into my shoulders.

“I’m trying not to hurt you, and I’m sorry if I do,” I murmur. I’ve never had sex with a virgin before, but she uses her heels to nudge me closer.

Feeling the tip of my cock at her entrance, the heat begging me to enter, I slowly push inside, her earlier orgasm making it easier, but I instantly feel the restriction of her hymen.

I can’t control the panic I feel as my gaze flies to hers. I don’t want to hurt her, but the need and determination in her eyes as she speaks only encourages me.

“Do it, Ryan. Take it, it’s yours.”

Taking a deep breath, I plant my lips on hers as I do just that. Flexing my hips, I thrust inside of her, and I feel her tense beneath me as she gasps.

My eyes slam shut as I try to remain still, her heat and body making my cock scream for more, but I want her to be as comfortable as possible.

Prying my eyes open, I glance at her, and the second I see tears gathering at the corners of her eyes, I try to figure out how I can make it better.

“No, don’t stop, Ryan, I’m fine. I promise, please, just move,” she pleads, and it takes a moment for me to follow her

direction. I move with short thrusts before I try to fuck her into the mattress uncontrollably.

To my surprise, after a few moments, her body relaxes beneath me, and her hips slowly move to meet mine, begging for more.

Tangling my fingers in her hair, I claim her mouth once again as I pick up my pace, matching her moans as her hot center envelops me.

“Oh my... fuck... damn...”

Her words are completely jumbled as she writhes beneath me, and her nails continue to dig into my skin, spurring me on.

We share a mixture of grunts and groans between us as we merge together as one, and my own orgasm takes over, ripping up from my feet and leaving my cock pounding inside of her as I throb with my release.

My mouth falls open as I come inside of her, watching as she lights up with the feel of me, and her back arches again as she rides her own high once more.

When every wave has left both of our bodies, I remain seated inside her as we try to catch our breaths, and I finally lift up onto my elbows to look down at her.

Sweat trails down her temples, hair sticking to her forehead as her telltale blush heats her whole face. Neither of us speak as we let our eyes do the talking, and my heart swells.

I always thought home was four walls and a roof, but right here, looking down at this girl, I know what home truly is. It's her.

And I'm going to do everything to keep her.

No matter the cost.

TWENTY-SIX



BETHANY

As I stretch my arms above my head, a yawn tears from my lips as I blink my eyes open. I roll to my side to find Ryan sleeping like the dead with his arm thrown over his face, and it makes me smile.

The ache between my thighs reminds me what we did last night, and the bloody sheets in the hamper offer the physical proof too.

I had sex.

I lost my virginity.

And it was freaking amazing.

As much as I'm sore right now, I'm wondering if it is too soon to go again. The feeling of Ryan inside of me is something I'm desperate to have again and again.

Glancing over my shoulder, I spy the alarm clock by Ryan's bed, which tells me we have twenty-five minutes before we need to get ready for school. With my new experiences, I'm desperate to surprise Ryan and put that time to good use.

I look down at the sheet that barely covers his hips, wanting to know how he feels on my tongue and what he tastes like. I want to experience it, but I don't know how to wake him up and ask for that.

"If you keep looking at me like that, my dick is going to burn a hole through the sheets to get to you," he grumbles,

startling me as he peers at me with a wry grin on his lips, and for once, I don't blush.

"I want to taste you before we head to school," I admit, and he coughs and splutters in response.

"Fuck me, Bethany, you can't say shit like that to me when I'm not fully conscious. My cock is running my body right now, and I don't want to turn into some crazy maniac desperate to come down your throat," he exclaims. I wet my lips as his words excite me, which is the complete opposite of what I think he was going for.

Before he can stop me, I pull the blanket back, revealing his pulsing cock. He doesn't stop me or cover himself up, instead he swings his left arm behind me to draw circles on my back while he uses his other arm to prop his head up.

I chance a look at him as I wet my lips again, but he says and does nothing, happy to lie still while I take the lead, and it fills me with even more confidence.

I wish he knew what he did to me and the person he made me become, eliciting newfound excitement that courses through my veins whenever he is near.

Tentatively, I lean forward, adjusting my position so my head is in line with his long, thick cock as I balance on my hands and knees.

I have no idea what I'm doing or what would even feel good for him, which is infuriating because he plays with my body perfectly, making me experience things I can't even explain.

Fuck it.

I just want to taste him. That's all this has to be.

Darting my tongue out, I sweep it up the length of his cock. Damn. He's so hot, so smooth, I'm a little startled and surprised. Needing more, I do it again, but I take my time, leisurely touching every inch of his length with my tongue, and I hear him groan above me as his hand squeezes my thigh.

“Get over here, Betty,” he mumbles before grabbing my ankles and shifting me until my knees fall on either side of his face. My eyes are still perfectly aligned with his cock, but I am above him this time as opposed to beside him.

Holy hell.

Looking down the length of his body, I startle when I realize my pussy is directly above his face, and that’s where his eyes are fixed.

“I can feel your eyes on me, Beth. You’re going to be too sore today for me to do exactly what I want to this pussy, so instead you’re going to let me soothe it with my tongue,” he states, leaving no room for argument as he grips my waist and pulls me down on to him.

A groan falls from my lips as he swipes his tongue along my sensitive folds, and he’s right, this doesn’t hurt, but his cock would. I lean forward, pulling my hair to the side as I suck the tip of his cock into my mouth.

It’s like a hot lollipop of lava, and it’s my new addiction as I try to take a little more of him into my mouth each time. Balancing myself on one hand, I use the other to grip his length, and he hisses against my pussy as he draws circles around my clit with his tongue.

“Holy fuck, Beth,” he grinds out beneath me, and it only fuels me on more.

Slowly, I test how much of him I can take, feeling the tip of his cock hitting the back of my throat. I gag and swallow around him, which only makes him growl.

Holy fuck indeed. He’s intoxicating.

I feel him gently thrust two fingers inside of me, swirling them along my swollen walls, and I gasp at his touch, always wanting more, but I refuse to come alone this time. I want to make him fall with me.

Trying to breathe through my nose, I tighten my grip on his cock as I move it in time with my mouth, letting his dick hit the back of my throat again before I pull back, and I feel him tense beneath me.

His own movements on me increase, and it suddenly becomes a race for who can make the other come first. Excitement, need, and pleasure flood my body as I feel myself detonate under his touch, and my mouth goes slack as I ride out my orgasm.

“Bethany, if you don’t want to choke on my cum, let go now,” he bites out as my pussy clenches around his fingers with my climax, but I want it all, reveling in him the second he sprays down the back of my throat again and again.

I don’t stop drinking him as some runs down his cock and over my hand, but the sight is hot as hell, and I almost question who I even am right now.

Feeling bold, I release him and spin around to face him. I lick his cum from my fingers, watching as his eyes darken in surprise.

“You are hot as shit, Betty,” he murmurs, grabbing my waist and dropping me to the mattress as I giggle. “I love you quiet and observant,” he murmurs, trailing a finger down my cheek with a grin. “I love you bold and brave,” he adds, my heart pounding in my chest as I gaze into his stormy blue eyes.

Does he realize what he’s saying?

I’m not sure he does, but screw it all to hell.

“I love you too.”

The words tumble from my mouth, and before I can take them back, he’s crushing his lips to mine. I melt in his arms, my eyes falling closed as happiness rushes through my body.

We have it all.

Well, we are on the cusp of having it all, and I refuse to have anything less than everything. We deserve it.

Soon.



I feel a sense of déjà vu wash over me as the school bus drives toward my house, and I hate it. I feel like I'm stuck in a time loop or something. The end is nearing, but never actually arriving.

This time next week, I'll be heading toward the diner like usual, waiting for the right moment to grab Hunter and go. The flawless plan gives me hope, but it still leaves me reluctant to go home.

My parents are unpredictable, and I just wish I was due to work today. Thinking about work draws my attention to Linda and Pete. I think they might be the only people I'll miss in this stupid town. I really need to make sure I get a chance to say goodbye to them this weekend on my shift.

What I hate most about being on this bus and seeing my childhood home appear in the distance is simply the fact that I can't see Ryan.

He makes me feel alive, like the me I was always meant to be but never had the chance to be. I feel whole around him, and after the last twenty-four hours, I know with all my heart that I love him.

I love how he handles me with care while also making me stand on my own two feet. It's exhilarating and addictive, and I just want to sleep in his bed by his side forever.

I have to figure out my future and how I'm going to make it work without using him as a crutch, but every time I attempt to bring it up, he shuts me down, telling me not to worry about it. It has something to do with an inheritance, but I know it isn't mine, and I need to work as hard as possible. I don't want him thinking I'm a freeloader, especially if I'm going to provide for Hunter too. I need to make sure I pack my hidden savings tin that I moved to Ryan's as well. This is exactly the situation I've been saving for.

As the bus slows, my heart sinks, and I repeat that damn word in my mind again.

Soon.

I've said it so much this past week, I'll never say it again in the future once it arrives.

I make my way down the aisle, everyone ignoring me as I go, and jump down the steps before the doors slam shut behind me. The air brakes on the bus hiss, but I don't jump for once as I pull my backpack strap tighter against me and head to my house.

If I can get in, check on Hunter, and hide away in my room for the rest of the night, then I'll be happy. I just have to get past my parents first, as always.

With a heavy sigh, I rap my knuckles on the door, and I hear my mother's voice carry through the house as she yells from wherever she is, but I can't tell what she's actually saying.

I startle as the door swings open and it's Bruce that stands before me, wearing a lascivious grin on his lips as he eyes me. My skin crawls as I take a step back from him.

I begin to sweat from panic, since the last time this fucker was here he tried to destroy me. Bruce violated me by pinning me down on my father's desk and coming on my back, and he was there when I ended up in the worst position possible with a doctor checking my hymen because he had taken a picture of me with Ryan. I immediately think they know what we did last night. This guy manages to catch every moment of joy I have.

They know I lost my virginity.

But... if they did, why is he smiling at me? He'd be raging like my parents, for sure.

I don't utter a word, waiting for him to either call my parents or let me in, but my father beats him to it, coming to stand beside Bruce as he glares at me.

"Don't just fucking stand there, Bethany Asheville, get inside," he grinds out, grabbing my arm and pulling me over the threshold and past Bruce. I stumble over my feet, trying to keep up.

I bite back any retort I have as I notice the suitcases and boxes packed up in the foyer, and my eyes instantly start

scanning for Hunter.

What on earth is going on here?

Why are our suitcases packed?

“Is everything okay?” I ask quietly, not wanting to rock the boat, but there’s a lot of stuff here, almost like we’re moving or something.

Bruce scoffs. “You want me to tell her? I don’t mind,” he offers, stroking his hand down my arm, and I grimace at the touch.

I wish he was dead. I really do. I don’t want this sleazy, disgusting man to ever touch me again.

“Fuck off, Bruce,” my father barks, turning his harsh glare on me. “It seems your mother had your period worked out all wrong, and I’ve got no chance of selling you if you’re fucking bleeding everywhere, now do I?”

My heart pounds in my chest as I process what he’s saying, trying not to cringe at his words.

“So you’re delaying it?” I ask, unable to stop myself as I pray, but my heart already knows the answer as I glance around at the suitcases.

“Of course not, we need the money now more than ever,” my mother interjects, coming to join us from the kitchen, and my skin tingles with fear as Bruce smirks at me from behind my father.

“We’re selling you, and we’re doing it tonight.”

TWENTY-SEVEN



BETHANY

I still can't see through the tears that blur my vision.

Sold. I'm being sold before the plan to get me out of here could be realized, and why? Because of my stupid fucking period.

I feel sick and at a complete loss as my mother closes the door to the suite at the casino, my heart jolting with it.

Hunter is out there, alone with my father. They want him here as insurance to make sure I remember what is at stake if I don't do as I'm told. Bile rises in the back of my throat again, and knowing Hunter is going to see all this unfold makes me want to die.

"Get a fucking grip on yourself, Bethany. You knew this was coming, you should be grateful you don't have to deal with the anticipation of waiting anymore." My mother's words rattle inside my mind as I try to keep up, but it's more difficult than I care to admit.

I never thought we would have to get to this stage, and now that we're here, I'm sinking among the monsters in this dark world.

My mother releases her grip on my arm as we get to the middle of the room, and I force myself to focus and take in my surroundings instead of continuing to wander around aimlessly.

We're in a small, dated suite at Knight's Casino with all the blinds drawn. There's a bedroom off to the left and a

bathroom straight ahead. We're standing in the lounge area, where there's a large beige sofa in front of me that faces a television on the left wall, and a small countertop to the right with a mini fridge and vanity, where two women are setting up.

The mahogany furniture and terracotta walls make the room feel dingy and dark. It's completely unwelcoming, and I hate it.

"Let's go, ladies, we haven't got very long," my mother complains as she pushes me toward the two women she always hires to do our hair and makeup.

My skin crawls at the fucked up memories I've been left with since the last time they used their makeup brushes on me. As much as I try to hide how much this hurts, my emotions get the better of me again, making tears fall from my eyes quicker than I can swipe them away.

I reluctantly drop down into the chair that's waiting for me, gripping the arms, and the cushion creases as my nails dig in. I am freshly showered and in a bathrobe, so this feels far too real.

Do these women know what's going to happen to me? Do they not care?

My brain is screaming to know whether or not they are aware I'm going to be sold, but I haven't worked out how to be the badass bitch I know I can be as I sit and accept this.

But *Hunter*.

He will not die at my father's hands, and most certainly not because of me.

"What will happen with Hunter after tonight?" I ask, speaking for the first time since they dragged me over here. My voice is raspy, hinting at how raw and sore my throat is from crying.

"That's none of your concern," my mother responds, rolling her eyes as she comes to stand behind me, meeting my gaze in the mirror with her eyebrows pinched.

“If his safety is what you’re holding against me, then I think it’s fair I know the whole picture,” I retort, determination burning in my eyes as I continue to stare her down, but she raises her eyebrows at me in surprise.

Without warning, she tangles her fingers in my hair and yanks my head backward. “You’ll watch your fucking mouth with me, bitch. I’m so done with you. We would have sold you sooner, but apparently eighteen-year-old virgins sell better,” she hisses as she lowers herself to growl in my face.

I take a deep breath, refusing to budge as I repeat the same words again, keeping my voice calm and quiet. “What will happen to Hunter?”

“None of your fucking business,” she yells, leaning back before she swings her hand and smacks me across the face.

I don’t flinch, I don’t even move. My cheek might sting a little, but after being beaten far too many times by my father, her feeble love tap doesn’t connect in the same way. It doesn’t stop my heart from pounding in my chest though, or prevent fear from crawling over my skin for what the future holds for my brother.

“You need to focus on getting ready. The party starts at eight p.m. and the bidding at ten sharp. We have one hour to make you look presentable, and we’re going to need it,” she barks, looking at me in disgust before turning her attention to the two women who happily stand by and watch her treat me like this. “You know what to do,” she tells them before dismissing us as she steps into the bedroom.

My heart is lodged in my throat as I remain still, observing them in the mirror as they get to work fixing me up so I no longer look like the broken soul I am.

I feel helpless.

I feel ashamed.

I have no options except to comply. Not when it comes to Hunter’s safety.

The only thing forcing my tears to remain at bay now is knowing the men who show up here tonight will be in for a

rude awakening when they realize my parents conned them.

I'm no virgin, and I almost wish I was still bleeding from the aftermath of it. I gave every piece of myself to Ryan. The mere thought of his name makes me want to scream for him in desperation.

He said he would save me, but this? This isn't his fault.

"Dos and don'ts," my mother announces as she saunters back into the room wearing a floor-length, black lace dress covering her body as she fixes her earrings and glares at me.

I don't know how long I zoned out for, but my hair and makeup are almost done, and my skin tingles with nervous anticipation.

"Do smile, be courteous, polite, and remain innocent. The allure of breaking in a sweet little girl will only increase the spending," she says with a grin that I don't return as she continues. "Don't speak unless directly spoken to, don't wander off on your own, and certainly don't allow anyone to test out the goods before they have won the auction and paid for you. Understood?"

I don't respond as I bite back everything I want to say, knowing that screaming and arguing would be a waste of my time and endanger Hunter. But I hope this woman gets what she deserves one day and then finds her ass burning in hell, where she belongs.

One of the helpers steps away and returns a moment later with a dress in her hands. It takes them barely a minute to strip and redress me. Once I've slipped on a pair of white pumps, I finally look at myself properly in the mirror.

My blonde hair has been curled around my face, and my makeup isn't too heavy. My eyes are dusted in neutral tones, and my lips are painted red. The dress is white, matching the pumps, with a see-through top showing off the white bra underneath. The bottom half is covered in white feathers, which barely covers my backside.

It's crazy how I look angelic and sinful all at once, but that's what they are going for.

A knock at the door tells me it's time, and I want to be sick.

I think I actually might vomit, but I push the feeling down.

I hold on to the hope that someone will save me, that Ryan will appear out of nowhere to save the day, but the chances are slim to none. When he does realize what's happened, all I can hope and pray for is that he tries to save Hunter from whatever fate my parents try to force upon him too.

I can play the part tonight, if only to rile up the winning bidder with the knowledge of my claimed virginity, just to watch them slaughter my parents.

If they don't kill me for the lie first.



RYAN

I place my surfboard on the deck beside me before I step inside and grab the towel I left on the sofa ready to dry myself off.

It's colder than I thought it would be out there, even with my wet suit, but feeling the water beneath my board and the wind whipping around my face was totally worth it. It's the only way I can relax without Beth being here.

All of the drama is slowly coming to an end. One week to go. One week to go and everything will look very different for me, Bethany, and Hunter. Maria Steele promised, and our brief chat before I grabbed my board and took to the water only confirmed it.

I'm leaving Featherstone.

Well, I'm leaving the general role and expectations of a Featherstone bloodline to follow and help one member of The Ring—Maria Steele. I know the terms of the deal, and I accept them wholeheartedly because I believe her when she says I'm going to get the future I want yet never knew I needed. But

most importantly, Bethany and Hunter will both have the futures they deserve, and I don't feel sad about it at all.

Running the towel over my hair, I make my way over to the breakfast bar and grab my phone, hoping for the usual little text message I would get from Bethany, but there's no notification.

I check the time, seeing it's a little after six in the evening. She would usually have messaged by now. Am I being fucking needy? Under other circumstances, maybe, but with Bethany, it's more than that. Her home isn't a safe place, and it's more about checking that she's okay.

Fuck.

Fuck it.

I quickly tap out a message and place my phone back on the countertop.

Me: Hey, just checking in, Betty. I hope you're okay.

With a sigh, I march up the stairs, taking my towel with me so I can quickly shower off the salt from the ocean and then maybe eat something.

If she hasn't responded by the time I get back down there, then it's free rein for me to log into the surveillance footage and check everything over.

Thankfully she knows I'm not a creep and it's just to keep her as safe as possible.

Stepping into the bathroom, I groan as her scent fills the space. The body wash and shampoo I bought for her smells sweet around me, and it instantly makes me desperate to see her, touch her, hold her.

Fuck.

Benji was right, I definitely am a lovesick puppy, and I don't even care.

I've spent far too long living in an *every man for himself* world, and feeling her touch, a touch that never held

expectation or was used to try and better her status within the Featherstone community, has changed my world. Literally. I'm no one's pawn or stepping-stone, and that's why I love it so much.

I turn the shower on, peel the wet suit from my body before standing under the warming spray, and quickly wash my body. The second my hand strokes over my cock, I instantly pulse, remembering the feel of her lips around me this morning and her pussy last night.

She's magic, *my* magic.

Feeling her tongue and lips around my cock was the best wake-up call I've ever had, and with her pussy in my face at the same time? I was in heaven.

It's freeing just to watch her take control of herself, her body, and her mind.

She is a literal queen, and it blows my mind how she doesn't even see how strong and resilient she is.

My cock hardens in my hand, and I can't stop myself from fisting it tight, trying yet failing to replicate the tight feel of her pussy. Precum leaks from the end of my dick, and there's no stopping me now. Bracing my other hand on the tiled wall, I close my eyes and picture my girl writhing beneath me, her fingers gripping the sheets as ecstasy rolls through her body.

As my mind replays her riding my face this morning, I can't hold back, spraying my orgasm all over the tiles as my chest heaves with pleasure.

Holy fuck.

I'm never going to tire of her.

Ever.

Letting the water quickly wash away the cum before it dries, I finish my routine and cut the stream, wrapping the towel around my waist before sauntering into my bedroom.

The king-sized bed sits in the center of the room, with the huge window straight ahead offering stunning views of the ocean, and my walk-in closet is to the left. The bed is made,

but I can remember exactly how the gray sheets looked this morning after our fun.

She spent the night with me for the first time, and I loved seeing her backpack at the side of my bed. I want it forever.

Remembering I still haven't heard from her, I quickly throw on a pair of gray shorts and a white shirt before padding barefoot back downstairs again.

I pick up my phone and deflate when I don't see a response, and I get a tingling feeling in my neck.

Something's wrong.

Not that she usually responds straightaway, but she would have sent something since arriving home.

With the prospect of food forgotten, I quickly make my way into the office where I have the three monitors set up with the surveillance from her house, instead of having it taking up all the space at the breakfast bar. The screens aren't on, but the boxes are *always* recording.

There's nothing in here but the desk, equipment, and office chair. The walls are bare, and the curtains are drawn, the overhead light illuminating the room.

Taking a seat in the black leather chair, I quickly switch on each monitor, watching as they come to life—one outside of Hunter's room, the other outside of Bethany's, and the third in her father's office.

I instantly go to her bedroom camera first, rewinding to see the last time she went to her room like she usually does. When I search through the feed for the third time, right back until lunch with no sign of her, I immediately start to panic.

I do the same thing outside of Hunter's room, and the only movement I get is their mother going inside just after lunch and walking out with a tie. That's it. Nothing else.

I glance at the clock again, knowing full well they would have both been hiding in their rooms by now. I move my attention to the office.

Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I try to calm the uncertainty building inside of me as I see a lot more action from there. I trail the time back to lunchtime, which is when her father and his partner, Bruce, walk in for the first time.

I keep the audio off as I fast forward through it all, watching as they step in and out of the office multiple times, occasionally with Bethany's mother, discussing God knows what. But even then, I don't catch sight of Bethany.

Everything has been too fucking quiet for the past hour or so, and there's been no noticeable movement, which does nothing to calm my nerves. I watched her get on the school bus this afternoon, there's no reason for her *not* to be there.

Switching back a little earlier in the day, I watch Bruce quickly dash from the office, followed swiftly by her parents, and I change it to play at normal speed with the sound as well.

I strain my ears as I hear them talking in the foyer. I turn up the volume, and my eyes widen a little when I hear Bethany's voice too.

What the fuck is going on?

I hear her father growl, and I quickly rewind it to play it again, trying to amplify the sound so I can hear it clearer. It plays once more, and my heart stops in my chest.

My girl needs me. Fuck. She needs me.

I replay it one more time to be sure before I make the call.

"I'm selling you, and we're doing it tonight."

I need backup, and I need it now.

TWENTY-EIGHT



BETHANY

I'm going to be sick.

Bile fills the back of my throat as my mother pulls me down the hallway toward the room of doom with her arm looped through mine.

I know whatever lies on the other side of those doors will ruin me. I'm not prepared. I will never be prepared, but that doesn't matter, not to *them*. When I walk through those doors, I'm never going to be the same girl again, and I can already feel myself dying inside.

I have to force myself to keep putting one heeled foot in front of the other as Bruce walks beside us, a gun digging into Hunter's back.

Shit.

This is... This is out of hand, but seeing a barrel pressed against Hunter's navy blue blazer tells me exactly what I need to do, and that's to go along with anything they say. Then, I hope I can convince the buyer to let me go, maybe hand me back or something, I don't fucking know, but I refuse to go down without a fight. I just need to find the right time to make my move when Hunter isn't directly in harm's way.

"Stand taller," my mother orders as we stop at the double doors, not bothering to look at me as she fixes her hair. I force my shoulders back, willing myself to feel the confidence she expects from me, but it's harder than I anticipated.

Nerves pool in my stomach as my palms sweat with fear. I flick my eyes to Hunter again. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't even blink. It's like he's masking his guilt right now, knowing I'm doing this to keep him safe. I want to tell him he shouldn't feel a thing, that I don't blame him, but I don't want to give any of these assholes the satisfaction.

God, the curse words are wanting to tumble from my mouth, rattling around in my brain, and I blame it all on Ryan.

Ryan.

Fuck.

There I go again.

I just... wish he was here. He would know what to do and how to get out of this, while I'm drowning before I've even stepped through the door.

"Remember the dos and don'ts, Bethany," my mother hisses, just as my father swings the doors open from the other side.

I have no recollection of the hallway behind me, and I stand frozen for a moment as the light difference between the two spaces blinds me. The auction room is much brighter than I expected.

The first thing I acknowledge is the sound, the low chatter and the buzz of excitement, and I internally cringe, gulping past the lump in my throat as I realize *it's for me*.

A nudge on my back from my mother forces me to take another step forward, and my father moves to my side, taking her place and allowing me an unfortunate view of the room.

All I can see are men—men dressed in a variety of suits. Some look rough around the edges with their collars flipped up and their hair slicked back, while others look like well put together businessmen you would expect to see on the front of a magazine. I don't recognize a single soul.

Disgust crawls along my skin as I feel every pair of eyes land on me. I'm sure I stand like a deer caught in the headlights, with my gaze flitting around the room.

I run my hands down the front of my very short dress, trying to lose the sweat, but all it does is draw their attention to it.

Dammit.

“Gentlemen, the girl of the hour, my beautiful daughter, Miss Bethany Victoria Asheville,” my father announces, his voice filled with pride. Tears of devastation threaten to burst from my eyes, but I somehow manage to hold it together. Tilting my chin up, I hold my head high, refusing to be viewed as a child. I want them to know what they are doing is wrong and that I know it. I want them to see I’m fully aware of what they are about to put me through.

I’m *defiant*. Be warned.

I look past the men standing before me. The white colored room has a bar on both sides, and the whole exterior is lined with tall tables where groups are standing around, nursing their drinks. A podium stands in the center with a microphone already set up, and I want to die.

I feel someone come to stand beside me as my father moves away to speak with someone to my left, but I don’t turn to see who it is until they talk.

“I thought Ryan was going to stop this from happening,” Hunter mumbles, and I whip my head down to his. What did he just say? Glancing around, I make sure no one heard him, but he scoffs. “It doesn’t really matter if anyone can hear me now or not, you’re apparently being sold off, and the guy who made all those promises to protect you is nowhere to be seen.”

He stares at me with a pointed look as I scramble to find a response. Defeat shines in his green eyes as I see my brother in a whole new light.

“How do you know Ryan?” I ask, avoiding a discussion about the actual situation with him right now, and he shrugs.

“He came to see me when I was in isolation the other night. He promised me all this shit too, but I wasn’t foolish enough to believe him,” he explains, and I tremble at his dismissive tone. Fuck, for a ten-year-old, he sure has a lot of

opinions and thoughts he's quite happy to share. "You stand there thinking the only way to protect me is to be sold, and it's not. I won't survive without you, Beth. I won't."

With that, he turns on his heels and skulks off, running his fingers through his slightly overgrown blond hair as Bruce trails after him.

I want to scream in desperation, in fear, in pain. I don't want any of this, and I'm at a complete loss.

We weren't prepared for the plan to change. This isn't Ryan's fault. It isn't my fault either, and it certainly isn't Hunter's. The people to blame are having the time of their life right now while the rest of us suffer.

"Let's get you circulating the room, shall we?" my father states, reappearing beside me, and my skin crawls as he grabs my hand and places it in the crook of his elbow.

My feet immediately move beside him, since I don't want to look like I'm being dragged and cause a scene, but with each step my heart breaks further. Anger simmers under the surface of my skin.

"Smile, Bethany, or Bruce will hurt Hunter. It's your choice," my father mutters under his breath, and I quickly do as he says against my better judgment. As I plaster a forced smile to my lips, I feel every bit the fraud I know I am.

My survival instincts are kicking in, they just aren't like everyone else's.

The usual fight-or-flight sentiment doesn't apply since I can't do either, so instead I float, letting them do as they please as I shut myself off on the inside.

I feel the numbness slowly starting to creep over me as I lock it down, but I find myself standing before the motherfucker from my father's office, and it hits me square in the chest before I can fully protect myself from the emotion.

"Bethany, you remember Mr. Manetti," my father says in introduction again, and my mouth dries as I gape at the man before me. This is the man who was present when my father,

the wonderful Bernārd Asheville, had a doctor confirm my hymen was indeed still intact.

Another man stands at his side, but I can't bring myself to look away from his deathly, leering eyes.

“I recall the pleasure,” Mr. Manetti replies as he wets his lips, looking me over from head to toe, and I try not to shrink away, but it's difficult.

“I'm glad you could make it, and I hope you do well among the bidders tonight,” my father says, dollar signs practically flashing in his eyes. I have to look away, and that's when I see *him*. In a crowd full of people, I spot him instantly, and my heart races in my chest as hope builds inside of me.

I want to cry.

He's here to save me.

Ryan is here to save me. He's dressed in a fitted suit, with the collar open and the top button undone, and I want to sob at his feet at how delicious he looks—never mind the fact he's actually here and pulling me from this hellhole.

How did he know? I don't care, I just... Thank God.

A soft sob passes my lips uncontrollably, and I catch myself quickly as I turn to face my father and Mr. Manetti, the latter frowning in the direction I was just looking. I try to hide my confusion.

He suddenly waves his hand in that direction, his eyes darkening, but in a split second, they change, like he managed to smother his emotions, and when he calls out, my heart completely stops.

“Carter, right? Ryan Carter from Featherstone? I'd recognize potential anywhere, boy, get over here.”

No.

No. No. No. No. No.

How? How does Ryan know the guy who was practically the reason for my hymen check?

No.

This was all a lie.

He lied to me.

My heart breaks in my chest as I turn my gaze in his direction to find him striding toward us, and every step he takes shatters another piece of my heart.

There's no explaining this.

None.

I would rather be sold than listen to any more of his lies.



RYAN

“I’ve got it,” Benji yells down the line, and I sag a little in relief, but it’s still not what I need.

He’s managed to hack into the security footage at Knight’s Casino so we can see what’s going on, but really, I just need to be there with my girl on my arm, torching the rest to hell.

Fuck.

I called Benji and Maria Steele straight away as I raced for my truck, ready to go save my girl, but as expected, it wasn’t easy.

Every door was manned by security, all of which were carrying guns. I could handle that, but I had no idea what would be waiting for me beyond that point, and if I wanted a clear path to her, I needed all the eyes I could get.

“I’m sending the access link over to you now,” Benji says calmly, and I still don’t respond, my focus on bringing the screen to life on my laptop in front of me.

I’m sitting in my truck at the back of the casino parking lot. Maria said she would be here soon and not to go in alone, but if I can get a clear view of an entry point before she gets here, then I’ll be doing whatever the fuck I want.

My Betty is in there, my life, and I won't stop until she's safe. With me.

"I've got it," I reply shortly when my screen comes to life with the footage of over a dozen cameras, and I hear him sigh in relief.

He's met Bethany once, and he's in as much despair as I am. Without missing a beat, he dropped what he was doing, or whatever guy he was doing, and jumped straight on board to help.

Knuckles rap on the passenger side window before the door swings open and Maria Steele climbs in.

She arches her eyebrow at me as my hand rests on the handle of my gun. She shouldn't have fucking caught me off guard like that.

"You don't expect to go in there and get far dressed like that, do you?" she says, glancing at my outfit, and I grunt.

I haven't changed out of my shorts and t-shirt from earlier, and my flip-flops were the first thing I grabbed as I left the house in a panic. What does she expect?

Before I can actually say any of that out loud, she places a bag between us. "I had a feeling you might need this. I'll give you a minute to change." She climbs back out of the truck, leaving me dumbfounded as I glance between the laptop, the bag, and my phone, where I'm assuming Benji still is.

"She's making you dress up to blend in, isn't she?" Benji asks, his voice filtering through the car, and I frown.

"Of course she's... Yep, yes she is," I grumble, peering inside the bag to find a pressed black suit, a white shirt, and polished black shoes.

I want to save Bethany, and I don't care how I look doing it. She isn't expecting James Bond to arrive, but if Maria thinks this will help me get further inside, then I'll do it.

I'm not stupid enough to not acknowledge who the expert of the criminal world is here.

“Benji, I’m going to change and head for the casino. I’ll put the earpiece in so you can be my eyes,” I inform him, hearing him hum his agreement before I step outside of the truck and change in the parking lot.

I don’t give a fuck where I am, and I don’t care for the tie or top button as I quickly lean over to tie my laces. It’s not worth looking at myself in the tiny truck mirror as I put my earpiece in and connect it so I can hear Benji breathing.

“Move back from the mic now, asshole. I can practically smell your breath through the line, and I need to focus on Bethany.”

He chuckles in response but does as I say, and when I round the front of the truck, I see Maria sitting in the blacked out SUV a few rows away.

“We’ll be on hand, and I got our name on the table at the last minute. Use Ryan Steele,” she says.

I nod before straightening my blazer, feeling my two guns at my hip and the knife on my ankle as I approach the casino.

How I ever truly thought I wanted to be a part of this world is beyond me. Feeling the pain and emotion on the other side and having the person you love be put on the table is enough to destroy my soul. Maria Steele just showed me the light, and I’ll happily follow it.

As I approach the door, the security guard eyes me over his iPad. Standing tall, I state my name as Maria advised. “Ryan Steele.”

He taps away for a moment before moving to the side and letting me pass. I thought I was going to have an issue with my weapons, but no, the motherfucker isn’t even checking me, which also means no one else inside has been checked either.

Great.

As I step into the blue carpeted lobby, I find temporary walls in place, offering a direct path toward the other side where another security guy waits at the next set of doors.

I roll my shoulders back as I approach. He asks for my name, and this time when he checks me off the list, he takes my thumbprint.

Let's hope I don't look like a liar if it pops up with Ryan Carter, but after a moment, he opens the red rope at his side and pushes the door open for me to step inside.

My heart thumps in my chest as I take in how many people are here, or more specifically, how many men. They are all here for one reason, and one reason only.

Bethany.

I'll figure out a way to kill every single motherfucker in this place if I have to.

Declining the glass of bourbon the server offers me as I step in, I focus on finding my girl. I spot Hunter off to the side with her father's friend. He has a deep frown on his face, and it encourages me to find her faster.

He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't be seeing this.

I see her father first, who isn't looking in my direction, and then my eyes drop to the light of my life. She's hardly recognizable in her tiny, white see-through dress and ridiculously high heels, but she's still mine under all of it.

The second her blue eyes find mine, I watch as an array of emotions flashes across her face, and it warms my soul that I can do that to her, but I will cherish it more when I pull her out of this situation.

Stroking the gun at my hip, I freeze when I hear someone call out my name.

“Carter, right? Ryan Carter from Featherstone? I'd recognize potential anywhere, boy, get over here.”

Looking to the right of Bethany, I feel my heart stall when I see none other than Rico fucking Manetti standing beside her—another member of The Ring at Featherstone—and I scramble over how to proceed.

I don't want to rock the boat among the members of The Ring, but Rico has always been the crazy one, the complete

opposite of Maria Steele, and I can't imagine she knows he's here, that's for sure.

Wetting my lips, I remain cool, trying not to draw any attention. I move toward them, and Rico pats me on the back in greeting.

"I hope I don't have to go into a bidding war with you tonight, my friend. I have some big names on the market for this little piece here," he says with a lewd grin and a wink, and I want to pull my knife from my ankle and carve his fucking heart out, but I'm stopped by the sound of Bethany's voice.

"You two know each other?" she asks quietly, her eyes swirling with pain as tears brim in them, and I realize the wrong connection she's making all too quickly.

"Of course, our bloodlines have crossed paths a few times," Rico responds casually like everyone is supposed to understand what that means, Featherstone or not, and I shake my head, but it's too late. She already thinks I'm linked to him in a bigger capacity, and the fact that I've never really explained Featherstone or my past to her makes it a whole lot easier for her to believe him and doubt me.

"Bethany, I—"

"So if you're friends, you'll be aware Mr. Manetti ensured my hymen was perfectly intact a few weeks ago to be ready for this auction," she says with a sickly sweet smile as her face becomes devoid of any emotion, and my hands clench at my sides as I connect the dots. "Father, I'm here doing exactly as you asked, and I'm asking you to remove this man from the room," she states, turning to her father while pointing to me.

"No, Bethany, no, I—"

"Enough," her father interrupts, pulling a gun from nowhere and aiming it at my head just as I do the same with mine, only pointing it at his chest instead.

"You clearly should have come with some backup, son. No one pulls a gun on me and gets away with it," he sneers as someone hits me on the back of the head with a heavy object. I

stumble to my knees, my skull throbbing with pain as I look up to see Bethany standing above me with wide eyes.

“Don’t hurt him, I—” She doesn’t get to finish her sentence as someone pulls her away.

I’m pulled to my feet with my hands secured behind my back.

“Get him out of my fucking sight. There are plenty of other buyers present tonight, and some child can’t afford the luxury of my baby girl even if he is from Featherstone,” her father hisses, turning his back and dismissing me as two more guards aid in removing me from the room while I search for Bethany.

Helplessly, my feet drag along the floor as I’m tossed outside. Another guard punches me square in the cheek before slamming the heavy door to the casino shut behind him.

What the fuck just happened?

The look on her face and the pain in her eyes devastates me.

Her pretty blue eyes were bleak, almost black, her skin was pale, even under the makeup they put on her, and her frown was fixed in place.

Fuck.

Wiping my face, I smear blood across my hand, and I sigh.

How did I just fuck that all up?

TWENTY-NINE



RYAN

Staring up at the casino doors that were just slammed shut on my ass, I force myself out of the daze I seem to be in and scramble to my feet. Dusting off my pants, I do a quick check to make sure all my weapons are still in place.

Bethany didn't give me time to explain, and now she thinks I work with the enemy. Fuck giving away that we know each other, everything is on the line.

Fuck.

"I'd say that didn't really go to plan, Ryan," Benji murmurs through the earpiece, and I offer him a two-finger salute through the camera at the door above my head.

No shit, Sherlock. I fucking got that.

I hear the sound of a vehicle approaching, and I glance over my shoulder to see Maria's SUV crawl to a stop before the window is lowered.

"What went wrong?" she asks, and I don't really know where to begin, because a whole heap of shit just happened.

"Start with Rico, Ryan," Benji says in my ear, and I nod as I swipe a hand down my face.

"Rico Manetti was in there," I state, meeting her gaze, and the thunder rolling in her eyes tells me that it's news to her.

"Fuck," she curses with a sigh, and I find myself stumbling to explain more.

“I hadn’t really gotten around to explaining all of this stuff, my real life, to Bethany, like at all, so I just walked in there and Rico recognized me. He called out my name as he stood beside her, and now she thinks I’m in league with him or something. He... Rico was present during some bad shit that happened to her, and now, I’m considered guilty by association. That makes me the bad guy too,” I explain, completely defeated as Maria and Benji both curse under their breath.

I close my eyes as I try to gather myself, getting my emotions in check.

I have to get back in there. She can fucking hate my guts or not, either way, I’m determined to save her. I pinky promised. I owe her that, I owe her everything, and hopefully, once we all get out of here together and alive, she’ll eventually be ready to listen to my explanation.

Stripping the blazer off my shoulders, I roll up my shirt sleeves before rechecking that my guns are loaded, then I pull magazines from the jacket pocket and quickly tuck them into my trousers.

Steeling my spine, I glance over my shoulder to look at Maria. “I did this your way, and it didn’t fucking work. Now I need you to support my way,” I state, and she nods immediately. I’m impressed by how much she’s willing to stick to our deal. Others would have double crossed me by now, but not her.

“My men are at your disposal,” she responds as another blacked out SUV pulls up behind her, and I nod.

“Benji, tell me another entry point I can get through right now. I’m going back in when I’m unwelcome, so I’m going to need all the help I can get.” My heart pounds rapidly in my chest as I take a deep breath and scan the building in every direction.

“The next entry point is to your right, but, Ryan, you *need* to hurry the fuck up. The auction is starting,” he urges, and it sends adrenaline surging through me. “Have Steele’s men take the left entrance.”

Clenching my fists at my sides, I try to take a deep breath as I relay the order to Maria's men, who instantly go to the left, leaving a handful of men with her. She wanted in on the communication, but I refused. This goes by my rules now.

Without a backward glance, I take off to the right, my long strides still not getting me there as quickly as I would like.

"How many men are at this door?" I inquire as I slow, seeing the door slightly ajar.

"Just one," he confirms, and without question, I approach the door, my gun loaded and ready, and when I push the door open with my foot, I come face-to-face with a security guard who startles at my approach.

I watch as his hand reaches for his gun at his hip, but I don't waste any time as I pull the trigger. The bullet fires from my gun, hitting him right between his eyes before he crumples to the floor in a pool of his own blood.

I don't know this man, he might have been a nice guy, but if he's willing to guard a fucking human trafficking auction then he's no better than the people inside.

"Nice shot," Benji says in my ear as I continue past the dead body and head down the dim hall.

I shake my head. "I don't need you to be my cheerleader, Ben. Just guide me," I respond, pressing my back against the wall as I approach the next door and try to spy through the small gap.

"My friend, you cheer me on through everything. I want you to get our girl and bring her back in one piece," he replies, and I shake my head. "The next hall is clear. Cut straight across and through the next door, but that leads into a room where there's a man and a young blond-haired boy. You'll need..."

His words trail off when he realizes I've already started moving, knowing full well if there's a young boy it'll likely be Hunter.

As I move across the quiet corridor like he said, I mumble my response. "She's not *our* girl, she's *my* girl," I amend, my

protective and territorial tendencies making a show as I hear him chuckle.

“I need you to find me a guy version of her, maybe a little older with a thick dick, but you know what I mean. She’s my friend, and I want to protect her.”

I hear that.

I don’t respond as I wrap my fingers around the door handle, ready to push it open when Benji speaks again.

“Ryan, the guy has his back to you and a gun pressed against the back of the kid’s head.”

Fuck.

I silently push the door handle down and sidestep into the room, completely unheard, with my gun ready to go.

“Listen here, you little shit. Once your sister is sold, I’m going to convince him to sell you too. Then I can kill him, take all his money, his name, fuck his wife, all of it,” Bruce hisses as he shakes with anger, and I raise my gun in his direction as I approach.

I can’t see Hunter since Bruce towers over him, but his choice of words makes it *very* clear who he’s talking to.

I don’t want Hunter to see this, I don’t, but I also need to save him and get to his sister before the auction ends.

“You’re nobody. You’ll rot in hell for what you have done to my sister, and I promise I will kill you,” Hunter barks, his tone dark and devoid of emotion.

When I’m less than a foot away from Bruce, I catch him off guard as I wrap my arm around his throat, kick the backs of his legs, and hold him against my body. I don’t manage to lock in and secure his firing arm, and I can’t give him a chance to use it.

“Close your eyes,” I yell at Hunter as I bring my gun to his skull and pull the trigger before he can even consider aiming. The sound booms around us, and my gaze remains fixed on Hunter as he watches the blood splatter from Bruce’s temple and spray over the both of us.

This motherfucker deserved far worse, but he no longer deserved to breathe after what he did to Bethany.

We both remain frozen in place, my fingers coated in blood as speckles dot Hunter's face, until he shakes his head and gives me a pointed glare.

"I don't know what the fuck you did to make her kick you out, but if you fuck it up again, I'll be doing the same to you," he warns, indicating the lifeless body I still hold.

It's hard to believe he's only ten, but I nod all the same as I carelessly drop the dead body to the floor.

"If I upset her again, I'll give you the loaded gun to do it," I respond, and he stands taller, pursing his lips as he nods with me. He likes that idea. "I need you to leave through the door I came through across the hall and down the corridor. There's an SUV outside, the lady waiting there is my friend. I need you somewhere safe while I help your sister, alright?" I say as I wipe my bloody fingers on my pants, and he nods.

"Just go save her," he orders.

I grip the door handle Bruce had him pressed against, swing it open without waiting for Benji to give me the all clear, and find myself at the edge of the main room where the auction is taking place just as the hammer comes down.

The sound of the gavel ricochets around me as half of the room groans and Bethany's father pulls a teary-eyed Beth down from the podium. I watch as she struggles against him. I start to move toward her, but the crowd is fucking everywhere.

"Sold, to a Mr. Tony Totem Lopez via Mr. Rico Manetti for the sum of twelve million dollars," the MC calls out. Thankfully nobody cheers, but it makes my skin crawl because they are jealous they didn't win.

Focusing on getting to Bethany, I hear a door slam shut on the other side of the room, and I pick up my pace, trying to push and shove through the crowd as they all down another drink in defeat. As the crowd thins on the outer edges of the room, I find the door she must have left through, wondering where the fuck Maria's men are.

“Ryan! Ryan!” I hear Benji scream through my earpiece, and I have no idea how long he’s been trying to get my attention. I blocked it all out as I focused on Bethany, the emotion on her face as her father dragged her down off the podium burned into my soul.

“What?” I ask, rushing for the door, but his words make me halt.

“She’s gone. They just sped out of the parking lot like lunatics.”

No, please, no.

“It can’t be true. Please tell me it’s not true, Ben,” I plead with him, not caring how I might look as pain crashes through my body.

“I’m sorry, Ryan. I’m trying to keep tabs on them, but it’s taking a minute to hack the systems. Go through the door on your left, it’ll lead you outside quicker,” he states, and I do as he says, needing to get to my truck as quickly as possible.

I blindly run down the corridor until the fresh night air hits me. I see taillights in the distance, my heart going with it as I slump forward and brace my hands on my knees.

“Fuck,” I grunt, my body tingling with fear as I run back around to the side of the parking lot I was originally in, completely bypassing Maria in her SUV. I fumble with my keys as I climb in my truck and peel out of the parking lot without a backward glance.

Nothing else matters but her right now.

Bethany.

My sweet fucking girl.

“Hunter didn’t make it to Maria,” Benji says, and my heart stills.

What?

“But I—”

“He’s alive, Ryan, just...His mother got her hands on him before he made it outside to Maria,” he explains as I continue

to accelerate.

Fuck.

Save Bethany, then find a way to save Hunter.

“I have Maria’s number on my phone, can you hack in and give the order for them to watch where he goes until I figure this shit out?” I ask, and Benji hums his agreement.

I will burn this whole fucking town to the ground until I find her, I swear it.

THIRTY



BETHANY

I feel the vehicle move beneath us, but I can't see anything as I sit with my hands tied behind my back and a sack over my head. I hate that I can't see, but I'm glad they won't be able to see the tears dripping down my face either.

From what I can guess, I'm in the back of a car by myself while another passenger sits up front with the driver. The two of them laugh and joke like they haven't just illegally collected a girl who was auctioned off for twelve million dollars.

I heard Mr. Manetti tell my father that he would stay and have a drink with him while I was escorted to the official buyer, and my skin hasn't stopped crawling with fear since.

I've tried to open the car door blindly with my heeled feet, but it's no use, it's locked.

I don't know what's going to happen to me, or if I'm going to be given a chance to plead for my safety or not, but in all honesty, that's not where my mind even is. It's focused on the fact that Ryan showed up, all dressed to the nines, aware of the man who instigated my hymen check.

The thought alone makes me want to be sick, but the pain I saw in his eyes as I pushed for him to be kicked out still haunts me, and it makes me wonder what could have caused that hurt. He burned me by lying and omitting truths that were important to my life, important to our future.

But fuck, I wish I had at least given him a moment to explain, because now... now I am never going to see him again, and that hurts more than not knowing about his connection to these people or whatever Featherstone is.

I feel the car slow and hear the scraping of gravel beneath us as we come to a complete stop, and I remain frozen in my seat. I have no idea how to defend myself, never mind with my hands tied behind my back and no vision.

When a car door slams shut and mine immediately opens, I follow the pull of someone grabbing my upper arm and stumble to my feet as the cool night air wraps around me.

I try as hard as I can to identify any kind of familiar sound or smell, but I get nothing as the grip on my arm tightens and someone pulls me against their side.

“Don’t you worry, baby, I’ll make sure you’re all ready for the boss. I’m desperate to rip the lace of your dress with my teeth,” he says with a groan. I shiver with fear and feel nauseous with disgust just as I lose my footing on the stairs that are suddenly in front of me.

I don’t respond, not even a sob in protest as he half drags me up the steps, and I can feel the difference as we move inside, the temperature rising just a little as a door slams shut behind us.

“Boss wants you to take her downstairs straight away,” someone else calls out in the distance, and the guy holding me grunts in response as he moves us to our right.

I try to retrace our steps over and over in my mind, so if the opportunity ever arises, I can run, but the amount of turns he takes—left, right, down a long corridor, right, right—has my mind spinning. Fuck.

He doesn’t offer a warning as another set of stairs appears, and this time they lead down. I don’t realize this until it’s too late. My foot slips, but he manages to tighten his grip even more, preventing the fall, at the same time it also feels like his nails are scratching my goddamn bone.

I hear another door slam behind us, and the heat rises to a perfect temperature. If I wasn't feeling distressed and helpless, it would almost feel cozy.

The vise-like grip on my arm disappears as the guy steps away, and I shake my head, trying to move the sack even a little to see what's going on around me. Before I can take my next breath, it's completely whipped off my head, and I blink at the dazzling lights that temporarily blind me.

I don't recognize the guy standing before me in black slacks and matching black shirt with the top buttons undone, but the way he casts his gaze over my body tells me he's been looking at me for quite a long time.

"The boss said to keep you busy for a bit. He's really into finding the right girl for the task. Motherfucker doesn't even care about your virginity, he just thinks it makes you more impressionable, innocent, and docile, increasing your devotion and willingness to serve him."

I frown in confusion, scrabbling to make sense of his words, but it's harder than I care to admit as I try to take in my surroundings too.

An electric fire burns to my left, a four-poster bed sits to my right, and there's a black fur rug under my feet, but there is nothing else in sight. The sheets are white, and as I consider this guy's words, I decide he must be lying, because this screams "I want your virginity" and nothing else.

"What does he want from me if not that then?" I find myself asking, and he grins down at me as he brushes his blond hair off his face.

It's startling how naïve I feel right now, because the guy is in his mid-twenties, and if I had seen him on the street, I wouldn't have considered him dangerous.

Everyone is dangerous.

"He wants you for the greater cause. He believes a girl should continue his legacy and offer ultimate devotion to him, but he'll never know if I break your little seal, now will he?" He wets his bottom lip, and I tremble as he takes a step closer.

I'm still defenseless like this with my hands tied behind my back, and I refuse to let this guy touch me if he's saying that's not what this is about. Right now, Hunter is safe, away from all of this, and I only have myself to worry about.

Clearing my throat, I shake my head, trying to dislodge the hair sticking to my face, and I dread to think what my face actually looks like. They definitely didn't use waterproof mascara, and I've done *a lot* of fucking crying.

What would Ryan do here?

I hate to seek his help, even in my mind, but I need the strength I only get from him.

First, I need to find a way to get my hands free from the bindings that are restricting my wrists.

"Y-You want to t-touch me?" I ask, unable to hide the quiver in my voice as I stutter, but he only seems to like my distress more.

"I want to do more than touch you, darlin'," he purrs, stroking his finger down my cheek, and it takes everything in me not to bolt out of arm's reach.

"H-How am I supposed to touch you back when I'm like this?" My tone is innocent, almost naive, but I feel like he can tell I just want him to free my hands.

He steps up to me, and I force myself to remain in place as he brushes his chest against mine. He strokes his fingers down my arms, teasing the knot at my wrists, and hope builds inside of me until he whispers in my ear. "Darlin', that's the whole appeal."

My blood turns to ice as he grabs my waist, takes two steps, and tosses me down on the bed. A cry falls from my lips as I bite my tongue. My arms are trapped under me, so I try to push away from him by digging my heels into the mattress.

"P-Please," I beg with the taste of blood on my tongue as he grabs my ankles and pulls me down to the edge of the bed.

When my feet dangle off the end, he quickly climbs on top of me, catching me off guard as he sits on my stomach, and the

pain in my arms and shoulders is almost unbearable.

“Please don’t,” I whisper as he grips my throat, securing me in place beneath him and rendering me helpless.

He ignores me as he uses his other hand to stroke the material of my dress, tracing the flowers embroidered into the lace over my chest as his lips start to tease my neck.

I slam my eyes shut as fear consumes me. I try to numb out the pain and ignore the feel of his lips against my skin, but I’m not that same girl anymore. I won’t lie here and accept this fate. I won’t.

I buck my legs again, but he doesn’t budge, he’s like a rock on top of me. I choke back a sob, his hand tightening around my throat as I try to free my hands. The rope burns as I try to twist and pull, but it’s difficult with him touching me.

I still as he leans down with a smirk on his lips, and he licks the lace over my nipple before grabbing the material with his teeth and ripping it like he promised.

I watch in horror as my breast is exposed, and he grins in triumph, the feel of his pleasure rubbing against my thigh as he presses into me makes me feel sick.

How do I survive this?

How do I...

“What’s this?” someone shouts, and I recognize the voice, but before I can place it, the guy glances over his shoulder, and in slow motion, everything explodes.

The deafening boom from a gun firing fills the room, and a single bullet hits the guy in the side of his head. I scream as blood covers me, twisting my neck to the side to hide myself from the mess above me as his limp body falls forward. Fear runs through my veins as I gulp in a huge breath.

Tears stream down my face and my throat burns from screaming, but I can’t stop the emotion from leaving my mouth. The motherfucker’s grip on my neck loosens as the life leaves his body.

My eyes are slammed shut, unable to look at the guy's exploded brains and blood, but I feel the moment the lifeless body is rolled off of me and I'm being bundled into someone's arms.

"Please no. Please don't hurt me," I beg, kicking my legs again now that they are free and connecting with someone's solid, muscular thigh. I think it hurts me more than them as they grunt.

"I've got you, Betty," I hear, and the swirling chaos inside my mind calms at the nickname.

Betty.

Prying my eyes open, I stare up into the stormy blue gaze I'm all too familiar with and gape at him. I have no words, since my mind is at war over how I feel about him right now, but he just shot a man in the head for touching me.

He cradles me in his arms, my own still tied behind my back, but I don't complain as I keep my gaze fixed on his jawline while he carries me from the building.

I can hear other gunshots, but they are off in the distance. Being in Ryan's arms makes me feel all too safe, so I don't even flinch at the sound as I stare in complete wonder at the man holding me.

The chill of the night air bites my skin for a moment before I'm placed in a vehicle, and the door is slammed shut before I can ask him to wait. I search for Ryan, and I frown as I watch him aim his gun and rush back inside.

What on earth?

"You are the infamous Bethany Asheville, I presume," a lady says, startling me, and when I look across the back of the dark SUV, I find a small woman sitting opposite me, almost in the shadows. How the hell did I miss her?

She screams business, in her tailored suit with her stern expression, and I find myself nodding in acknowledgement, unsure if she can actually see me back here, but she continues as if she can.

“Ryan will only be a moment. I’m Maria Steele, you may call me Maria,” she states as I continue to stare at her in shock like a fool. “From what I understand, he has much to tell you, and from my experience, men aren’t usually the best at explaining themselves, so give him a moment. But I will tell you this, I offered Ryan Carter a deal, a deal I expected him to refuse given his background, but he accepted, and he accepted because of *you*.”

As she finishes speaking, the door swings open again, the interior light illuminating the space, and I turn to find a panting Ryan standing there. His eyes rake over me once, twice, three times before he’s sure I’m okay, and then he turns to Maria.

“He ran. Totem got out in time. A lot of his men are dead, but he’s not there. Rico is nowhere to be seen either,” he says, swiping a hand down his face, and she nods in understanding, although disappointment creases her lips.

“I thought we had an excellent opportunity to capture him, but we can revert back to the original plan. Is everything else okay here?” she asks, and Ryan nods before turning his attention back to me as he holds his hand out.

Is this guy crazy?

“My hands are tied behind my back,” I grumble, and his eyes widen in panic as he steps inside the SUV, pulls a blade from his ankle, and leans behind me to gently cut the rope free.

My body sags in relief as I relax my shoulders, trying not to rub the burn marks as I get the blood flowing through my hands again.

“Can I get you out of here?” Ryan inquires as he moves to crouch in front of me, and I nod before I can change my mind.

I have to trust what this random woman said about him, and I have to trust in my own gut instinct that what I’ve felt for him this entire time is true.

“Please,” I whisper, a sob bursting from my lips as I do, and he quickly carries me bridal style from the SUV as my

body shakes from crying all over again, and I find myself instinctively curling into his chest.

“I’ve got you, Bethany. I promise, I have you now.”

I pray that isn’t a lie.

THIRTY-ONE



RYAN

My knuckles whiten as I grip the steering wheel with every ounce of my pent-up anger that still burns through my veins. Another quick glance to my right reminds me she is here with me, where she's supposed to be, but fuck if I know how to handle what that guy was doing to her.

I grind my teeth as I try to contain the rage, but it's impossible.

I already shot the motherfucker, but he deserves to be reborn so I can do it again and again and again.

The SUV that drove her away from the casino took its sweet-ass time, clearly not worried about anyone having an issue with them taking her. So when I caught up to them, I got on the phone to Maria while I still had contact with Benji through my earpiece.

Maria showed up with her men in tow, ready to go to bat for me and my love once more, and it was in that moment, win or lose, that I vowed to do the same for her.

She wants me to help protect her granddaughter, and I will, giving up everything I have at Featherstone except my bank account to become a protector of the granddaughter of an elite member of The Ring. I would go down as dead, deceased in the eyes of Featherstone, but it's all fucking worth it just to have my girl breathing beside me right now.

Once upon a time, nothing would have mattered more than my status in Featherstone, but now it means nothing in

comparison to Bethany.

I cast my gaze her way again, and it breaks my heart to see her curled in on herself with her arms crossed over her chest, her knees up to her chin, and tears streaming down her cheeks. I want to console her, to make everything okay between us, to take her burden and make it mine, but I need to get her away from the immediate danger first. Then we need to discuss the fact that her parents still have Hunter and where we actually stand.

I have so much shit to explain, and I can only hope I didn't screw everything up like the damn fucking idiot I am. I just thought I had more time.

Pushing my foot down on the accelerator a little more, we travel down the freeway toward Knight's Creek, since fucking Totem had a house set up in the next town over, and I can't stop the image from replaying in my mind.

The order from Maria was clear, kill every single fucker between us and Bethany on sight. That was simple enough, until I crept downstairs and walked in to find some scumbag pinning her to the bed with a hand wrapped around her delicate throat as he ripped her barely there outfit off.

I froze for a moment, not at the sight, but because I had no clear shot of the motherfucker without risking Bethany. With Benji screaming in my ear to get the guy's attention, I growled the first words I thought might work.

"What's this?"

I felt like a fool when the words left my mouth, but to my surprise, the fucker turned around, offering me a clear shot into the side of his skull. As much as I loved the visual of the bullet piercing his skin and exploding his brain, I instantly regretted it when the aftermath of Bethany's screams filled my ears and his blood painted her skin.

She was terrified, her high-pitched cries tearing from her throat until I consoled her. I'd muttered a few things in her ear, but it wasn't until I called her Betty that she calmed, and it

gave me hope—hope that she knew I wasn't the monster she first assumed, and hope that I could mend us back together.

The rain that started to fall as we left the fucked up mansion of misery bounces off the front windshield unrelentingly as the wipers whip back and forth across my vision.

A cry fills my otherwise silent truck, and I flick my gaze in her direction again to find her physically curled into a ball, sobbing into her knees with her arms banded around them tight.

Fuck getting her out of here, I need her to see I'm here. I need to touch her, hold her, and protect her.

Spying Asheville High up ahead as we get closer to town, I slow down, turn into the empty parking lot, and come to a stop toward the back. I shut off the engine and switch on the overhead light as I turn to face Bethany again, finding her in the exact same spot as moments before.

I watch as she shivers and drags her hands roughly over her skin as she rocks a little, and my stomach turns as I try to find a way to hold her in my arms.

“Bethany,” I say, but it comes out as a whisper. My soul breaks as she responds by swinging the passenger side door open and jumping down from the truck.

My heart lurches as I do the same before racing around the back of the truck, to find her there with her hands braced on the latch of the tailgate as she takes huge breaths. Water pours over the pair of us as we stand in the rain, and the dark reality of our lives comes to light.

“Betty, I—”

“It won't go away. I can't make it go away, Ryan,” she cries, looking up at me through her wet lashes as her eyes widen in despair.

“What won't go away?” I ask, taking another step closer, and when she doesn't immediately move away from me, I take another so we're standing side by side, leaning against the truck.

“His hands... his mouth... him, just him. I feel him everywhere, and I need it to go away so badly, Ryan,” she says, sobbing with every word as she runs one hand down her throat and the other fiddles with the ripped lace of her dress.

I really want to bring that fucker back to life so I can slice him apart piece by piece.

Swiping my dripping wet hair back off my face, I take a calming breath and focus on being here for Bethany.

“Tell me how I can help. Anything, Betty, anything,” I plead, hating the loss of control I feel, and her wide eyes turn to mine as she moves to face me head-on. I turn too, desperate to be whatever she needs.

“Make it go away, Ryan, please.”

I frown in confusion as her hands come up to my chest, her fingers gripping my soaked shirt as I blink through the rain.

“I don’t under—”

“Here,” she cries hysterically. “He touched me here. Erase his touch with yours. I’m begging you, Ryan, please,” she implores as she grabs my hand and moves it to cup her exposed breast.

“Beth, I don’t want to do anything to trigger you ri—”

“If you love me like you said you did, and this wasn’t all a lie, then you will help me,” she interrupts, her cries calming as she looks into my eyes.

She knows exactly what she’s asking for, and I told her I’d do anything.

Fuck.



BETHANY

Rain drips down every inch of my body as I plead with the asshole who shattered me only hours earlier to touch me. I watch as he runs his fingers through his soaked hair, water

gathering at the ends, but he doesn't remove his other hand from my chest as he looks torn over what to do.

The dull streetlights around the parking lot offer a little light, just enough so I can see all of his facial features. With the rain obstructing my vision, anything more than fifteen feet away would be nothing but darkness.

All I could feel and see was that man touching me. I couldn't erase it. I hoped the rain might cleanse me... but *nothing*. Except where Ryan's touching my exposed breast. I feel the excitement pooling in my stomach from his touch, and only his.

I won't beg again, but I don't know what I will do if he doesn't give in to me, I can't think about it right now.

His thumb slowly circles my exposed nipple, and he watches for my reaction as I shiver under his touch. We've only had sex once, but I don't care where we are right now. I need him to erase everything that happened tonight and send me to heaven with his touch. I don't trust anyone the way I trust him.

"I'll explain it all to you, Betty. I promise," he whispers, and I nod. I'll agree to anything to get him to touch me, but I know I'll listen when the time comes. We don't need any words right now, not a single one.

I push up onto my tiptoes and press my lips to his, and his mouth molds to mine instantly, making me melt as I feel the intense connection buzz between us. Ryan's free hand moves to my waist as the other continues to tease my tight nipple, and I shudder under his hands, desperate for more.

"Let me get you back in the truck," he murmurs against my lips, and I shake my head.

"No, here, right here," I insist, moving my hand between us and hitching my dress up over my hips. "Where's the latch?" I ask, searching blindly in the rain to drop the tailgate so I can make use of it, and he finds it quickly. I instantly miss his touch against my skin.

Without thought, I grab the torn lace material at my chest and pull it even more, right up to the neckline, until it falls away on either side of me. I stand fully naked in the rain, wearing only my heels.

My wet blonde hair sticks to the back of my neck as I go to sit on the edge of the tailgate. Ryan finds his way between my legs in a heartbeat, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly open as he takes me in.

“My neck, touch my neck,” I tell him as I paw at his chest, and his lips move to my desired spot, making my back arch with pleasure.

“You’re fucking beautiful, Beth,” Ryan murmurs against my skin. I barely hear him over the rain, but I preen under his words as he goes back to biting and sucking my neck, and I gasp at the sensation.

He keeps one hand on my hip, trying to hold me in place, as the other moves to tease my folds. His thumb circles my clit as I inhale deeply, needing more.

“Please, please, please,” I beg, unashamed as I desperately slide my palm over his pants, his hard cock pushing against the zipper as I try to undo the button. “I need you,” I add, and any uncertainty he had about this moment is squashed as he drags me against his chest, his lips finding mine in a blind haze as he inserts two fingers into my core.

I hear him curse as he feels how wet I am, eager for him to consume me as the rest of me is drenched from the rain.

“So fucking tight, Beth,” he growls, circling his fingers inside of me, and I tilt my hips to feel it again.

Without the sharp pain of my hymen breaking, it feels like an entirely different experience. My pussy squeezes his fingers, needing more friction as he glides his thumb over my clit.

“I want to feel your cock stretch me,” I say with a gasp, remembering just how full he made me feel last time. I want him to push me over the edge. I know that would work

wonders, washing away all the physical and emotional trauma from tonight.

“You are something else, Betty,” he praises with a small grin, looking at me through wet lashes, and I bite my bottom lip, too eager to respond as he releases his cock from his pants.

“I want to feel you,” I repeat, and he wastes no time lining his cock up with my entrance and slowly pushing inside one small thrust at a time. I feel my walls stretch for him, and a cry falls from my lips.

He holds my hips with both hands as he moves me to the very edge of the tailgate, and then he sinks deeper as I brace myself on my hands and gaze up at him, my mouth slack with pleasure.

When he’s fully seated, I squirm as I adjust, but holy fuck, I understand the obsession. I want to be this full all the time.

“Are you okay?” he asks, stroking my hair out of my face, and I nod.

“I’ll be better if you move,” I mumble in response, and he does just that, my pussy molding perfectly to his cock. I slip my hands between my thighs, dragging my fingers over my swollen clit. “Oh God,” I cry. Ripples build inside of me as he continues to stretch me.

“You’re mine, Bethany. Tell me you’re mine,” he growls, and I look up from where we are joined to find his eyes fixed on mine, but I say nothing, not after earlier when my world broke in two. “Say it, Beth,” he repeats, increasing his thrusts, and I groan as he hits a spot inside of me that makes me want to sing.

When I continue to pause too long, he slips out of my body, making me moan in displeasure as he pulls me to my feet, spinning me on the spot, and bends me forward over the tailgate.

Before I can question what he’s doing, he thrusts straight into my pussy, only this time he slides deeper, and I groan with ecstasy.

“Holy fuck,” I pant, trying to keep myself propped up on the wet surface, but it’s more difficult than it looks.

Ryan leans forward, pressing his chest against my back as he whispers in my ear. “You can admit it or not, but you’re mine, Betty. Always mine.”

Without another word, he pulls out so only the tip of his dick remains inside of me before slamming home hard and fast again and again. I turn into a screaming pool of ecstasy as I climax around him.

“I’m yours, I’m yours,” I chant uncontrollably as my eyes roll back in my head and wave after wave of my orgasm crashes through me.

“Fuck,” he grunts just as I feel his cock pulse inside of me, and it makes my pussy squeeze him more, milking every ounce of his climax from him before I slump forward on the tailgate.

I don’t know how long we lie there, letting the water cascade over us, but eventually he slowly pulls from my pussy and lifts me into his arms, placing me soundly in the cab.

Ryan quickly fixes his pants and rounds the rear of the truck to grab the discarded clothes. After grabbing a towel from the back and offering it to me, he turns on the engine and heater.

It feels like all of my bravado and confidence from earlier is melting away, but I no longer feel that man on my skin anymore.

“Where do we go from here?” I ask, blinking up at Ryan who gives me a soft smile.

“Do you want the literal answer?” he offers, and I nod, because yes, I really don’t know where I’m supposed to go beyond this parking lot. “We return to the beach house, change, and figure out how we get Hunter out of your parents’ house. Nothing else changes from there, Beth. I want you safe, and I want you with me,” he answers honestly, and I gulp.

“I can’t return to my parents’ home ever again, so I agree, but getting Hunter out is priority number one, and it’s all I can

focus on right now,” I say, even though it hurts my heart, and he sighs with defeat.

“Hunter first,” Ryan agrees, but I recognize that tone—he hasn’t given up on me yet.

THIRTY-TWO



BETHANY

I am finally dry and wearing a pair of yoga pants with a loose white t-shirt, but I'm frozen in complete shock as I observe Ryan and the surveillance system that he placed in the Asheville house.

He is completely in his element, talking on speakerphone with Benji and Maria as he tries to coordinate a plan of action while I stand here gaping at the entire setup.

It is knocking me off-kilter to see him be Ryan, the full version of himself. I believe I truly misunderstood the situation at the casino, but my heart still clenches with hurt, and I hold on to that, refusing to be the naïve girl I have always been.

“Thanks, Maria. I'll call you if needed, but having them on standby would be greatly appreciated,” Ryan murmurs, flicking his gaze to mine for a moment as she ends the call, leaving only Benji on the line.

I nervously fold my arms over my chest as I still refuse to sit in the chair he brought in for me—I'm too antsy to remain stationary. My brother is with my parents, and once they find out what happened, they'll surely dangle his life in my face. I dread to consider what that will look like.

“How's my favorite girl doing? Still hanging in there?” Benji asks, and I blush slightly as I roll my eyes. I love that he so easily adopted me into his friendship circle, but he obviously knew Ryan was omitting things, big things, from me, and I'm still mad about it.

“She’s perfect. Still very pissed at us, but she’s perfect,” Ryan answers, his gaze lingering on me as he looks me over again. I watch as his hands clench, desperate to reach out and touch me, but he’s uncertain how I will react.

I don’t know how I want to react. My mind and body are pulling me in two completely different directions, but ultimately, I know I’ll lead with my heart. I just can’t do that right now.

Needing a minute, I squeeze his shoulder gently as I pass and step out into the open kitchen and living room for a breather.

My feet instantly carry me toward the back, where the start of the sunrise breaks through the sky, offering a glimmer of light over the ocean and beach below. God, it’s beautiful.

It’s almost six thirty in the morning, and I haven’t slept a wink. I’ll do all of that when I have Hunter safely out of that house. Opening the patio door, I lean against the doorframe as I let the sound of the ocean lull me into a bit of peace for a few moments.

Not a soul is out there, and the rain has stopped. Noticing the weather, I feel my body tingle with the desire to fuck outside again, only this time without the added element of rain, and I shake my head.

Now isn’t the time for that. I almost feel guilty for delaying getting Hunter because we stopped at the school, but my body and mind were being beaten by the memory of that asshole, and I know I wouldn’t be standing here now, strong and determined, if we hadn’t.

Ryan did that. He makes me whole and lets me fix myself, and it’s the strangest sensation ever.

Hands gently grip my waist as a body presses against my back, and the touch of his full lips makes me shiver as he kisses the crown of my head. Neither of us say anything for a moment, happy to bask in each other’s presence, and I can’t hold it in.

Whirling around, I bury my face in his chest as I clutch his shirt, and he wraps his arms around me tightly, enveloping me in his citrusy scent.

Holy shit, he feels like home, and I want to get lost in him, but I know now isn't the time. I inhale one last time before leaning back, and as I look up, I see him smiling down at me.

"Are you ready to go?" he asks, brushing a loose tendril of hair from my face, and I nod, completely in awe of him at this moment. He knows I'm angry and upset, and he doesn't know where we'll go from here, but he is still doing exactly as he promised, and that's saving both me and my brother.

"Yeah," I murmur in response as we both reluctantly drop our hold on each other. "What's the plan?" I ask, and his eyes widen a little as he swipes a hand down his face.

"Honestly? There really isn't one," he admits as I watch him move over to the breakfast bar and start attaching his hip holster, securing a gun on each side, and it surprises me how natural it looks on him. "We know he's in his room from the surveillance footage. If that changes, Benji will alert me, but I'll get him out, and we'll run," he tells me, and I frown.

"What will I be doing?" I question as he pulls his top down, concealing his weapons.

"Ideally, I would have liked for you to already be on the move, but I think your brother may get his stubbornness from you. I know you won't leave without him, and he won't leave without seeing your face too, which means you'll wait in the truck."

He stands tall with his hands on his hips as if he's ready for an argument, or for me to deny his simple plan, either way, he's on the defensive, and it's kind of cute.

"Okay," I answer, heading for the front door, and he just stares at me for a moment with surprise written across his face until I open the door, and that kicks him into gear.

We're going to get my brother out of there and run. Nothing else matters.

Screw this town and what it's allowed to happen.

I'm a goddamn fucking survivor, and I'm taking what's mine.



“Say it one more time,” Ryan repeats, and I’m about to completely lose my agreeable side and strangle him in a minute.

“Is that *really* necessary?” I grumble, rubbing my eyes as I force the fatigue from my body.

“Just once more, and I’ll leave it there.”

I sigh, turning my attention to him as we sit in the truck, parked across the street from my house. We’ve seen both of my parents moving around through the windows, and the anger is clear on their faces—they know I’m not where I’m supposed to be.

It causes my stomach to twist, but I swallow the uncertainty, reminding myself I was never theirs to sell to begin with.

Wanting to hurry this along before I let them get under my skin, as usual, I wet my lips and repeat the words again.

“I will wait in the truck with the doors locked. Don’t let anyone see me, and if they do, don’t let them in. Benji is on speed dial, Maria too, and you’ll be in and out as quickly as possible,” I murmur, and he nods along with every point.

I don’t know how he’s going to get in and out around my parents, but he’s asked me to trust him, and as much as I don’t want to admit it, I do.

“How long?” I add, giving him a pointed look, and he frowns as he rubs the back of his neck, trying to shake off his own tiredness. He is hot as hell dressed all in black with thick combat boots, but he looks nothing like the surfer guy I know so well.

“How long what?” he asks, and I shake my head.

“You know, like in the movies. How long do I wait until it becomes concerning that you haven’t come out yet?” I say like it makes total sense, and he rolls his eyes at me.

I can see the slightest touch of a grin on his lips, because he thinks I’m asking a rhetorical question, but when he sees I’m not laughing and am, in fact, waiting for an answer, he rubs his temples.

“Don’t be—”

“I’m serious. My father is fucking ruthless, Ryan, we know this. So I’ll ask again, how long?” I interrupt, forcing my point, and after he stares deep into my eyes for a moment, he breathes out a reluctant sigh.

“Twenty minutes.”

“Ten,” I counter, arching an eyebrow at him, and he gives me a stern look in response as he grips the steering wheel.

“Twenty,” he states, and I sit taller, refusing to back down.

“Ten.”

“Dammit, Beth,” he grumbles, his knuckles turning white as he grips the steering wheel as we try to come to a compromise, and I relent.

“Fine, fifteen, but I won’t go any higher,” I retort, keeping my eyes fixed on him.

“Deal.”

Thank God.

I know he wants to protect me, and I appreciate it more than words can say, but when it comes to me offering the same sentiment, he’s not in agreement.

“Hurry,” I whisper, reaching over to stroke my hand over his cheek, and his eyes close for a moment as he leans into my touch, making my heart soar.

“I will,” he mutters with a small smile on his lips before climbing down from the truck and shutting the door discreetly behind him.

It feels like my heart is in my throat as I watch on the edge of my seat while he slinks around the back of the house unnoticed.

I wring my hands as my teeth continuously dig into my bottom lip and my nerves get the better of me. I glance at the clock in the truck every couple of seconds, and when it just edges over ten minutes, I start to panic.

I just argued to be able to follow him, and now, as the time approaches, I have no idea what I will actually do with myself.

Movement out of the corner of my eye catches my attention, but my heart sinks as I see rage in my father's eyes as he stands in the living room with his gun aimed toward the foyer.

Fuck.

No.

Without thought, I swing the truck door open, not bothering to shut it behind me as I rush across the quiet road to my family home. I hear shouts as I approach, and for the first time in as long as I can remember, I wrap my hands around the door handle without knocking and step right inside.

Adrenaline courses through my veins as I take in the scene before me, my eyes falling straight to my father as he glares at me.

I flick my gaze past him to my mother, who's leaning against the doorframe to the living room with the open fireplace crackling behind her, while Ryan stands in front of Hunter on the stairs, his gun raised at my father in defense.

He takes another tentative step down as my father continues to look at me, his gun still aimed at Ryan as he sneers.

"You," he barks, pointing his unarmed hand in my direction as my mother cackles in her drunken state.

"Yeah, Bethany, you," she taunts with a haunting laugh as I stand frozen in place.

Ryan and Hunter make it to the bottom of the stairs. My father is only a few feet away from them now, and I try to gulp past the fear building inside of me as I watch them get closer to my father, but he's distracted by my unannounced entrance. Without blinking an eye, he aims his gun at me as he turns to face me full on, and my heart sinks.

If I've fucked them out of their deal, he'll either want to keep me alive to get his money or shoot me dead on the spot for being a further disappointment than he already anticipated. Bernārd Asheville won't have anything to lose at this point if the debt notices from loan sharks are any indication of how royally fucked they are. Money or death.

"Bernārd, you need to stop waving that thing around. We've had enough alcohol for the next century. Let's put her in isolation, then later today we can pin her to the wall and use her as a target while we practice shooting for when we have to fight against the people we owe money to," my mother suggests, her eyes glossed over as she gulps the fresh bottle of bourbon in her hands.

"Shut the fuck up, woman. Get my son from that asshole. I warned her of the fucking consequences, and she disobeyed, so now Hunter will pay the price," he growls, his gun still aimed in my direction as Ryan continues to place himself between Hunter and my parents.

"No. Don't you dare touch him!" I yell, fear burning through my body as panic takes over. "I screwed this all up for you. Take me, hurt me, I don't care, but don't you dare touch my brother."

I move toward him, but before I can even finish my protest, my mother strides toward Hunter, reaching around Ryan to get to him. Ryan attempts to keep his gun aimed at my father all while trying to push her away, and she stumbles.

"You're not going to touch either of them. I'll have you dead on the floor in seconds if you even try it. We're going to leave now, Hunter, Bethany, and me, and you're going to let us," Ryan states calmly as my mother stumbles into him,

creating a domino effect on Hunter, who manages to stay on his feet, but anger shines in Hunter's gaze.

I watch as he evades Ryan's outstretched arm, darting under it to get to our mother, and he pulls the liquor from her hands.

"You might be better parents if you weren't so fucking drunk all the time. But I guess that's nothing in the grand scheme of things, given all the stupid shit you're willing to fucking do for your own gain," he growls, his empty hand fisting at his side as the other throws the bottle of bourbon over our mother's head, the contents spilling across the carpet before it smashes against the fireplace.

Everything seems to go eerily quiet for a moment as the anticipation of what will happen from Hunter's outburst ripples through the room. I inhale and exhale as we wait.

Within a second, the room erupts. I gape as the fire whooshes out of the confines of its metal gate, flames and ash igniting from the alcohol. I watch in amazement as it rages in the living room, spreading quicker than I could have ever imagined.

The colors are hypnotizing, the reds, yellows, oranges, blues, and blacks creating an intricate dance of their own shapes and patterns. It's almost like watching a beautiful sunset explode on the horizon, except the setting is my prison.

"Ryan," I call out instinctively, concern building inside of me as the living room continues to become engulfed in flames.

"What the fuck have you done?" my father roars, running for Hunter, but Ryan smashes him in the face with his gun before he can get too close, and I watch him fall to the floor as I rush to pull Hunter behind me, all while my mother sobs over the spilled bourbon on the floor.

I can't fully comprehend the sight in front of me as I watch my father punch Ryan in the face, the pair of them brawling on the floor as my mother wails and the flames continue to spread, teasing at the doorway into the foyer.

My concern for Hunter's safety intensifies as smoke begins to billow around us. The heat from the fire touches our skin, and a gunshot rings out, forcing a scream from my lips.

Too much is happening all at once. Too much for me to focus on anything besides keeping Hunter safe. Too much for me to even know where to begin or how this is going to end.

"Bethany, get Hunter out of here!" Ryan yells above the sound of wood splintering and the fire crackling, but I falter, my arm wrapped firmly around Hunter as I balk at leaving Ryan alone.

Ryan's gaze finds mine as he rolls on top of my father, pinning him to the ground as he wrangles the gun from my father's hands. "Bethany, I'm on my way. Get. The. Fuck. Out. Of. Here. Now."

Hunter links his fingers through mine, pulling me backward toward the front door, which is thankfully still open as we spill out onto the street, and I finally come to my senses.

Guiding Hunter toward the truck, I glance back over my shoulder, fear rising inside of me as flames continue to consume the Asheville house.

I bundle us into the truck without even realizing what I'm doing, captivated by the surreal moment crumbling around us. I stare at the place that was once my prison, which is now completely engulfed in its own version of hell.

As the flames begin to kiss the sky, the smoke billowing around us outside, I realize I'm free.

I'm fucking free.

Bethany Victoria Asheville is free.

No more rules.

No more beatings.

No more emotional abuse.

Nothing.

Yet I can't bask in any of the glory when I know Ryan is in danger.

I feel helpless.

I feel numb.

I feel scared.

“He’s going to be okay, Beth,” Hunter murmurs, and I glance at him out of the corner of my eye as he lifts his thumb to wipe the tears from my face. I didn’t even know I was crying.

My brother shouldn’t be consoling me right now, not at all.

“I’m sorry, Hunter. I’m overwhelmed, but are you okay?” I ask, looking him over from head to toe, and he shrugs.

“I’m fine. I watched that crazy motherfucker blow Bruce’s brains out last night. He’ll walk out of there any minute. Well, he better,” he grumbles, and I don’t know what to call him out on first—the fact he said motherfucker, or the fact he said Ryan killed Bruce.

Speechless, I gape at him like a fish as he rubs at his blond hair, watching the house continue to light up the early morning sky. The foyer is now covered in flames and smoke, and my fears for Ryan’s safety kick up a notch while Hunter seems to remain calm.

“He’s there,” Hunter yells, patting my arm as he points to the side of the house. Smoke lingers around Ryan as I watch him slowly make his way to the road, and I’m out of the truck and rushing toward him before I even realize it.

A sob slips past my lips as relief floods my veins. He stumbles, almost dropping to his knees, covered in soot and cuts.

I circle my arms around his neck, crying at the feel of his breath on my skin as he coughs but pulls me close.

“When you two idiots are done, we need to get away from the fire,” Hunter shouts, and I immediately remember where we are. I help Ryan to his feet as he looks down at me with a soft smile.

I walk with him toward the truck with his arm over my shoulder before he slips inside the driver’s seat, and then I

quickly squish in on the passenger side next to Hunter.

No one speaks for a moment as Ryan starts the truck, puts it in drive, and peels off toward the beach house. Neither Hunter nor I look back over our shoulders, refusing to look at our past and leaving it exactly where it should be.

“I killed my parents, didn’t I?” Hunter says solemnly, and my heart lurches in my chest.

“No, it was me... I, uh, I had to shoot them,” Ryan admits, and Hunter’s shoulders sag with relief as I wrap my arm around him.

He’s not sad they are dead, just relieved their death wasn’t delivered at his hands.

But I see the small flare of Ryan’s nostrils and the twitch of his mouth as he lies, and my gaze finds his for a moment over Hunter’s head.

My heart beats rapidly in my chest as I watch him take the burden away from my brother, and it’s in this very defining moment that I know I love him with every ounce of my being, and he loves me.

We’ll weather the storm, no matter what, but as long as I have these two, the rest of the world can burn to ash.

THIRTY-THREE



BETHANY

I yawn as I wipe the sleep from my eyes, wishing I could fall straight back to sleep, but my mind is already in overdrive as I recall what we went through yesterday.

Trying to blink my eyes open, I'm surprised to find no light filtering in through the window because it's dark outside. I wonder what time it is.

I swipe my hair out of my face as I pull the covers off and sit up, and I startle when I find Ryan sitting at my feet with his legs hanging over the side of the bed.

His chin is against his chest, and defeat is etched into every inch of his face as he tilts his head to look at me with a sad smile on his lips.

"Hi," I murmur, feeling nervous. So much is still left to be said between us, but his shoulders relax a little at the sound of my voice. "What time is it?" I ask, knowing my watch and phone were in the fire we drove away from last night, and I swallow past the memory.

My parents are dead.

Dead.

And it feels fucking fantastic.

I am unshackled, unchained, released.

"It's almost eleven," he responds, and it surprises me how long I've slept for. "Hunter is downstairs with Benji and

Maria,” he adds, knowing what I was about to ask next, and I relax back, leaning against the gray cushioned headboard.

“Thank you.”

He nods, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. “I was hoping I could talk to you for a minute before we head down and join everyone to go over the situation,” he says quietly, and my throat dries out as I manage to nod in response.

I can feel my heart rate increasing as I wait for him to find whatever it is he wants to say, but I don’t rush him, keeping my lips tight as I stare at him.

“My parents died when I was young, and I spent a very long time growing up in group homes, too angry to be fostered and too rugged to be adopted, but one thing I did know was that my bloodline was important,” he mutters, looking down at his joined hands.

I suck on my bottom lip to keep myself quiet, crossing my legs as I get comfortable.

“There’s an organization that runs the criminal underworld. Every minuscule detail is under their control, and each family, each bloodline, has a skill set they specialize in,” he explains casually, like he’s letting me know what the weather is, and my jaw nearly hits the floor with how crazy that sounds, but the sincerity in his voice tells me it’s all true.

“My family specialized in infiltration and combat, which basically means we can dig into organizations and eradicate them if necessary, all while defending ourselves with brutal force.” My eyes widen as he still refuses to look at me, but before I can encourage his gaze to swing in my direction, he continues. “I thought it was awesome. I’d spent a long time defending myself anyway, so when I started at the high school, things were calmer. I created a new persona for myself, and I loved every minute of it,” he admits, and I can understand what he means.

To go from home to home as a child with no say, no control, then to finally have the world at your feet? I get it. I

want to reach out and squeeze his shoulder, but he finally looks my way, and I'm frozen in place by the pain in his eyes.

“When I came here, it was to infiltrate Knight's Creek for something. It was never disclosed what for, but it was clearly for something Featherstone was interested in. That's when I met you, and my whole life changed.”

His words hit me hard in the chest, and tears well my eyes as I watch him slump into himself, his arms falling weakly at his sides in defeat while my heart pounds like crazy.

“After you told me what you were dealing with, I knew it was connected. I could feel it in my bones, but when I called it in, begging for them to step in to save you, they did nothing. *Nothing.*” He repeats the last word under his breath like he's still in disbelief, and I pull my knees up to my chest, wrapping my arms around my legs.

We were both dealing with our own version of hell, it's just that neither of us realized it.

He stands and rakes his fingers through his hair as he paces in front of me. “Maria approached me, literally the moment after I got off the phone with the office at Featherstone. It was in Pete's parking lot. She's a high member of the organization, and she offered to change the outcome of both our lives. One look at you through the window had me jumping to agree, and I don't regret it, not for a second. We wouldn't be here now if I hadn't, and even if everything between us is blown to hell, I would do it all again to keep you safe.” His voice is raspy as he meets my gaze, and I can't stop the tear that trails down my cheek.

“Ryan, I—”

“Please, it's okay, just let me explain. I need to get it all out,” he interrupts softly, and I nod for him to continue, but I stand from the bed too, hating the invisible walls between us.

“I should have told you about my fucked up past, I should have told you all of it, explained better, but I didn't plan any of this. Not a second. In the beginning, I was going to return to my old life, so it didn't matter, and I know that sounds harsh,

but it was the truth,” he confesses, lacing his fingers together behind his head as he faces me. “But I didn’t choose this,” he says, waving his hands around. “I didn’t choose you, my heart did.”

I can’t breathe, watching the truth spill from his mouth. My tongue is plastered to the top of my mouth as tears stream down my face.

“But I love you with every fiber of my being. I’ve never led with my heart before, I’ve never had a reason to. I want you to be my forever,” he murmurs, dropping his hands to his sides as he lowers his chin to his chest again.

I stare in wonder as I try to find my own words, but it’s hard, especially when he’s just said so much.

He drops to a crouch, his hands on his head as he grips his hair in desperation, and that’s what kicks me into action.

I take a step forward, stopping right in front of him, and pry one of his hands from his head before lacing my fingers with his. I wait for him to finally look up and meet my gaze, and when he shines those stormy blue eyes my way, the words flow freely.

“I fell in love with you without truly knowing you as a person, and that’s my fault,” I tell him truthfully, and he wets his lips and nods, but the defeat on his face doesn’t waver. “But I don’t regret it, not a single second of it.”

His glossy eyes widen, and he looks at me with surprise as his jaw drops. Ryan pulls our joined hands toward him, and the gentle press of his lips against my knuckles as he looks up at me through his lashes makes me weak in the knees.

This man.

“Tell me there’s hope,” he whispers against my skin, making goosebumps rise up my arms, and I nod.

“I know you lied in the truck last night, Ryan,” I murmur, and he freezes, but he must know what I’m talking about, and the soft smile on my lips tells him I’m not mad. “It destroyed me at the casino when I saw that you knew that Manetti guy, but everything you did afterwards has proven me wrong,” I

say honestly, and he rises to his feet, gripping my waist with one hand as he raises the other to cup my cheek.

“I promise you, with all of my soul, that I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you,” he vows as he places his forehead against mine.

“You already have,” I whisper before pressing my lips to his.

My lips tingle at the touch, at the feel of home, and I hum against his mouth as he pulls me against his chest.

“I love you,” he says against my lips, and I smile.

“I love you too.”

“I love you three, but unfortunately we’re going to have to break up the little love fest for now. Maria says we have big things to discuss,” Benji shouts through the closed door, and Ryan groans, making me chuckle, but I feel him.

God, after last night, I want to feel him everywhere, but that’s going to have to wait—for now.

“Lead the way,” I mutter reluctantly, and he does, clasping our hands together before leading me downstairs.

It isn’t until we’re halfway down the staircase that I realize I’m only wearing one of Ryan’s plain t-shirts with my panties on underneath, but thankfully it’s down to my knees, so I don’t stress too much about it.

As I brush my hair back off my face, I spot Hunter sitting at the breakfast bar. Benji slips into the seat across from him with a knowing grin on his lips as Maria sits on the sofa.

I recall Ryan mentioning her importance, and I respect that, along with the help we have received, but my priority is Hunter, and that’s who I greet first.

“Hey, bud,” I murmur as I release Ryan’s hand to check on him, and to my surprise, he turns to me with a grin.

“Hey,” he says, stuffing another bite of pancake into his mouth, and a serene feeling washes over me.

Knowing he's okay, I turn my attention to Maria who is already watching me with a smile.

"I'm sorry for showing up in the middle of the night, but when you guys slept through the day, our window of decision making got smaller," she explains, but there's no judgment in her statement.

"It's okay, has there been a change to the situation?" Ryan inquires, and she nods.

"There has. Last night, Bethany, you were bought by Rico Manetti for a man named Totem. Rico is a member of The Ring within Featherstone, like me, but Totem...well, he's the reason for a lot of deaths within our organization, and a highly wanted man," Maria explains, not concerned whether or not I'm up to speed on the situation, and I nod all the same as I move to stand beside Ryan in the middle of the room.

"Neither were killed last night, which means Rico will be hunting Ryan now, because he'll be worried Ryan knows about the connection between Rico and Totem," Maria adds, and my eyes widen as worry rises inside of me. "If you are still sure about your half of the agreement, I have a solution."

Ryan rubs his forehead but nods, while I look between the two of them.

"What's the deal?" I ask, not caring who answers it, but wanting the answer all the same.

Maria beats him to it. "I want Ryan to protect my granddaughter. She isn't aware of this world, but when she is, she'll be a force to be reckoned with. Along with that and her bloodline, she'll also be a target. There's more to it than that, but when needed, I want Ryan's loyalty."

I look at Ryan, but he's watching Maria with a promise in his eyes.

"I still agree to that, especially after yesterday," he states, and I glance over my shoulder to check on Benji and Hunter, who are watching them both as well.

"I'm glad. I know I've already helped, and I promised to set up Bethany and Hunter too, but for you, Ryan, I think we

need to declare you deceased.” Her words sink to the pit of my stomach like a rock, but Ryan is already nodding as she continues. “It would take Manetti and Totem out of the picture for you, and I will put you down under Steele Security for the rest of your life since you’d never be able to get a job elsewhere.”

If anyone else was saying this, I would instantly assume it’s a setup for her to have control over him forever, but the trust Ryan has in her already seeps into me too.

“Do I still get to be with Bethany and Hunter?” he asks, and my heart warms, especially when he includes Hunter, and Maria smiles.

“Yes,” she responds, rising to her feet, and I realize she’s not in a business suit like last time. Instead, she’s in a pair of yoga pants and a long, floaty black top, far more casual than usual, and it’s a good look on her.

“I want in too,” Benji adds, and I almost pull a muscle in my neck. I glance over my shoulder in surprise, but it’s the uncertainty on Hunter’s face that makes me pause.

“What’s wrong, Hunter?” I question, turning to him.

He clears his throat as he turns on the chair. “I can’t leave my friends, Beth. Xavier and Tobias, they...they didn’t bag any better parents than us. I go there for sleepovers every weekend because they are left alone, and we take care of each other when the nanny’s shift finishes.”

I gape at him for a moment, upset I never knew any of this, but I’m glad he’s telling me now.

“You don’t have to leave, not if you don’t want to. If anything, it would be good to keep tabs on Ilana Knight too. You’ll be deceased in the eyes of Featherstone. I’ll have you wiped from the system entirely, and you’ll work solely for me. We’ll alter your names on documents, but you’ll be off the grid, never using government travel and leaving no paper trails,” she clarifies, and I love this woman more and more every time she talks.

“Then I don’t want to,” Hunter reiterates, and I swipe a hand down my face, trying to keep up with all the information. “Maybe I could live with Xavier permanently, then I wouldn’t have to be declared dead with these nut jobs,” he adds, looking past me and straight at Maria.

I follow his gaze, and she smiles and nods.

Do I not get a say here? I think to myself, but I hold it back. I don’t disagree with his thought process, it just feels daunting.

“You can figure all that out, I’m sure, but honestly, that would work well, although we would have to work out who your guardian would be so you aren’t placed into the hands of child services,” she reasons, picking her bag up from the floor beside her, and I continue to gape like a fish.

“Do neither of us get a say?” Ryan asks with a raised eyebrow, and I appreciate him voicing what I have an issue with.

Maria gives him a pointed stare. “Let’s be honest. You will do everything in your power to give Bethany what she wants, who, in turn, will want to support her brother in the best way possible. I’m just cutting out the middlemen and talking to the boss,” she states, winking at Hunter who grins, all pleased with himself, and I shake my head because that’s all true.

“I’ll get everything set in motion, and I should make you aware that the two bodies found in the Asheville fire were confirmed as your parents, and the house is nothing but ash.”

She squeezes my arm as she passes, but it’s not in sympathy, it’s almost a relief squeeze, and I accept it, before Benji walks her to the door.

Looking around, I know things are going to change, even if only a little, but the usual angst and pain that hovers above my head like a dark cloud is gone.

If Ryan is declared dead, I might be deceased, too, so no one comes looking for payment for my parents’ debts, but it’s all worth it, even if I don’t understand how any of this works.

Turning to Ryan, I let him wrap me in his arms, my heart filling with love for the jerkface who started out as a real asshole but changed my world.

I'll follow him to the ends of the earth.

Now and always.



EPILOGUE

Four Years Later

“Ryan, I swear to God, Hunter and Benji will be here for dinner soon, and I have something to tell you,” I squeal as he continues to ignore me, carrying me into the house over his shoulder with powerful strides.

He kicks the front door shut with his combat boot before whirling around and pinning me against the wood.

Our lips come together in a total frenzy as we uncontrollably fight for an extra touch, a deeper kiss, just more.

Ryan’s been away for four days, Maria called him in, but they didn’t manage to get their hands on Totem. Again. It’s the same story every time, and I’m not sure if I’m even supposed to know what they are up to, but he tells me anyway.

No secrets.

None at all.

“Fuck them coming over, they’ll have to wait. You promised me your tight pussy, and I want it. I’ve missed you, Betty,” he growls against my mouth, and I shiver at his words.

Four days. Ninety-six hours. Five thousand seven hundred and sixty minutes. And far too many fucking seconds to even think about.

We’ve gone longer without seeing each other, but it never gets easier. More importantly, this time, I have some news of

my own.

Tugging at his hair, I wrap my legs around his waist as I feel his cock against my stomach, and his fingers search under my floaty dress to find the globes of my ass.

I wore it for the easy access, but he was supposed to be here almost an hour ago. Traffic held him up, but now we're cutting it close.

"You're on a timer, and you better make me come. Orgasms aren't the same when they are not from you," I say with a pout, and he pulls back, giving me his megawatt grin as he looks at me.

Sex through a laptop screen with a vibrator between my legs doesn't count, but God did this man ruin me. I'm addicted to anything that results in an orgasm from him, and he knows it.

"As you wish," he mutters before finding my core with his fingers, and he groans when he realizes I have no underwear on. "Fuck, Beth."

My pussy clenches as he wastes no time fucking me with two fingers, my excitement making me wet and ready. I grin at how much it affects him too.

"Timer, Ry," I whisper huskily, reaching down to unbutton his jeans, only to find he's commando also.

Holy sweet Jesus.

As if answering all of my prayers, he lines his cock up with my entrance and thrusts deep inside me with one swift motion, and I cry out with pleasure.

I grip the nape of his neck as he tilts back, managing to hit me deeper with the slight adjustment to our angle, and my eyes roll with ecstasy.

This is never going to get old.

Ever.

"Fuck," I moan, releasing one hand from his neck to find my clit, my body coming alive at our combined touch. This is

the exact feeling I've been chasing for the past four days.

"So damn wet," he murmurs, pinning my hips to the door and bending his legs so he can move harder. I can hear the knocker pounding on the other side of the door in time with his thrusts.

Knowing someone could hear it and know exactly what we're doing makes my body tingle, and with the perfect stroke over my clit in time with Ryan's thick cock hitting my G-spot, I explode.

"Holy shit. Yes, yes, yes," I scream, sweat gathering on my brow as Ryan grunts too.

"Fuckkkk."

His cock pulses inside of me, prolonging my orgasm, and I collapse in his arms as we both try to catch our breaths.

"So, you had something to tell me?" he murmurs, his forehead pressed against mine, and I suddenly feel the nerves I was dealing with before he arrived.

"Uh, yeah," I mutter, rubbing my lips together as his blue eyes meet mine.

He frowns. "What's wrong, Betty?" he asks, running his thumb over my chin as I swallow hard.

I just need to say it. Fuck my nerves and my anxiety, I just need to get the words out. "I'm pregnant."

My voice is barely above a whisper as his mouth falls open with surprise. I have no idea how he's going to react, but in the next breath, his lips are crushing against mine again.

His cock jolts inside of me, attempting to stir back to life, and I grin against his lips as I finally let myself feel excited.

"I fucking love you, Betty. And I love our unborn child with every breath I take too," Ryan says before kissing me gently on the corner of my mouth, and I sigh.

"I fucking love you too," I reply, and he grins like he always does when I actually curse. I roll my eyes, but before I

can continue, a knock booms on the door behind me, and my blood runs cold.

“When you two literal fuckers have finished, I’m starving,” Benji hollers, and I hide my face in the crook of Ryan’s neck like Benji can see me. Ryan chuckles. “And just an F.Y.I., your brother is heading down the driveway now too.”

Shit.

Ryan pulls his cock from my core, and I groan at the emptiness I feel but quickly rush to the bathroom without a backward glance to clean myself. We can continue to discuss this later.

Giving myself a moment, I make sure I look much more put together before I go in search of them, fresh panties firmly in place. My three favorite guys—well, three of five if we count Hunter’s two best friends who have grown on me too.

Then there’s also Pete. He and Linda demanded to know what the hell was going on with me, and Maria agreed they could be informed if they would be Hunter’s guardians, and they did, without question. Hunter doesn’t know, and he doesn’t need to. All he knows is freedom, and that’s all I want for him.

I find them in the kitchen, sitting at the breakfast bar like they always do, and I smile.

Watching them laugh and joke without a care in the world leaves me speechless every time. We have been through so much, and I’m ready for more of the good stuff in life. We deserve it. My hand instinctively falls to my stomach, and a smile creeps over my lips.

Ryan looks over his shoulder at me as I lean against the doorframe, wearing a heartwarming grin on his face, and I can’t wait for Benji and Hunter to feel what we feel.

Love. Unconditional, soul destroying love.

I feel alive, even when I’m dead, and there’s no place I’d rather be.

RESOURCES

If you or anyone you know is dealing with any of the situations mentioned, please reach out to the following resources below:

United Kingdom -

<https://www.supportline.org.uk/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

United States -

<https://victimconnect.org/>

<https://www.thehotline.org/>

For further information, please reach out to your designated countries hotline(s).

Afterwords

WOW. Just WOW <3

This story wrote itself and broke me in the process.

Two people have never loved each other as much and as easily
as these too.

I didn't know how I was going to handle an MF book, but they
honestly told me the story. What started to scare me, was how
long it was taking to get to the smexy hahahaha!!

It took an age, but damn was it worthwhile and perfectly
timed!

I'm really excited for you to delve into Lou-Lou's world next,
she's a badass sassy bitch and I love it!

Now I need a lie down. haha.

THANK YOU

Oh my dayssssss, thank you to my main man who held my hand when I was getting overwhelmed with all of the feels and talked me down from the stresses. I love you boo!

To my babies, who happy dance, shake their booty, and bask in the joy of this journey with me. Thank you for letting me interrupt our summer holiday to still work on this baby. It was totally worth it.

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About The Author

KC Kean is the sassy half of a match made in heaven. Mummy to two beautiful children, Pokemon Master and Apex Legend world saving gamer.

Starting her adventure in the RH romance world after falling in love with it as a reader, who knows where this crazy train is heading. As long as there is plenty of steam she'll be there.



Also By Kc Kean

Featherstone Academy

(Completed Reverse Harem Contemporary Romance)

[My Bloodline](#)

[Your Bloodline](#)

[Our Bloodline](#)

[Red](#)

[Freedom](#)

The Allstars Series

(Completed Reverse Harem Contemporary Romance)

[Toxic Creek](#)

[Tainted Creek](#)

[Twisted Creek](#)

Standalone MF

[Burn To Ash](#)

The Emerson U Series

(Reverse Harem Contemporary Romance)

[Watch Me Fall](#) coming January 7th (Book 1 of 3)