



BLUE BLOOD
STILL RUNS RED.

REVIVAL OF A KING

BLACK HALLOWS BOOK ONE

G.N. WRIGHT

Revival of a King
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This is dedicated to every book that has ever left me with a cliff-hanger and the authors that wrote them. I love and loathe you.

The first time you fall in love it changes you forever and no matter how hard you try that feeling just never goes away.

Nicholas Sparks

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TRIGGER WARNING

This is a full-length romance that is the first book of a dark romance series. It contains brief references to sexual assault and violence and other themes that some readers may find triggering.

Prologue

Three Years Ago

Freezing. That's what I am. So cold. Not only my body, but even my soul feels like it's a block of ice. Why am I so cold? The last thing I remember was running through the woods with Marcus. Where is Marcus? Where am I? Just as I'm forming these thoughts, darkness descends.

Marcus is my best friend, Marcus Riviera, My River. We've been best friends since kindergarten when Jimmy Olsen came over and pulled one of my pigtails. Marcus walked over and pushed him into the sandbox and told him to leave me alone. He reached out and held my hand and we've been inseparable ever since. We sat next to each other in every class, hung out almost every day after school and took vacations together with our families. We are always together, River and Ells against the world. He has always been there for me, stood up for me, protected me, he has made the girl I am today.

We shouldn't have been in the woods. It's forbidden. Marcus' dad says it's not safe. He says there's animals out there to fear, but like many kids out there, we thought we had nothing to be scared of. Each time we'd go into the woods, we'd go deeper into the unknown. Exploring and discovering what forbidden treasures we could find. I wanted to turn back today, something felt off, but Marcus dared me to go further. And I never back down from a dare.

I wake again to a foggy feeling clouding my brain. My head is pounding, and my body feels heavy, like it's being weighed down. I try to open my eyes to see where I am, but they won't cooperate. My heart is starting to race, fear starts to creep in. I try to move but my limbs feel heavy, awkward, and impossible to lift. That coldness I felt, I feel it from head to toe, I am bare, naked, vulnerable.

That's when things start to register. I focus and realize my arms are strung tightly above my head; my wrists bound closely together. I realize my thighs are sore, held unbearably wide by other constraints around my ankles. That's when I register pain all along my abdomen. So much pain. Then I smell it, an iron metallic smell is all around me. Blood. What the hell happened to me?

An unfamiliar buzzing sound perforates my consciousness. I try to concentrate but my head hurts so much. I try to move when the squeak of a

floorboard next to me makes me flinch.

“Shh, Ells. It’s Ash. I’ve got you.” I am hushed by a familiar voice. Is that Asher? Asher is here? Why the hell is he here? Where even is here?

I struggle to open my eyes but when I do, I’m greeted by Asher’s sapphire blue gaze. Asher Donovan is my best friend like Marcus, well not exactly like Marcus but close enough. He moved into our town a couple of years ago with his family and joined our little double trouble twosome. Marcus doesn’t like him as much as I do but he puts up with him for me. The three of us hang out a lot together as do our families. He is an amazing friend like Marcus, but I don’t see him the same way I do my River. There is just something different about my friendship with Marcus, there always has been.

Blinking away from his eyes, I look around the room. It’s small and dark. It looks like a cabin of some sort. That buzzing sound is coming from an air conditioning unit in the corner. There are no windows, just a door in front of me leading to somewhere else. I’m lying on the lone piece of furniture in the room, a dirty mattress on the floor. I turn my eyes back onto Asher and notice the sadness in his gaze as he looks over me.

I follow his eyes and take stock. The blood that I smelt is all over me. My abdomen is covered with cuts and marks I have no memory of receiving. Following the blood further, that’s when I notice it covering my thighs.

No. No. No. No. No. No. Please god no.

“I’m so sorry, Ells. I had no idea.” Asher whispers as a tear streaks down his face.

I feel sick. I can feel the bile clawing its way up my throat wanting to get out. This can’t be happening, none of this makes any sense.

“What’s going on? Where’s Marcus?” I question, my own voice sounding hoarse and broken.

“Just don’t say anything when they get here,” he replies, just as we hear footsteps approaching. Ash tenses next to me, wiping the tear from his face quickly, putting an impassive mask on and my heart sinks. What could be worse than what’s already happened.

The door flies open, and I am greeted with the sight of Asher’s father Elliot and his older brother Greg. They share the same family looks with Asher, that all American tall, fair haired boy next door look. The same striking blue eyes, eyes I usually find charming, attractive even, but not right now. Their expressions are a stark contrast from what I saw on Asher’s face a moment ago. They look excited, giddy even and I fear things are about to

get worse.

“Well, I didn’t want to believe my son when he said he had caught himself a princess but here you are!” Elliot’s voice booms across the small space as his gaze assesses me from top to bottom lingering on my thighs. His smile expands into a grin like the cat that got the canary as he slides his gaze over to Greg and slaps him on the shoulder.

“How was she son?” he asks proudly.

“A nice tight fit,” Greg replies smoothly, looking directly into my eyes showcasing a huge sadistic smile on his face.

I feel the bile clawing further up my throat, trying to find a way to get out. How could he do this to me? How could Elliot let his son do this? Elliot is friends with my parents. Their family have been to my house for dinner multiple times. What the hell is wrong with them? Elliot turns his gaze onto his younger son.

“Well Ash, you’re on guard duty until her sale tomorrow. It’s time you started to take more of an active role in the family business,” he commands.

“Yes sir.” Ash replies without skipping a beat. Oh god, Asher is a part of this? I want to cry.

“That’s my boy and feel free to have a go before she’s gone, finally pop your own cherry,” Elliot sneers gleefully offering him a wink and then nods to Greg, “You drug her again. We want her to be nice and compliant when the buyers come tomorrow, no surprises.”

Greg slithers over to me. I want to fight. I need to try and defend myself, but my body won’t comply and as he kneels down and slides a needle into my arm, I feel the fogginess begin to take over me again. Before I slip into the darkness one more time, I hear his whispered words against my ear.

“I’ll come back for another taste later, princess. My cum mixed with your blood is a great look on you.”

The last thing I feel is him stroking my face before I succumb to the darkness.

I reawaken to the feeling of floating. Like drifting lazily down the river, feeling the ebb and flow of the water beneath me. But it’s not the water that’s holding me, it’s someone’s strong arms under me. Recalling what happened earlier, I try with all my might to kick my legs and swing my arms, but my limbs won’t cooperate. They feel like they’re encased in concrete, just useless accessories attached to my body.

“Ells, it’s going to be okay. I’m getting you out of here,” Asher whispers

breathlessly. His pace is fast. Leaves crunching underfoot while his heart beats strong beneath my head resting on his chest. I fight to stay awake, but I keep drifting back into the darkness.

A while later I am awoken by another voice, cutting into my hazy thoughts.

"Fuck, is she okay? What did those bastards do to her?" the new voice questions.

"It was Greg and his crew, they ... he ... I didn't get there in time to stop them," he chokes out. His whole body deflates with his confession. I want to comfort him. Tell him it wasn't his fault, but the fog won't let my mouth cooperate.

"Hey, kid, you saved her from worse. You're a hero," the man argues, and I feel instantly grateful to him for voicing my thoughts. He says what I cannot, Asher did not do this to me. He has nothing to feel guilty for. I look into Asher's eye to try and convey my agreement with the man's comments but as our eyes lock, Asher flicks his gaze away, his face guilt ridden.

"Just hurry and get her out of here before they realize she's missing and come looking for her," Asher replies before he looks down at me with so much sadness as he leans in to place a kiss on my forehead. "Oh, Ells Bells, I'm so sorry. I wish I could have done something more; I wish I could have stopped them but don't worry, I'll make them pay."

The look in his eye tells me that what happened here hasn't just changed me irrevocably, it's changed him too. The fun-loving boy of my childhood is gone. We will never be the same.

He gives me one last look and then passes me off to the man and turns and walks away before I can respond. I have no idea where he's going or when I will see him again and it makes my heart ache.

The man quickly wraps a blanket around me to cover my body and it's only then I focus on him. My River. He has come to save me.

"Marcus?" I question, still disoriented.

"It's Michael sweetheart, don't worry we are getting you out of here," Marcus' dad answers me.

I don't have time to answer him before he turns and begins running at a quick pace through the woods. At this point, I don't care where we're going, as long as it's as far away as possible from the hell that occurred back there.

After what seems like hours, we clear the tree line just as dawn begins to break. The sunlight streaming into my eyes makes me squint, and into view

comes a small car. Michael slows his pace and makes his way over to the vehicle. As he nears the passenger side door, my heart starts to race, and I begin to panic. What if I've gone through one hell, only to be placed into another? Who is in this car? What if Asher just handed me from one devil, to another?

I have always trusted Michael but then again, I also trusted Elliot and Greg and look how that turned out. I must have tensed, because Michael squeezes me closer in an attempt to comfort me when in reality, it only suffocates me.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, you're going to be safe now."

He places me gently down while keeping one arm around me as he uses the other to open the car door and then pushes me inside. In the driver's seat is a man who looks not much older than me. I've never seen this guy before, but Michael trusts him to take care of me. He got me far away from that place. I still cannot comprehend how this all happened, I was just out in the woods with Marcus ... Marcus. What happened to Marcus? Oh god! I whip my head quickly and choke his name.

"Marcus?"

Michael smiles at the mention of his son's name and kneels so he's on my eye level. "Marcus is going to be okay. I will watch over him. He's strong. But one day, sweet girl, you're going to have to come back for him. He'll need you".

That's when it hits me, I'm leaving. I'm leaving Black Hallows. Everyone I've ever known is here, my friends, my family.

"What about my parents?" I ask, only now realizing I disappeared yesterday. They must be worried sick. Oh lord they would be devastated to find out what happened to me. After a few moments of silence, I turn to Michael and plead for an answer.

He flicks his eyes from me to the unknown driver and back, giving me, a sad smile and I know. That one look was all it took. They knew. They knew what was happening to me and did nothing. It all finally dawns on me. I was kidnapped, beaten, raped and if that wasn't enough, my parents knew and did nothing to stop it. I finally give in and let the tears fall down my face. Suddenly a hand reaches over and hands me a tissue. I turn and find enough mental capacity to ask a question that's been running through my mind.

"Who? Who are you?" I garble through my tears.

The tension slowly releases from his shoulders and he looks to me with a

friendly but sorrowful smile. He's familiar to me, yet I know we've never met. He's got a handsome face with kind blue eyes and looks to be in around his early 20's.

"I'm Zack," he replies simply.

"You can trust him more than anyone, Elle. Don't worry, he will keep you safe from here on out," Michael tells me with such conviction, and I have no choice but to believe him.

"Forget about this place and what happened here and don't come back until you're ready, it's not safe for you. Take care, kid," he adds before he quickly shuts the door and steps back.

Before I can protest the stranger next to me revs the engine quietly and takes us back out onto the main road.

And then we drive out of Black Hallows, the only home I've ever known.

Present

It's been three years since that night, and what I still remember most is the blood. The smell of it as it covered my broken, battered and beaten body.

It's ironic really, that blood is what I remember most. It's what I see when I close my eyes every night and what reminds me most of my hometown. Not my childhood or all the memories I created growing up here, nope, just the blood. Because blood is the currency of this town. Black Hallows runs on it, blood seeps through its veins. New blood in, old blood out.

I was a child back then; I didn't see it before it was too late. Before it was my blood that paid the price. I've tried to forget that night, move past it, but that just isn't possible.

I'm no longer bleeding, but I am forever broken, both inside and out. I can recall the pain, I have the scars to remind me every time I look at my body, but it's not the pain that plagues my nightmares. No. It's the feeling of being completely and utterly powerless. Having something stolen from me when I wasn't even conscious enough to fight back.

The memories of that night came back to me in bits and pieces over the years, until I remembered every moment, all the sordid details that I wish I could forget. Now I relish that every time I close my eyes, I feel the pain, I see their faces, I see their smiles. It fuels my vengeance.

When you are little, they tell you to check for monsters hiding under your bed. It turns out the monsters don't hide out in the dark, they stand in the light with a smile on their face and a knife behind their back. One of them a weapon to disarm, and the other a weapon to kill. I don't know which one I'm more scared of. These monsters know your name and learn your every weakness.

When I think back to that night, I thought I was just unlucky, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe even paying a price for my insubordination but I was wrong. It was much bigger than me and my family, much darker than I ever could have ever imagined.

It has been three years since the night, the night they thought they ruined me, beat me.

How wrong they were.

They didn't beat me.

They made me.

Now it's time I show them what they made, I am going to hunt them down and take everything from them.

Burn their world to the fucking ground.

I won't stop until it is their blood paying the price.

I left this town a scared, damaged little girl.

Now, I'm their worst nightmare and they don't even know it yet.

My name is Elle King and it's time the elite of Black Hallows paid for their crimes and make no mistake... they will pay in blood.

Chapter 1

ELLE

I hate this town and everyone in it, well almost everyone.

Growing up here was a dream if you grew up on the North Side that is. It's all white picket fences and happy smiling families. I loved my house, my private school, and my black card, I thought they gave me status, something that people would be jealous of and they were. How sad my life was back then, and I didn't even realise it. I thought living on the North Side gave me power and status but all it did was paint an invisible target on my back and put me on the map.

I'm parked at the top of North Hill, the most prestigious and sought-after section of real estate in the whole town of Black Hallows. An estate of mansions housing the richest patrons this town has to offer. You can see everything from up here, from North Side to South Side, to Riverbank and even the Strip.

The rest of the town looks up here and sees beautiful houses filled with perfect families who have more money than god. They are jealous of us, covet us.

If only they knew the darkness that resides here.

The North Side is home to celebrities, politicians, and even high up mafia bosses but only the most rich and powerful are granted a home on North Hill. The requirements were simple blue blood and green money. This side of town is filled with high end stores, Michelin star restaurants and luxurious hotels and bars. They also have the prominent Hallows Preparatory Academy home to the most elite students aka the future devils of this world.

All are a stark contrast to the other part of town, the South Side. The South Side is filled with families who are barely getting by. Trailer parks and small houses all of which were unappealing and overcrowded. Run down stores, dive bars and ill-equipped hospitals and of course the local school, Hallows High.

I'm a north bred princess as the townies would call me. Born and raised right here on the hill. Or at least I was until that night.

The last thing the rich devils of this town would expect is the return of Elle King. Eighteen-year-old daughter of the elite Jonathan and Sarah King. My parents are old money, wealthy and influential beyond belief. We were

royalty amongst our little town, no one was more affluent than us. They were madly in love and doted on me, the picture-perfect family. Or at least that's what they showed the world, showed me.

I was the royal princess living at the top of the hill and their pedestal until I saw the truth. I was blinded by the mansions, the parties and being given everything I ever asked for. I thought I knew all about being in a loved happy family, how wrong I was.

The King's are all about connections and apparently their connection with the Donovan's and friends was more important than the one with their own daughter.

I haven't spoken to them in years. I doubt they care and neither do I. They aren't my family anymore. They are too busy worrying about being better than everyone else, you know that archaic notion of thinking their shit don't stink and their blood is bluer than most because they've had their money longer than others.

It is all utter bullshit if you ask me. My parents are worth billions in old money going back generations. Zack Royton, my savior, and my new family is worth billions in new money. I know who the better soul is. Zack came to me when I had nothing and no one and gave me everything. I would be lost if not for him, but I'm not. He took me from this town without looking back and welcomed me into his family with open arms.

Thanks to him I get to be me, just Elle, a dark tainted soul on my path for revenge. Lover of dancing, country music, books, and donuts. The wild colors of the autumn fall and the smell of crisp winter mornings. My biker boots and oversized tees. The girl with many secrets and not enough people to share the burden with. The rich girl who knows money means both everything and nothing in this shitty world.

It's time for me to make my mark back in this town and what better time to start that than with my first day of senior year.

As I was growing up my future was mapped out. It was set in stone that for high school I would attend Hallows Preparatory Academy but that is the last place you would find me now. My parents and Elliot Donovan are on the board there together and I won't allow them to have any kind of influence on my life.

Instead I am heading across town to the South Side. To a place I barely know anyone which is the best thing for me. I need to be there to start to execute my plan and put certain things in motion and that starts right there at

Hallows High.

The last three years of my life have been great. Zack was there for me every day. Although it wasn't a regular childhood I had, he taught me everything I needed to stay safe. He trained me in kickboxing and krav maga. He taught me how to shoot a gun (several guns in fact). He taught me hand to hand combat. He taught me how to blend in and how to stand out. To always think ahead and have a backup plan for your backup plans. To think of every possible outcome, and never to be caught off guard.

That's why when I pull up into the parking lot of the local South Side High School, I park in the back corner, giving myself a full view of the school and its surrounding area. There is nothing prestigious about this place, it's one large square building in desperate need of a paint job, with a couple of back buildings and a shitty football field across the way. Surrounding the entire premises is a large fence that has more holes in it than the fishnets I'm wearing.

Sitting back, I take it all in from the driver's seat of my jeep, hiding behind my tinted windows watching all the students milling around. Catching up with old friends, discussing their summer breaks, looking excited about what this year has in store.

The bell ringing startles me and breaks me from my thoughts. Everyone in the surrounding area starts to slowly make their way inside, still chatting, still looking hopeful. It is the complete opposite to what I feel inside; but why would they feel like I do? They are just here for their education, completely ignorant to the horrors that occur daily on their own doorsteps. I used to be just like them, ignorant, naive but my eyes were opened, and I'll never be blinded again.

Once almost everyone has made their way inside, I gather my backpack from the passenger seat and climb from my jeep. I try to ignore the sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as I make my way up the steps. I wish it was just usual first day nerves but even I know that's not true. I'm nervous yes, but not because it's my first day at a new school, but because I know who I'm going to see today. It's been a long three years, but the time has finally arrived to return to Black Hallows. And to him. My River.

He's here. I know he is because I checked. Over the years, I've kept low key tabs on him. What was I supposed to do? He was my best friend, my first love, my River. I should probably stop calling him that. It's been years since

I've seen him, spoken to him. Ever since that night that changed everything. I couldn't even reach out to him after I left, it was too dangerous.

My silence mixed with the devil's lies led him to believe that I abandoned him when he needed me most and I did. It just wasn't my choice. It's just another thing they took from me, he doesn't even know the tip of the iceberg I'm floating on but none of that matters. He blames me for everything including the murder of his father and he should. It's my fault that Elliot Donovan executed Michael Riviera. Marcus lost everything because Michael helped me escape and I should explain to him what happened to me, but it won't change anything now and it would only invite him into my danger. Besides, I didn't come back for him. I am here for the other guys, the ones who stole from me and so many others and it's time they started to pay for their sins.

My vengeance begins today.

I make my way to the door that opens to the school and sigh. I look to the large sign hanging above like some welcome home banner.

'WELCOME TO HALLOWS HIGH'

It should just say welcome to hell.

Well, there's no going back now. Let's do this, I've taken on guys twice my size and won in training, surely, I can handle high school. Fuck, who am I kidding? This is going to be a shit show but I'm already here so in I go.

Chapter 2

ELLE

I curl my palm around the door handle and hesitate one more time, I take a deep breath trying to fortify my inner strength for what I am about to begin. There is still time to change my mind, turn around and leave this town for good but I need to do this. For me, for them, for Michael. I have my reasons, my secrets, secrets that I need to protect and taking down the Donovan's is the only way to do that.

"Are you planning on going in or are you just gonna block the way all day?" a smooth cocky voice with a dark edge breaks me out of my stupor.

I turn to an Adonis smiling back at me with a cheeky grin on his face. I'm not joking, that is the only way to describe the pure perfection of this guy. He's tall, easily over 6ft, with a lean muscular frame, his hazel eyes slowly assessing me from head to toe. His dark blonde hair is long and tied into a messy man bun, he's got one ear pierced and half a joint hanging from his lips looking like he doesn't have a care in the world.

He's leaning on a beautiful red dodge charger which like my white G63 Mercedes jeep looks largely out of place in the lot of run-down cars. He's parked it right at the front of the lot next to a top of the line blacked out SUV similar to Zack's and a black Ducati motorbike. None of them fit the profile of a south sider high school student so I can't help but wonder who the hell he is.

I have done more than enough research into the people of this town but that concentrated mainly on the elite and regardless of what he drives if he fell into that category he wouldn't be here.

I flick my eyes back to him to assess him some more and the cocky grin on his face only grows the longer I stare at him. He pushes off the hood of what I presume is his car and makes his way to the bottom of the steps and looks up to me.

"You're new, I haven't seen you round here before."

"Actually, I'm old, a wanderer returning," I muse. I nod to the joint as I continue, "Might wanna hide that before you get caught?"

He shakes his head with a chuckle like what I just said was the dumbest thing he's ever heard.

"Oh, Princess, you are definitely new if you think anyone would try to

call me out for this,” he makes a show of taking a big drag as he slowly ascends the stairs until we are toe to toe and then blows the smoke directly into my face.

“Want some?” he asks, cocking his brow at me.

“No thanks, I don’t smoke.”

“Who said I was talking about the joint?” he smirks a devilish grin before he adds, “I’ve got something else for your mouth.”

It takes me a second to register what he just said and then I almost choke on my breath. What the hell is this guy for real, is this how he picks up girls? I mean probably considering he looks like that; they probably drop to his feet daily. He’s probably had every girl here wrap their lips around his cock which I’m sure is no doubt just as magnificent as him. Like good looks and that bad boy attitude isn’t enough I am sure God gifted him with a super dick too. I can tell he is that fun kind of dangerous, the kind of guy you know will rock your world and break your heart all at the same time.

I am not used to spending time with any guys my age, well not ones who openly flirt with me anyway. So my inner bitch claps back before I can stop her.

“No thanks, pretty boy, I don’t have time to choke on anything that small, I need to get to the office.”

His laughter follows me as I turn and walk away. What the hell - where did that come from Elle?

He hollers after me, “I can’t wait to give you a Rebel’s welcome, newb.”

I throw him a vague wave to his statement and whatever it means and carry on my way.

There are a few students still lingering in the hallway but none of them pay me any attention as I make my way down the hall to the principal’s office. Even if they did, there isn’t anyone who would know who I am in this school. I am sure by the end of the day everyone will know my name. That’s just how high school works isn’t it? The gossip, the drama, the rumors, the lies. All bullshit that I don’t care for or bother listening too. It’s irrelevant to my life and why I’m here.

With the amount of zeros in my account balance, you would think walking down these shitty rundown halls would make me feel out of place but I don’t; I feel freedom, power and control over my own life. That is the most important thing. Seeing the dented lockers and walls that are in dire need of a paint job just reminds me that I am not being controlled by the

demons over at Hallows Prep. The strong smell of cleaning products mixes with the stench of weed and it may as well be a summer field to my nostrils as it smells nothing like wealth. I inhale it deeply with a smile on my face as I continue on my way, excitement burning across my skin. This is the start of my new life, I'm going to get my revenge, finish high school and then get the hell out of dodge.

I've known Principle Lock my whole life thanks to the hefty donations my parents used to pour into this place to make themselves look good. I can tell from the rundown look of things that their generosity has since ceased to exist and I make a mental note to have a chat with Zack about giving them some funding. Lock was surprised when I got back in touch with him but happy to welcome me here.

Graham is only in his forties but his graying hair and wrinkled eyes make him look a lot older. Not that it surprises me, the stress of running this school would send a lesser man into an early grave. "Are you sure this is what you want, Elle? I could have you in Hallows Prep by tomorrow, it would only take one call."

"Graham," I start, and he raises his brow at me, "Sorry, Principle Lock." I correct scolding myself internally for not remembering that I must address him by title while at school.

"Gonna take some getting used to huh, Elle?"

I laugh, "Definitely and you know the last place I want to be is Hallows Prep. I will not let them have any aspect of control over me."

He nods understanding me completely without me having to explain. He knows what happened to me and why I'm here. I needed an ally here and he was my top pick.

"Okay, well everything you need is in that pack and don't hesitate to come to me if you need anything else."

"Thanks, I won't."

I stand to leave and move towards the door when he calls my name and I turn around.

"Ells, try and stay out of trouble."

"I will."

He laughs, "Now we both know that isn't true."

I smirk as I leave his office, he knows me too well.

I slip out of the office doors and move down the corridor to turn the corner and slam straight into a hard body. Not just a hard body but a hard, hot

as fuck body. A broad chest and strong arms bulging against a white button down. Fuck me sideways is everyone in this school a fucking god like specimen. What the hell is in the water in this place?

He's got a sharp jawline with a little scruff of a beard, brownish blonde hair that's short on the sides and a little longer and styled on top. Sparkling green eyes staring back at me from behind a pair of glasses perched on his nose. He looks far too mature and serious to be a student but he doesn't give off a teacher vibe either. Fuck, if he is a teacher a bitch might just pay extra attention.

He is so beautiful that I don't think before I blurt out, "Woah, Clark Kent watch it."

His lips quirk up at that in amusement and it just highlights his beautiful face more.

"Don't be fooled, sweetheart. I'm no hero," his voice is low and deep and makes my arms tingle in goose bumps.

He stares at me intently like he knows me until he abruptly turns to walk past me to the office when I call out to his back, "All heroes become villains eventually."

He stops and cocks his head slightly to the side to look at me and his smirk broadens.

"And do you prefer the hero or the villain, Elle?" he must have seen my name on the folder in my hands, the way it rolls off his tongue makes it sound like he knows me already, throwing me off slightly, but I keep my expression neutral as I respond.

"A hero is just someone hiding their true identity, at least with a villain you know where you stand."

What can I say being traumatized and raped at the age of fourteen really makes a girl cynical and unwilling to trust. Sue me. I imagine an answer like that is probably going to make this guy think I am certifiable, but he seems amused by it as he just nods and enters the office.

Lord help me, I have barely been in the school twenty minutes and already I've met what I am sure are two part time Abercrombie models. How do the girls here even focus with guys like that sharing their classrooms?

The hallways are empty now. I've got my bag on my shoulder and my welcome pack in my hand. The pack includes my locker details, class schedule and school map all of which are useless. Zack already hacked the school system so I could memorize all the details, so I shove the pack into my

bag.

I step into the restroom to take one last look at myself. I've left my blonde hair long and loose with its natural curls framing my face and tumbling down my back. My makeup is a simple flick of eyeliner, mascara, a nude lip with a dab of blush. I've paired my oversized guns and roses t-shirt dress with my favourite checked shirt tied round my waist, fishnets and black boots. I look nothing like the pink preppy princess I used to try and be and I've never felt more like myself.

I leave and move towards my first class of the day when I'm stopped in my tracks by moaning.

What the hell is someone actually getting their rocks off in a school and on the first day back. Seriously? I look around the deserted hallways and decide there is no harm in peeking to where the sounds seem to be coming from. What can I say? I'm a nosey ass bitch.

I dip my head into a dark classroom, and I am greeted with the back of some guy who's clearly got some chick on her knees going for it on his dick. Jesus Christ it's not even 9am. The slurping noises coming from her are almost comical and must be exaggerated, I mean I'm no expert but it's so over the top it brings a smirk to my face.

Are guys really into this shit? I mean it doesn't seem like the dude getting sucked off is, he's leaning back against a table with his phone in his hand for god's sake. Talk about bad head. I turn to silently retreat when my bag catches on the handle and makes the door screech. Fuck my life.

The guy immediately whips his head around and his face comes into view.

FUCK. I meet the eyes of the boy I told myself I was ready to see. Now a man I am definitely not ready to see, especially so much of him.

Marcus Riviera. My River.

Chapter 3

MARCUS

I should be in my first class of the day, but a long summer has made for some eager girls. First period has only just started, and I've already got a girl on her knees sucking my dick. It's sloppy but fuck it, I needed something to take the edge off so when she offered I happily obliged.

The last two months have been a fucking blood bath here in Hallows. Hell, who am I kidding? The last three years have been. I was thrust into the foster system after my dad was murdered and only then were my eyes opened to the crimes Elliot Donovan was committing right on my own fucking doorstep. Running his drugs and guns into this town like the fucking devil he is. He took everything from me, and I wasn't about to let that go.

I started my plans for revenge and then I met my boys and formed my rebellion against the elite. I went from a North Side Prince to a South Side King. Our power and influence increase every day and we have a lot of people who turn to us for help, rely on us, respect us, even fear us. That's a lot to have for three eighteen-year-old kids who don't have any real family anymore.

The tension has been rising with the North Side families getting bolder. Running more drugs and guns than ever before. They're no longer afraid to get their hands dirty but their deep pockets have a lot of influence. I used to be just like them and now I want to bring every one of them to their knees.

The girl sucking my dick is making ridiculous noises and I wish she would just choke on my cock silently so I can think straight. I can't even remember her name and once we've finished here, we won't communicate again. The last thing I need is a girlfriend trying to be up in my business. All the girls I get with know it's one encounter and then I'm done.

I think I'd rather be in class at this point to be honest, but I just felt like I needed to let off some steam. First day of senior year and I'm already dealing with bullshit hence the mouth I'm slamming my cock into.

I hear the door creak and realize we have an audience. I turn around to see who our little spectator is when I hear her voice.

"Wow, you've grown into quite the ladies' man," a soft sultry tone hits my ear.

My whole body tenses. No way, it can't be her. Impossible. Yet here I am looking right at her. Three years feels like an insignificant amount of time as I lock eyes with the beauty in front of me. One glimpse of her and it makes me shoot my load all over the girls face before I can stop myself. The fact she can still affect me after not seeing her for so long is ridiculous. But staring into those ocean blue eyes mixed with her rosy pink smirk and breathy voice there was no stopping me. I would know that voice even if I wasn't looking at the person who owns it. Doesn't matter that it has been three years since I've heard it.

I turn to look at her fully, my cock still out and semi hard and glare at the girl in front of me.

Elle fucking King.

She's staring at me like it hasn't been three years since I've seen her. Since she left me and betrayed my family. What the fuck is she doing here? There are no words coming out of my mouth as she continues to stare at me. I can't form any coherent thoughts let alone a fucking sentence.

Elle King in all her womanly glory, far from the young girl I remember, lets her gaze assess me slowly, lingering on my still half erect cock. She pops her eyebrow and smirks at me. Fucking smirks.

"Miss me, River?"

Hearing her old nickname for me roll off her tongue breaks me out of the trance her return had me in. I pull my pants back up as the girl I was face fucking tries to talk.

"Ever heard of knocking, bitch? We were..."

I cut her off before she can even finish her sentence, "Leave," my sharp tone leaves no room for arguing but of course the girl still tries.

"But Marcus, I thought..."

"Leave now," this time a command that she will not ignore. My voice is hard and cold as my body vibrates with anger and something else I don't recognize.

Elle chokes back a laugh and the girl glares at her.

She huffs and grabs her things and leaves shoulder checking Elle as she passes. Before I can even react, she has her slammed against the door with a hand around her throat.

"What the fuck? Get your hands off me, you crazy bitch!"

I can see Elle squeeze her throat from here and fuck me, it makes my dick harder and I feel it strain against my pants. The fucking traitor.

"Touch me again and you will regret it," Elle says in a perfectly calm tone.

She pulls back and slams her head into the door before dropping her and turning back to me like it was nothing.

What the fuck? We both ignore the girl scrambling up and out the door, our stares now locked on each other. I stalk towards her before I can stop myself and halt when our chests are barely touching. She doesn't even flinch at me towering over her, just cocks her head back and keeps her eyes on mine. Her once soft stare now seems cold and distant. It's clear to me that wherever she has been, the last few years have changed her. She's no longer the little girl I shared my first kiss with and who I used to sneak out to lay under the stars with. No, the girl in front of me now might as well be a stranger.

"Fuck you doing here, King?" I spit the words at her and her smirk returns. Anger and lust seep into my bones just looking at her. Fuck. I don't know if I want to kill her or fuck her against the table until she screams my name.

She leans forward and her breath licks my ear as she responds.

"Don't worry, River, I'm not here for you," she purrs at me.

She walks away before I can even conjure up a response and I'm left mesmerized by her tight little body with curves in all the right places. I am well and truly fucked.

Elle King. My first friend, first crush, first love, first enemy. Fuck. The last few years feels like nothing in this moment. It would be a lie if I said I hadn't thought about her every day since she left. She has always been at the back of my mind like a leech you can't offload. I try to remember all the good times we had as kids but the only thing I can think of when my mind invokes her name is how she's responsible for my dad's murder. She might not have pulled the trigger, but she helped load the gun.

I spend the rest of the morning hiding in the shadows and watching Elle move from class to class like she belongs here. I've missed the whole morning of classes, but I couldn't give a fuck at skipping out. It's not like anyone in this shithole would try to question me on it, they know better.

The bell for lunch rings out and I head to my locker. I spot my boys down the hall and make my way towards them immediately. Jace, Lincoln and I have been friends since I was put into the system a few years ago and we've been down for each other ever since. They're my family and I'm theirs, we

always have each other's backs no matter what. They are the only people I genuinely care about. My brothers.

"Look who finally decided to grace us with his presence," Jace hollers down the hall at me with a huge grin on his face. I don't know how he manages to stay so easy going and carefree all the time. He's been through just as much shit as I have.

I reach them both and we all bump knuckles.

"You good man?" Lincoln asks like he knows what kind of morning I've had and I just nod.

They get me like no one else does and know when I don't feel like talking. My head is still reeling from Elle's return and I need to collect my thoughts. What the fuck is Elle doing here and where the hell has she been for the last few years? Is she back living with her parents and, if so, why is she here and not at Hallows Prep? And, more importantly, why the fuck do I care? She betrayed me so why should it matter to me what she does. Except it does, doesn't it? Fuck. I need a drink.

I am gripping my locker door so tight I think I might just rip it right off its hinges. I try to distract myself with the thoughts of what I heard from my crew yesterday.

They've been watching that fucking snake Donovan and his sons for months now and still they haven't found anything useful for us to use against them. Add that to the fact that Elle has fucking appeared out of thin air like she never left, and it is safe to say I am fucking on edge.

Jace pulls my concentration back to them when he mentions Elle.

"Well, just wait until you see the new chick."

Lincoln responds while looking at me, "Already did, brother."

"What? When did you get to see her?"

"Bumped into her in the office this morning when I went to see Lock."

"Damn, wish I could have some of that brushed up against me," he pouts and just the thought of him near her infuriates me and then he nudges me.

"Here comes that fine piece of ass now," he says to me quietly before yelling out behind me "Yo newb, ready to show me what that mouth can do, yet?"

"How about tell you to get fucked by your own hand, pretty boy?" Elle quips back without even missing a beat.

Lincoln smiles slightly which is a rare thing and Jace continues to haggle her.

“Come on now, baby, I’m a nice guy, really. Let me show you just how good I can be.”

She just laughs at him “Maybe ask your friend how I feel about the good guys?”

At first, I think she is outing that we know each other but then Lincoln grunts a laugh knowingly and I can’t take it anymore. I turn around and she’s leaning against what must be her locker right across from mine with that signature smirk on her face. She’s rocking ripped fishnets and boots like they were made for her and I can see a peak of ink darting down her wrist and across her thigh.

She looks like a fucking rock princess with curves that are made to be caressed. I just want to wipe that smug look off her face and can’t help myself from snapping at her.

“That’s funny because I thought you preferred preppy little fucks with daddy’s credit card, princess.”

She frowns slightly at that but then schools her expression and responds, “I do that’s why you’re off my radar now, River.”

“You don’t get to call me that anymore,” I snap loudly.

“Sorry, didn’t realize there was a statute of limitations on a childhood nickname.”

“Only for traitorous whores.”

A sad expression covers her face, but she masks it with a laugh. It’s clear there are multiple people now watching our exchange take place including my boys.

“Oh, and you’re well acquainted with all the whores around here, aren’t you River? Enjoy your next tragic face fuck.”

She turns off towards the cafeteria before I can even reply, and I am left staring at her retreating form.

“Dude what the fuck? Do you know her?” Jace asks as he stares after and I can feel Lincoln staring at me.

“Yeah. That’s Elle King,” I reply through gritted teeth. Only Lincoln will have any idea what that name means to me.

Chapter 4

ELLE

What the fuck is wrong with me? I'm supposed to be laying low and getting the scope of things, not taking part in verbal sparring matches with Marcus. Why the fuck did I even speak to him this morning? I should have just turned and walked away and ignored him, but I just couldn't. Seeing him lit a spark in me that I haven't felt in years.

I thought it would be like old times when he first locked eyes with me but then I saw the clear disdain in his stare. He hates me, which I knew he would but damn if it didn't hurt to see him look at me that way. It's for the best that he feels that way, I need to keep him away from me and out of the reason that I am back here. He's already paid too high of a price for his family getting involved in business with the Donovan's. He lost his dad because he chose to save me and I won't let Marcus make the same mistake, I'd die before letting him bleed for me.

I make my way to lunch and try not to linger on the two interactions I've already had with Marcus. Why does he have to be so beautiful?

He's no longer the sweet little boy I left behind but all man. Tall, dark, and handsome with that bad boy edge and of course he is friends with the other two hotties I met this morning. I bet they have every girl in this place hanging off their dicks.

I heard Marcus' name multiple times throughout the morning along with his two friends who I have since learned are Jace Conrad and Lincoln Blackwell or the Rebels as they are apparently known around town. It's clear from what I've heard so far that they pretty much run things around here. That usual top of the food chain bullshit but I can't be caught up in whatever they have going on, I've got my own stuff to be doing.

I just hope Marcus isn't going to try and ignite some bullshit vendetta against me and get in the way of what I actually came back to this shitty town for.

I enter the cafeteria and it's like every eye hits me, but I just ignore them and get in line and fill my tray. I'm so anxious after the morning's events that I need a major carb load. I grab a huge chicken bagel, bag of chips, a donut, and a soda. I pay and make my way to an empty table at the edge of the room

which gives me a full view of everyone else and all the exits.

There are plenty of people giving me curious glances and trying to make eye contact to get my attention, but I just want to eat my lunch in peace.

“Hey, it’s Elle, right?”

Fuck me sideways. I look up and see your typical jock staring at me and I just offer him a simple nod and smile.

“Can I sit?” he asks pointlessly as he slumps into the chair across from me.

“Sureeee,” I drag out the word sarcastically.

“I’m Josh it’s nice to---”

“Beat it, Sanders.”

I don’t even have to look to know it was Marcus that spoke, and my new lunch buddy, Josh, is already scrambling from the chair opposite me. Pathetic.

I look up and swing my gaze across the three of them slowly, making sure to linger on Jace and Lincoln longer before I look at Marcus.

Jace looks like the most laid back of the three with his arrogant grin and cocky swagger. He’s wearing a band shirt like me with baggy jeans and vans and has another joint perched behind his ear. He is giving off those I don’t give a fuck about the world or anyone in it vibes but I recognize pain in his eyes.

Lincoln looks like the quiet reserved type. He’s no longer wearing the glasses he was rocking this morning so either he doesn’t need them all the time, or he is wearing contacts.

Dressed in a fitted shirt and jeans you’d think he was a grown man going to work rather than a student at a rundown school.

Then there is Marcus, he is the tallest of the three and a contrast to both of their light features with his dark hair and dark eyes. There is a slight covering of facial hair dusting across a jawline so sharp it could cut glass. He looks sinful in his fitted black jeans, white tee and black leather jacket.

The three of them together are a dangerous cocktail that I bet everyone wants a taste of. I need to deter their attention away from me and quickly.

“Oh goodie, the Rebels have decided to grace little old me with their presence.”

I throw their nickname in their face to taunt them that I already know who they are and that I just don’t care. Marcus tightens his jaw and cricks his neck slightly before responding.

“We just thought you’d be up for adding three cocks to your roster, princess, or are our wallets not thick enough?”

His statement is bold and loud enough to draw most people’s attention and he smirks. It’s clear he wants to put me in my place in front of his minions without alerting them to our past. He thinks he will get one over on me, but I am more than happy to play his little game.

I exaggerate a fake gag, “Sorry, almost lost my bagel there,” and I see a few people hiding a smirk in my peripheral.

Marcus is not impressed so his little buddy tries to jump in to help him in what I am quickly learning is typical Jace humor.

“Oh, come on, baby girl. Marcus might be picky, but I’ll let you take a ride on my cock. I’m all for a little charity work.”

I keep Marcus’ eye as I throw back with my inner bitch out in full force.

“He didn’t look too picky this morning when he was shoving his cock into some sloppy Sally.”

I hear a few gasps and chuckles around me and it’s clear no one has ever dared to speak back to their precious Rebels before. It makes me feel giddy inside and I am thriving off it. Before Marcus can even respond I turn my gaze to Jace.

“I have some time for you right now though, pretty boy.” I say breathily.

“What?” he stutters, slightly confused while glancing back at Marcus.

“To jump on your cock. Wanna go at it right here on the table where everyone can watch?”

I don’t even know who I am with the words spurting from my mouth, but I can’t seem to stop myself from riling Marcus up. It’s just like when we were kids except that little flicker between us is now a full-blown inferno.

“I’ll do you and even Superman here,” I nod my head to Lincoln, “but Marcus will have to take care of himself I don’t fuck assholes.” I make sure to project my voice across the room so everyone can hear.

He is seething now the anger rolling off him in waves, he bares his teeth grinding them when he spits out his response.

“Listen here, you mouthy little traitor, I don’t know why you thought you could come back here but you aren’t welcome. Leave while you still have the chance, or you won’t like the consequences.”

The word traitor spurs me out of control and before I can even second guess what I am about to do I am up and over the table. I push into Marcus and I slip my knife from the sheath concealed on my thigh and press it into

his cock, I see his eyes widen when he realizes what's in my hand. His boys tense beside him but make no move to help him. Nobody can see the knife but the four of us.

"No, you listen here, you arrogant, big headed fuck. I didn't come back here for you, so stay the fuck out of my way and we won't have any problems. You don't wanna cross me River, I'm not the same girl you remember," I keep my voice cold, calm, and calculating.

This is exactly what I needed to keep Marcus from getting too close to me and what better way to do that than to throw down the gauntlet.

I press the knife firmly into him before pulling it back. I grab my bag and throw my lunch inside and turn to leave when his arm reaches out and pulls me until my back hits his front and his mouth is next to my ear. I ignore the heat of his hand clutching my arm and the tingle of his warm breath on my ear refusing to let the shudder I'm feeling escape.

"And if I do cross you, little King?"

I turn my head slightly and lick my lips and his eyes instantly track the movement.

"Then I guess you'll feel my wrath, caveman."

I drag my arm from his grip and storm out heading straight to my jeep. I need to clear my head space and once inside I decide to call Zack in an attempt to calm my thoughts.

He answers on the third ring and I lean back in my seat and close my eyes to let his voice soothe my racing heart. He's always had that effect on me.

"Hi sweetheart, how's my girl's first day going?"

"Uneventful," I grumble because there is no way I can get into bullshit high school politics with Z. He cares too much about me and I don't need him going all alpha male on my ass.

"I find that hard to believe but okay, we can go with that."

I laugh at how well he knows me, "How are things with you?" I ask.

"All good, just grabbing some lunch. Everything okay, Elle?"

"Yeah, yeah course everything is fine. I just wanted to check in."

"Don't worry everything is great."

"Great. Will I see you for dinner later?"

"Yeah, sure. Shall we say 7?"

"Sounds great. I should go. Love you, Z."

"Love you too, sweetheart."

He hangs up and I release a breath opening my eyes back up and

immediately spot the Rebels. They are right across the lot, but I can feel their glare burning me in place. Looks like it's going to take more than a little conversation to turn Marcus' and his guys attention away from me.

Well bring it boys, I love me some Rebels.

Chapter 5

MARCUS

I can tell the moment she spots us because I can see her tense from here. Instead of backing down like everyone else would, she flips us the finger. She jumps from her jeep and storms towards us, the sun bright behind her making her porcelain skin fucking shine. She was always pretty even at that young awkward stage when we were ten, but she has grown into a fucking vision.

As she nears, I expect another confrontation, but she barges past us like we don't even exist. With no direction from me, Jace and Lincoln let her pass and we all turn to watch her go.

I see my boys and every other fucking male in the hallway checking her out and why wouldn't they? She looks like every guys' wet dream come to life. Nothing like the wannabe sugar babies we got here already. All desperado-hoes wanting to be noticed by the rich picks across town yet jumping on our dicks any chance they get.

Fuck if it doesn't make my blood boil to see the interest in all their eyes. Yeah, she's a fucking knockout, straight up ten out of ten. Toned with curves in all the right places and an ass that makes you want to indulge but she is also a fucking liar and a traitor. I don't fuck either but that doesn't stop the possessiveness from rearing its ugly head.

I need to shut it down.

She isn't mine and never was. No matter what promises she made me.

Lincoln speaks first as he turns back to me.

"So, Elle King is back?" he asks, cocking his brow like he always does.

I'm slow to reply, "Clearly, she's—"

They both cut me off.

"Hot as fuck," Jace gleams at me.

"And a bit of a badass," Lincoln smirks.

"Yeah I like her and that ass," Jace adds playfully.

They both laugh.

Fucking typical Jace always thinking with his dick, I am used to it by now, but Lincoln is never taken by any girl and it unsettles me. She is getting to me and my boys already and she hasn't even been here a day.

I need to sort this shit out now.

“She’s also a fucking traitor who can’t be trusted,” I bite back.

“So, what do you want to do?” Lincoln asks.

“Exile her.”

“How?”

“She’s invisible, spread the word. Nobody talks to her; nobody even fucking looks at her. Elle King is a fucking North bred princess and she doesn’t belong here.”

I turn to march away, not waiting for their response, when an idea hits me. I spin on my heel and nod my head towards her jeep.

“Nuke it,” I say angrily.

They both look surprised and then Jace looks absolutely gleeful, he’s a little pyromaniac, but Lincoln looks grim, still he nods his head in agreement.

Elle thinks she can come in here and fucking have whatever she wants. Well, she is wrong. The King name means nothing to me anymore. Wrecking her car will be a minor inconvenience for her that will be easily fixed by daddy’s black card, but it will make me feel better watching it fucking burn.

I head to class, thankful when I find that I won’t be sharing it with Elle and wait for the show. I don’t know how my boys get it done so fast, but I knew I could count on them. Twenty minutes later I hear the explosion and I am fucking giddy as everyone jumps to run outside.

I exit the school and the crowd parts, giving me a clear view of Elle watching her precious jeep go up in flames. She must sense my presence because she turns and meets my gaze instantly.

Her frame being licked by the flames makes her look like she’s the devil’s fucking princess. I drag my gaze lazily up her body to meet her face, but I don’t find the expression I was expecting. I wanted distraught anger or upset confusion but what I find is pure excitement. What the fuck?

She moves until she is in front of me and puts her hand to the center of my chest, her touch burning through my shirt as she speaks.

“Didn’t anybody ever tell you not to start a fire you can’t put out, Riv?” and then she just pulls back and laughs as she heads back into school like none of this is even happening. I turn to watch her leave and see her lean in to whisper something to Principle Lock and his gaze fixes with mine before turning back to her and giving her a slight nod. She then pulls out her phone and heads inside.

What the fuck is happening?

I search around for the guys and find them staring after Elle too with a

similar expression to what I am sure is on my face. I motion for them to follow me and we make our way to our parking spots. I climb onto my bike and tell them to meet me at the loft before I rev my bike and fly away from the school and the girl fucking with my head.

I am already sitting with a tumbler of smooth amber liquid in my hand by the time Jace and Lincoln arrive. It's 5 o'clock spmewhere, right?

“Right, you need to spill your fucking guts, man,” Jace yells as he enters.

“That chick didn’t even fucking flinch and we just blew up a fucking hundred-thousand-dollar jeep,” he adds.

Lincoln is silent beside him because he isn’t as in the dark as Jace. When we met and I realized what a fucking tech guru he is, I had him hunt Elle, trying to find out where she had disappeared too. I never told him who she was to me or why I wanted her found just that it was a priority, and he should keep at it until she's found.

I motion for them to grab a drink and sit down. I neck the whiskey before taking a deep breath.

“Elle King is the daughter of Jonathan and Sarah King.”

Jace eyebrows shoot up but Linc remains stoic. There isn’t much here I will tell him that he doesn’t already know. The only thing he doesn’t know is why I wanted to find Elle so much.

“She disappeared three summers ago without a trace. It was a few months before my dad was murdered.”

I still remember that day like it was yesterday. Summer had just started, and we were spending more and more time out in the woods exploring together. I told her we should go deeper into the trees further than we’d been before, but she was too scared. Until I teased her with our double dog dare tradition knowing she would never back down.

The last thing I remember is seeing the flash of her blonde hair disappear into the trees as she took off like a shot. Then I lost sight of her. It got dark shortly after that and when I couldn’t find her, I panicked and ran back to my house to tell my dad. I remember him looking more worried than I did but he remained calm as he told me to stay at the house to wait and he would look for her. She never came back, until now.

“We were friends, best friends. More than friends even or as much as you can be as a couple of kids. We did everything together. Our parents were

friends, so we were always together. It was just us two until the Donovan's moved in next door to her and brought with them their sons."

Jace interrupts, "You were friends with the man who murdered your dad?"

"Yeah I was."

He looks to Linc as I continue. They know I hold a vendetta against Donovan for killing my dad, but I have never gone into the stuff surrounding it.

"Well, Donovan has two sons, one is the same age as us."

"You mean that pretentious little psycho, Asher, from Hallows Prep, don't you?"

I nod.

"Well, he became our third wheel. Me and Elle were always getting into trouble and causing mayhem wherever we went but Asher was the goody two shoes. The Kings' loved him and they started to talk about uniting the families when they were older."

"What? In some sort of arranged marriage?" Lincoln asks.

"Yeah, they were supposed to be in one or they still are. I don't even know anymore. All I know is that she disappeared, and my dad was on edge. Taking late night phone calls and sneaking around when he thought I was asleep. It was clear he knew something but every time I asked he just went with the same bullshit line that the Kings fed me that she had gone to boarding school.

Then one night I came home and found him with a bullet to the head. The day CPS came to pick me up Elliot was there, and he said it didn't have to be like this, but Elle chose the wrong side and my dad had to pay the price."

"What? So, she's the reason he's dead?" Jace asks, clearly confused.

"Yes," I say almost silently into the quiet space.

"But she was just a kid," he says carefully, "I mean what could a fourteen-year-old girl possibly do that would make Donovan want to kill your dad?"

"Does it fucking matter? He's still dead," I snap angrily.

"Dude, chill. I get it, I do but I just don't get an evil vibe from her. I doubt she wanted your dad dead especially if you guys were friends."

"Where does Asher fit into this?" Lincoln interrupts, his mind always working and trying to figure things out from every angle. He has wanted the pieces to this puzzle ever since I gave him the task of looking for Elle and

now he is being given them he won't stop until he has them all.

"That little snake was in on it, I guess. I mean he is like his dad's little lap dog. The only time they aren't joined at the hip is when he's at Hallows Prep or when he disappears once a month to fuck knows where. Fuck knows where she has been for the last few years, but I don't think it's a coincidence that she has come back now they're old enough to be married."

Silence descends on the room.

They know my past, but I always kept Elle out of it not wanting to think about her, let alone speak her name. They are helping me trying to dig up dirt on Elliot and his fucking ring of friends, but I always kept this part to myself. I don't know what is going to happen next, but I know my boys will be with me no matter what.

Chapter 6

ELLE

I am still amused by today's antics at the end of the day. Clearly Marcus wanted to piss me off but in reality, he only succeeded in pissing himself off. What can I say, it's only a car. Like yeah what a fucker for doing that, like seriously I love my jeep but it's just stuff. Easily replaceable. The old me would have freaked out majorly and thrown a huge fit but the new me knows that material things have no true value to life. Not to me anyway. The only things that matter to me are my family. And I guess you could say my revenge.

Either way, today was fun and if that's how Marcus needs to tackle his grief then so be it. Because that's what today was. Grief. Grief at seeing me and missing his father. They go hand in hand.

I don't know how to play things with him. On one hand I don't want him anywhere near me or my plans but on the other he is still my best friend even if I'm not his anymore. He will always be my River. No longer a boy but a man, a broken one.

I won't bring him into this, but I won't stand by and be his punching bag either.

I am still mulling over what to do when I climb from the Uber I got from school to grab some food while I wait for Zack.

The Shack has been in this town for as long as I can remember, and hands down has the best burger I have ever tasted. It stands alone in the middle of a huge parking lot with plenty of picnic tables outside to sit on in the warm summer months. The inside is worn but nice with its large leather booths and sleek red tables and a huge service area across one wall.

God, I've missed it here. I can see it's still just as popular with the amount of people here. It's a mix of the old regular types and students from schools on both sides of town. There is never any drama here, no one would dare, we all have too much respect for the owner. She spies me as soon as I enter and her face lights up with a genuine smile. She's small and slim with brown hair that has obviously been dyed because she's old enough to be a grandma yet despite that she's beautiful and this place and the people in it are her babies.

"My child, tell me my eyes don't deceive me and my little Elle has finally

come home." I laugh as she steps from the counter and engulfs me in a tight hug.

"Come on now, Pam, did you really think I could live without the best burgers in town for too long?" I tease as I return her hug.

She steps back and appraises me from head to toe, "You have grown into quite the beauty, Elle, I see you finally grew into these ears," she laughs as she pinches my ear.

I roll my eyes while laughing. She always loved to tease me about my ears growing up. She pushes me to a booth and starts fussing over me, immediately shouting in my old regular order, and telling a waitress to get me a milkshake and it feels like I never left.

"Michael told me what happened, I can't believe you're really back," she leans in, slightly lowering her voice.

I flinch slightly at her unexpected words, "Yeah, I didn't know whether I would ever make it back here."

"I won't say sorry but I will say I hope you're back for more than just my food," she levels me with a serious look and I know she knows what type of people run this town.

I wink and she smiles at me the way a mother should a child. Warm, loving, and safe so much so that I can't help flinging my arms around her again.

"Thank you," I whisper, getting choked up. I pull back but keep my voice low, "I have someone I'd love for you to meet. I'll bring them by when I can. I know they'd love your burgers and shakes just as much as me."

She smiles, "Anytime, my sweet girl."

She gets up to leave, "Don't you dare think about leaving without saying bye again!"

I laugh "Never."

I zone out everyone around me enough to not pay attention to them but while also keeping fully aware of my surroundings. I wolf down a double cheeseburger, fries, and a side of onion rings with two chocolate shakes and feel like I might burst. I really did miss this place.

I'm idling now waiting for Zack to pick me up on his way home when the bell over the door rings and I hear a new familiar voice.

"Yoooo Pam, I need one of your juicy big p's in my mouth, woman," Jace's cool smooth voice reaches out across the diner with an echo.

"Oh child, behave," she scolds him from the counter and it's clear he's a

regular here.

He saunters his way through tossing a wink at two girls who practically swoon. His face is light and chilled until he spots me, and he changes course immediately.

Fuck me with a rusty spoon here we go again.

"Well well well, princess, and to think Marcus told me you had no taste," he says as he pops a cocky grin at me.

I scoff, "Yeah, well Marcus doesn't know shit about me anymore so don't trust everything you hear."

He holds his hands up in mock defense as he slides into the booth with me, taking the seat across from me.

"Hey, don't shoot the messenger, babe. I'm still undecided."

I feign flattery as I deadpan, "Oh wow, lucky me, one of the Rebels thinks I may be worthy, the joy."

His signature smirk finally returns to his face and, before he can say anything, I add,

"Did you enjoy blowing up my jeep, pretty boy?"

His eyebrows shoot up like he can't believe I'm actually acknowledging it by accusing him right out, but his whole face lights up.

"It's the most fun I've had all summer, princess," he chuckles.

"Must have been a shitty summer," I quip back, making his grin fall.

"You have no idea, princess," he says in the most serious tone I've heard from him and I immediately don't like that sound on him.

He changes the subject before I can dig any further, "So, why are you back in Hallows?"

The question catches me off guard, so my answer comes out in a questioning tone

"It's my home?" I say.

He snorts, "So no impending nuptials to prepare for?"

I'm immediately baffled by him, "Nuptials?" I muse out loud. What the hell is he talking about?

"Why would I come back here just for a wedding? Trust me there isn't anyone in this town I care about enough to want to attend their wedding." Except Marcus but I am not going to admit that out loud.

My answer makes him light up like it's what he was looking for, but I am still in the dark.

"I bet I could think of one person you care about enough," he says in a

mocking tone and I roll my eyes. I am not going there with him, but he continues.

"So, what's the story with you and Marcus anyway?" he's watching me so intently now that I find it hard not to fidget under his glare.

"I'm sure he's filled you in," I say in a flat tone trying not to show any emotion.

"I'd rather hear your version."

"There is no version. We were friends and then I left," I shrug like it's no big deal.

"And then his dad was murdered," he adds, and I flinch instantly at his casual tone and the mention of Michael.

I take a deep breath as I try to muster an answer but all I can come up with is, "Yeah." I quietly exhale as I look around the diner in an attempt to calm my racing heart.

"What do you know about it?" he asks in a sensitive tone that I wouldn't expect from him.

I meet his gaze in confusion, wondering why he's asking this. I doubt Marcus would have asked him too. I don't owe him an answer; he's practically a stranger and close to Riv which makes this dangerous territory. But I find myself thinking about how to answer him, the stranger who a few hours ago set fire to my fucking jeep. Yet he's not a bad guy, I can sense it. He's good, pure. Yeah there is a hint of darkness in those hazel eyes of his but it's not evil, trust me I know what evil is like. So, I answer him as honestly as I can.

"I know that Michael was the best father to his son. I know that he loved Marcus more than anything in this world and I know that if I could do anything to bring him back, I would. There isn't a day that goes by that I don't miss him. The world is a darker place without the presence of Michael Riviera in it," my voice is cool but I can feel my throat burning at the emotions I'm currently feeling.

Jace doesn't respond to that and just watches me intensely. His eyes pinning me to the spot with such fierceness that it makes me want to shudder. God, I imagine he could get girls to do anything with that stare. In another life we would be great friends, I can feel that connection you get when you meet someone who you just know gets you. That's what I feel now but this isn't another life. This is a life where anyone close to me is in danger. I'm over here and he has to stay over there. Like being on opposite sides of this

booth we need to be on opposite sides of this life. He needs to think I'm just the North bred princess I once was.

We sit in silence even as his food is placed in front of him and he starts to eat. Just watching each other, observing. I can see he is trying to work me out and I don't know what vibe I am giving off, but he doesn't seem too fazed by me.

The tension breaks when a girl slides a napkin onto the table towards him as she passes and tells him to call her as she runs after her friends with a giggle.

I roll my eyes and he smiles at me, "Jealous, princess?"

I scoff "Please! I bet your dick gets so much action you're lucky it hasn't fallen off yet."

He laughs loudly, "You're not wrong there," he says, giving me a cheeky wink and I roll my eyes again.

"God, you're insufferable," I say, scrubbing my hands over my face, it's been a long day.

"You'll get used to me," he says in a flirty tone.

"I don't anticipate spending that much time with you to do that."

"What kind of friend would I be if I didn't play nice with my best friend's girl?"

"You call blowing up my car playing nice?" I laugh, "Remind me not to get on your bad side, pretty boy," I drawl sarcastically.

He smiles at me in a knowing manner and I realize I didn't rebuff the rest of his statement. "And I'm not his girl," I snap.

"Whatever you say, princess," he smiles, positively giddy now and it's so infectious that it makes me smile too.

I go to respond when a car honking stops me. I look to the window and lock eyes with Zack who's pulled alongside the curb next to the window I'm sitting by. He nods his head in greeting and glances Jace's way.

I look back to Jace and see him looking at Zack.

"Friend of yours?" he asks in an unusual tone.

"Something like that," I shrug noncommittedly.

"Something like that," he repeats slowly, testing my words and I groan internally as I stand and gather my things. I turn behind me to the counter and say a quick goodbye to Pam with Jace's eyes on me the whole time. I turn to walk back past him to leave when he grabs my arm.

"Watch your back with Marcus, he will keep coming for you," he says

glaring up at me.

"Maybe he should watch his back," I say as I pull my arm from his grip, "it's not safe to be around me," I warn.

I stalk from the diner and Zack climbs from his SUV and walks around to open the door for me. He pulls me into a hug as I get close.

"Everything okay, sweetheart?" he asks in his usual caring tone.

I pull back as I answer, "Of course, Z," I smile at him as I move around him to get into the car and he shuts the door behind me. He stalks around front and climbs back on his side.

"Only you would say everything is okay when someone burns your car like it's a burger on a BBQ," he muses while looking back over at Jace.

"It was a stupid welcome prank," I shrug.

"Sounds like a bunch of Rebels if you ask me," he says in his no-nonsense tone looking back at me and I have to stop a flinch. He knows. Of fucking course, he knows, he knows everything.

"I've got it handled," I say, turning from him to stare out the front window.

"I'm sure you do," he says, starting the engine.

Jace's eyes are still on us as we pull away.

Chapter 7

ELLE

After my encounter with Jace I don't speak to any of the Rebels for the next few days. It's Thursday now and the week is quickly passing thanks to Marcus marking me as public enemy number. No one has even tried to bother me. He clearly thought shit like that would piss me off but honestly, it's been heavenly and, actually, quite informative.

Being treated like you're invisible means people actively act like you aren't around and, therefore, run their mouths freely. It helps that outside the classroom I keep my headphones in, constantly giving the illusion that I can't hear anything. Sneaky I know but also helpful in my recon.

I have already learned that there is a party tomorrow night being thrown by someone on Riverbank which is classed as neutral territory. Meaning it will be a mixture of both North and South side students, the perfect hunting ground. From the research Zack and I have conducted, we have noticed a pattern of girls from all over town being taken. Some just for a couple of days and others never returning. From what I can gather it seems the richer girls are being drawn in and drugged into compromising positions to bring their families to heel through blackmail and the poorer girls are being taken and sold to the highest bidder. Elliot Donovan is a sick bastard.

My jeep has already been replaced thanks to Zack and I drove it here early to make sure I snagged a spot right at the front of the lot. I want it to be the first thing Marcus sees when he rocks up today. I should be avoiding him like I have all week but secretly I'm craving his attention and the way it made me feel. I also need to show him that no matter what he does, I will come back swinging.

I don't have to wait long before I hear the rumble of his motorcycle and am greeted with his leather clad physique a few seconds later as he pulls into his usual space right next to the steps. I am grateful for the sunglasses I chose to throw on today so I can let my gaze linger on him without it being too obvious.

He's in his usual leather jacket with a charcoal shirt and dark jeans that are tucked into black boots. He swings his leg over his bike and pulls his helmet off, the lingering heat of summer has left a slight sheen of sweat on

his skin. He looks like pure lust. He was always a good-looking boy but now he's so beautiful it hurts to even look at him. I know that if that night never happened my hormones would have had me jumping his bones a long time ago.

He swings his gaze around the lot but halts as soon as he sees me leaning against my shiny new jeep with my headphones in. I push my glasses up into my hair and offer him a smug smile. I can see his jaw tense from here and he slowly lowers his eyes to my outfit. I'm wearing fitted ripped black jeans with a see-through black top that has embroidered flowers across it. His stare turns dark as he takes me in.

Fuck. Why is he so good looking? We continue to stare at each other until a girl slides up next to him. He must see the frown before I school my expression because he smirks before sliding his arm around her. Bastard.

He is still staring at me as he leans in and whispers into her ear and she giggles. The sound grates me. They turn and head around the back of school and it doesn't take a genius to wonder what they might do back there.

I huff and then jump when a deep voice catches my attention.

"Careful King, your jealousy is showing," I turn to find Lincoln Blackwell leaning on his SUV next to me staring at the spot Marcus and the girl just disappeared from.

"I'm not jealous," I scoff, and he looks back at me with a little smile. Something I've noticed he doesn't do often.

"How do you know Zack Royton?" he asks, his face turning serious again.

That is the last thing I ever expected him to come out with and it throws me completely.

"What's it to you?" I say back, trying to act casual and throwing my gaze around the lot at the students milling around.

"I work for him," he says casually and my gaze snaps back to him at his statement.

What the fuck? Lincoln works for Zack. Why don't I know this?

I try to keep my impassive mask in place, but I am sure he noticed my shock. I don't say anything, so he continues.

"He came across my skill set almost two years ago and reached out and asked me to do some work for him," the undertone of his statement tells me the work he does isn't on the books at Royton Technology.

"Marcus and Jace help me out sometimes," he adds, his voice is assertive

and smooth.

I try to stop my face from reacting but in the inside, I am screaming what the fuck?!

“Jace and Marcus don't have contact with him. In fact, they've never met him, but they do some work for him too.”

I don't even know what to say but he saves me from saying anything when he reaches into his bag and pulls out a brown envelope as he continues to speak.

“Met with him yesterday and he gave me a really interesting job, told me it was the most important task he had ever given me and not to share it with anyone.”

Fuck I know where this is going. I reach into the envelope where I find a picture of myself and a piece of paper with some details about me. I look back to Lincoln and see him watching me closely.

“Look Lincoln, I know how this looks,” I start.

“And how's that?” he asks.

“Like I am being looked after by some older rich guy with no obvious reason considering we have only known each a few years but not everything is as it seems, okay?”

“Okay,” he says rapidly.

I expected some backlash or more questions, but he just accepts my answer and grabs the envelope back from me. What the fuck?

“I'll be seeing you, King,” he adds before turning to walk away.

Fuck me. I have only been back a few days and things are already complicated and now I have got to worry about Zack setting a little watchdog on my back.

I don't have time to dwell on the new information I have learned, and it would be pointless too as Zack always puts my safety first no matter what I think. Besides, I've got plans in motion for today.

It took me a few days to put my revenge plan into action but now that it's complete, I am practically floating with excitement. I can't wait to see what the guys think of my payback later.

When lunch rolls around I grab something quick from the cafeteria then skip outside to enjoy the show. I'm sitting on the hood of my jeep, staring at my ordered handy work, slurping my tropical peach tea with a smile on my face when the doors to the front of the school open.

Jace is the first to exit, head buried in his phone until he notices me

staring at him. His attention stays on me for only a fraction of a second before he swings his gaze to his beautiful, once red, dodge charger.

I knew from watching them this week that out of the three of them he would be the least mad. He is still a child at heart, fun and playful which is how I know he will appreciate my payback. His face lights up with a huge cheeky smile making him seem like his young, carefree self.

“Naughty princess, you have been busy,” he says as he runs his hand over the now bright pink hood of his car.

I fake ignorance while smirking, “Who me?”

“I knew you would be fun to play with. Marcus is gonna be so fucking pissed,” he says with a chuckle.

I shrug “Yeah, well he’s always pissed.”

He smiles at me, “That he is, princess.”

He shocks me then by coming over and jumping onto the hood with me and grabbing a handful of my fries. I smack his hand away because this girl doesn’t share food.

“Shouldn’t you be somewhere else. Don’t want anyone seeing you fraternizing with the enemy and reporting back to your boss.”

“You’re funny, Ells,” he chuckles as he attempts to snag some more fries.

“Only friends call me Ells,” I say as I smack his hand away again.

“Aw don’t be like that, we are friends.”

“That’s funny, I thought we were enemies.”

“Nah, Marcus just hasn’t realized it yet.”

“Realized what?”

He is saved from answering when a roar comes from the steps.

“WHAT THE FUCK?” the angry tone seeps into my bones and makes me shudder.

Marcus storms down the steps towards his Bugatti bike which is also supporting a new paint job. Lincoln right behind him surveying his pink SUV with mild amusement. The vast display of pink is truly a sight to behold, it took a chunk of money and a few guys to do it but I could not be happier right now.

He locks eyes with me, “What the fuck did you do?”

My body chills with the dark tone he uses sending flutters into my stomach.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I smirk, “but pink really is

your color, Riv.”

“You’re fucking done here,” he seethes as he kicks at his bike with so much force it goes flying a few feet away from where he stands. That shouldn’t do things to me, but it does.

“Aw come on, Marcus, this is a fucking dope ass prank,” Jace says as he nicks some of my iced tea. I snatch it back and he pouts at me, rolling my eyes, I give it back and let him finish it. He is such a child.

Looking back to Marcus I don’t think he could get any angrier.

“Get the fuck away from her and call the guys and sort this shit out,” he vaguely waves his hand towards the pink display just as few students exit the building and see the commotion.

Jace slides off the hood of my jeep kissing my head as he goes. The gesture is so friendly and familiar that I freeze in shock.

“See you soon, princess. I can’t wait to be besties,” he says excitedly, and I don’t want to upset him, so I manage to quip back, “Always a pleasure, pretty boy.”

He joins the other two and then all of them head back inside together telling a few people to fuck off as they go. Typical rebels.

The rest of my afternoon is dull in comparison to my lunchtime entertainment and I am grateful when the last bell rings out. I take my time gathering my things from my locker hoping that my vain attempt at dawdling will help me avoid another run in with the rebels. I think once is enough for today especially after what I did.

I barge out of the school doors and slam right into somebody. Why there are still people here is beyond me. In fact, almost everyone is still lingering around. They must have heard about the pink ladies show I arranged with the guys’ rides. I smirk to myself for the hundredth time today. I try to push past them but of course they don’t budge, not until their bullshit monarch exits the school that is.

I move forward as soon as the crowd starts to part in an attempt to get to my jeep and floor it before the guys catch me. I am sure Marcus will want some form of payback for what I did to his bike even though it was revenge for my jeep.

It’s only then that I see the sleek black car parked across the curb obstructing half the walkway with a beautiful lean frame standing next to it.

Asher Donovan in all his glory. He looks every bit the billionaire’s son he is on the wrong side of town. Leaning against his car that costs more than the

houses around here. He's not wearing his Hallows Prep Academy uniform, so I know he hasn't come from school. Instead he's donning grey slacks and a white fitted shirt with the sleeves rolled up. You can see the veins on his forearms and his biceps bunching against the fabric showing his clear work out habits. His blonde hair is cropped short and slightly flopped over on top yet trimmed at the sides and his blue eyes sparkle with mischief. God, I've missed him.

"It's about damn time, baby girl."

He hollers at me but I'm already running towards him and he huffs as I slam myself into him and his arms pick me up and spin us around. He's one of the only people's touch I can tolerate but that's because he knows my limits. He feels as familiar and safe as always and it makes the chaos of the week so far fade away instantly.

"Where have you been?" I whisper in his ear.

He pulls back looking down at me, "Father had me taking care of some business," he replies, his lip curling in distaste which tells me not to ask.

"Well we've missed you," I say, attempting to bring his smile back.

He smiles at me, "I've missed you too, sweetheart."

He hugs me again tighter before releasing me, "I called Zack and he said I'd find you here, so I thought I'd swing by and pick you up."

"Thanks, but my jeep is here."

"So? Send someone for it and come catch up with me," he ruffles my hair as he sets me back on the ground but keeps his arm around my shoulder.

"I see Marcus is still as possessive as he always was. If looks could kill, I'd be dying a slow painful death right now," he smirks.

I risk a glance back towards the school and as the crowd has thinned out with people leaving. I see Marcus and his boys are leaning on the steps watching our interaction. My gaze locks with his and I just know this is going to become something so I turn back to Ash to say I will go with him when I'm interrupted.

"You lost, Donovan?" Marcus calls out, commanding the attention of everyone still here with his clipped tone.

"Nope," Ash drawls, popping the p without missing a beat and a beautiful smile on his face. I can see girls ready to fall at his feet thinking he is the Prince charming they are looking for. If only they knew how dark his heart is. Asher is one of the best people I know but you can't be raised by the devil and get out unscathed.

"Well, you're a bit far from the North side, my man," Lincoln adds, sounding just as predatory as Marcus.

"Yeah, just came to pick up my girl here," Ash nods his head at me as his arm tightens around me. I can see the tension rolling off Marcus from here and the display of affection from Asher clearly has him thinking we are a couple. We aren't, we have just been through so much together. You go through hell with someone, you're going to have an unbreakable connection with them,

"I guess you two followed daddy's orders after all," he laughs a humorless laugh that leaves an evil grin on his face, but I can see from here it's more pain than anything else.

My inner bitch laughs out loud. Christ if only he knew the extent of my fucked-up life. How damaged I am and how much worse it could have been if not for Asher. I will never be able to repay him but that is as far as it goes.

"Marcus warned us your pussy only gets wet for fat wallets," Jace sneers at me, his playfulness from our lunchtime interaction long gone.

"Watch your fucking mouth, Conrad," Ash barks making two out of three Rebels' smile.

The lingering crowd takes a growing interest in our exchange. Clearly desperate to see the dynamics of the situation and the dark sinister look on Ash's face has me cutting in before the guys can respond.

"Nope, I'm happy to slum it every now and then, pretty boy, just not with arrogant fucks who talk better than they fuck," I smile sweetly.

Ash laugh a taunting and sinister sound as Marcus' eyes burn into his skull.

We need to get out of here before this becomes more than it is, I reach into Ash's pocket snagging his keys and slide myself into the driver's seat of his matte black Lamborghini Aventador. It has the desired effect as he just laughs forgetting the stand-off we were in and walks round the hood and slides into the passenger seat throwing one last look at the rebels.

"Where to, babe?" he asks, sliding his gaze back to mine with a genuine smile.

"Milkshakes, of course," I wink at him and he chuckles as I pull away from the crowd, the school, and the Rebels without looking back.

Chapter 8

ELLE

Catching up with Asher was amazing. Not only was it great to see him even though it's only been a few weeks, but he also had a lot of intel to share from his Dad's dealings. I was up half the night listening to recordings and looking over photos meaning I am dead tired when I wake.

Asher has been playing the dutiful son ever since the night I was taken. He was cunning and smart even at fourteen and told his dad that one of the guards helped free me and he was too late. The guard paid for Ash's lie with his life and I wish I could feel some remorse for him, but I don't, he knew what sort of shit the Donovan's had going on.

Since then he has kept his eyes open and his ears close to the ground, gathering intel of all his father's dealings and passing it to me and Zack. I knew I wanted revenge for what happened to me, but it has taken a long time to get to the point where we can actually put it in motion and it's all thanks to him.

I pad down to the kitchen barefoot where Zack is making us breakfast and I fling my arms around him as I dive on his back.

"Woah, sweetheart, you trying to make me burn myself?"

"As if I'd ever hurt my favorite person," I mock disbelief as I slide down off him. "I hope that bacon is for me," I add cheekily.

I turn to the coffee machine and switch it on, I am in desperate need of the black magic this morning.

"Of course it is. I know better than to let you start a day on an empty stomach."

"You spoil me," I gleam.

"Ash give you anything useful?" he asks.

I shrug, "Mostly stuff we already know but I think I found a lead on something that I am going to follow up this weekend."

He hands me a plate as I sit at the table and drops a kiss to my head.

"Well be careful and let me know if you need anything."

"I know, I always am."

He turns to leave when I question him, "How long have the Rebels worked for you?"

He freezes and turns to look at me, I can see his brain thinking about how

he is going to answer, and I think he is going to lie until he lets out a breath.

“Since you decided you wanted to come back here for revenge,” he says calmly.

Oh lord of the fucks have mercy on my soul.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Marcus Riviera,” he says his name with such casual conviction that I recoil.

“Yeah, I know all about Marcus,” he adds.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I ask quietly. I want to be mad at him for keeping something from me but it's not like I tell him everything and I know that everything he does is to protect us.

“Why didn’t you? Michael is the one who got me to come to Hallows for you, did you really think he didn’t tell me about you and his son?” he says back, and I shrug.

“Look Ells, I know you think you can do this alone, but you can’t. Where do you think I got half of our intel about the Donovan’s from? It's not like he posts his illegal activities on google.” He shrugs himself before continuing, “Linc is a fucking genius so I got him and his guys to look where Asher couldn’t. I know you and I know you don’t want Marcus anywhere near Donovan but he was going to go after him regardless after what he did to Michael, at least this way he has back up.”

I say nothing because what can I say? He’s right but it doesn’t mean I agree with him. That night and losing Michael broke me, it took a miracle to bring me back from it, I don't know how I would survive again if anything happened to Marcus.

“Look I’ve got to head into the office for a while, so I’ll catch you after school okay?”

I offer him a wave over my head lost to my thoughts and the plate of pancakes and bacon, “Yeah, catch you later, Z.”

I inhale my breakfast and two cups of coffee and rush to get ready. Taking zero effort I grab a crop sweater and throw on some high waist cut off jean shorts and my favorite boots. Piling my curls into a messy bun on top of my head, a dab of moisturizer on my cheeks and a slick of gloss on my lips is as far as my effort goes today. I have no time for anything else.

I am running late and dragging my ass hard by the time I get to school and heave myself from my jeep.

I groan as I enter the room of my first class and notice the three Rebels

have already situated themselves around the only remaining seat. God, can't a girl catch a break around here.

I squeeze past Jace and throw myself into the chair without even apologizing to the teacher as she continues her lesson. I try and fail to stifle a yawn.

"Tired, princess?" Jace asks in a quiet, snarky tone but I am in no mood for his jokes today.

"Yep," I say popping the p, "it was a long, hard night," I smile sweetly at him without missing a beat and I feel Marcus tense on my other side. Boom first point for Team Elle.

The class continues and just as I'm about to start taking notes a firm hand grips my thigh. Thanks to my cut offs the touch is skin to skin and it makes me jump. A touch like this would normally have me reaching for the blade tucked into my boot, but this isn't just anyones touch, and it feels the opposite of threatening. I glance down and see Marcus' firm grip caressed around the tattoo on my thigh.

I turn slightly to look at the owner of the hand and Marcus is taking notes like everything is normal. It's like he isn't even aware of my existence until he moves his hand slightly higher and I can't help the squeal that leaves me causing Jace to look, he glances down, sees Marcus' grip on my thigh and smiles. I look back to Marcus and he is smirking. Bastard.

I try to quickly think of a plan, but I am saved when an office aid enters the room.

"Miss King," she looks directly at me, "your presence is required at the office."

"For what?" I ask in no mood to be dealing with any shit right now especially given Marcus' grip on me, I can barely think straight.

"Your parents are here for you," she says.

I blanch, okay now I'm fully awake. What the fuck are my parents doing here? I knew they would hear of my return at some point, but I didn't expect to be ambushed at school. Marcus' grip falls from my thigh at her statement and Jace leans in on my other side.

"Better not keep Daddy King waiting, princess."

All three of the Rebels are glaring at me and it's clear these stupid fucks have no clue what is happening here. Guess it's time to show a slither of my cards and reveal some of my secrets.

"That's funny considering I have been emancipated for three years. I'm

eighteen and regardless they aren't my guardians. So, you can kindly tell them to fuck off."

All three guys exchange a loaded look at the new information I have just released as the teacher calls me out for my language, but she is cut off when Graham pops his head in the room. Fuck not Graham, Principle Lock, that shit is hard to get used to.

"Elle, a word?" he nods his head for me to follow him.

I gather my stuff and follow him out into the hall but not before I notice Marcus' sharp glare on me. He's looking at me like he wants to rip me open and read my every thought. I pull my eyes from his and leave the room.

"Are my parents really here?" I ask Principle Lock in an annoyed tone.

"Yes, they heard you are back, and they aren't happy," he smiles.

"Well I'm not happy that their DNA runs through my veins but life's a bitch, ey?"

He barks a laugh as we near his office "Don't let them take that fire, Elle."

I smirk and lean in for a quick hug, "Never."

My parents have hardly changed in just over the three years since I've seen them.

Jonathan is still wearing a three-piece suit wherever he goes. His hair has slightly greyed since I last saw him, and he's foregone his contacts for glasses. His eyes are still fierce, and his mouth is in the same flat line it always was.

My mother looks ever the perfect Stepford wife. Hair perfectly done and nails manicured to perfection. She's wearing fitted trousers with a sleek blouse paired with heeled pumps no doubt all from a fashion collection not even available in stores yet.

Their appearance would never give away the fact they were blackmailed into selling their own daughter.

"Thank you, Graham," my father nods at him, brushing him off completely with a no-nonsense tone before locking his gaze on me. I see his distaste as he takes in my appearance.

"Mr. and Mrs. King, to what do I owe the pleasure?" I draw out slowly letting them know I'd rather be anywhere else but here.

"Elle," he tries in his warning tone that used to make me obey his every command.

"Jonathan," I reply, and he sneers at my harsh tone and use of his name.

He was always daddy but that was before I knew what a sick bastard he was, my mother tries next.

"We didn't expect you, sweetheart," my mother tries in her "people" voice. You know that fake tone people use when talking to others they want to impress. Gag.

"Yeah, I'll bet," I snort in response.

"You should really be in Hallows Prep, their education system is just so much more elite, no offense, Graham," she says in the most patronizing tone I've ever heard.

"None taken, Sarah," Lock smiles, looking like he is genuinely enjoying this shit show.

"It will be a cold day in hell before I willingly step foot in a place funded by you two and the devil himself," I say, letting the words penetrate the air with so much force I practically spit them.

"Elliot Donovan is an upstanding member of this town; you really shouldn't have believed the lies that degenerate Michael told you."

I see red instantly. How dare she. How dare they. Are they really going to stand here and act like I fucking imagined being taken and raped by the spawn of Satan. Fuck them to the fiery pits of hell and back.

"You don't get to say his name," I yell, "don't even think it. Michael Riviera was ten times the person either of you will ever be. He saved me from a fate worse than death and then paid the ultimate price for helping me. I have to live with that guilt every day, so you don't dare say his fucking name to me. In fact, don't say anything to me. I needed you when I was a scared fourteen-year-old little girl. I don't need you now. Stay the fuck away from me."

I turn to leave when my mother calls out my name one last time, desperately trying to get my attention, but I know it's because she wants something other than my daughterly love.

"No, Sarah. We were done the moment you let them touch me. I won't tell you again," I seethe at her. Fuck her for thinking this would go any other way and fuck them both for even daring to try.

I don't cry. Ever. But fuck if I don't feel the tears burning at the back of my eyes at having to defend Michael to those assholes. I am on autopilot as I rush to get to my jeep before I have a breakdown when I feel firm hands grip me tight.

Chapter 9

MARCUS

The blood in my body turns to ice. Emancipated. What the fuck? How is that even possible and how didn't I know this?

I see Jace look to me just as confused as I am and Linc is as silent and reserved as always. Hell, the attention of the whole class was on her. I had Lincoln look into her, but he couldn't find anything for the last three years from when she left until she enrolled here at Hallows, it's just a big empty void.

I presumed Daddy King kept her hidden at whatever fucking boarding school they said they sent her too but if what she is saying is true then where the fuck has she been the last few years?

I turn to the guys, "Let's go - NOW," I say as we turn to follow them. The teacher doesn't even bother trying to stop us, she knows better.

"What's going on?" Jace asks as we enter the hallway.

"I don't know," I answer honestly, "but I think we might be about to find out."

We follow close behind Elle and Lock but not too close that they notice us. I watch them round the corner and enter the double doors to Lock's office which he thankfully leaves open.

Jonathan and Sarah King haven't changed. They still reek of wealth and power which looks out of place in the grubby little office. The sneer on Jonathan's face tells me that just being here feels beneath him. I never liked that prick.

I listen intently to their interaction planning on staying hidden but at the mention of my dad's name I move to go to them, but my boys grab me tight by the arms holding me back as Elle snaps.

"You don't get to say his name," she yells, "Don't even think it. Michael Riviera was ten times the person either of you will ever be. He saved me from a fate worse than death and then paid the ultimate price for helping me. I have to live with that guilt every day, so you don't dare say his fucking name to me. In fact, don't say anything to me. I needed you when I was a scared fourteen-year-old little girl. I don't need you now. Stay the fuck away from me."

"Elle," Sarah tries.

“No Sarah. We were done the moment you let them touch me. I won’t tell you again.”

Her sentence makes my blood boil. Let who touch her? What the fuck am I missing?

She turns to leave, heading right our way and as soon as she clears the corner, I grip her tightly and drag her into an empty room before she can even register we are there. The boys follow behind me and shut the door.

She is shaking and on the verge of tears but still attempts to defend herself until she realizes it’s me holding her and she sags in relief slightly before shoving me off her.

“What the fuck was that about, Elle?” I shout in her face with a sharp tone, but it doesn't even faze her.

“Just catching up with the folks,” she replies, her voice dripping in sarcasm and sadness. “How much did you hear?” she adds, looking up at me warily as I reply.

“All of it,” I state coldly.

“Fuck,” she practically whispers, “I can’t do this right now.” She tries to leave but I grab her, and she flinches away from me.

She pulls her arm from me and in a quick motion grabs a knife from her boot and throws it out in front of her forcing me back. Fuck me, I know I should be serious right now but seeing her face all fierce and brandishing a beautiful black blade my way makes me hard as fuck.

“No one touches me without permission and gets away with it, not anymore,” she says coldly.

My blood turns to ice at her statement and I feel the boys tense at the same time I do and Jace speaks first.

“What the fuck you mean not anymore, princess?” he asks tentatively as he takes a step towards us.

“Just forget it,” she snaps, closing her eyes as if in pain.

“If someone hurt you, I’ll - - “ I start but she cuts me off.

“You’ll what, Caveman?”

The crack in her voice and sadness in her eyes breaks the wall of hatred around my heart usually aimed towards her as I step closer. She looks vulnerable and tired.

Without thinking I reach to cup her face with my hand.

“I’ll fucking end them for you, little King,” I don't even know what made me say that but somehow I just know in this moment that no matter what she

has done I won't let anyone hurt her.

She releases a breathy laugh, "Some people are indestructible Riv, if you haven't learned that in this town by now then you haven't been paying attention."

She pushes my hand from her face and doesn't even wait for a response before turning and pulling open the door to leave. I watch her walk down the hall still standing in the same spot, my arm still outstretched.

"What the fuck, brother?" Lincoln speaks.

I turn to them, "We're missing something, and I need to know what."

We move to follow Elle as the bell sounds signaling the end of lessons. I need to ask her what happened between her and my dad because I am starting to think Elliot Donovan is a bigger prick than even I thought.

We follow her through the halls until she exits the school and heads for her jeep. She climbs inside and puts her head down on the wheel. We all exchange a glance sensing how vulnerable she is right now. I nod to my brothers and they hang back as I approach alone. I tap the window and she doesn't even startle like she knew I would come for her. She unlocks the door without even looking and I climb in next to her.

"Elle," I whisper.

"Please River, just let it go," she says, raising her head to look at me.

"I need to know the truth."

"Like the truth matters, you decided your narrative about me years ago. I have neither the time or the desire to change that view for you."

"I think you owe me more than that," I say tentatively.

She laughs, "I owe you nothing. The only Riviera I owe anything too is buried six feet under and won't get to enjoy the penance I deliver. Now get out."

I wince at the mention of my father, "Whatever happened with my dad I deserve to know."

"Michael didn't want you involved then and I sure as hell won't involve you now."

"Involved in what? I need to know what is going on."

"I need you to leave me alone."

Her words hurt more than if she would have punched me and I hate that she has this effect on me when five days ago I was happily pretending that I forgot she existed.

I go to speak again when her ringtone fills the empty space of her jeep.

She looks to it and breathes a sigh of pure relief. The silence allows me to hear who has had that effect on her.

“Hey sweetheart, I got your message. What’s up?” A guy's voice is like an accelerant to the fire I feel inside my bones.

“Z,” her voice cracks, “I need you,” she says to him while looking at me.

“On my way.”

“I’ll meet you at the house,” she replies and then hangs up.

“Who the fuck was that?” I demand, not even attempting to hide my rage but all she replies with is “My savior.”

She leans across me and opens the door for me signalling for me to get out.

“This isn’t over,” I say as I climb out and the boys come up behind me.

“It was over the last day we played in the woods, Marcus.”

My name falling from her lips sounds so foreign and I loathe it almost as much as watching her drive away from me.

I’m still thinking about everything that transpired between us the following night. I haven’t seen Elle since our confrontation. I am three quarters of my way into a bottle of jack and smoking my second joint when a girl in a North Prep uniform slides up next to me. The party here on Riverside always has a laid-back vibe and allows for the easy mix of students from both sides of the town letting us all kick back. Which means girls from the elite side of town like to try their hand at playing with the bad boys before they go back to fucking their preppy boyfriends.

The north prep chick is attempting to talk to me, but I don’t even pretend I’m listening, even when she starts rubbing her hands up and down my body and kissing my neck.

All I can think about is Elle and it’s fucking with my head. I’ve hated her with a fiery passion for years and she has just walked back into town like she never left. And worse than that I don’t have a clue where she’s been or why she bothered coming back, except for Asher fucking Donovan.

I need to remember she’s a traitor and not the Elle I remember.

A traitor who was at least part of the reason why my father was killed. Yet I can't help but replay the conversation I overheard yesterday. She defended my dad and referred to Elliot as the devil so why would she have helped him take down my dad.

“Yoooo,” Jace throws himself on the other side of me and nudges the arm not being clung onto by the prissy north side chick.

I look at him and he just gestures his head across the room as he says, “Your girl’s here,” I immediately snap my eyes to where he is looking and sure enough Elle is standing there looking like a fucking angel of darkness. She’s got her hair slicked back into a pony with heavy eyeliner and a red lip. She’s wearing a red leather skirt with a plain t-shirt tucked into it and a pair of sneakers. Effortless yet sexy as fuck and my dick is instantly hard.

Jace looks at me and laughs, “You are so fucked.”

Just as I think about standing, someone slides up next to her and hands her a red cup.

Of course, she’s here with Asher fucking Donovan.

Chapter 10

ELLE

I fucking hate parties and that is speaking from zero experience with them. But let's face it, people are assholes and no one more so than high school kids who think they know everything. When in reality they don't know shit about the real world and for most of them this will be the peak of their life. I used to love socializing and being the center of attention but that's just another thing they took from me. Now I see past the bullshit filter everyone puts out there. I don't care what jock scores the most touchdowns or who is hooking up with who. It's all bullshit but for tonight it's a necessity.

The party is being held in an old warehouse on Riverside that is frequented most weekends by kids from both schools from what I hear. It's run down but someone has decked it out with a dj set up, loads of black sofas and lights etc so it actually looks pretty cool. There is a bit off to the side where someone has made it into a drinks area filled with shelves, fridges and a large table that's piled with bottles and a few kegs.

I'm only here because I need an in with some of the girls. I need intel on the clubs Donovan is using to pick up his elite targets. I could easily go and check them out alone, but I'd stand out by a mile. Easier to insert myself into a group of girls and blend in.

I rode here with Asher so I plan on having a drink, just enough to give me a little buzz so I can tolerate dealing with people. Because you know, they suck. He has gone to grab me a drink while I check things out. I have only been here five minutes when I feel eyes on me.

I turn around slowly swinging my gaze around until it lands on Marcus. He is sitting next to Jace on one side and has a girl from Hallows Prep draped across his other. The usual hatred I have become accustomed to seeing in his stare this week isn't there. He is looking at me like he is a starving man and I'm his next meal. I can't take my eyes off him. It looks like he is about to get up and come over when he freezes.

I feel Asher's presence next to me and it breaks whatever connection Marcus and I just had. I take the drink from him and look back at Marcus and am greeted with his usual disdain this time. Fuck my life.

“So what's the plan, Hells Bells,” Asher leans in so I can hear him over the music and I see Marcus tense from here and when Ash realizes I'm not paying attention to him he follows my stare.

“Is there something going on with you two I should know about?” he asks.

I finally pull my eyes away from Marcus to meet his, “What? No of course not,” I stammer.

He rolls his eyes at me, “Well he looks like he is two minutes away from fucking you or killing you, or maybe both.”

“It's not like that.”

“Sure it's not,” he deadpans. “Anyways, we don't have time for him. We've got work to do. Come on, let's go make you some new friends,” he laces his fingers with mine and pulls me into the crowd of people but not before I see Marcus slam the bottle he was drinking down and storm away, lost to the darkness of the warehouse and the girl follows.

I shouldn't care but fuck if I do.

Ash pulls me over to a group of guys and girls and I see them judging me instantly and trying to work out who I am. I vaguely recognize a few of them from middle school but they changed enough that I can't place their names. When they speak it's clear they don't recognize me either.

“Sup, Ash?” one of the guys nods to him.

“Ronan,” he nods back and then looks at the other two, “Tyler, Matt,” he looks back at me gesturing to where I'm standing next to him, “This is Elle King.”

“Damn, sup Elle?” the guy Ash called Ronan says to me.

“Don't even fucking think about it, Atkins,” Asher shoots him a look of pure evil and I have to give his arm a little squeeze to pull him back. He really can't help how protective he is over me but after what he saw I don't blame him.

There are four girls standing within the group and three of them are looking at me like I've stolen their favorite toy. I guess Ash is considered a very eligible bachelor even at eighteen.

The one not looking at me with hatred seems familiar and she smiles at me, so I smile back.

“Glad to see you haven't changed too much, Smell,”

The recognition is instant, “Tay?”

“Knew you could never forget me, bitch” she barks a laugh.

Taylor Kennedy, holy shit. Far from the little girl with glasses and braces that I remember. She's fucking stunning. She's got a short sleek black bob and eyes as green as fresh spring grass, long lashes fanning against her face. Her makeup is low key, and her outfit is nothing like the three girls she is with. She's wearing docs with fitted checked pants that are belted at the waist with a plain black tank top tucked into them.

"I can't believe it's really you, you look amazing," I say as one of the bitches next to her snorts and in typical Elle fashion I don't hold my tongue.

"Problem?" I glare at her, but she doesn't answer.

"Elle, this is Madison, Casey and Skyler," Ash says, his voice cold and dripping with disdain. He leans into me adding the word, "Snakes," low next to my ear just for me and I smile.

"Asher where have you been? I've missed you," the one called Madison says in a nasally tone. He doesn't look at her as he answers with one word, "Around."

I can see all of them trying to work out the dynamic between us.

Skyler speaks next, "So how do you two know each other?"

Before I can answer the guy named Tyler speaks up, "Wait, Elle King? As in Jonathan King's daughter?" my answering nod changes their attention to me instantly. I have gone from a nobody to a somebody in their eyes now. They all appraise me differently now that they recognize me.

Fucking pathetic and to think assholes like this are going to be given jobs in the future that help run this country. Fuck nepotism.

"Wow, so you guys haven't seen each other in three years then, that's how long ago you went off to boarding school, right?" Madison chimes in again and I have to squash down the laugh that threatens to escape. So that's the story the precious Kings came up with about their daughter's sudden disappearance. So predictable.

I don't get a chance to answer as Ash does it for me as he puts his arm around me and pulls me closer.

"Actually, we never stopped seeing each other, I visited Elle every month," he tells them and technically he isn't lying, he did visit me every month.

A loud crash draws our attention as I see Marcus close enough to hear what Ash just said. Jace and Linc are standing next to him, all of their eyes are on us while everyone else's are on the busted keg he just threw. He looks beyond furious as he turns and storms off.

“Fucking south side scum,” the guy named Matt sneers and I dig my nails into my palms to stop myself from dick punching him.

Taylor must sense something is off as she steps forwards and grabs me, “Come on, bitch. Let’s drink, catch up and show these boring fucks how to party,” and I sag in relief.

“No wonder you never touch any of our girls when you’ve got that waiting for you,” I hear one of the guys say as we turn and walk away.

“Speak about her like that again and I’ll insure you’ll need to have your jaw wired shut,” is the last thing I hear from Ash before I am out of earshot. My little psycho is always protecting my honor.

I’m definitely buzzed for the first time ever and fuck if it doesn’t feel good. I’m lost in the music with Taylor as we sway and grind and I feel free. Free of trauma, grief, responsibilities, anger, revenge, just free. I open my eyes when I feel that prickly awareness coat my skin only to lock eyes with Marcus. He is leaning against the wall a few feet away and it’s like the crowd has parted for just this moment. His stare is so intense it gives me goosebumps, having his attention on me like this makes me feel sexy and for once my appearance doesn’t feel like a burden.

Taylor notices my attention and looks right at Marcus and then back to me.

“You jumped on that yet?” she leans in and practically yells in my ear.

“What no of course not and don’t you think Ash and I --”

“Please,” she snorts. “In the Elle, Marcus, Asher triangle it was always Marcus,” and I have no words because she’s right. “Besides we both know Asher doesn’t look at you like that.”

“What makes you say that?” I question her.

“Because I have eyeballs,” she laughs, clearly as tipsy as I am and with that, she offers no further comment and continues to dance again.

I look back to Marcus and his burning gaze is still on me, I can’t take the heat. Being an eighteen-year-old virgin really doesn’t equip you to handle attention from any guys. And yes, virgin because I don’t count rape as me losing my virginity. As far as I’m concerned, I will be a virgin until I choose to consent to have sex for the first time.

Marcus’ eyes track my every move, and it makes me feel tingles deep down in my stomach and mixed with the alcohol it all becomes too much.

I turn and flee. I’m out the doors and down the side street before I can even think about it and I find myself having to hold onto the wall to get my

breath back. What the fuck was that? I barely have time to think before I am being gripped and pushed against the wall.

Considering I'm definitely drunk my reactions are quick and my knife is in my hand and against the assailant's throat before I can even blink.

"Are you always armed?" Marcus' velvety voice breathes against me as he flicks his eyes to the knife at his throat and then back to me.

I don't think before I reply "In this town? Yes."

We just stare at one another for the lord knows how long, could be a second, could be an hour. He has got one hand on my hip and another on my collarbone and fuck if I can feel how strong his grip is and without thinking I lean into it and it breaks the spell.

He slams against me pushing me further into the wall and closing the gap between our bodies. I'm instantly aware of his hard on pressing against my stomach. What the fuck?

My eyes widen and I let a gasp leave me and his stare hardens.

"Fuck you doing here, King?" he spits the words at me.

"Party?" I barely choke out the word and it comes out sounding like a question.

"No, not tonight. I mean here, back in this fucking town, my town."

"Please," I snort, "this town currently belongs to one man and it isn't you."

He answers by sliding the hand on my collar bone to grip my throat and before I can stop it I'm hit with a flashback. Seeing Greg and his minions with their hands on me and I can't prevent the panic attack from hitting me.

I feel out of it and barely aware of my surroundings when I hear new voices clashing with each other. I can barely choke out a breath and my heart feels like it is going to burst from my chest. I try to take a deep inhale to bring myself back, but I feel too far gone. Even though I know its Marcus hands on me it still has triggered that dark usually dormant place in my mind, and I can't shut it down.

"Get your fucking hands off her," Ash roars at him.

"What the fuck, Marcus?" Jace shouts.

"Brother," Linc says cautiously.

I feel Marcus' grip leave me and I only focus again when hands tentatively reach out and touch my face and my vision returns fully and I lock eyes with Asher.

"Ash," I sigh, letting the tension leave my body.

“Yeah, it’s me, baby girl. You’re okay. I’m here.”

He puts his arm around me and lifts me up and that's when I realize I slumped down the wall onto my knees. I look up and all three Rebels are staring at us. I hate that they saw me in such a vulnerable way and I just want to get out of here quickly.

“Elle,” Marcus’ voice is firm but confused.

“Touch her again and I will fucking end you, Riviera,” Asher snaps at him, pulling me into him more like he can protect me with his body from all the bad in the world. If only it were that easy.

“I just want --” he tries again.

“I don’t give a fuck what you want. Wake up and realize the world doesn’t revolve around the fucking south side king and his precious Rebels.” He laughs mocking him, “You’re fucking pathetic, if only you knew what hap--”

“Ash,” I yell in a panic at the thought of him revealing something but of course Marcus doesn’t miss it.

“Knew what?” he steps forward.

“Just fuck off, Marcus. She doesn’t need you anymore,” the glare he serves him would scare a lesser man, but Marcus doesn’t even entertain him. Ash turns to me, “Come on, Hells Bells, let's go home.”

I don’t miss the recoil Marcus has when Asher says the word home. He leads me away and bundles me into the car and before I know it, we are speeding away into the night with Marcus staring after us.

Chapter 11

ELLE

Fuck me, hangovers are not fun. My head is pounding, and I honestly feel like if I move, I'm going to hurl my insides out. I shuffle from under the duvet and groan out loud as the light pouring through the drapes burns my retinas. Fuck my life. Remind me to never drink again if this is what you get, it's not fucking worth it.

"Hungover, baby girl?" Ash's voice startles me, and I almost throw myself out of bed trying to lunge for the Glock I keep next to my bed and he laughs at me.

"Fuck, Ash. Alert a girl to your presence, you little fucker. I almost shot you."

My best friend is sitting next to me with a beautiful smile on his face that he saves just for us and I relax instantly. He's shirtless showing off his lean toned physique and the large angel tattoo on his chest. He really is gorgeous. Seeing him like this when he is just his relaxed carefree self really makes my heart burst. Moments like these are so rare and I cherish them.

"Righttttt, I'll try that the next time you're in a drunk coma like sleep but let's be honest, you are shooting no one in that state," he rolls his eyes dramatically and then winks at me.

"It's a good thing I love you, Ash," I smile at him. "Otherwise I'd shoot you just for your attitude." He knows I am totally bullshitting but I'm hungover so who the fuck cares? We always tease each other like this. I'm probably the only person in the world who gets away with teasing him and I secretly love it. We share a bond made as kids, forged by darkness, and strengthened by grief. These moments where it is just us where we can feel like any other two teenagers, heals my soul and I know he feels the same.

"What are you doing here, anyway?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay," his eyes turn into his usual dark serious glare and that's when last night starts to come back to me.

The alley with Marcus, the panic attack, Ash coming to help and all three rebels seeing me vulnerable. Fuck me with a rusty pipe. I scrub my hands over my face and exhale loudly.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Ash. You know me," I offer him a small smile.

“He puts hands on you again and I’ll cut them off. I don’t give a fuck who he thinks he is,” he deadpans totally serious. He doesn’t have to mention Marcus’ name for me to know who he is talking about. He doesn’t care that we all used to be friends, the only thing that matters to him is our safety and fuck if it doesn’t make me love him more. I know he would die for me without hesitation and it’s hard to find that kind of love in this shitty world.

I lean over and rest my head on his shoulder.

“I know you just want to protect me, Ash, but you don’t have to worry about Marcus. He isn’t a threat,” he knows this, but I still feel like I need to remind him. His protection knows no bounds.

He leans his head against mine and grabs my hand as he replies, “I failed you once Elle and I promise it will never happen again. So, I will protect you against everyone even if that someone is yourself.”

I don’t respond because I don’t know how. Ash would protect me with his life, and I would do the same for him, but I would also do the same for Marcus.

We lay like that for a while until Ash’s phone goes and he turns rigid as he looks at the screen and then swipes before placing it next to his ear. I can’t hear what is being said on the other line but from the tension rolling off him I know it’s family business. Ash is just responding with one-word answers until he says, “I’ll be there in one hour.”

He throws the phone down and exhales.

“Time to go back to hell.”

“Where did they think you were all night?” I muse.

He smiles and winks at me, “In bed with a beautiful girl.”

I laugh, “Ah yes, what a wild night you had. I’m sure there were plenty of people last night that would have happily warmed your bed and given you some action.”

“And I’d take a night keeping you safe over that any day baby girl,” his tone serious again.

I give him a sorrow smile back “I know, Ash. Always?”

His face lights up, “Always,” he says simply.

That has been our little saying to each other since we reconnected after that awful night. Just letting each other know that no matter where we are or what happens, that we will always have each other’s backs.

He throws back the duvet and climbs out of bed picking his pants off the floor and quickly pulling them on and then shrugging into his shirt. He looks

pristine considering he is climbing out of a bed that isn't his and putting on yesterday's clothes but that is just Ash for you. He would look stunning in a sack never mind his bespoke Hugo Boss shirt and pants.

He leans down and drops a kiss to my cheek and then disappears out of my door. I look at the time and it's still only 9am. Lord knows what time Ash put me to bed last night but all I want to do is turn over and sleep but that's not on the agenda for today. It's Saturday which means it's a day for Zack and I, my favorite time of the week and unlike last Saturday we won't be alone.

Now that I am fully settled in the house and school, it's time for the rest of our family to join us.

When Zack took me from Hallows, he drove me straight from this hell hole to his parents' house. That was the first day I met Helen and Arthur Royton.

They are the kind of parents every kid wishes they could have. Beautiful, smart, funny, caring and absolutely devoted to their children. The day I met them was the day I found new parents, a new home, and a new family.

They lifted me up from the depths of hell along with Zack and made me who I am today. I'd be lost and probably dead if it weren't for them. My new family gave me everything I had always needed, and I will forever be in their debt.

I'm not the first stray they took in. Zack's piece of shit of a mom gave him up at birth. Her loss was Helen and Arthur's first gain. They realized pretty early on in their marriage that they couldn't have children of their own and decided there were already plenty of children out there who needed a home and loving parents.

Since then they have taken in three more children. The twins who have just left for college and more recently a little girl. They are always willing to help out anyone with anything.

I make my way to the kitchen and can already hear all the commotion that can only mean they are already here. I round the corner and am greeted with my favorite sight in the whole world. Nearly my entire family in one room.

Arthur is helping Zack with breakfast and Helen is sitting at the breakfast bar. But it's the smallest of the Royton clan that sees me first and I get the biggest smile I've ever seen on the littlest face.

She has a mouth full of chocolate pancakes, her favorite and she is tapping away on a tablet playing an alphabet game.

“Sassy Cassie, I have missed you, baby girl,” I coo as I ruffle my hand through her soft messy curls and drop a kiss to her head.

“I’m not sassy, I’m a pwincess,” she replies in her sweet voice.

“Oh, I’m sorry, princess, if you’re a princess can I be the queen?”

“No, you’re a King, remember, silly?”

Her response makes me smile and it is probably the only time I smile at the thought of being a King. I thought about changing my name, but my name is part of who I am and tells the story of where I came from, regardless of how shitty that is.

Helen pulls me into a hug next. She is almost 50 but looks in her late 30’s. She has got beautiful silver blonde hair that is sleek straight and is wearing cream linen pants and a silk champagne blouse. She squeezes me tight and it feels like home.

"Here's my little rose," she coos, "I've missed you, honey."

"It's only been a week."

"And that's a week too long, my child," she pulls back and starts fluffing my hair in a motherly manner. God, I love her.

Arthur looks just as young as Helen even though he is in his early 50’s. His hair is dark and slicked back with his grey coming through on the sides and in his slight facial hair. He is dressed in one of his usual jumper and chino combos and that forever friendly smile.

"Bacon and waffles for my little firecracker," he winks at me as he slides a plate across the counter to me.

"My hero," I smile at him. He was the first to realize the way to my heart is through my stomach and has been plying me with food ever since. He reminds me of Michael, the type of dad who would do anything for their kids or just the type of person that would do anything for anyone really. He knows me so well and I know I can always rely on him no matter what.

Arthur and Zack grab plates of their own and we all head over to the dining table so we can eat together comfortably. I am so happy to have them here with us, it completes the dynamic of our family and soothes my soul instantly.

Even when they were still working the first year I was with them, we always made time for family dinners. It was our thing. We would talk about anything and everything, sharing stories from our past and making plans for our futures. They always made me feel like I truly belonged with them.

Arthur was a world-renowned surgeon who was a true leader in his field

and Helen was a family lawyer who was a force to be reckoned with. Both of them retired just over two years ago so they could devote more time to each other and their family.

Helen is the one who helped me get emancipated from my parents and is a true inspiration for the kind of parent I could only long to be. After the week I've had with my run-ins with the Rebels and my devil creators, it's nice to finally be able to relax and breathe.

We spend the day catching up and moving Helen and Arthur into the large guesthouse out the back of the main house. It keeps them close to us but also offers them privacy of their own. Being back in Lucifer's town means we want to keep eyes on them as much as possible.

After helping them get settled they all head out for dinner and I wish life could be simple sometimes and I could go with them, but I have work to do. I've got a little mission planned for tonight to follow up on some leads I gathered during the week.

Zack comes to my room before they leave.

"Dressed to kill, I see," he smiles lovingly at me.

I am wearing fitted black leather pants tucked into combat boots and a black lace bodice. The perfect outfit for me to blend into where I am going tonight. Showing off skin and ink yet perfectly hiding the knife sheathed at my waist, the gun at my ankle and the black jeweled knuckle dusters look like accessories to my ensemble.

I am making sure I have enough weapons at my disposal considering I am going alone. This is not like the elite clubs where I plan to blend myself into a group of 'friends', no tonight's mission is in a shit hole of a bar where I need to be low key and keep to myself.

"Always, Z," I offer him my most sinister smile and he just chuckles at me.

"Be careful sweetheart and watch your back."

I scoff, "Like you don't have people watching it for me."

He smiles, "Yeah, well call me if you need anything."

"I will."

Tonight, is all about hitting the first mark on my list, one of Donovan's low life drug runners. They use him because he's got looks that attracts the girls and while he distracts them with his charm and fake Rolex, he spikes their drinks to make them more agreeable. Then the sick little fuck transports them right to the devil's playground for his twisted games but not before he

tests out the merchandise himself.

Elliot Donovan thinks he is untouchable, well I'm about to take his business apart piece by fucking piece until he's got nothing left. Only then will I grant him the mercy of ending his life with a bullet to the skull.

It's going to be a game of chess and it's time to take out the first pawn.

Chapter 12

MARCUS

I haven't slept. I couldn't. I just kept playing Elle's face over and over in my head when she just faded out right in front of my eyes. Fuck. I don't think I have ever felt panic like that since the night she left town.

One minute I was looking into those ocean blue eyes, alive with rage and heat and the next it's like they were totally blank. Just vague and lifeless and I never want to see her look like that ever again. I wanted to do something, help her but before I even got the chance Donovan was dragging me out of the way and cradling her in his arms.

Which why wouldn't he? She is his to cradle. Seeing them together makes me feel things I don't understand, and I don't fucking like it. Whatever made her react like that last night I never want to see it happen again and the fact that I somehow caused it makes me feel sick to my stomach.

God my head is truly fucked up. She has been back in my life for less than a week and my thoughts have never been so chaotic. I need to shut it down. I sit up and my head is throbbing, and my back and neck are stiff from laying on the sofa for so long. I didn't bother trying to stumble to bed and from the empty bottles surrounding me on the floor it's probably a good thing I didn't. I doubt I would have been able to make it.

"You look like shit, player," Jace comes into the living room in his sweats with a towel around his neck. He must have come from the gym we have here in our loft.

We have lived together for the last year after we all started making serious money working for Mr. Royton. He's our unofficial boss and excuse for having so much cash at such a young age. We have been making big money pretty much as soon as I hit the south side and teamed up with the guys.

The Donovan family is so powerful that no one had the balls to go against them meaning the playing field was wide open for someone to step up. That someone just happened to be me. It didn't matter that Donovan had fucked my dad over and took all our money before he killed him. I had enough contacts and respect that it was easy to start over.

Mix that with Linc being recruited for his super hacking skills and

bringing us along for the jobs he is given means we are flush. We all have legitimate bank accounts set up which houses our “clean” money and anything else we stash around our house or in one of our other secret places.

We chose this place because it’s off the main roads and offers us privacy. Add that to the fact it has five bedrooms, three bathrooms, a gym, an office, a games room and a rooftop garden. All wrapped up securely with a top of the range camera and motion sensor system thanks to Linc. This is our safe haven.

“I feel like shit too,” I croak out, my throat sore from a mixture of too much whiskey and weed.

“Wanna tell me what the fuck happened with Elle last night?” he snaps at me and it takes me aback completely. Serious is a tone that I rarely hear from Jace and to hear it now about someone he barely knows irritates me.

“Yeah, I think I’d like to know that too,” Linc says coming from his office and I want to roll my eyes, it looks like I am being double teamed on this one.

I blow out a breath, “Honestly, I don’t fucking know.”

I think back to last night and seeing Elle with Asher’s arm around her and how it fucking flipped a switch in me. I don’t know what the fuck happened, but my hatred suddenly felt a lot like jealousy and lust and it confused the fuck out of me. I went from thinking about how much I fucking hate her to how much I wish it was my arm around her.

She looked fucking beautiful as always and then she was with him and chilling with his friends, friends that used to be our friends and then dancing with that Taylor chick like the music was fucking composed to the movement of her hips. I was as hard as steel watching her and all I could think about was how much I wanted to grab onto her and never let go.

“She’s like a stranger to me now,” I admit to myself out loud.

Jace and Linc take a seat across from me on the other side of the sofa but I can’t even look at them. I am too lost in my thoughts of last night.

Her presence is like a drug and I’m addicted. So, when she fled from the party I followed. The rage in her eyes when I grabbed her lit an inferno inside of me that I never want to burn out.

“I don’t know what happened, one minute she was looking at me all calm and collected and the next she was shaking, and her stare was just vacant.”

Last night just cemented the fact of how much has changed in the last few years we have spent apart. We aren’t Ells and River anymore; we are just two

strangers who share half a past. In all honesty, I hate the way things are between us, but I don't know how to change them or if I even should.

"It all just happened so fast," I continue. "We were going head to head like we have been all week and then she freaked out and before I knew what was happening Asher knocked me out of the way."

Asher giant fucking prick Asher, he is just always there now. Him and Elle, always fucking together. That used to be us, me and her, inseparable and always on the same side. Now we might as well not even be in the same place, we are so far gone from each other I don't know if we can find our way back.

"She was having a panic attack, Marcus," Linc states like it was so fucking obvious. "So, something must have triggered it," he looks at me expectantly.

I huff, "Look, I had her gripped by the arm and she was talking shit to me and then I moved one of my hands to her throat and then she just flipped, but in my defense she did have a fucking knife to my throat."

He and Jace trade a look and it pisses me off that they are clearly on the same page as each other here.

"Look man," Jace starts, "think about what you were told and then think about what you know about Elle. Then think about all the shit we have seen this week and the stuff we overheard. We already agreed we don't have the full story."

I hate to admit it but Jace is right. I thought I knew the whole story but it's clear there is something more going on here. I need answers and she is the only one who can give them to me and yet I know she is the last person that will. Asher obviously knows, he has too. He said it loud and clear last night that they have never lost touch or stopped seeing each other the last few years.

If they never lost touch, then surely, she is on Donovan's side. Asher never spoke to me after Elle left but he did try to reach out after his father murdered mine. I told him to burn in hell and to take Elliot and Elle with him. At that point, my grief was so fresh I didn't give a fuck about reason just facts.

"Yeah we are out of the loop. She is shady and guarding who knows how many fucking secrets," I snap back at him.

"Look Marcus, I love you, you're my brother and I will always have your back but I have to tell you, I think you have things wrong about her," he

looks nervous to say that out loud and I don't blame him after everything I've said.

"Yeah brother, I have to agree with Jace on this one," Linc adds.

"She came back for a reason," Jace continues.

My head is fucked from what I thought I knew and from what I have heard this week. I don't know what to think.

"She never even reached out to me, not once, not even when my dad died," I say after a couple of minutes of silence passes.

She was my best friend. My only friend really, unless you count Asher which I don't, I only used to put up with him because of Elle. Just us until I met the guys. I have spent over three years fucking pissed at her for leaving and hateful at her for what happened to my dad.

"I needed her," I add so quietly it's almost a whisper. "How can I trust someone who left me?"

"Elle was your friend and it sounds like something happened to her that sent her running from this town and I think you are lucky she even came back," Jace is trying hard to mask his pain but I can see through it, his anger isn't aimed at me right now.

"She was just a kid," Lincoln says solemnly like he knows something I don't.

"Elliot Donovan said it was because of her that my dad was murdered because of something she did."

Even as I say the words aloud, they don't hold the same conviction as they did a week ago. Do I really believe that Elle, my Elle, would do anything that would result in murder? What if this whole time I have been blaming her for something that didn't happen and if so why did she leave? What would make Donovan lie about her unless he did something to her. No that can't be right because then why would she cut me out and turn to Asher.

"And you believe that low life piece of shit? The first rule of this town is you can't trust a fucking Donovan," Jace snaps again.

"Yeah and she's got one on her fucking arm!" I bellow back at him.

Jace laughs now for the first time since this conversation started "Yeah, well that's just your jealousy, bro."

Jealousy. Of course I'm fucking jealous. How could I not be? Asher used to be on the outside, it was me and Ells against the world and he was our third wheel. Now I am the one left out in the cold, the one she looks at with disdain while she looks at Asher like he is her everything. The pain at losing

my best friend is just as bruising as losing my father. I'm left with nothing while Asher gets everything.

"You're right but still, she's with Asher now," the words taste bitter on my tongue.

"She seems cool, I like her, and I have never seen you get your head fucked with by a chick."

I want to laugh. Of course, she is fucking with my head. She has had permanent fucking residence there, has since we were kids, and we had our first play date.

"I feel like I have hated her for 3 years for leaving and everything else, how can I just turn that off?"

"You just gotta decide if it's worth it," Jace says.

"What's worth it?" I ask, confused.

"Everything," he smiles at me before grabbing his bottle of water from the table and leaving the room.

Chapter 13

ELLE

For as rich as Elliot Donovan is you would think he would have classier ways kidnapping young girls. You would never think one of his favorite hunting grounds would be the dive bar on the south side strip.

I've been digging into his business for over two years and I know so many sick and twisted details of his fucked up little sex ring that it doesn't even shock me anymore. He is clever. I'll give him that. You would never know about his sick perversions if you didn't know what to look for. He covers his tracks well.

He preys on the young and vulnerable. His main M.O. is to take the girls who are forgotten and left behind so nobody notices them or cares when they're gone. I was the first exception from what I've gathered but certainly not the last.

He has since upgraded to stealing girls of the elite families and putting them into compromising positions to use as blackmail against anyone who might even think about opposing him. The threat is normally enough to have even his most defiant opponents fall back in line. If they don't, well, I hate to think about what happens to those girls. Either way, Donovan reaps the fucking benefits.

His organization gets off on making little girls break.

I wonder if I'll get off on breaking them.

I spy my first target. Nate 'Octo' Maxwell, he is known around town for being one of Donovan's biggest drug runners, supplying everyone with the goods but I know of his true crimes. He preys on girls in bars by drugging them and carrying them off to their worst nightmares. He's got his fingers in so many pies that he's been nicknamed the octopus. I shit you not, the fucking octopus!

I've been sitting in a back booth for almost two hours watching him fucking drool over a girl who is no more than fifteen. He's got his arm around her and has been plying her with free drinks since I got here. She is completely out of it and not just from the free booze and I wish I didn't have to watch this, but I need to make sure my timing is right.

Even without the Donovan paycheck he is the type of narcissistic asshole

who doesn't know how to take no for an answer. They use him for his boy next door good looks that lure in the girls but all I can see is a sick fucking rapist who needs to burn in hell.

The girl slips from her stool and he shoots his arm out to catch her the black tentacles of ink on his arm curving round her to keep her up right. He tosses some bills across the bar to cover his tab and starts towards the back of the club to the entrance that leads to the alley.

Showtime.

The adrenaline that starts to burn in my veins fuels the fire in me that was started on the night I was broken. I have been working towards revenge for so long that the feeling of it finally being put into motion makes chaos flow through me. I can't wait to paint the walls with his blood.

I follow him as he drags her along with him, she is fully passed out now and honestly it takes everything in me to not fucking kill him right here, but it will be a lot cleaner outside. The fact that no one even bats an eyelash at him dragging an unconscious girl out back tells you enough about the caliber of people that frequent here. Everyone knows who Nate Maxwell is and who he works for, they don't dare interfere as they are too scared of the repercussions. Sadly, I've already experienced some of the worst Elliot Donovan has to offer so I have no qualms about dealing with this low life.

I stalk him from the darkness as he makes his way outside and over to a van that is waiting for him, he flings the back door open and practically throws her inside.

The rage is real.

I step from the shadows and call out his name.

"Nate Maxwell," he startles and turns towards me quickly and I see recognition hit his eyes after a couple of seconds.

"I never forget a pretty face, princess," his eyes rake over me and he licks his lips.

I have to fight the bile from making its way up my throat, I am going to enjoy this way more than I thought.

"And I never forget an impotent rapist cunt," I snap at him and his face is a mixture of lust and glee. Sick bastard.

"Oh girl, you should have stayed in whatever hole you have been hiding in, but I am glad you didn't," his glare turns sinister. "Mr. Donovan is going to be happy with my hunting tonight."

He lunges at me, but I anticipate his attack and have already pulled my

knife from its concealed sheath and as he slams me against the alley wall, I plunge it into his side. He grunts in pain and falters slightly, but it doesn't weaken him enough, I guess he has a lot of practice at subduing young girls.

He twists my arm until I drop it and then pulls the knife out and throws it to the floor as he barks at me, "You fucking little slut," his insult makes me roll my eyes considering the only time I have ever been fucked is against my will. I dig my fingers into the stab wound I left, and he yells out and immediately releases me.

He recovers quicker than I expect and punches me hard in the face and I see stars and have to bend over. Fuck that hurts. He retreats to grab something from his van and on his return, I can see rope in his hand. Oh, fuck no, not today Satan. I stand up straight and I feel blood trickle down my face and onto my lip and I dart my tongue out to taste it. Oh, he is going to fucking regret making me bleed.

I duck down to the ground as he lunges for me again, I throw my knuckle dusted fist right into his dick as hard as I can and the scream he lets out is like a symphony to my ears. Fuck. I have always wanted to do that to someone and trust me Nate Maxwell is a prime fucking candidate.

I can feel my face swelling from where he hit me, and I would love nothing more than to plant a bullet in this sick fuck's skull but I don't want to draw too much attention.

I bend down to retrieve my knife but a gasping noise from the van distracts me. I turn to make my way towards the girl when a hand reaches out and grabs my ankle. The hand yanks me to the floor before I can reach the van. My head slams into the ground and the impact makes me dizzy. Nate uses the distraction to climb on top of me and pins me down with my arms locked tight into my body. It's a good thing Zack trained me with some of the best, otherwise I would be well and truly fucked right now. I need to think and fast.

The blood pouring from his side soaks into my lace bodice and I know it won't be long before he passes out from the blood loss. I ready myself to headbutt him when his excited pissed off stare suddenly turns vacant and he lets out a grunt as his body becomes dead weight on top of me.

His body is on me for seconds before it's being hauled off and I am greeted with a face I never thought I'd be happy to see. Lincoln reaches out his arm to help me up and as I stand, I see my knife poking out of the back of Nate's back. I think I might be in shock because I don't even know what to

say.

He is standing there, green eyes alive with intensity and looking right at me. He is dressed head to toe in black and there is a black duffel at his feet. He reaches out and tentatively grabs my chin and tilts my face to the side to survey my injuries.

I am definitely sporting a black eye and a cut on my eyebrow.

"You okay?" his stare locks me in place and I just nod.

He leans down to check Nate's pulse which I know is now non-existent and then he studies our surroundings taking in everything he sees.

"You seriously came here alone," he snaps and it's not a question.

I huff at him. Like I haven't been training for this type of shit for three years.

"I can handle myself, Lincoln."

He just shakes his head and looks pointedly at the dead body at our feet. Okay, I guess he caught me in a compromised position, and he helped me just at the right time but hell if I am admitting that to this cocky asshole. I could of handled it without him, it's what I trained for.

"I would have been fine," I snap at him.

"If you say so."

"Whatever, stalker."

"This stalker just saved your life," he says, and I notice his frown when he clocks the cameras.

"The cameras are fake, and I cut off the ones on the street," he swings his gaze back to me as I speak, clearly shocked.

"I'm not stupid."

"I didn't think you were, but I am being paid a lot of money to have your back."

"The man who is paying you also paid to have me sufficiently trained." I make a show of gesturing to my knife and gun.

"Oh, so you are smarter than you look," he gleams at me and I roll my eyes at him.

"Don't make me dick punch you too," I snap at him, flashing him the duster on my fist and he smiles.

What the fuck am I going to do with him. I don't have time to worry about him right now, the dead leech at my feet takes precedence.

I need to call for help and I debate whether I should get Lincoln to leave first but then I think fuck it. He did just help me kill a man. Guess I'll have to

trust him a little. I pull my phone out and dial the third number on my speed dial.

“Hey, it’s me. Yeah, I’m okay but I need a clean-up and a safe house, and can you get Doc to meet me there?” I speak quickly into the phone to Zack’s head of security without using his name, I ain’t trusting Lincoln that much. It’s also why I only ask for Arthur by his codename.

Lincoln watches me closely and I can tell he’s trying to work something out. He is looking at me like he is expecting me to freak out or something, which I guess isn’t too farfetched considering the last time he saw me I was having a panic attack. I see his mind working trying to piece together what is happening and I can see when he thinks he gets it because he tilts his head to the side and frowns even deeper than before.

“What?” I snap after I end the call.

“This is the octopus dead at our feet.”

I roll my eyes of course he knows who it is. I should have seen this coming when he told me he had been working for Zack. Has Z told him what’s going on here? And if he hasn’t, should I? I mean it is going to be pretty easy to figure out if he is going to keep fucking following me.

“And?” I say dismissing him as I make my way over to the van to check on the girl.

“I know exactly who this lowlife works for. I’ve been watching you for hours, so are you really going to try and act like I’m stupid?” he looks at me expectantly.

I honestly don’t know how to even answer him. I mean he just saved my ass and he obviously knows more than I imagined but how can I open up to him, he’s still a Rebel.

“Look Linc, I appreciate your help, but I have got a dead body to dispose of and an unconscious girl to tend to. So, can we do this another time? Like, maybe never?” I say as I reach out and check over the girl for any injuries.

She looks even younger up close and it makes me want to cut the dead piece of shit on the floor even more. Fucking bastard. Of course Lincoln ignores me and comes over to help me.

“Are you going to make stalking me a habit?” I ask distractedly.

“Yep,” he replies obnoxiously, and I groan.

Fuck it. Z obviously trusts him, and it looks like I won’t be getting rid of him anytime soon.

“Fine. Two conditions. One, Marcus does not find out about this. His

safety is a top priority to me, and I won't have any more Riviera blood spilled on my watch."

I expect him to fight me on this, but he simply nods and responds, "And two?"

"Two," I exhale. "Two is you don't ask me any personal questions. I am not an open book and we won't be sharing secrets or trading stories. You can help me with this no questions asked, or I can easily add losing a tail to my skill set."

He holds his hand out to me and I look at him confused and he just shakes his head and grabs mine to his and we shake on it. He then turns and reaches into his duffel and starts pulling out plastic sheeting and tape. Fuck me, what the hell have I got myself into here?

Chapter 14

ELLE

It's Monday morning again already and I feel a sense of Deja vu as the dread fills my stomach as I enter the Hallows High parking lot. I can't believe it has only been a week since I came here, so much has happened.

I am beyond exhausted after my busy weekend and no amount of foundation or concealer is covering up the bruises on my face. The swelling has decreased, thankfully, but you can still quite clearly see the black eye I am sporting.

I am purposely running late to avoid any extra attention, but I'm not surprised to see Lincoln leaning on his car waiting for me as I pull into the spot next to him. I get out and slam the door shut and head straight to him, no point in delaying the inevitable.

"King," he nods at me and then reaches out to tilt my head up and to the side.

I don't normally let people I don't know touch me but if Z trusts him enough to follow me then I have to remember I can feel safe with him.

"Guess your weekend activities are standing out loud and clear," he adds.

I scoff, "What have you never seen a girl who likes it rough before?"

His jaw tightens, "Don't try saying that shit to Marcus, he will lose his shit."

"Marcus is of no concern to me," I snap back.

"I thought we'd agreed to a truce. So, you can cut the bullshit."

I laugh, "We did. I let you help me clean up a murder that if I remember correctly, you committed. I agreed to allow you to continue stalking me, but those things will stay between us and not be told to anyone, specifically Marcus." I rush the words out in annoyance at having to even entertain this conversation with him.

"Okay," he says simply.

"Okay?" I muse slowly. Not the answer I was expecting from him, I was readying myself for him to put up a fight, why is he just agreeing with me?

"Yeah, okay. Look, I love Marcus too. He's my brother, but he's already in this whether you like it or not, we've got our own thing with Donovan and his crew. But if you need someone to have your back and you think the only

way to do that is to keep secrets, I'm in".

"Fine," I snap not bothering to take the time to worry about whatever they have with Donovan, "But things are done my way regardless of what Zack tells you to do."

He just nods and I turn to leave but stop to add, "And if you insist on following me like a creepy fucking stalker you might as well just join me next time."

"Oh, I intend too," he smiles a cocky smile and I huff again.

God, why are boys so fucking irritating? Or maybe it isn't boys maybe it's just the fucking south side Rebels that piss me off. I spend a lot of time with Zack and Ash and they never get on my tits like the three fuckers here do.

I keep my head down and manage to avoid too much notice but that's only because Marcus and Jace are missing from my morning classes. I know my luck is going to run out at some point and as I make my way down the hall to my locker before lunch and see the small crowd across from it I know that point is now.

Marcus and the guys are standing by his locker with his usual fan club of girls and god does it make my jaw tick. Fucking stupid, insufferable, good looking bastard. I hate the way he makes me feel and that just being around him fucks with my head. I don't have time for any distractions. I have enough on my plate to deal with without adding anything else.

Lincoln is the first of the trio I lock eyes with but that's only because he was already watching me, the little creeper hasn't stopped doing that all morning. He offers me a slight nod hello which to anyone would look like he was just cracking his neck and I appreciate his subtlety at this moment. If only the other rebels were like that.

I don't even get to my locker before Jace calls out to me.

"Enjoy yourself on Friday, princess?" I freeze momentarily completely caught off guard at the fact he is calling out to me and throw a look his way before I try to get to my locker. I just want to dump my books and get out of this hallway before some bullshit starts. If only I was that lucky.

"What the fuck happened to your face?" Marcus roars making the few people around him startle.

"It's not your business," I snap back loudly and turn to open my locker but before I get a chance Marcus is on me and spinning me round and pushing me against it. Fuck, that shouldn't excite me, but it does.

"I'm making it my business," he says as he stares deep into my eyes like he is trying to figure out what is going on inside my head. I laugh internally. He used to be the one person who knew me better than anyone, now he wouldn't be able to figure me out with coordinates, a map, and a fucking compass.

He continues before I can even muster a response, "Did Asher do this to you?" his voice is dark as he speaks the words through gritted teeth. His jaw is tense, and his eyes look murderous at the thought.

I laugh, "Why? Why do you even care?" I don't hide the annoyance in my tone, and I can see Linc and Jace watching us closely along with the rest of the hallway.

"Because you deserve better than him!" he shouts, and it pisses me off to hear him demean Asher in any way. He is the best fucking guy I know and would hang the fucking moon for me if I asked. Marcus may be my best friend, but Asher is family, and no one insults my family. I don't bother letting my anger out when I know how to cut him with words alone.

"He's hot, rich and really good to me. What's better than that?" I let the words roll off my tongue and I notice Lincoln close his eyes in frustration but typical Jace seems more amused than ever by what is going down.

He growls at me and it sends shivers through my soul, "Don't push it, sweetheart."

"Why?" I say firmly unable to get out more than that one word. I am distracted by his hot firm body against mine burning a fire inside me. I can see the jealousy about Ash, and I written all over his face and if I want to keep him safe and away from me, I need to use that.

"Because you don't wanna see my bad side, Ells," he cups the side of my face that is injured and caresses his thumb across my cheek.

I laugh loudly trying to hide what his touch is doing to me, "Your bad side is all I ever fucking see," I snap as I push his hand away from me.

He steps away slightly snapping back into his role as a Rebel and tries to start again "If Asher hurt --"

I slap him hard before he can even finish his sentence. His face swings to the side and it stings my hand, it turns so silent around us you could hear a fucking pin drop. He swings his head back at me and the rage I expect there is nowhere to be seen. The look in his eye is one I can't decipher and at this moment, I have no desire too.

"Fuck you Marcus. Just seriously fuck you!" I'm loud but deathly calm.

We are locked in a stare off until some girl rushes to his side and it creates a chain reaction as a few people follow suit. Fucking pathetic, all of them. Although, I note his boys don't move from their spots by his locker.

The girl who rushed forward throws herself at Marcus dramatically, but his gaze is so focused on me he doesn't even flinch.

"What the hell is wrong with you? You can't hit him. They're the Rebels, you stupid bitch," she whines at me and if my eyes weren't locked on Marcus' I would roll them.

"And?" I ask in a bored tone.

"That means what they say goes. They're Kings here," she says loudly and with confidence, but it soon falters when she sees the gleam in my eye.

I break Marcus' gaze for the first time and swing my eyes around to everyone else as I state loudly.

"Well, I guess it's time to stage a coup. There's a new King in town!"

I throw that statement down like a fucking gauntlet and don't wait for a response as I turn and walk the fuck away leaving Marcus to his precious fans. I am so over this high school bullshit.

I walk right out of school and head straight to my jeep. Fuck Marcus, fuck his followers and fuck this stupid fucking day. I climb in and gun it out of there before he or either of his fuck wit sidekicks can corner me. I don't know where to go but I do know I need some carbs.

After stopping to load up on two cheeseburgers and a large portion of onion rings I drive around aimlessly for a while to kill some time. I need my rage to cool so I drive to Hallows Prep knowing there is only one person who could calm my mood right now.

I pull my jeep up to the gate and then make my way over to Ash's car and jump up onto the hood to wait. It isn't long before the doors open, and students start filing out. A few people glance at me curiously but they aren't stupid. Asher is a Donovan, yes, but his reputation precedes him in his own right. They wouldn't dare to come over to me especially after it looked like he publicly claimed me on Friday night. Again, pathetic high school bullshit.

As soon as I see him stroll out looking like a knight amongst peasants, I slide off the hood to greet him. I mean every kid at this school is loaded but none have the money and power that matches being a Donovan. That and his natural aura, he just screams power.

He locks eyes with me almost instantly and gives me his signature little grin that he saves just for me and I feel immediately soothed. It's amazing

what our connection can do, just one little look and I am coming down from the ledge I was on.

“My little Hells Bells, I wasn’t expecting you,” he says loudly as he walks down the steps towards me.

“And aren’t I just the sweetest surprise?” I gleam at him but even I can hear the defeated tone in my voice.

He goes to pull me into a hug when he frowns instantly.

“What happened?” he asks in a serious tone.

“Oh nothing, I just had a run in with Marcus and I’m still stressing about it.”

I don’t even get to finish my sentence before he roars and gets into his car and slams the door. It isn’t until he revs his engine loud enough to make a few people jump that I realize he meant what happened to my face. I thought he was asking why I was in such a shitty mood. Fuck!

He floors it out of the school parking lot, and I have never moved as fast as I do now. He thinks Marcus did this to my face, he thinks he is the one who gave me this black eye. I dive into my jeep and drive as fast as I can after him. I can’t see his car, but it doesn’t take a genius to figure out where he’s going. I’ve never been to where Marcus lives and neither has Ash but that doesn’t mean we don’t both know exactly where it is.

I need to catch up with him.

Fuck I need to get to him before he gets to Marcus.

Chapter 15

MARCUS

I pound my fists into the bag again and again. I didn't even bother to bandage my knuckles and they are split and bleeding, but I don't care. The pain is a welcome relief compared to the tight feeling in my chest that I've had since I saw that awful shade of purple marking her perfect pale skin.

Going a few rounds on the bag usually clears my head but today it just isn't working. I walked out of school today not long after Elle did and came straight here to vent my frustrations. My head is filled with so much fucked up information that I don't know where the truth starts and the lies end. My judgement is clouded as fuck when it comes to the young girl who stole my heart and then ripped it out of my chest.

I need to talk to her, ask her what happened and why she left but I can't even think straight let alone get those thoughts into a fucking sentence. I miss my dad, I wish he was here so he could tell me what to do, but he isn't, and I don't have a clue whether that is Elle's fault or not. I mean the guys are right, now that I think about it. Why would it be? She was a kid just like me, what would she gain from helping Elliot Donovan take out my old man.

And I don't just miss my dad, I miss Elle too. Miss being River and Ells the inseparable best friends who were destined to be everything.

The alarm from our security system blares through the loft telling me that someone has breached the perimeter. What the fuck? No one dares to come here uninvited so that means whoever the fuck is here is here to fight. Well bring it fucking on, with how I feel today I could do with spilling some blood.

I quickly make my way into the main living area to find Jace and Linc already armed and waiting, they nod at me as I enter, and I ready myself for our guest.

The door comes flying off its hinges and I have to admit I am impressed that someone could have the strength to do so but that quickly dies when I see who our uninvited guest is.

Asher Donovan surveys the room quickly until he lands his gaze on me and he smiles the most sadistic smile I have ever seen. What the fuck does this prick want?

“You’re a fucking dead man, Riviera,” he says almost too calmly. “Question is do you want your boys to die for you too? Make no mistake, I could take all three of you with my fucking eyes closed but only your blood is required as payment for what you did.”

I arch a brow at him, “As entertaining as that sounds, Donovan, I haven’t got a fucking clue what you’re talking about. However, if you would like to try and take me then bring it the fuck on.”

This fucker thinks he can come to my house and threaten me and my guys. Not fucking happening.

I look to my brothers, “Stand down, he’s mine.” They both look at one another before they nod and step aside.

Asher smiles a sinister smile, and I can see his eyes are dark and focused. He came here for blood so that’s what I’ll give him.

We launch at each other at the same time and just as I am about to throw a hit, I hear her.

“Stop!!” she sounds out of breath and distraught.

The distraction allows him to get a clean shot to my face in the exact spot Ells left her mark on me today. Guess they really do fucking everything together.

“Ash, no!”

He doesn’t even look at her as he readies himself to throw another punch and fuck me, he may be tall and lean without as much muscle as me, but he can certainly pack a powerful jab.

“He is going to pay for marking you, Ells. I am going to fucking gut him until his organs spill out and then choke him out with his own intestines.”

Erm Okay? What the fuck is going on in this psychotic little fucks head and what the hell does he mean marking her?

She grabs his arm before he can throw his next hit and my eyes lock in on her hand on his arm. It’s only his arm but I still fucking hate it. Hate it and crave it.

“Ash, it wasn’t him. I swear,” she says firmly.

“Don’t fucking protect him Hells Bells! He’s not worth it,” he seethes.

“Ash, on my life I promise you it wasn’t him, okay? I swear to you on us! Always?”

The way she says us cuts through me like a fucking knife and what the fuck is always? It clearly means something because I see him relax instantly and it pisses me off more than the fucking fist he just gave me. I don’t miss

the little nickname he called her either, I thought it was enough hearing him call her Ells or worse fucking baby girl but the fact he has his own name for her makes me want to rip out his tongue

He doesn't stay calm for long as he swings his gaze to her.

"Then who the fuck was it, baby girl? Tell me so I can cut off their fucking cock and hand it to you on a platter."

Okay this guy seriously has fucking issues and I know I ain't the only one who thinks so when I see Jace grab his junk protectively. I have heard he has turned a bit psycho in the last few years but now I genuinely think he needs to see a fucking therapist. He was a quiet kid, never said a bad word to anybody. What the fuck happened to him between then and now.

"Already taken care of," she says flatly.

"Who was it?" he demands.

She huffs and I can tell she doesn't want to be having this conversation especially with an audience.

"Nate Maxwell," and I tense just as much as Asher does and we speak at the same time.

"The Octopus? The fucking Octopus! What the fuck were you doing near the Octopus baby girl?"

"Why would Nate Maxwell give you a black eye?"

I see her look at me quickly before she looks back to him. She is debating what to say and I know that is purely for my benefit not his. It's me she doesn't trust; she probably shares fucking everything with him. He must sense her hesitation because he speaks again a little lower, but I can still hear him.

"Why the hell did you go after him alone? You know I would have come with you."

"I wasn't alone, I had back up," she says quickly then cringes slightly as if she said too much. She looks to me again and Asher follows her gaze before he tenses up even more.

What the fuck is going on here. Nate Maxwell is one of Elliot Donovan's low life drug pieces who runs his product all over town. Why the fuck would she be getting into it with that scumbag and why is Asher acting like it was premeditated. I am missing so many details I can't even keep up.

"We should go so we can talk about this in private," Asher's voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Ells, can we talk?" I say quickly before she can answer him.

He responds before she can, "She has got nothing to fucking say to you, Riviera!"

Him answering for her fucking infuriates me. Like she isn't her own person. Her own strong independent sexy as fuck person. Fuck I need to sort my head out. There are so many things I want to know, questions that I need answers for, and she is the only one who knows the answers.

"Look, Ells, I'm sorry about today but--"

She interrupts me, "I have nothing to say to you, Marcus." I fucking hate the way my name sounds coming off her tongue, I was always River before and now I am Marcus. How the mighty have fallen.

"I don't care, there is clearly something going on here."

She laughs a humorless laugh "Yeah, no shit, sherlock."

"Elle talk to me. Where the fuck have you been? Why did you leave? What happened with my dad?"

Each question I ask she tenses further, and Asher is deathly silent next to her his stare zoned in on her completely. She squeezes his hand subtly, but I don't miss it or the fact that he relaxes a little when she does it. I fucking despise how in tune they are with each other. It's like they are two sides of the same person and it makes me sick to my stomach.

"Why do you even care?" It's the same question she asked me earlier in the hallway.

"Because it's you Ells, because despite every fucked-up thing that has happened the last few years you're still my friend." The word friend tastes like poison on my tongue.

Asher swings his gaze to me now and I can see him assessing what I just said and when I look over to him, he sees my expression and fucking smirks. He can hear the lies my tongue speaks. Elle and I have never been friends, not really, it was always more and now everything we once had is his now.

"The answers to those questions are irrelevant," she responds in an exasperated tone.

"I know but you don't understand," I try again.

"No, Marcus, you don't understand." I can see she isn't going to let me in, so I try another route.

"You weren't there for me, Ells. At the darkest lowest point of my life when I needed you more than ever, you turned your fucking back on me. I don't know how to forgive that, but I want to."

"No, you chose to believe the devil himself over your best friend. You

believed what he said rather than hear my side of things. How can I forgive that?"

"Ells,"

"No! Just no, Marcus, we aren't friends anymore. I don't need you now. I don't care that you're sorry or that your King of the fucking south side. I am not one of your stupid soldiers who is just going to fall in line because you say so. In case you have forgotten I am a King; I don't take orders from anyone. Not now. Not ever."

Fuck, she is so beautiful and strong, and I've fucked it all up and lost her to a fucking Donovan. I look to Asher expecting to see his smug smile, but he just looks solemn.

"Come on, Ash lets go, we are done here." She looks me directly in the eye as she speaks and then tugs on his hand. I feel that tug in my chest and I know no other words will make her stay. Asher gives me one last look and then they both turn and walk out, leaving the destroyed door behind with my unanswered questions.

Chapter 16

ELLE

I thought avoiding Marcus would be easy but he is everywhere. It's been weeks since the incident at the loft and I have done my best to keep my distance from him but not for his lack of trying. He is everywhere all the time.

After a week of my ignoring his pleas to talk he eventually stopped trying but I still see him watching me, analyzing me. It's like he thinks if he stares at me long enough the secrets I'm keeping will just burn onto my skin for him to read. Which isn't too farfetched, if I let him close enough to see the scars on my body the story would tell itself and then we would all be doomed.

I refuse to bring him into my darkness even as he battles to make his own way in. I will fight him at every turn. He doesn't understand, he can't. He is so focused on what he thinks he knows that there isn't room for anything else.

Which is why he can't be involved in this, people think Ash is bad, that the Donovan blood pulsing through his veins creates that monster lurking beneath the surface but he has control. He may lose it sometimes, but he ultimately knows the long game we have to play if we are going to win and that's why I trust him with my life. He knows what I need to get vengeance and he will fight with everything he has to give it to me but only when the time is right.

Marcus is too much like his father, doesn't think before he acts. Michael came for me without thought and look where that got him. That same impulsive mindset runs through his son's veins. He was the same when we were kids, always getting us into trouble. If he found out the truth about what happened to me, about what they did to me and everything that has happened since, he wouldn't hesitate. He would go straight to Donovan's house and attempt to put a bullet in his brain before he even realized that Elliot's guards had gotten him first.

I'm surprised he hasn't ever tried it before considering what they did to his father, but Michael was a grown man, he had his own sins to atone for. None as bad as Donovan and his sick twisted friends and none that warranted his execution but still. I think that is the only thing that is keeping Marcus at

bay, he is waiting, biding his time until he is strong enough to wipe them all out and get his father's justice.

All that would be out of the window in a second if he knew Donovan's real truth, his real crimes. Not his drugs or his guns but his girls. Donovan is too smart for that though; his secrets are too well hidden that even someone as skilled as Lincoln wouldn't be able to fully uncover them unless he knew where to look. Zack found them because Zack knew, I told him. Gave him as much information as I could remember and then Ash filled in the rest. Between us we have a lot of knowledge of his true darkness and it's still not enough.

If Marcus knew what he did to those girls, what he did to me and what he had planned for me, he wouldn't wait for anyone to get revenge. He would rip this town apart trying to avenge me without a thought. There is too much on the line for me to allow that to happen. I have too much at stake to let his recklessness get in the way of my plans for revenge. In light of all that and my lucky escape with the Octopus I have been biding my time and working more carefully. Not just to protect myself and my family but also to protect my truth from Marcus.

I have been spending my time training with Z and Ash to keep my skills on point, I have even done some run throughs with Linc. We have done a few more stake outs together all a lot less bloody than our first as we were just gathering intel. Following targets, learning their habits, their weaknesses, bugging their houses, photographing their crimes, hacking their computers that sort of thing.

All boring but necessary stuff, it turns out having someone to help me hasn't been so bad after all. It's nice to know someone other than Zack and Ash has my back and I suppose Linc isn't terrible company. He is quiet and focused which is how I like to work. The only problem is that he has access to all our gathered intel, and I know he knows what is going on here and I see the questioning stares he throws at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention.

I know he wants to ask me why I'm doing this, although I am certain he has already figured it out, it's not hard too. He knows, but he is also the type of person who wants the version straight from a person's mouth rather than drawing his own conclusions. He wants to ask but he won't break my rules and I like him even more for that fact, but I still don't want him too close.

Outside of our jobs I have taken to avoiding him as well as Marcus. The

key to avoiding Marcus has been to stay out of sight outside of class. I arrive late, leave early, and hide out at lunchtime and so far, it seems to be working. Add that to the fact he isn't actively seeking me out outside of school yet means I have some form of haven from him.

At lunch I lay at the top of the bleachers at the back of the school. The football team here on the south side is so shitty that the bleachers barely see any action. I like it here, it's peaceful, helps me think and relax. It also gives me a clear view of the school so I can see anyone before they can reach me.

I knew I would be found sooner or later but it's not the Rebel I expect to interrupt me.

I spot Jace's cocky swagger emerging from the bleachers next to me as he looks to be buckling up his pants and then I see a girl trail behind him wiping down her skirt and I know exactly what he has been up to and let out a laugh.

The sound draws his attention immediately and my presence lights up his whole face and he turns and starts towards me jogging up the steps until he reaches me and plops down next to me.

"Naughty princess, do I even need to ask what you're doing out here?"

"I'd say out of the two of us I'm the one doing no wrong here, pretty boy. Enjoy your lunchtime delight?" I ask sweetly and he throws his head back with a laugh.

Just because I have been avoiding the Rebels, well the two of them that don't permanently stalk me, doesn't mean that I haven't been watching them. Marcus and Lincoln's eyes are always on me with caution but Jace always offers me his friendly smile.

"Meh, it was okay for a Wednesday afternoon," he shrugs his shoulder like it's no big deal that he has girls fighting for his attention every day. I'm sure the guys are accustomed to that kind of affection, but I can't help but wonder if they have ever felt something more. They all aged out of the foster system recently, so I know they don't have any blood relation that matters to them.

"Have you ever felt a true connection with someone, Jace? You know like more than lust and sex?" I ask and I notice his face fall before his mask slips back into place. I wish he didn't feel like he had to wear that around me, but I suppose we don't know each other well enough for him to let it go.

"Have you?" he throws back to me.

"Have I felt something more than lust and sex?" I repeat the words slowly like I'm testing how they feel on my tongue but really, it's to delay my

answer. "Yeah, more is all I have felt and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for it."

"Yeah and your little psycho feels the same given the threats he gave to Marcus." His usual playful tone is there but I feel the hint of disapproval which I'm sure comes from being Marcus' friend.

"Yeah, Asher and I have a special connection." It's the truest thing I've ever said to him but how do you explain to someone a bond forged by experiencing and witnessing one of the worst things imaginable?

"Yeah and what about Marcus?" his tone becomes serious in an instant and I can see how much he wants a true answer.

"Marcus and I were inevitable until we weren't," I answer honestly. "Sometimes things don't work out and life gets in the way, this is just one of those times."

I give him the truth because I know he needs to hear it. His soul is bright, and his intentions are pure, he thinks he can play matchmaker and bring his friend some happiness in a world of darkness. He doesn't realize bringing us together would cast the biggest shadow of all.

"That's bullshit. Life only gets in the way if you let it, Elle."

"Yeah well, Marcus can't even decide whether he hates me or not, so I don't think it matters." I try to play it off like I don't care but I'm sure he can see how much pushing Marcus away hurts me and the thought of him actually hating me cuts me deep.

"Marcus is just confused; he's still pissed as hell at you but is struggling to control his feelings towards you because of your past and how hot you are."

"Oh, so you think I'm hot, pretty boy?" I tease desperately trying to bring the conversation back to safer pastures but it's pointless. As playful as Jace is he sees right through me.

"Hotter than the devil princess, but Marcus would murder me on the spot if I even thought about touching you and you know that."

His words shouldn't satisfy me, but they do. It's a feeling that I can't let manifest.

"Look, Jace, I know you care about Marcus and you think bringing us together would be great, but it wouldn't. I have so many things going on in my life, things I can't let Marcus into. Things with my family and this town and then there's Ash--"

He cuts me off before I can finish "Yeah princess, I get it you chose

Asher.” He practically spits his name, and it hurts me to hear it. If only people knew the true angel he is instead of the devil he portrays himself as. I should end this now, tell him that things aren’t like that with me and Asher but at least this way it keeps Marcus at bay even if it does hurt him in the process.

I would rather him be heartbroken than dead.

I don’t get to answer him either way before the bell rings cutting us both off. He gives me one last look before shaking his head and leaving me to my thoughts as he disappears back into school.

I don’t even debate going back to class, I grab my things and skirt around the side of the building and head for my jeep. Once inside I dial Z.

“Hi sweetheart, everything okay?” He pretty much answers the phone the same way every time I call, and it always offers me instant comfort.

“Yeah, all good, just wondering if you wanna play hooky with me and head to the range?” I cringe slightly asking him, hoping he won’t call me out for wanting to ditch.

“You know what? Yeah, that sounds great I’ve had a shitty morning of meetings and could do with letting off some steam.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling.”

“Okay well let me wrap some things up and I’ll meet you there soon.”

“Cool see you soon, love you.”

“You too, bye.”

I put my phone away and go to start my jeep when a shadow approaching catches my eye and I look to see Linc coming my way. I roll the window down as he comes to my driver’s side.

“Hey is everything okay?” I ask looking around knowing that we agreed to keep our contact at school as minimal as possible.

“Yeah fine just passing on some intel that could be interesting,” he slips a file into my hand and I flip it open to take a look. It looks like a shipping order of some kind with codes that I don’t understand but it has a delivery location and tomorrow’s date on it.

“Donovan?” I ask and he just nods. “Where’d you get it?”

“I sent a virus to his board email address for HP on the off chance he would open on his personal laptop and he did, so I was able to hack into his personal email. There wasn’t much of use apart from this.”

“This is great Linc we will definitely go check it out.”

“What did Jace want?” he switches the topic abruptly which I have

learned is his usual manner. He never uses more words than necessary and will always move on quickly.

I release a slow breath, “He wants the world to be all sex, puppies, weed and rainbows,” I say with a sigh. “He was grilling me about Marcus, I guess he thinks if he asks me enough my answers will change, and he can hook me and Marcus up.”

“And will it? Change I mean?” his stare is so intense I have to look down to avoid it.

“We don’t always get what we want, Lincoln.”

“So, what no sex, puppies weed and rainbows for you huh?” He senses my solemn mood.

I laugh, “I’m an eighteen year old virgin, allergic to dogs who doesn’t smoke but I guess a few rainbows in my life would be nice,” I answer honestly and swing my gaze back to him only to be greeted by his furrowed brow. I realize I have just let it slip that I’m a virgin and I can see his mind working and wondering. He is probably more confused than ever by my relationship with Asher now.

I don’t let him ask any more questions and quickly start the engine.

“Thanks for this,” I hold up the file. “I’ve got somewhere to be, but I’ll text you later and arrange our activities for tomorrow.”

He just nods watching me closely, not in the way Marcus does but still trying to work me out all the same. God, I wish I didn’t have so many alpha assholes in my life.

By the time I get to the shooting range Zack is leaning against his SUV completely zoned in on his phone. Always working. He looks exactly like your young billionaire CEO with his dusty blonde hair tousled over stylishly, a light stubble coating his chin and his grey three-piece suit molds to his body like a second skin. He really is handsome.

He glances up as I approach and his whole face lights up in my presence like it always does and it cheers up my day.

“Sup kid?” he ruffles my hair playfully with a smile.

“Ready to shoot some shit,” I smile back.

“Shall we have a wager?” he asks as he wiggles his eyebrows at me.

“Oh, you are sooooo on,” I agree. “Loser cooks dinner?”

He smiles knowing I am going to lose. I always do, “Cool I’m in the mood for tacos.”

The little shit knows tacos is the only thing I can make well.

We head inside and once we are strapped and have our targets up; I share with him the intel that Lincoln gave me. We discuss back and forth as we take turns hitting our targets.

“It seems legit,” I shrug watching as he lines up to take his shot.

“I’m sure it will be, Lincoln is a very talented young man, and I am glad you’ve brought him on board.”

I scoff, “Like I had a choice.”

He smiles looking over at me and takes his winning shot without even looking, smug bastard.

“I mean I’m glad you let me have someone watch your back, you’re not indestructible, sweetheart. You think the worst thing has already happened but trust me we both know it could be much worse. I just want you to be careful.”

“I am, I’ve got more to live for now than I ever did. I don’t plan on leaving our family behind.”

He pulls me in for a hug as he speaks, his voice muffled by my hair.

“Sweetheart, they are lucky they are still breathing after what they did to you. Me and Ash plan on killing those bastards as slowly as possible.”

I don’t reply because what can I say that sounds perfect to me and I am so grateful to have two amazing guys willing to shed blood in my honor. I look forward to it.

He pulls back and smiles, “Come on I’m starving, and my dinner is being cooked for me tonight.”

I go to punch him, but he darts backwards, “Ah Ah don’t be a sore loser!” he yells over his shoulder as he turns and walks away. Smug smug bastard.

Chapter 17

MARCUS

Best friend, enemy, stranger, stalker.

That sums up my relationship with Ells from past to present. I thought I felt empty during the three years that we were apart. Out of sight but never out of mind. That hollowness is nothing compared to what I feel now. The ache of seeing her everyday makes it hard to talk, think, breathe.

We are together but separate. Close, yet never further apart. I watch her, both consumed and infuriated by her presence. Eyes as blue as the ocean and a smile that could turn the world.

Trying to figure out what happened three years ago is like trying to complete a jigsaw without the final image and some of the pieces missing. It's impossible and it's even worse when the answers hide inside a package of pure perfection. A package that is dead set on forgetting I ever existed.

She likes to pretend she hasn't been watching me too, but she has. Always when she thinks I'm not looking at her which is stupid really because I am always looking at her. When you have a sunset in your view you don't let your gaze wander from it. I see how she tracks my whereabouts every time she enters a room or how her jaw ticks whenever a girl tries to talk to me, and she always looks murderous if they touch me. She thinks I don't see that, but I do.

You'd think someone going out of their way to avoid you would mean you wouldn't see them and I guess that would work if I wasn't actively making sure I get in her path every chance I get. The only time I give her solace is when she heads to the bleachers for lunch. I followed her the first day she went there but was stopped in my tracks when I saw her there. She looked peaceful, free, like she had released the weight she carries on her shoulders. I couldn't take that away from her.

Instead I bide my time, learn her routine, notice her quirks, and store them away in my mind. It's how I know to be waiting for her first thing in the morning. She doesn't go into school until the first lesson is underway of which I am sure she arranged it with Lock for it to not be an issue as none of the teachers ever call her out for it. That or her surname grants her leniencies that others here aren't accustomed to.

I watch as she enters the deserted hallways. Her hair is pulled to the side in some kind of messy braid and she is wearing yet another band shirt that's tucked at the front and loose at the back. Her jeans hug her curves until they flare out slightly at the bottom where she is wearing a pair of classic black chucks. How can she make the simplest outfit look sexy as fuck?

I follow her like a predator, and she is my prey. I wait for her to get close to the counselor's old office before I strike. She whirls towards me at the last minute like she knew someone was following her, my clever little King. She swings a fist that catches my jaw as I push her into the room and close the door. The hit lands in the perfect spot and fuck does it hurt, I mean I knew it would, I was the first person who taught her how. It hurts more now than it did when we were twelve.

"The fuck Marcus!" she yells at me.

"Why do all our interactions involve violence?" I say as I wiggle my jaw from side to side trying to ease the pain.

"When someone is following you, you attack first, ask questions later, it's basic survival," her tone is annoyed and exasperated. I push her towards the door, careful not to touch her or crowd her after what happened last time.

"And what are you trying to survive?" I put my arms on either side of her frame.

"This town," she replies quickly before I see her eyes scrunch slightly like they used to when we were kids when she wished she wouldn't have said something. She straightens up before continuing, "What do you want Marcus?" her eyes look anywhere but at me.

Hearing my name like that makes me snap. "Would you stop with the fucking Marcus!" I shout and her eyes come back to meet mine. I can feel the connection flow through us when our gaze locks on one another.

"That's your name," she deadpans, trying to act unaffected by our closeness but like I said I'm always watching. I hear her breathing picking up and can practically feel her heart beating out of her chest. I lean down until our heads are almost touching and I hear her sharp intake of breath.

"No, to you, I'm River," I don't give her a chance to answer before I slam my lips to hers and she yelps in surprise allowing me to slip my tongue into her mouth until it tangles with hers. She tastes sweet and like home and I know instantly that one kiss will never be enough. One kiss is all it takes. From that first peck as two ten-year-old kids to this now. I can feel it from head to toe, the change taking over my body, the claiming of my true love

except she isn't mine. I press our bodies together so she can feel my hardened length against her stomach, and she stills in shock and I pull back to look at her.

The look in her eye is a mixture of shock and if I am not mistaken lust. I lean back in and place one last kiss on her lips and she lets me. We stand in silence just staring at each other until she breaks it.

"You shouldn't have done that, Riv," her voice is almost a whisper but hearing her call me Riv just sets it in stone that she is mine.

"No, I should have done that the first time I laid eyes on you again."

She scoffs, "Yeah? That before or after you had your dick sucked?" She tries and fails to push me back.

Oh, my fiery little King is jealous, and it looks so fucking good on her. I reach both hands out and cup her face on either side.

"Ells, everyone who isn't us is insignificant. You and I are going to be the final chapter," I say the words before I can even process them. But even thinking about them I don't take them back. That kiss changed everything. Yeah, some shit happened, and I don't even know the half of it. But. I do know that Elle, my Ells, would never do anything to intentionally hurt me. Elliot Donovan is a fucking snake, and I don't trust anything that comes out of his mouth and I was stupid to ever listen to him. I was too consumed by the grief to think straight, everything was messed up. But now Elle is back, and I am thinking clearly for the first time in three years.

I continue, "I am going to break you apart piece by piece until I have your every truth."

My voice seems to break her out of herself as she pushes me back with enough force to move me now and her voice is cold and detached when she speaks, "I've been broken since the night I left and only one person helped me heal and it wasn't you."

We both know who she is talking about, "Stop throwing Asher in my face little King or I will show you exactly who you truly belong to." I swear if I have to think about that psychotic little prick being close to her one more time I will fucking rip him apart limb from limb. Then bend her over until her hips are bruised from my touch and the only name leaving her lips is mine.

I see her anger. She balls her hands into fists and tightens her jaw as she starts to pace back and forth in front of the door. "Fuck you River! All you do is flaunt and fuck girl after girl and I just---"

"I haven't touched another girl since the day you came back," I scream at

her and she stutters to a halt and I can tell she is going to challenge me.

"You expect me to believe that?" she demands.

I am a lot calmer than her as I lean back on the large oak desk in the center of the small room. "I don't care what you believe, it's the truth."

"I see girls hanging off you all the time," she says flatly.

"Then clearly you're not looking hard enough at the true narrative."

"Neither are you," she screams.

"What does that mean?" I don't miss the fact that she said she had been broken since the night she left town. What happened to her? Who hurt her?

"Nothing just forget it," her demeanor changes instantly when she realizes she has said too much, and she closes herself off completely and I can see she is ready to dart.

"Don't bullshit me, Elle. Just because we have been apart for three years doesn't mean I don't know you better than anyone else."

"See that's the thing Marcus, you don't know me anymore. I'm not the little girl who is just going to follow you around because of some stupid childhood crush. I have moved on and it's time you did too."

It would hurt less to be hit by a train; her words are like a knife to my heart. I stand from the desk like her words haven't just crushed me.

"Please Marcus, just leave me alone," she says slowly, giving me a tight-lipped small smile and then she turns and walks out the door, taking my heart with her. I touch my lips where the burn of our kiss still remains and wonder what the fuck do I do now?

Whiskey. Whiskey is what I do now.

Chapter 18

ELLE

We are parked at the docks on the far side of town, Linc insisted that he would drive and I was too pent up to even argue with him. We are waiting to see if the intel about the shipping on Donovan's emails is real and if so to gather evidence of what is going down here.

So far it has been quiet, we arrived early so we could park discreetly and make sure we can't be seen. Linc chose a spot backed away from the docks down a side alley. There are no lights or cameras and with Linc's blacked out SUV and the help of our binoculars we are in the perfect spot.

This could be the evidence we have been waiting for in regard to the girls he runs. I know that Donovan brings in his guns and drugs from out of state with the help of a few motorcycle clubs and he also owns two of the three private air strips in town, the third belonging to Zack. Which means he can fly in whatever he wants and avoid customs. So, what could he possibly be getting in shipping if not girls?

This is what I should be thinking about the shipment, about what it could be, who it's from and where it's going but in reality, all I can think about is Marcus' lips. About how they were both soft and firm at the same time, how his tongue slipped into my mouth and felt perfect dancing with mine and the feel of his hardness pressed into me causing tingles deep down in my stomach.

"What's the matter?" Lincoln's voice breaks me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry, what?"

"What's the matter with you, you look all red, are you feeling okay?" He is staring at me intently like he can read my mind and I hope he can't because I think I would die of embarrassment.

"Yeah," I cough out. "Yeah, totally fine."

"Spill it," he demands.

"Excuse me?"

"I said spill it. Elle, I have been watching you for weeks and I can tell you have something on your mind." I go to speak but he cuts me off with his hand, "No, don't start, you always have stuff on your mind, the wheels in your head are always turning but something is different today, you seem

different.”

Fuck does he have a map that leads to the thoughts in my brain, how the hell does he know something is different about me? I could tell him I suppose but maybe that would be weird considering he is Marcus’ closest friend or maybe he could offer some insight. Not that I want more insight into Marcus. So, I can’t stop thinking about the kiss, big deal, doesn't mean I can do anything about it. I pushed any feelings I may or may not have aside and told Marcus to leave me alone. That was the right thing to do to keep him safe so why can’t I get him out of my head.

I have obviously been silent for a while lost to my thoughts because Linc thinks the silence is my answer and turns to face back to the place where we are expecting the action.

“Marcus kissed me,” I blurt out quickly and he swings his gaze back to me straight away.

“Okayyyy,” he says slowly, “And?”

“What do you mean fucking and?” I snap. “That’s it.”

“So, what’s the issue? Donovan?” he asks, and I can see he is genuinely curious. I really wish he had more words to offer right now because my nerves are shot to shit and when I get nervous I ramble and he is really the last person I should word vomit in front of but he’s all I’ve got right now.

“What's the issue?” I laugh. “The issue is he kissed me. He kissed me and I liked it, I more than liked it! He just grabbed me. One minute we were arguing and the next I was having my first real kiss and it was like that bullshit you see in movies or read in books. The sparks were fucking flying and the butterflies were fluttering. Eurghhh it’s so fucking stupid but I can’t stop thinking about it. I always thought my first kiss would be him and I guess if you count an awkward peck as a child then it kinda was, but this was different, more. Now I am wondering how I was okay with him touching me that way when normally I have a full-blown attack if someone touches me unexpectedly so yeah there is a fucking issue!”

What the hell is wrong with me, I never talk this much especially about my feelings, I can’t believe I just said all that. I don’t have time to be thinking about this and I certainly don’t have time for fucking butterflies. The words rush out so fast that I barely take a breath and when I look back to Linc he is just staring at me.

“First kiss?” he repeats slowly. FUCK!!! Why did I just tell him that?

“You told me yesterday that you were a virgin and now you are saying

that Marcus kissed you and it was your first kiss.” I can see his mind working trying to piece together what he thinks is going on and failing, “So what about Donovan?”

Fuck. I don’t even know what to say to him. We have forged a sort of truce friendship in the last few weeks working together. He has had my back, helped me gather some great intel and even taken to bringing me my favorite chocolate donuts with the sprinkles on our stake outs. He is getting to know me with the little I offer him and most importantly he follows the rules of not telling Marcus and no personal questions. In fact, this is the first time he has asked me any sort of question that isn’t related to our missions and I can’t exactly be pissed when I started it. I trust him, obviously, but if I reveal that Ash and I are just friends he will jump on the Marcus train along with Jace and then I’ll have to deal with both of them on my case.

No, I can’t tell him. So, I decide to be as honest as I can.

“I love him,” I say with conviction because it’s true I do love Ash just not in the way the guys might think. Lincoln is looking at me like he can see every lie I am telling but just as he is about to speak his phone rings through the audio on his truck and he looks away.

The screen above his radio says ‘JC’ which I can only presume is Jace. He looks at me and I nod giving him the okay to answer and he clicks to accept the call. Loud music immediately assaults our ears, and I can hear what sounds like shouting and some screams in the background.

“Hey man, I need you at The Ring. Marcus is drunk off his ass and has already beaten four Hallows Prep guys fucking bloody. It’s a total shit show. If I don’t get him out of here soon, he’s gonna land his ass in jail,” as soon as he says Marcus’ name I tense.

Linc looks to me to try to assess how I take the information. This is my fault, he disappeared after our kiss at school today and now he’s causing havoc with a bunch of preppy assholes which I have no doubt he is just picturing Ash’s face while doing so. I have no idea what The Ring is but if it could lead to him being arrested then clearly it isn’t good. I have to help him. I sit up and pull my feet down from where I had them resting on the dash and put on my seat belt. Lincoln doesn’t move or say anything.

“Let’s go, superman,” I say.

“Princess? Is that you?” Jace questions immediately.

“Yeah, it’s me, pretty boy.”

“Linc man, do you have a fucking death wish?” he continues through the

phone and I have to laugh.

“Elle, this isn’t funny Marcus is going to murder him,” he turns his serious tone on me.

“Jace,” I scold him for even thinking what I know he is. “I would never do that to Marcus, Linc and I were just, look we were just busy but it’s not what you think. I would explain if I could, but I can’t.”

“Whatever, just both of you get your asses here now!”

“On my way, brother,” Linc says and then he disconnects the call.

“What about--” he gestures towards the docks as I cut him off.

I huff, “Let’s sort our guy out first and worry about this later.”

He smiles at me and I fume at myself for referring to Marcus as our guy and he sees it and chuckles.

“Yes, let’s,” he responds smugly as he floors it away from the docks.

I don’t have time to contemplate not staying to get the intel we need because the only thing I can feel right now is guilt for hurting Marcus and sending him off to whatever The Ring is. I need to get to him and make sure he is okay. I’ve already got the blood of one Riviera on my hands; I don’t need another.

Chapter 19

MARCUS

Nothing makes me feel more alive than the sound of bones cracking beneath my knuckles. The feeling of inflicting pain and suffering on some prick who thinks they can take me just because they have a black card and a fast track ticket into daddy's company. I have been coming to The Ring since I was fourteen. It's a fight club on the North Side of town filled with stuck up steroided fuck heads who haven't got a clue how to fight in a real battle. The kind where you fight for your life instead of a bit of green.

The first few times I came here I was still part of this bullshit crowd. One of them and proud. It makes me sick thinking about it now. I loved being part of their in crowd, now I love fucking destroying it. My undefeated streak makes them loathe me. Everyone wants to take on the fallen prince of the North Side. They think my demise was a fall from grace, but I was actually reborn on the South Side and revived from the ashes of who I once was to who I am meant to be.

Before I had a lot of money and little power. Now I have less money yet more power. More power than I could have ever imagined. I lost a father but gained my brothers, lost my girl but gained my crown, lost my connections but gained my crew. I would take being a South Sider any day of the week. These fuckers pity me, look down on me yet they are still scared of me, it's fucking pathetic.

Scared but stupid enough to try take me on. I have already pounded four of these little dickheads into the ground leaving them broken and bloody yet a fifth stands before me thinking his fate will somehow be different. Stupid fuck, it's laughable that they think they can beat me, even funnier that I bought this place a year ago and every bit of money these pricks pour into it lines my pockets.

Usually the rush I feel when somebody's blood coats my skin makes me feel alive but not today. Today I feel empty, desolate, fucking bare of anything that isn't need. The need for release, the need for satisfaction, the need for Ells, my little King and her perfect fucking lips. The taste of her will be burned into my brain for all eternity. The need to feel our connection burning as our mouths collided, the need to hear her breathy little moans as I

molded my body to hers and the need to take her and make her mine.

She hasn't left my mind since the day she came back but today is different, today I felt her tongue tangled with mine and I will never be the same again. She awoke a fire in me that I thought had burned out but turns out she was the only accelerant needed to ignite it. Now she is in me, forged into my brain like an illness, I am infected by her and there is no cure except to have more of her.

The whiskey must be catching up on me because now I'm even seeing her. She's walking towards me like a dark angel ready to take me straight to hell for my sins. Her hair is pulled back and up high and she's wearing a fitted black hoodie, black leather pants and black boots. Even my fantasy of her is fucking stunning and as black as my soul.

The distraction of my fantasy allows this asshole to land a kick to my ribs, a cheap shot but even distracted I am better than him. I grip his foot as it makes contact with my side and use the momentum to throw us both to the ground and I hear the beautiful tell-tale snap of his ankle as I pull his foot round my back when we slam into the floor. His scream is music to my ears, but I don't let it stop me. I dive on top of him and as he is pinned to the ground, I rain my fists down upon him, making contact wherever I can. I lean back to appraise my handy work and decide there is not enough blood. As I raise my hand to hit him again, to inflict more pain in hopes I can feel anything other than my need for Ells, I feel a hand wrap round my arm.

I turn and lock eyes with those so pure and blue they stop me in my tracks.

"That's enough, River," her voice is barely audible in this rowdy crowd, but I hear those three words like they were spoken into silence. I block out everything else around me and focus on just her and the whiskey pumping through my body. It's some strong shit to be making me see things that aren't here, and her touch feels so real. I'm just staring at her when all of a sudden, a loud crack stings my cheek.

I shake my head and look up to see Elle, but this time flanked by Jace and Linc. What the fuck? She's really here. I focus on everything else around me and see people running in all directions and I can hear sirens moving towards us.

Elle touches me again as she tugs on my arm. "Come on, Riv, we have to move now!" She is shouting to be heard now but still I can't seem to concentrate enough to move.

She huffs as she turns to the guys, “He’s drunk. You guys need to drag him, otherwise I will be bailing all of our asses out of jail. Let’s move.” She shouts the orders with such confidence that Linc and Jace move immediately and grab one of my arms each and hoist. My legs tumble a little as we leave the ring, fuck I really am drunk.

The adrenaline of the fight must have been keeping it at bay but one touch from her and I’m grounded. I see us rushing towards Linc’s SUV when I speak.

“My bike,” I say to no one in particular but Jace answers.

“One of the boys took it, told him if he crashes it you’ll kill him.”

Accurate. Normally I wouldn’t let anyone touch my bike but clearly, I’m in no state to ride it. The guys stop as Elle flings open the door and they practically throw me inside the back seat. I’m about to protest when Ells slides in next to me. Okay so no protesting here. The boys quickly climb in front and we are out of there like a flash.

I turn to Elle as she speaks, “Throw up on me, Riv and I will stab you,” she pats the knife sheathed at her side and I groan, fuck that’s sexy and they all laugh. Shit, did I say that out loud?

“Don’t worry, princess, he’s not that type of drunk. He should be passed out soon enough,” Jace adds helpfully from the front seat and Linc sniggers.

Elle studies me slowly and when she seems satisfied enough that I won’t vomit on her she turns away. The rest of the car ride is silent as we make our way through the middle of town and when we come to the road that forks between the North and South side I see Linc look in the mirror to Ells and she subtly shakes her head. He turns towards the loft as we make our way home and I wonder silently why she’s coming with us.

The ride sobers me a little but not enough. We pull up into the garage and Elle exits the car like her being here is the norm as she follows Jace and Lincoln inside. She doesn’t even wait to see if I’m behind her. When I get into the main living area she is nowhere to be found and I look to Jace who has a huge smile on his face as he just points to my room.

I enter and still don’t see her but hear rustling around coming from the bathroom and as I take a look she is bent over rifling through the under sink cabinet pulling out the various pieces of first aid stuff I keep under there. Seeing her tight leather clad ass up in the air like that has me groaning and she jumps and hits her head.

“Fuck,” she huffs.

I rush forward, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she points to the toilet. “Now sit”.

I stand dumbfounded when she speaks again, “Riv, please sit, it’s been a long night and I just wanna patch you up and then collapse in bed.”

I watch as she pulls out bandages and cleaning solutions and I sit down, smile and waggle my brows at her, “Whose bed?” She stills slightly and I see the blush spread across her chest. God, I would fucking kill to see that on her whole body.

“Behave or you can patch yourself up,” she chastises me, and I grin even wider.

She kneels down in front of me and I try to behave but the images in my head are fucking sinful. Thankfully, Jace saves me as he enters the bathroom and takes us in.

“Woah, princess, two minutes in here and he’s already got you on your knees.”

She rolls her eyes like she is utterly used to his form of humor, “Don’t make me have to patch up you too, pretty boy,” she snaps without looking his way as she starts to pour ointment onto pads and rubs them over my knuckles. The sting barely registers as I’m mesmerized by her skill and grace at such things.

“But I’ve got nothing to patch up?” Jace laughs baiting her more.

“Then I’ll fucking stab you first,” she replies cheerfully turning to give him a smile full of menace and it makes me laugh. She turns back to me and smiles a full genuine smile, and it makes my heart stop. Fuck, it has been a long time since I have seen that smile aimed at me. Jace hops onto the counter as Linc arrives at the door and assesses the scene.

“Oh, come on, princess, you love me too much for that or is Linc your favorite now?” She stills slightly at his comment but recovers quickly and I make a note to find out what that means when I’m sober and of sound mind. Right now, all I can think about is the beauty on her knees before me, tending to me like I’m hers to care for. It feels bittersweet until I remember her earlier words.

I don’t give her a chance to answer Jace, “Why are you here?” I ask and all three sets of eyes in the room hit me.

Silence stretches on as she goes back to caring for my knuckles until she finally speaks. “I was worried about you,” she answers and from the look she gives me I can tell how hard it is for her to admit that. I look to the guys

and they both nod and leave the room.

“When I was worried about you, I was met with a slap to the face,” I throw back at her with a smile.

“Yeah, and you more than deserved it. Ash would never hurt me; he loves me like --”

I cut her off as my rage rushes to the surface, “And do you love him?” I’m not sure what answer would give me the most satisfaction.

“Yes,” she replies without pause, “of course I love him, we’re a family.”

“So why are you here?” I ask again.

She huffs frustratedly like she doesn’t want to answer but does anyway, “Because I was worried, Riv, and I care! Are you happy now? Because I fucking care about you that is why I’m here. If you are ever in trouble I will be here because apparently where you’re concerned, I have no fucking reason whatsoever. Because it’s you and it’s me and it’s us and I fucking care, okay? So can you please just shut the fuck up so I can clean and dress your wounds in peace?” the words come out so fast I can barely keep up and it was like she could barely control saying them. But she did and they are out there now lingering in the air waiting to be acted on.

She loves Asher but she cares about me. I have no clue what to do with that right now and the whiskey is telling me not to even try so I stay quiet and just watch her work. I take note of every inch of her as she tends to me. The way her eyes tighten as she concentrates, how her tongue peaks out slightly as she works and how a few hairs constantly fall down into her face and she huffs as she pushes them back behind her ears. She always did have baby hairs that couldn’t be tamed and as it happens again, I reach out on instinct and push them back and she stills. My hand lingers on her face as I caress her cheek and she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

When she opens them again, she speaks, “Okay I’m done,” she stands and begins to clean up the supplies and I reach out and grasp her arm.

“Leave that, Ells. I’ll do it tomorrow,” she just nods in response and then looks around like she isn’t sure what to do now so I continue, “I need to shower.”

“Right, of course. I’ll get out of your way and go get you some water and painkillers.”

“Or you could join me and scrub my back?” I say as I pull my shirt over my head and she almost walks into the door frame trying to leave the room, my laughter follows her.

I strip off the rest of my clothes as I turn the shower onto one of the hottest settings and step under the scalding spray. I let it rain down on me as I wash the dirt and blood from my body, ignoring the hard on I'm sporting just from thinking about the girl in the other room. I wash quickly and step out and wrap a towel round my waist. I'm definitely sobering up slightly but now I need to sleep this off. As I walk into the bedroom, I find Ells staring at my shelves where I have two framed photographs both the only personal things I have in here. One is of my Dad and I on a fishing trip from a couple of weekends before he was gone and the other is of me and Ells. She is sitting on my shoulders in the pool at her house, it was a day before she left and the last happy memory I have of us together.

I break the silence, "Seems like another lifetime."

She doesn't miss a beat when she responds sadly, "It was."

She turns to me and I don't miss the slight shock that hits her as she takes in my semi naked frame. I see her eye me from head to toe lingering at my towel covered waist.

"Usually, I take a girl to dinner first before she gets me naked," I tease. She recovers quickly and brings her stare back to mine and her eyes shine defiantly.

"Yeah, somehow I highly doubt you took any of the girls you've had in here to dinner."

Oh, my silly little King if only she knew, she is the only girl I have ever had in here.

"I left water on the nightstand for you next to some Advil, make sure you take them," she says as she goes to leave.

"Hang on," I speak, eager to keep her in my bedroom longer. I motion to the closet as I walk inside and find something to throw on, settling for a tank top and some sweatpants. When I emerge, she is still lingering by the door tensely but relaxes a little when she sees I'm now dressed.

"Can we talk?" I ask cautiously hoping that we can work some stuff out and she surprises me.

"Sure," she exhales, "But I need to sit down."

"My face is available," I tease before I can stop myself and I am not even sorry when I am granted that beautiful blush up her neck again.

She shakes her head slightly, "Just get in bed, Marcus. I am giving you five minutes," she walks over to my bed and pulls the sheets back for me and then proceeds to sit at the bottom on the opposite side. Not one to waste an

opportunity with her on my bed, I run and jump onto it like I used to when we were kids, making her nearly bounce off. She squeals as she throws her arms out to steady herself.

“Still a fucking child I see,” she says but the smile on her face soothes me as I get comfortable, “What do you want to talk about?” her tone turns serious.

“Us,” I state simply.

“Riv--” she starts but I cut her off.

“No, Ells. We need to have this out just you and me, lay our cards on the table.”

“I can’t do that so stop asking me to,” she stands and begins to pace next to the bed and I grip her arm as she comes around to my side and for once she doesn’t flinch at my touch.

“I’m worried about you, little King,” I lean up on my knees, so we are almost chest to chest and pull her close to me.

“I am not yours to worry about, River,” she says quietly.

“So be mine,” I reply as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. I know there is so much shit going on that I don’t even know about, but can it really stop us from being Marcus and Ells again. We were best friends, always on the same side no matter what. Is it gonna be so hard to find our way back to that? Maybe but doesn’t mean I don’t want to try. We will fight and argue and probably down right hate each other at times but at least we will do that together.

“Marcus, don’t.”

“No, Ells. You need to hear this. I want you,” I cup her face on either side. “I have wanted you since the fucking sandbox when I pushed that little punk Jimmy for pulling your hair, since you were a gangly ten year old who gave me the first peck on the lips, since I chased you through the woods and lost you, since you came back here like the most beautiful ghost of the past I had ever seen. Fuck, I wanted you even when I fucking hated you and I did hate you, Elle. God, I hated you so much. Hated you for going away, hated you for being involved with Donovan and his fucking family, hated you for having some part in my dad’s death and hated you for storming back into this town like you fucking own it and not even caring to let me know. Except none of it has ever really been hate, Ells and we both know that.”

“River,” her voice is a whisper almost drowned out by the pounding of my heart and I swipe a tear that falls from her eye. “Stop please, you should

hate me. I left you and didn't think twice about it, I moved on and yeah, I came back here but I didn't come back for you."

"Please, Ells, just let me in and we can do whatever this is together," I wish the whiskey were burning through my body harder to dull the pain I'm feeling.

"I'm sorry, I can't," who knew four words could destroy a person?

The last thing I see before I collapse back into bed and fall asleep is her back walking away from me.

Chapter 20

ELLE

I flee Marcus' room struggling to keep my tears at bay. Fuck, I never cry and am usually a boss at controlling my emotions, but I was not expecting that. Drunk Marcus is a whole other level that I was not prepared to deal with. He was flirty as fuck one minute and the next pouring his heart out and rather than taking it and protecting it like the precious thing it is, I fucking stomped all over it. I keep trying to tell myself it's for his own good but how many times can I keep hurting him before I lose him forever?

That should be what I want, to push him away and lose him, let him get over me and move on. That would be what keeps him safe but thinking about him giving up on me makes my heart ache.

I make my way back into the main living area and find Jace and Linc both sitting on a large curved sofa playing video games. I didn't take much notice of the place last time I was here considering I was trying to stop Ash and Riv from murdering each other so I let my gaze swing round the room.

It's nothing like you would expect for a pad housing three teenage boys. The floors are all hardwood, dark mahogany, white walls surround us. Behind me has the hallway leading to the bedrooms and bathroom, then one side has three doors, two big double ones and a smaller one. The middle of the room dips lower which houses the huge curved sofa with a glass fire in the center and then the tv is fitted to what looks like half a wall coming from the floor up. The kitchen is off to the remaining side and is open plan looking over everything, dark countertops sit amongst gloss white cupboards with matching appliances. It really is a beautiful space, not far off something I would pick out for myself.

"Fuck sake Linc!!" Jace's shout breaks me out of my appraisal and I turn to concentrate back on the guys. "You always fucking cheat!"

"No, I'm just better," Linc responds calmly and then notices me standing there. "Everything okay?" Jace turns to look at me also as I answer.

"Yeah fine," I throw my thumb over my shoulder, "He's in bed so I'll just..." I trail off not really knowing what to say.

"You can crash here, princess," Jace says like it's no big deal and I raise my eyebrows at him, "What? We have a spare room. It's not like I'm saying

you have to bunk with Marcus,” he laughs.

“I don’t doubt you have the room. I’m sure this space has seen a lot of girls come through here,” I look around the room again and imagine the revolving door of girls that have been through here and try not to rage as he laughs louder.

“Oh, princess, you really aren’t catching on, are you?” When I just look at him with confusion he continues, “We don’t bring girls back here like ever, we have a place for that. This,” he gestures his arm around him “is just for us, our family place to wind down and chill and shit.”

“So why let me come here?” I question but Linc interrupts before he can answer.

“Jace is right we have the room, but I can take you home if you want,” Linc stands as he says it like he knows my answer before I speak it.

I nod, “Erm yeah if you could that would be great,” I hesitate not really sure how to explain what just went down between Marcus and I and decide to just be as real as I can. “I don’t think I should be here when he wakes up, he won’t wanna see me.”

“Sure, let me just grab my keys,” he says as Jace laughs, getting up to turn off the tv.

“Silly princess still doesn’t know anything,” he comes to me and leans in wrapping one arm around me and kissing my head. “You were part of the family before we even met you, just you and Marcus that needs to accept that, but I think we are getting there,” he pulls away walking backwards and winks at me. “See you soon.”

The drive home is silent, Linc pulls into my house and puts the code in for the gate. As he pulls up and he turns to me.

“Look, Elle, I’m sorry about tonight, about having to ditch on our plans, I mean.”

“Lincoln don’t ever apologize for being there for your friend. That is the best quality you can offer in a friendship, being there for them no matter what. Don’t worry about tonight, there will be other opportunities, I’m sure. I doubt Donovan is going to become a saint overnight.”

“What’s your deal with him?” he stares at me intensely before he continues, “Look, I know you said no personal questions and no involving Marcus but the more I help with this the more personal it looks and I think Marcus is involved already.”

I struggle to steady my breathing as I try to think of a way to answer him,

but he doesn't give me a chance.

"Wanna know what I think?" My silence is his only answer "I think something happened to you, something bad and I think little Donovan was there, helped you. I think it forced you to leave, disappear completely off radar. I know because I checked for Marcus. He had me try to check up on you multiple times over the last few years and I never found anything. It's like you were gone. But here you sit outside of Zack Royton's house. A house you live in, a house just far enough from Elliot Donovan's but still close by to be able to watch him."

I have no words to say. This is the most I have ever heard Linc speak in one go and I have nothing to contribute because I don't want to lie and everything, he is saying is dead on. Z said he was smart, and I have seen that for myself, I knew it was only a matter of time before he figured stuff out.

"Now little Donovan I have figured out, I've watched you two together more than you know, I see how you are. You move and he moves, like you are counterparts of each other. I see the love but it's familiar love like a brother like family not lust or sex. What I can't figure out is Zack? Where did he come into the picture and why? And then there is Michael. How is his death tangled up in this?"

Silence descends on the car before I manage to find my voice.

"Lincoln," I blow out a breath, "I can't. You're right there is something much bigger going on here but I just--"

"Elle, stop," he grabs my hand and engulfs it in both of his. "I'm not asking for your truths; I just want your trust. I am with you on this one hundred percent and I know if you told Marcus he would be too."

"I can't, I'm not ready and neither is he, I don't think we ever will be," I answer him honestly and he just nods. I lean in and kiss his cheek.

"Thank you," I whisper hoarsely trying to keep my emotions in check as I climb from the car and go inside.

I head straight to the kitchen in search of some carbs that will soothe my emotions. I eat half a tub of Ben and Jerrys and still feel no better. I go in search of something I know will make me feel better.

I head out back and make my way to the guest house and use my key and passcode to slip inside. I make my way down the hall to the room with the pink door and slip inside.

Cassie is sleeping curled up in the middle of a double bed surrounded by pink blankets and cushions. She looks tiny in such a large bed and the sight

of it warms my heart instantly. I strip off my hoodie and pants down to the tank and shorts I had on underneath and pull the blankets back and climb in next to her.

As quiet as I tried to be, the movement still wakes her, she's a light sleeper. She rubs her eyes and turns to me.

"Shhh, it's okay, angel. It's only me. I came for snuggles," she smiles a sleepy smile at me as she cuddles in close.

"Bad dream again?" she asks me quietly.

"No, princess, no bad dreams I just wanted a cuddle with my favorite girl," she smiles at me before closing her eyes.

"You're my favorite too," she responds sweetly, and I hold her tight. Snuggles make everything better. I shut out everything in my mind and just breathe in her scent and drift off to sleep.

Chapter 21

MARCUS

I'm wide awake, like I have been for hours, even the whiskey inside me couldn't lure me into staying asleep. My brain hasn't shut off all night. All I can think about is her, Elle. She consumed my every thought and from what sleep I did manage, my every dream. I have been replaying last night repeatedly in my head, every moment, every word, and it doesn't add up.

Why was she even at The Ring? I got there early and met up with some of my boys, Jace and Lincoln were nowhere to be seen. I was drinking, placing bets, winning money, and even doing a little work. Then when none of that was distracting enough from thinking about Elle's lips on mine and having to watch her walk away, I decided it was time to bust some fucker's face up.

Drowned in whiskey and blood, fighting against opponents who were just masked as my own demons. Feeling Elle's kiss and rejection over and over again at every hit they managed. Thinking about her and wondering what she was doing and who she was with and then suddenly she was there. And who she was with was my brothers.

They surrounded me together, Elle ordered them to help me and then we left together. We all piled into Linc's SUV with her and Jace's cars nowhere to be seen. Which means she must have come to The Ring with Linc but why? How?

Jace had arrived earlier with some of our crew but Linc said he was working. How did he go from working to being with Elle? It's clear Jace would have called Linc when he thought trouble was brewing but he wouldn't have called Elle, neither would Linc. Which means they must have been together when Linc got the call.

My whiskey haze is lifting, and I am now thinking clearly, I need answers and I need them now. I climb from bed and head into the living room and see Jace making a coffee.

"Hey man, you good?"

"Where is she?" I have no time for pleasantries right now and all I want to know is where Elle is and what happened last night.

He reaches up and pulls on the back of his neck, one of his nervous twitches that is always his tell, "Linc gave her a ride home last night."

“And how did she get to The Ring?” he doesn’t respond straight away, and it just adds to my anger and I step towards him and he raises his hands in surrender.

“Look man, all I know is when I called Linc to come help me with your drunk ass, Elle was already with him.”

“Where is he?” my voice is strained with my barely restrained rage.

“Marcus man, just relax it’s not like that.”

“Where. Is. He?” I ask again slowly trying not to lose my temper and Jace’s shoulders slump as he responds, “He’s in his office,” he nods over my shoulder.

I don’t hesitate before I stalk towards the door and throw it open and the force causes it to ricochet off the wall and Linc just raises his eyes at me like he had been expecting me. Jace is right behind me.

“Explain,” one word that holds so much tension as I spit it at him.

“Explain?” Linc repeats in question but I can tell by his face he knows what I mean.

“Explain Elle. Explain why it is that you can’t seem to find where she has been the last few years, or where she is staying now but you somehow knew where she was last night to bring her to me and were able to drop her off at home afterwards?” The words come out calm and collected considering the fury coursing through my body.

“Marcus,” he rises from his chair and comes around to the front of the desk to lean on it. “I am your brother, and you can trust me with your life, you can trust I will always do right by you which includes doing right by Elle.” He takes off his glasses and scrubs his hands over his face like he is tired. “There are things I can’t tell you and I can’t tell you why I can’t tell you but trust me when I say I am doing what is best for us and our family and that includes Elle King.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do with that, Lincoln?” my voice is less calm now and even I can hear the stress and worry laced into my tone.

“Whatever you want,” he shrugs nonchalantly, only fueling my rage more. He is always serious, but I can see now he means this. He’s my brother but he really won’t tell me what’s going on.

“Something is going on here and I’m going to find out.” I am going to make it my mission to find out, not only is Elle keeping things from me but now she’s got my brother hiding things from me too.

“And I really hope you do but it can’t come from me.” He’s serious, there

is no detection of a lie in his voice, he really does want me to know what is going on, but he doesn't want to be the one to tell me. That's when it hits me, he's doing this for her, for Elle, she's got to him and now he is choosing her side over mine.

"You trust her?" I say in shock, it takes a lot for Lincoln to open up to anyone.

"With my life," he responds without missing a beat.

"And does she trust you?" he pauses at that before he glances to Jace who is still standing silently behind me watching over our interaction ready to come between us if need be. Linc answers, "She's getting there."

Well fuck me, I did not see that coming. I knew Elle being back would be trouble for me, but I never saw it going like this. She's got me wound up in knots and both my brothers are looking out for her. I have seen it with Jace, the little jokes and affectionate gestures. She reminds him of his sister, I get it. But Lincoln is different, he's never had a family, never had anyone to rely on or care about. Jace and I practically forced him to be friends with us, so someone had his back. For him to be opening up to her is such a big deal.

"Okay," I say eventually and feel Jace relax behind me. Lincoln doesn't say anything he just nods and goes back around to his computer to carry on his work.

I turn and head back to my room, my head is filled with far too much information yet still not enough to give me the answers I crave. I need to do something; I need to know where Elle has been, and it looks like I can't rely on my brothers for that information but that doesn't mean I don't have other people to help me. I'm the leader of the South Side after all. I grab my phone and pull up my contacts and dial my second in command outside the guys.

"Sup, boss?" Jack's voice answers after two rings. Jack Hanson is a South Sider through and through, born and raised here, he knows everything about everyone and if for some reason he doesn't know, he will find out. He can be invisible when he needs to be and has eyes everywhere. I wouldn't pick anyone else for this which is why he also runs a lot of my other shit for me.

"I need a tail."

"Let me guess on that hot piece of ass you pretend you hate?" I grind my teeth at his response, "Watch yourself, Hanson," I bite back.

"Hey man, I'm just busting your balls. Who's the target?" he asks all serious now and I feel like a prick when I answer, "Elle King," there is a pause before he bursts out laughing. Okay, I guess I pay him to be perceptive

but not on me.

“You done, you little fucker?”

“Yeah, man”, he says, still laughing, “What you need?”

“Eyes everywhere. I wanna know where she goes and when and who she's with.”

“Yeah, consider it done, what's her address?”

“That's what I need you for, prick! She's a ghost, find out what you can and don't underestimate her. I want something by the end of the day.”

“Okay, I'll get on it with Kai and Malcom, reporting to you or--”

I cut him off, “Yeah, directly to me and make it a priority,” I bark back but he is used to my sharp tone, so it doesn't even faze him.

“Sure, no problem.”

“Got anything else for me?” I ask now that my first priority is out of the way I can relax and listen to some of my actual business.

Coming to the South Side was a fairly easy transition. Everyone was too scared to go against the rich pricks from the North that there wasn't much in terms of gangs or leaders or any shit like that. I came in and was respected just for being a North Son Prodigy, everyone in town knew what happened to my dad, word here spreads faster than a hooker's legs.

I was kicked out of a few foster homes for being a rowdy fucker until I landed in my fourth and met Jace, we hit it off instantly. I recognized the cold look in his eyes, I see it in the mirror every day. We were both alone and thirsty for revenge from some North Bred pricks. We started doing our own recon, watching runs, and stealing stashes of drugs and guns for ourselves. Moving them discreetly and making our own money. By the time we came across Linc we were flushed with cash and had nothing to do with it. He became our thinker, he never makes spontaneous decisions, always plans everything through first and is always the rational one of the three of us.

Once he came along, we started funneling our money into legitimate businesses, bought The Ring and a club down on Riverside and signed up to do some work for Mr. Royton. Once we were more established people started looking up to us and coming to us for stuff, we deal with anything from protecting people to hunting someone down and making them disappear. We are good at what we do, that's why we now have the South Side at our feet.

Jack answers, “Not much man, police raided the fight club but we had cleared out our shit by the time they got there. I paid off the deputy to make

sure he said nothing. Had a couple of jobs come through the wire, a few protections needed and also a hunting, all seem straightforward enough.”

“Right, I’m heading in now, so I’ll go through them, keep me updated on King.”

“No doubt.”

I hang up the phone and throw it on the bed, my head is still fucked but there isn’t much more I can do right now so I think heading into work for a little will keep me occupied. At least until I can get some information on Elle.

Chapter 22

ELLE

I woke up this morning filled with so much pent up energy that even my late night snuggles with my mini best friend didn't cure me. I need release and the only way I can get that today is with Ash's help. I called him this morning and told him I needed him, he didn't even ask why, just what I wanted to do and that he'd be here within the hour.

I'm in the gym warming up when he swings the doors open and walks in, he barely gets into the room before I am flinging my arms around him.

"Woah, Hells Bells. Sup?" he says, staggering back slightly as he catches my body against his.

"Nothing," I sigh, pulling back to look at him. "Just needed a hug."

"Well, I have always got one of them for you but how about something that will actually help you," he gleams at me wiggling his eyebrows.

"Yeah, kicking your ass always cheers me up," I tease.

"Ha you wish, baby girl,"

We make our way over to the mats in the corner and start to stretch. We have done this countless times, stretch, fight and then go over any bad moves and work on any new stuff. Keeps up both fit, trained and most importantly ready for anytime we might need to fight.

We spar back and forth and when I throw myself at him again and he is able to easily block it he stops.

"Right, what's happened?" He accuses me, standing back and staring at me fiercely.

"What do you mean?" I question him confused.

"You're sloppy."

Why does he always notice everything? That's the problem when you have been friends for as long as we have, you can't be this close to someone and keep secrets, it's impossible, they know too much about you.

"I'm just tired," I shrug and bend to pick up my water bottle trying to avoid his gaze.

"Bullshit, I have been sparring with you for years and not once has that affected you. I've fought you tired, ill, even fresh out of the hospital, so don't fucking lie to me, Elle."

Ash never uses my actual name, it's always Hells Bells or baby girl so when he uses my given name, I know he is losing his patience with me. It doesn't happen often.

I huff, "Marcus kissed me."

He rolls his eyes as he throws himself onto the mat to sit, "Of course he did." He takes a drink of water before continuing, "What else?"

"What do you mean what else, that's it?"

"Baby girl, I know you better than you know yourself so I know just a kiss wouldn't have you like this, what else?"

"He thinks you and I are together."

"Because you let him think that, why?" I sit down next to him as I think about how to answer him and he continues "Look I don't care what he thinks about us, but you obviously care, so why?"

"To protect him," I say with sorrow as I look at him. "You and I are in this already. We weren't given a choice, fate fucked us on that one, but Marcus isn't. He has already lost Michael. I won't allow him to sacrifice anything else."

"You're wrong, losing Michael means he is already in this, my father murdered him in cold blood. The Marcus I grew up with would never forget that."

He says the same thing I have already heard from others but is he right? I know Marcus, he is going to want revenge for what happened to Michael and I am sure he will get it regardless of me being here. Does that mean he is already in danger and no matter what I do he would be putting himself at risk anyway?

"Look, baby girl, I get it I do but I don't think it's your choice to make. He's already in this and you being around him only brings him in further. You have to let him in fully or let him go and cut him out of your life for good, there is no in between here."

He's right I know he is but I just can't bear the thought of Marcus joining us and him getting hurt or worse, but can I let him go? I left this town for years and not one day passed that I didn't think about him, how can I lose him forever?

"He said things," I whisper, and he looks at me. "Things that I can't stop thinking about, things that make me want him but how can I bring him in when he lost his dad because of me?" he grabs my shoulders and turns me to him fully.

“Listen to me, Elle, and listen well because I am only going to say this once. What happened to Michael wasn’t your fault. My father is a sick murdering bastard, and he is the only reason Michael Riviera is dead. No one else and trust me, I will make him pay for that. He will burn in hell for his sins and I will make sure I send him there myself.” His grip on my shoulders is tight but the slight pain is welcome to give him the comfort he needs. I pull him in for a hug and we hold each other tight, both of us seeking comfort from something we will never be able to forget.

I pull back, “What if he finds out what happened to me and can’t get past it?” I voice my biggest fear to him at barely a whisper as a lone tear escapes down my cheek.

He cradles my face and swipes the tear away, “Baby girl, nothing could stop that boy from loving you and if the truth changes that I will kill him and gift you his heart.”

A sad laugh escapes me and before I can respond the door pushes open and Z appears.

“You have a visitor, sweetheart, he said it’s important,” he stands aside and reveals Linc standing behind him and my eyebrows hit the roof. I never expected him here. Sure, he has picked me up here for missions and dropped me off, but I have never invited him inside and I feel like cursing Zack out for letting him in. Is he insane? He knows how secret I like to keep things where home is concerned. I look at Ash in a panic, but he is just stoic, watching Lincoln intently. Fuck looks like I am being outnumbered on this one, I try not to panic as he enters and Zack leaves.

“Heyyy,” I say slowly, and it comes out all awkward and high pitched and Ash laughs slightly beside me, and I elbow him hard.

“Hey,” he responds, watching us closely. “Sorry to just drop in but it’s important,” he taps a file in his hand and my stomach sinks. That’s when it hits me, whatever is in that file is important as fuck otherwise he wouldn’t have come here. I already know that whatever is inside there I am not going to like.

“What is it?” I ask my voice coming out a little shaky and I see him look at Asher like he is contemplating what to say in front of him and I wave my hand, “Speak freely.”

He nods briefly and takes a deep breath, and he hands me the folder, “Elliot Donovan has put a bounty on your head.” I feel Ash tenses behind me, and he snatches the folder before I can even open it.

I feel the fear grip me instantly, doesn't matter how much training I've had, the thought of him knowing I am near still instills fear into me. We knew this would happen, expected it even. I knew someone like Greg Donovan would never let me go and neither would Elliot. Clearly, they know I'm back in town, but I wonder how they found out.

I look back to Linc who for the first time since I have met him looks worried, "What's in the folder?"

"Emails between your parents and him." Ah, so my sick fucking DNA providers told him I'm back, how nice of them.

Ash throws the file at me and stands and starts pacing muttering to himself, "Fucking sick piece of shit, fucking slit his throat while he sleeps tonight."

I stand, placing my arm on his to stop him, "Ash chill, it's fine." I mean it is definitely not fine but the last thing I need right now is for him to lose it on it on me and fuck up our plans.

"Fine!" he shouts "Fine! It's not fucking fine, that sick bastard is after you," he continues to pace not concentrating on us whatsoever. "Was once not enough?" he shouts, and I tense and look to Linc who I can see analyzing every little thing.

"I won't let him get to you again, Elle. Last time I wasn't strong enough but I'll fucking die before I let him near you this time."

"Ash," I snap quickly bringing him back to us and I see him realize what he has said, and he shakes his head.

I go to speak to try to rectify what is going on in his head when things go from bad to worse. The doors to the gym fly open and both Ash and I recoil in panic as Cassie comes running into the room.

"Mommy, Daddy, look what I made!"

Chapter 23

LINCOLN

My brain practically short circuits as a little toddler comes racing into the room like a little ball of energy. She obviously lives here as it isn't even lunch time yet and she's wearing peach pajamas with matching slippers which slap against the floor as she runs towards Elle. I look back and forth quickly between the two of them and my brain feels like it might explode.

Searching for Elle for the past few years means I have practically dug up her whole life including pictures of when she was young. This girl looks like one of those pictures come to life. Like I am staring at three-year-old Elle running towards her future self. Only logic tells me that isn't the case.

I look back to Elle and see her whole persona change in an instant. The shock and panic on her face is masked instantly as she bends down just in time to catch the little girl throwing herself at her. She locks eyes with me over her shoulder before pulling back to speak to her.

"Show me, baby," her voice is calm and caring in a soft tone I have never heard her use before. The little girl holds up a crown shaped cookie decorated with pink icing and sprinkles and a bite already taken from the corner.

"For you Mommy, King's wear crowns," the little girl says excitedly before she looks at Asher.

"I'll make you some too, Daddy!" She says matter of factly, and I almost choke on the air I'm breathing when she refers to Asher as Daddy. What the fuck?

I try to quickly sort through the things I know. Elle told me she's a virgin who has never been kissed yet she stands before me now with a daughter in her arms. I told her just last night I thought something bad had happened and that I thought Asher and she were more like family. But what if they aren't just like family but are a family, a real one?

I look to Donovan who is staring at me with the most intense glare I have ever seen. The glare that says if I make the wrong move here then I'll be leaving here in a body bag. I look between the three of them and the little girl finally looks up at me. Even if I hadn't heard her call Elle, Mommy, it wouldn't matter she is like a carbon copy of her. Little blonde curls reach her shoulders, and she has the exact same eyes as Elle.

“Stranger, Mommy?” the little girl half shouts as she scrambles to hide behind Elle’s legs, clutching her cookie tightly to her chest as one of her arms circles Elle.

“No, baby, this is Lincoln. He is a friend of Mommy’s, it’s okay.”

The little girl smiles slightly, taking me in, she is so like Elle as she looks me up and down before deciding for herself. She steps forward and holds her tiny hand out to me.

“Hi, I’m Cassie, nice to meet you,” the words don’t come out properly pronounced, showing her young age but her voice is sweet.

I step forward and so does Donovan and I slow my movements as I bend down so I meet her tiny height.

“Nice to meet you too, I’m Lincoln but you can call me Linc.”

“Linc,” she repeats slowly testing it out and then smiles “Hi, Linc.”

“Hi,” I smile back automatically. “That’s a pretty awesome cookie you made.”

She gleams from ear to ear before holding it up proudly, “It’s cause my mommy is the King.”

“So that must mean you are a princess, huh?”

She nods eagerly, “Uh huh!”

Elle cuts in now picking the little girl up and she curls her tiny arms around Elle’s neck, it’s obvious they adore each other. Asher steps up next to them and puts his hand to the girl’s back and rubs it up and down. The tension in the room is practically visible when Elle takes a deep breath.

“You know, Linc has a secret too, baby,” the little girl looks between us eagerly and I’m confused as to what she means.

“What is it, Mommy?”

“Can you keep a secret?” she lowers her voice looking around like she is making sure no one is around to play with her.

“Yessss,” the girl hisses back, joining Elle in the game.

“Linc here is Superman,” I smile when I realize what she’s referring to and that quickly turns to a little laugh when I see Cassie’s shocked face and Asher’s confusion. “Yeah he protects people, looks for bad people and helps make them go away.”

“Does he protect us, Mommy?”

Elle looks at me now and I can see the truth bigger than ever before, this is what she has been so worried about, why she has been pushing Marcus away. Whatever feelings she has don’t matter, she isn’t a normal teenage girl,

she's a Mom. No matter what happens she is always going to put this little girl first. I finally understand her. I don't let her answer as I cut in to answer Cassie.

"Always, little princess," she smiles even bigger and Elle smiles too, and she hugs her closer like she can protect her if she just stays in her arms.

The doors bursting open ease the tension and we turn to see an older woman walking in already speaking, "There you are sassy pants. Sorry, sweetheart, I thought she had gone to the bathroom and I---" she cuts off as she realizes someone else is standing by her and looks at Elle in a panic.

"It's okay, Helen," she gestures to me, "This is Lincoln, he is a friend of mine and he works for Zack." Elle looks to me, "This is Helen, Zack's mom," she explains.

Her demeanor changes completely when she realizes I'm friendly, "Oh, well hello, sweetheart," she walks over to me and shakes my hand. "It's lovely to meet you," she looks at Elle, "about time you had some friends, little rose," she laughs.

Elle huffs, "I have friends," the little girl reaches out and Helen grabs her and she curls up to her in a very familiar way and it only adds to my confusion about the dynamic here and I see both Elle and Asher watching me as Helen continues.

"Pssshh family doesn't count as friends so take away me, Asher, Arthur and Zack and who do you have?" She says the word family with so much conviction that I know she really means it.

"Whatever," Elle responds, "I have friends," she mutters to herself before looking back at me.

Helen senses the tension creeping back in, "Well, shall we leave Mommy to train some more and go finish our cookies?" and the little girl nods eagerly. Helen turns to walk away, and Cassie looks over her shoulder at me.

"Bye, superman" she yells sweetly, and I smile "Bye, princess" I say back.

I wait until she is out of the door and it's closed behind her before I turn back to them.

Asher speaks first, "If what you have seen here today ever leaves this room, I will make you fucking disappear without a trace," he says calmly and I'm not stupid, I've heard the rumors about him. Him and Elle might have some sort of friendship, but he is still a Donovan and that psychotic blood still runs through his veins.

I look to Elle and can see that she agrees with him even if she looks less pleased about it.

“She’s yours?” I question stupidly because it is without a doubt true and she nods but I notice Asher doesn’t move an inch at my question.

My brain starts working overtime as things start making more sense. The little girl can’t be older than three which means Elle was pregnant at fourteen, right when she left town. I look to Donovan again who is still staring me down and things start slotting into place.

I think about everything I know for a fact. Elle left town, Michael was killed a few months later, Elle came back emancipated and living with Zack Royton, she has a daughter that calls Asher “Daddy.” Yet if that’s the case why is she back here gunning for Elliot? Asher just said he won’t let him get to Elle again.

“Who’s her father?” I ask tentatively and Elle flinches slightly which gives me my answer before anyone can speak it.

“I am,” Asher answers, clenching his jaw tightly like one wrong word or move will send him into an outburst.

I breathe out slowly as I think about how to ask the next question, “And who is her biological father?” I say slowly.

Asher steps forward, “You are entering dangerous fucking territory, Blackwell.” He looks every bit the Donovan he is as he stands before me now. His fitted grey workout clothes allow me to see how much tension he is holding in his shoulders. He would end me right here and now if he felt it was necessary and all for these two girls.

Most people would look at him and see your typical billionaire’s son but the only thing I see is pure anger and hatred. It rolls off him in waves and it seems the only person able to calm the storm is Elle. Yet, I can also see the love he has for these two, he would kill and die for them. I’m sure he already has.

Elle reaches out and grips his arm as she speaks to him but with her eyes locked on mine, “Ash, it’s fine,” he turns to her immediately.

“Baby girl,” he says in shock and I can see the anger rolling off him. “He’s a fucking Rebel or have you forgotten that? This doesn’t concern him.”

“This has concerned him since the night he put my knife into Nate Maxwell’s heart to protect me,” she replies without breaking our eye contact.

“What?” he roars at her. “He’s the fucking back up you had, are you fucking kidding me?” He starts pacing up and down beside her again like he

did when I first came in here with the intel that sits forgotten on the floor.

Elle ignores him as she addresses me, “You told me you are all in, that still true?”

“Of course.”

“Even if that means keeping things from your brothers?” We both know she is referring mainly to Marcus.

“I have been doing that since the day you came back,” I reply honestly.

The next words out of her mouth is the conclusion I had already come too but was praying I was wrong. All the things I have seen, heard, or read all start to add up. She’s a virgin, with a daughter. Asher Donovan is protecting them both with everything he has. She came back to this town for a reason and the only reason I could come up with, she has been pushing away. She wouldn’t let Marcus get close to her or allow herself to get close to him.

The training, the hunting, the panic attacks, it all makes sense and points to only one answer.

“Greg Donovan is her father.”

Five words that change everything. As soon as she speaks them into the air, I know that I would protect her and that little girl with my life, even if it means keeping Marcus in the dark the whole time.

Chapter 24

ELLE

Let the words I have never spoken aloud linger in the air like the poison they are. Speaking those five words sickens me because they aren't true, not really. If you look at DNA then yes, Greg Donovan is Cassie's father. Just like Jonathan King is mine but what the fuck does DNA matter? The only father I consider now is Arthur Royton, a man who has given me more in the last three years than my own father did in fourteen.

Just the same as Ash is Cassie's father, he has given her everything he can and protected her with everything he's got. The sacrifices he has made for her, she will never know but I am eternally in his debt.

Greg Donovan isn't a father; he is a rapist. A rapist that took everything from me but left me with the best thing I could have ever asked for. Raped and beaten, I was stolen back and taken into the night before I could be sold off to only god knows where. I spent weeks in bed with Helen and Arthur looking after me, when the vomiting first started, they both passed it off as stress, PTSD. None of us ever imagined it was morning sickness.

Helen is the one who noticed first, I guess when you have spent as much time as she did trying to conceive a child, she knew what to look out for. When the lines turned pink, I felt sick, disgusted, I was already broken and now I had a rapist's child growing inside me. I wanted it gone and to never think of it ever again.

They took me to a private clinic and when they checked me over, they gave me an ultrasound. The second the sound of her heartbeat flowed through the room I felt different, better. I was no longer the damaged broken little girl who had been raped, I was pregnant and going to be a Mom.

Four months after I left Black Hallows, Ash knocked on the door to tell me that Michael Riviera was dead, murdered in cold blood for protecting me. That is the moment I would have broken completely, fallen apart with no hope. Except I did have hope, I had something more important than myself to live for.

I told Asher I was pregnant, and he didn't even hesitate, he took me in his arms and told me he would always be there for me, for us, no matter what. That the baby growing inside me didn't deserve to know that they were

fathered by a Donovan. That is the moment I asked him to be her Dad because at that moment I knew he would lay down his life for her like he had already done for me.

Lincoln's face tightens as I speak the words and Asher pulls me into his arms from behind so my back hits his chest, like he can take away the pain of the truth.

"Explain," he says through gritted teeth and I can see the anger and pain in his eyes.

Ash cuts in, "Elle, you don't have to do this," he says, tightening his hold around me.

"Yeah, Ash, I do," I sigh as I steel myself against what I am about to say, I gesture to the benches next to the mats and we all take a seat.

"Elliot Donovan runs a sex ring," I blurt out. "I mean I'm sure after the past few weeks you have sort of figured that out," he nods a strained nod as I continue. "Well, they took me," I shrug like it's no big deal, "at first I didn't know what had happened, I woke up disoriented and groggy, tied to a bed and Ash was there with me."

Ash speaks up, "I followed my dad there," he says quietly. "I heard him on the phone when I was outside his office and heard him say Elle's name. I had never been out there before but I just had a bad feeling so I followed him, what I saw--" he chokes on his words slightly as he tightens his hand on mine until his knuckles are white. "What I saw I will never forget."

Linc looks to me as I carry on, "I was drugged, raped and beaten," I lift up my baggy workout top to show the scars on my stomach and he curses.

"They thought Ash being there meant he was ready to be part of the family business," I laugh a humorless laugh, "but he was my salvation."

"I didn't save you, I failed you," Ash says to himself in sorrow, but I can't answer him right now if I want to get the rest of the story out.

"Ash was gonna go get my parents, but he saw my dad with Elliot at the building where they were keeping me. There were a few men from town there with them, with one notable exception."

"Michael Riviera," Linc finishes for me and I nod.

"Ash snuck me out and Michael was waiting for us. He ran through the woods with me until we were right on the other side of town, carrying me the whole way. Zack was waiting for me there. The rest as they say is history, I left town with Zack and didn't look back."

Linc looks both upset and angry but I feel nothing, talking about that

night is just like reading off a shopping list for me. I blocked out all those emotions years ago and forced myself to keep them shut away. If I ever tried to open that box, I fear not even my daughter would be able to save me.

“Why’d you come back?” Linc finally speaks as he looks to me and I feel Ash squeeze my hand. “Why not stay away from here and never look back?”

I take a long deep breath and then blow it back out as I try to think how to explain my vengeance to him, but Asher is the one who answers him.

“She came back for Marcus,” my head whips to him in shock and I meet his gaze as he stares at me. “Come on, Hells. I thought we were all being honest here,” he looks to Linc and then back to me. “If you are going to trust him, which can I say, I think is a fucking mistake by the way then you have to be honest with him and yourself.”

“I--” I start but don’t know how to finish. “I want revenge, on Greg, his crew, Elliot, my parents, all of them. That’s what I want and what I came back for, for me and for Marcus.” I take another deep breath as I think about how to admit the next part to them, to myself, “I also wanted to see how Marcus was. I mean I knew he was okay; I kept an eye on him after what happened to Michael, but I needed to see for myself.”

“You need to tell him,” Linc says firmly.

“Should she have done that before or after he blew up her fucking jeep?” Ash snaps at him bitterly and I see Linc flinch slightly before he frowns. I want to laugh and roll my eyes at the same time, like he was literally just saying the same thing to me before Linc barged in here. Ash does not know how to play nice with others.

“Marcus isn’t ready,” I reply simply ignoring the tension between the two of them.

“He won’t ever be ready for this,” Linc admits solemnly. He knows Marcus as much as I do, we both know what this will do to him.

“Then he won’t know,” I reply simply. “I love Marcus, I always have,” I admit aloud before even thinking about it, “but that doesn’t mean I will ever put him or his feelings first. Cass will always be the most important thing to me, and I will protect her with everything I have no matter what the sacrifice.”

“Even if it means breaking your own heart and his?” He questions and I can feel the sadness in his voice.

“My heart was shattered beyond repair and the only thing that makes it work now is my daughter,” I reply honestly, and I can see he understands.

I may want revenge; I may be in love with someone I may never have but they won't ever interfere with Cassie. She is the only thing I can't live without.

Eager to change the subject, I stand and pick up the discarded file from the floor and flip it open to read as I speak, "Now how about we get back to work?"

I read over the emails that are inside and see an exchange between Elliot and my father talking about an eighteen-year-old scotch that has been distilled in a king casket. God do they really think they are covering their tracks well with this bullshit? They even refer to it as being the one that Greg tasted once. Sick fucking bastards. The words don't do anything but fuel my anger and encourage my need for revenge.

My gaze flicks to Linc first, this is why he came here and doesn't seem too surprised about Cassie or fazed about Asher. Clearly, he has been watching and picking up on things and why he knew to ask about who Cass' dad really is, he suspected something bad had happened. Zack was right, he really is smart.

I look to Ash now because he is the loose cannon of this current room.

"Ash," I say tentatively, trying to keep him calm but it doesn't work.

"No, Hells Bells. Don't give me that tone, I can't let him get to you."

"Ash," I repeat, "I know but we need to be smart."

"Smart would have been gutting them all the night they hurt you," he spits angrily but I know it's not aimed at me. "I am going to murder every last one of them Elle. Make them bleed until I am standing in a fucking river of their pain."

"We will do that together, Ash," I crouch in front of him and look up into his eyes. "But we will be smart about it because I won't lose anyone else I love to those sick fucks, okay?"

He doesn't respond so I push him, "Okay, Ash? Always?"

He releases some of the tension and gives me a slight smile, "Always, Hells," he says quietly.

I turn to Linc who is watching our exchange quietly, "You're in this now which means we stick together and have each other's backs."

"You're gonna need protection detail on you," he starts but I hold up my hand.

"No."

"No?" they both roar at me in unison and I grimace. Fuck's sake, I have

far too much testosterone to deal with, I need some girl friends around.

“I said we need to be smart, having guards around me would just draw more attention to me. We need to be staying under the radar.”

Linc nods, “Well, I’ve got you at school, we share most classes,” he says simply.

“No driving yourself, get Zack to accompany you to school or one of his drivers if need be, they are always armed,” Ash adds.

“So am I,” I smirk at him and he just shakes his head at me.

It’s clear we have a lot to work out but at least we are working together on this. Time to make some serious plans.

Chapter 25

ELLE

We spent a couple of hours with Lincoln, all of us being completely open and honest about what we know and putting all our information together to plan what we should do next. We decide with Elliot putting a bounty on my head that we really have no time to waste and it's time to ramp up on fucking his shit up. They want me alive and submissive but that is never going to happen.

We decide on our next mission and agree to meet later tonight after Cass has gone to bed to do some recon work.

We have a few hours to kill so I decide to take Ash to The Shack so we can refuel before our evening activities. I introduce him to Pam who fusses over him like she does me and we both enjoy a platter each with burgers, fries, onions rings and salad.

Halfway through the meal Ash interrupts my eating, "Remember what I said about Marcus?" he asks suddenly, "About letting him in or letting him go?" he confirms, and I nod.

"Good, because here he comes," he says calmly, and I choke on the burger in my mouth as Jace's voice cuts across the diner.

"Is that my favorite royal?" he bellows at us.

I turn and see him walking smoothly towards us, a huge grin on his face. Marcus is following slowly behind him and I can feel his fiery gaze locked on me from here.

Ash and I are sitting in a booth opposite each other leaving both seats next to us open. Jace isn't fazed by Ash's presence as he throws himself into the booth next to me.

"Princess," he says, pulling me into his side in a one-armed hug before kissing my head. He nods his head at Ash, "Donovan."

Marcus is now standing awkwardly next to the table and Jace laughs.

"Sit down you fucking ape," he scolds him as he points to the open seat next to Asher. Marcus looks at it, grunts and then drags a chair from another table so he can sit at the end of ours.

They both order and then an awkward silence descends on the table before Jace breaks it.

“Sooooo what are you two love birds up to this weekend?” he asks, and I see Ash look to me straight away to see if I have decided what to do yet.

Before I can answer Marcus cuts in, “Yes, please share with us your weekend plans,” he says with a cruel smirk on his face. “What did you do last night, Ells?”

“Marcus, don’t start,” I try to engage with him, but he cuts me off.

“What? Surely your boyfriend should know you spent your Friday night with three guys that weren’t him,” he turns to Asher.

“You should keep better tabs on your girl, man.”

Asher just laughs, causing Marcus’ anger to increase as he looks back to me.

“How’s your new friend, Linc?” I try not to react when he speaks but his words throw me off slightly. Clearly, he knows something is up after last night so I try to think of something quick that will help cover our tracks.

“I hired Lincoln to do some work for me,” I reply coolly thinking it gives the best explanation as to why we would have been together.

“What kind of work?” he snaps, and I see Ash tense at his tone but I give him a look that indicates he needs to chill.

“The kind that’s none of your business,” I reply in a bored tone. “He is being paid a lot of money to keep the work private,” I state with a smile.

He doesn’t smile back, “Yet, somehow I imagine I’m the only one who is being kept in the dark,” he replies dismally.

“Stop acting like a whiny little bitch. It really is beneath you,” Asher snaps at him in a sinister yet chirpy voice like he really is enjoying this cluster fuck of a conversation. I can see the psycho side of him is really enjoying having one up on Marcus.

I really need to end this conversation and get out of here before things get any worse. I shove the last bite of my burger in my mouth and look at Ash in the hope he is on the same page as I am, but he is still glaring at Marcus.

Jace cuts in before Marcus can respond, “Ignore him man. He is just jealous that he’s not getting a taste of that elite King pussy,” I choke on my food for a second time and Jace laughs.

“Watch your fucking mouth, Conrad” Ash barks, finally breaking his gaze from Marcus to give the death glare to Jace now.

Jace holds his hands up, “Hey no disrespect, man. Princess here knows I’m only playing,” he states as he winks at me.

“I don’t give a fuck, speak about her like that again and I will rip your

fucking tongue out,” Ash replies calmly and I notice Marcus has become deathly silent during their exchange with his eyes locked on me in a unwavering stare.

“Woah, Princess. Your boyfriend always this touchy?” Jace laughs, not even one bit fazed by Asher or his psycho.

I go to reply but Ash cuts me off, “I’m not her fucking boyfriend,” he snaps loudly enough that a few other tables look over but my only focus is on Marcus as he whips his head towards Asher as he continues. “I never have been. We aren’t fucking nor will we ever. She is my family, and you will treat her with the fucking respect she deserves.”

He is holding on to his temper by a thread so I reach out and squeeze his arm and Marcus focuses on that before he looks back up to me and I can see the confusion in his eyes as clear as day.

The four of us are now at an impasse as no one knows what to say to ease the tension Ash’s last statement has just left us in.

“Well shit,” Jace exclaims after a couple of minutes of silence. The break in the quiet causes Marcus to jump from the table, knocking his chair over and storming outside. Jace goes to stand but I stop him, “I’ll go.” I climb across his lap to get out.

I follow after Marcus outside and find him leaning against Jace’s Dodge smoking a cigarette.

“Well?” he asks as soon as I get to him like he knew I would come.

“Well what?” I reply trying to gauge where his head is at, I don’t know him as well as I used to.

He laughs a mocking laugh as he repeats my words back to me.

“I want to know why, Ells?” he says, throwing his half-finished cigarette to the ground.

“Why did you leave this shitty town? Why did you come back? Why since being back have you let me think that you chose Asher fucking Donovan over me?”

He stalks towards me as he throws the questions at me until I am backed against the wall of the diner and his arms crowd me on either side. Why does he always get me in this position? I don’t feel the same anxiety as the previous times he has done this. I know he won’t hurt me.

I don’t know how to answer him. How to tell him it would never be a choice. He thinks it's been a choice between him and Asher, if only. If my choice were that easy then my answer would be simple. It would be Marcus

every damn time. But even if I could choose him, then I would have to bring him into my world, a world of secrets and lies, a world of deceit and danger. A world where I was raped and became a mom because of it.

Being a Mom is my biggest achievement but also my biggest secret. I would lay down my life for few people, but Cassie's name is at the top of that list and when it comes down to choices, I choose her every time.

"I already told you," I say, trying to hold back the emotions I am feeling. "I didn't come back for you."

"See, I barely believed you the first time you said that. Now I definitely don't. Stop lying, Ells."

He is so close to me now that I can taste the nicotine on his breath as he speaks to me, I can barely think when he is this near to me.

"I can't," I say simply, hoping he will accept that and leave us be.

He pushes his body against mine as he brings his mouth to my ear, "What you have seen so far was me holding back because I thought there was someone in my way," his voice is like velvet and it wraps around me, making desire pool in the bottom of my stomach.

"And now?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper but he is so close he hears it anyway.

"Now?" he says, "Now, I know the only thing in my way is you, little King he pulls back and turns to leave before throwing over his shoulder.

"Watch your back, baby."

I stand dumbfounded as he stalks away, leaving Jace's car and Jace behind as he walks into town alone.

"You were always insufferable to be around," Asher's voice cuts through the air and I turn to see both him and Jace standing there, clearly having been witness to what just went down.

"They were always like this?" Jace questions him.

"It's gotten worse," Asher confirms, and I don't like the fact they seem to be forming some sort of alliance together. Jace looks at me and for the first time he looks serious, the playful side of him is nowhere to be seen.

"I don't know what is going on here, princess, but don't break his heart. He's lost enough." His words hit me right in the gut as Ash also stares at me.

"That's the last thing I want," I reply as I look back at Marcus still in sight, "but it's too late for that. When he finds out the reason I left there won't be anything left to break."

I look back to Jace with a sad smile on my face and step towards

him before he can answer me and pull him into a hug squeezing him tight.

“You’re a good friend, pretty boy. I’m glad Marcus has you.”

I pull back and nod to Ash and then towards his car, signaling it’s time for us to go. Just as I am about to pull the door open Jace responds, “It would be better if he had you.”

I look at him and offer him another small smile. Jace Conrad is probably one of the purest people I have ever met, always looking for the good even when there is none to be found. I hope for his sake he never loses it. I nod to him and give him a little wave as I get into the car and we drive away.

Chapter 26

ELLE

Today has been a lot to take in and it's far from finished. I'm awaiting Lincoln's arrival and still reeling from the day's confrontations. The fact that Linc is now aware of Cassie's existence has me on edge, Ash too, but what's done is done and I just have to trust in his alliance until he proves otherwise. Add that to Ash blurting out that we are not romantically involved in front of Marcus, well he may as well have offered me up on a platter for him to take.

Marcus was always a dominant personality even as a kid and now a man, he will for sure go after what he wants. How can I take on Elliot Donovan and his North Side kingdom while pushing away the South Side King?

None of which is relevant now, tonight is all about Jonathan and Sarah King. The plans I have for them all extensive but in order to be put in motion I need to familiarize myself with their lives more. Where they go, who they associate with and what they do.

Ash is lying on my bed shirtless in his sweats. We agreed right at the start of this he could never be directly involved with the missions as it would mean losing our inside man. He knows that is the best course of action, but he is still sulking about not being able to join us tonight but with Cassie snuggled under his arm sleeping softly he seems content enough. He would be by her side 24/7 if he could be, there is no one in this world he loves more. She is his salvation.

"I should be coming with you, not him," he huffs out.

I gesture to the earpieces on the side next to his headset and laptop.

"Technically you will be coming with us," I smile trying to lighten his mood.

"It's not the same. I can't protect you through a fucking computer."

"No, that's what Lincoln is for," I say, and he just scoffs at me.

"Ash, you know it would be game over if you were caught doing this with us," he sighs at my statement. "Besides the way I see it you have the best night out of the two of us," I nod my head at Cass, and he smiles.

"She is my shining light in a world of dark," he says as he looks down at her and strokes her cheek lightly causing her to turn and snuggle closer to him.

I look at them and my heart bursts, my favorite sight in the entire world is watching these two together. He was dealt a shitty hand in life and to be able to see him looking after our daughter with some care and attention, it really does make my heart soar.

A knock at my door breaks us both out of the moment and I can feel Ash tense from here. I move over to open it and pull it back to reveal Lincoln, he looks slightly uncomfortable being here, but I guess we both need to get used to him being part of this so closely.

“Ready,” he asks tentatively as he looks behind me at Asher. I see him take in Ash’s lack of shirt as he looks him over from head to toe before looking back at me with a tight glare.

“Yeah, I’m ready,” I say, taking a deep breath. Leaving to do these missions is always hard but even more so now as I take in Cassie’s small frame curled up in my bed. I have to remind myself that I am doing this for her just as much as me. If the Donovan’s found out about her they would want her just to spite me. I will die before I let them have her.

Ash gently pulls himself from Cassie as I make my way over to them. I lean down and drop a kiss to her head whispering in her ear even though I know she is asleep and can’t hear me. I stand and turn to Ash who is watching me closely before he pulls me over to where the earpieces lay on my desk.

He hands it to me, and I place it in my ear, and then he slips a small microphone device into my bra and I can feel Linc’s glare on us as he does so. Ash actively ignores him and then hands me a little remote with a small button on.

“Any issues whatsoever and you press this button and help will be there,” it’s the same stuff I use on every mission since what happened with the octopus but he still feels the need to go through the motions with me. I would roll my eyes, but I know it’s just his need to keep me safe.

He pulls me in for a hug and kisses my head, “Be safe, Hells Bells,” he whispers in my ear.

“Always.”

I feel his smile against my hair, “Always.”

He pulls back and turns his attention on Lincoln, walking over to him and handing him his own earpiece and microphone.

“You let anything happen to her and I’ll boil your limbs in acid while you watch,” he says in a serious tone and we both know he isn’t joking. His glare

on Lincoln is more intense than I've ever seen before but I can't understand why. The tension towards him is like a fiery rage.

"I'll die before anything happens to her," Linc replies coolly but also just as intense and his honesty shocks both Ash and I. Ash just nods in return so I motion for Linc to leave and I follow behind him silently until we are out of the house and in the car.

"Linc," I start not really knowing what to say.

"I meant it Elle. I know we haven't known each other long and we have only really interacted doing this bullshit, but I promise I've got your back. I won't leave that little girl without a mother."

I blow out a breath not really knowing how to answer him, so I just offer him a nod.

"Let's cut the heart to heart, shall we?" Ash's voice hits my ear and Linc tenses before he turns back to the wheel and we make our way into town.

We are staying in the North Side tonight; Lincoln hacked my father's emails, and we know him, and my mother are having dinner at some posh restaurant in town so we make our way there first.

We have been sitting outside the restaurant for over an hour waiting for them to emerge when I can't take the boredom anymore.

"I'm just gonna grab a donut," I say to Linc nodding my head at the shop across the road.

I walk up and down the aisle grabbing junk food until my arms are full and I am forced to head to the counter. While the cashier is ringing up my stuff, I feel eyes on me, I turn to find a guy around my age watching me but when our eyes meet he looks away.

I bring my attention back to the cashier and hand over some cash and turn to leave. I catch the stranger's eyes again and I feel wary of him watching me but not unsafe, how strange.

I'm still pondering about him when I climb back into the car.

"Everything okay?" Linc asks.

"Yeah," I say, shaking it off and bringing out some Milk Duds and passing them to Linc, one of his secret little guilty pleasures I've noticed. "For you, Superman."

He looks at me and smiles when he sees what I am offering, shaking his head.

"For that sweet tooth of yours," I grin at him.

He just nods and turns his attention back to the restaurant, but I keep my

attention on him. We have spent a lot of time together since that first week and I have noticed a few things about him, not just his sweet tooth. He is always serious, his laughs and smiles are reserved only for his brothers and now me, he is insanely talented in what he does, and I never see him entertaining girls the way Marcus and Jace do.

“Why do you never have girls fawning over you like the others?” I ask him and hear Ash snort in my ear if I weren’t looking at Linc I would have missed the tug of his mouth into a smirk.

“Because I don’t indulge them like my brothers do,” he replies simply.

“Yeah, but why?” I ask.

“None of them are my type,” he shrugs, his stare still not wavering from where I should be watching too.

“What's your type?”

“Dark and unavailable apparently,” he mutters more to himself before he realizes he said that out loud. I take a big bite out of my donut while I wait for him to continue.

His eyes flash to mine and he lets out a sigh before adding, “I’m gay.”

My eyebrows practically hit the roof and I choke down the half-chewed bite in my mouth and then cough, “Wow, sorry. I just didn’t expect that.”

“It’s not really common knowledge,” he replies. “I’m not hiding it or anything I just don’t have a big circle of people that I share my personal life with,” he shrugs like it’s not a big deal, but I sense that it is.

I reach over and grip his hand in mine, “Well, thank you for sharing it with me,” I say and a moment of understanding passes between us and I just nod and take another bite out of my donut.

“If you two have finished gossiping,” Ash barks at us and I laugh causing Lincoln to smile.

“Sorry, Ash, forgot you were there,” I say sweetly, and he scoffs.

“Well, try to remember I’m not really interested in hearing about who warms the help’s bed at night.”

I go to yell at Ash for being rude when Linc beats me to it.

“And who warms your bed at night Dark Prince?”

“Like I’d tell any of my secrets to a fucking Rebel,” Ash grits back at him.

“I’m sure I’d be interested in a lot of your secrets,” Linc muses back and I’m impressed he is willing to go toe to toe with him.

I cut the conversation off when my father emerges from the restaurant

alone on the phone and we see him look up and down the sidewalk before turning one way on foot and walking away.

“Shit,” I grab the door handle to get out, “We have to follow him.”

I hear Linc’s door open and close and he pulls me in close to him and puts his arm around me while checking our surroundings. To anyone watching us we would look like a regular couple just taking a walk.

We have been following him for a couple of minutes when I notice someone is across the road following a little behind us. I make a casual gesture of stretching and looking around and see it’s the guy from the store who was watching me. Okay I definitely don’t believe in coincidences.

“Someone is following us,” I whisper hoping I am loud enough for Linc to hear me.

“What!” Ash roars into our ears and I cringe slightly.

Lincoln turns around casually and checks out our tail then curses in recognition, “Fuck!”

“Friends of yours?” I query his reaction.

“More like friends of Marcus,” he replies firmly, and I blank slightly.

“Of fucking course,” Ash mutters.

Fuck Marcus has got someone following me? How long has that been happening and why haven’t I noticed that before?

Linc senses where my brain went and answers my unspoken questions “We got into it this morning about our,” he pauses trying to think of the right word.

“Friendship?” I answer him questioningly and he smiles while Ash grunts.

“Yes, friendship,” he repeats. “He wasn’t happy about the fact I wouldn’t tell him why I was keeping things from him in concerns to you and -”

I interrupt him, “I told him I hired you,” he looks to me bemused as I continue, “What? It seemed fitting,” I shrug. “I couldn’t exactly tell him you like to stalk me into dark alleys, now could I?” he laughs as I wink at him.

“Not unless you wanted him to kill me.”

“I’d protect you, Superman, don’t worry.”

“Another fucking Rebel under your skin,” Ash mutters in our ear.

Linc just laughs at me and then turns serious and I can tell he has got his thinking face on. I look back to my father and see him enter a warehouse. He raps on the door three times before someone lets him in, what the hell. I see Lincoln saw it too and he nods letting me know he will check it out.

“Jonathan has entered a Warehouse on the corner of 5th and Middleton,” I whisper to alert Asher.

Linc pushes me towards the street on the right and as we turn down there, I see it's empty as he pulls me into a dark doorway and quickly puts his hand across my mouth to signal me to be quiet. We hear footsteps quickening and then someone whisper, “Fuck”.

Lincoln steps out and I hear a yelp of surprise and a scuffle before the guy from the shop and another guy I didn't see drop like a ton of bricks at my feet. I look to Linc impressed and he just shrugs like it was no big deal.

“What the fuck is going on?” Ash shouts.

“Calm down, spawn of Satan, I've handled it,” Lincoln answers him coolly.

“Linc just took down the two guys following us,” I answer him because I know he will lose his shit otherwise.

“Impressive,” he mutters sarcastically.

“I know how to handle myself,” Linc says, not even looking ruffled by any of it as he turns back to me and checks the streets surrounding us.

“I'll bet,” Asher murmurs and if the street wasn't so quiet, I would have missed it.

Linc clearly not listening to him speaks to me, “Come on let's grab the car and get these out of sight, I'll scrub the cameras and look into the building Jonathan just went into.”

“I've already done both,” Ash answers him in a bored tone. “We can reconvene when your hands aren't full.”

I nod knowing we need to be done for the night before our luck runs out and we are caught with two bodies at our feet. They might still be alive but still it doesn't exactly look in our favor if someone stumbled across us.

Chapter 27

MARCUS

I lie in bed staring at the picture of me and Elle on the shelf. I swirl the amber liquid round the glass as I contemplate my thoughts. All of which are consumed by the blonde temptress who has crashed back into my life. Everything I thought I knew has exploded in my face and left me with half-truths and soiled facts, I don't know which way is even up anymore.

What I do know is, Elle left town without looking back but from what I have learned it sounds like she didn't just leave but ran, escaped. What or who was she running from? It has to be Elliot and he paid her back by lashing out and murdering my father but why? How did my father become involved in a war between my little King and the devil himself? And more importantly why? Why would Elliot have an interest in Elle in the first place?

Which brings me to my next point, Elle may still be a King by name but no longer by blood, she left her parents just as she did this town but again why? What would make her cut the ties to the only family she has ever known?

More unanswered questions, not being bound by the Kings means she must have had other help to be able to hide her from someone as skilled as Linc. Linc the same guy who searched far and wide for her to help me locate her, now the one helping her keep running from me.

Then we have the biggest factor of all, she still has Asher fucking Donovan at her beck and call but not in her bed and I am more confused than ever. He treats her like she is the most valuable thing in his life and would lay down his life for her, why? Why if he isn't in love with her would he do that? The only people I would do that for is Elle and my boys, the girl I've always loved and the family I chose. He said they were family. What does family mean to them, does it mean the same thing it does to me?

So many fucking questions and not enough answers. The closer I get to her the more red flags I find but is Elle just keeping things from me or is she a liar? The sad thing is I don't care either way, no matter what the truth is I have already decided it's irrelevant. Whether she believes it or not Elle King is mine and I will fight to get her even if that fight is against her. I won't stop until I know her every thought, every secret, and every desire, until she

belongs to me, mind, body, and soul.

I throw back the liquid and grit my teeth as I feel the welcome burn as it slides down my throat. It does nothing to ease the tension in my shoulders or the lust in my cock. A cock that has been rock hard all fucking day, ever since it was pressed against the angel that evades me.

I reach into my sweats and fist my hard length and hiss as I slide my hand firmly from root to tip. I close my eyes and imagine her here, remembering how it felt when she was on her knees before me. I wish she were here now, taking care of me in a whole different way. My hand moves faster as I imagine her taking me to the back of her throat as I grip my hand in her hair, the imagery is too much. I come with a harsh grunt as I shoot ropes of hot cum across my stomach.

Fuck even my own imagination of that girl has me coming undone. I need her more than I need my next breath and I will do whatever it takes to make her mine.

I grab tissues from the nightstand and clean myself up just as I hear Lincoln's voice bellow through the loft.

"Marcus!" his tone is serious as always but something about it has me moving faster than usual.

I enter the living room and he is waiting by the door that leads down into the garage, as soon as we lock eyes, he nods his head behind him and turns to go. I follow after him and find him next to the trunk of his SUV. Once I reach him, he nods and then flicks open the trunk revealing to me Jack Hanson and Kai Buck.

This is literally the last thing I would have expected to find, and I am sure the shock is displayed as clear as day on my face as I look back to Linc for an explanation.

"I told you I had her back," he says simply and then it clicks in my head what he means.

I sent Jack after Elle and clearly, he found her, but she wasn't alone.

"Busy evening at work?" I say through gritted teeth as he remains stoic beside me like it's every day, he brings home two unconscious bodies.

"Call them off."

"And if I don't?"

"Then you will keep receiving these gifts," he says smugly. It's a side I have never seen of Linc aimed at me before, usually this bravado is saved for anyone we are up against. People are usually quick to dismiss the smart, quiet one of our trio, but they shouldn't, he is as lethal as Jace and I.

I'm proud and pissed at the same time.

"Linc," I start but he stops me.

"Marcus," he says in exasperation, "I need you to trust me, brother."

"Why?" I try to implore as much emotion in that one word as possible.

"For her," his reply is instantaneous, and he knows my reaction to those two words are inevitable. I would do anything for her.

He pulls me close, so we are almost chest to chest.

"It's worse than we could have ever imagined, and she needs us," he speaks slowly like he is trying to remain calm.

"How can I be there for her if she won't let me?"

"She just needs time, give it to her, show her you're there, bang on the walls she has up until they crumble down around you and I promise you she will let you in."

I have never seen Linc so adamant before.

"I told you I want you to know what is going on but I won't be the one to tell you," he pauses slightly and I can see he is thinking about how much to say. "That still stands but I need you to listen to me and trust me, can you do that?"

I nod before he even finishes his sentence, we are brothers and we always have each other's back. The fact that he has now got Elle's back and is keeping things from me pisses me off, but it also just cements him as more of a brother to me. The fact he would do anything for my girl and yeah, I have decided she is my fucking girl that just shows me how much I can trust in him.

"What do you need?"

"First, call off these two fucking morons," he rolls his eyes, and he shuts the trunk on them, and I have to smirk. "She needs eyes on her, but those eyes should be ours and no one else's," he adds.

"I can do that," I say wondering where he is going with this.

"Second, you need to push her. She thinks she is better off keeping you in the dark but I think she's wrong, but I won't disrespect her wishes."

He rubs his hands down his face and I can see how tired he is. I think about how I've barely seen him the last few weeks and it makes sense now knowing he's been working for Elle.

"Third, forget everything you think you know because it's wrong and when you learn the truth, I need you to dissect it. Don't forget who the real enemy is and don't overreact."

I frown at his instructions, what the fuck does that mean?

“I never overreact,” I try to start and he fucking snorts a laugh. “So, what now?” I add as the fucker is still laughing at me.

He turns serious, “Now, we protect her with everything we have,” and the words pierce my heart with both love for him and panic for her.

What the fuck are we getting into?

He turns to get into his car.

“Where are you going?”

“To tuck these little boys in their beds,” he says with a smile.

On Monday I am anxiously awaiting Ells’ arrival, Lincoln told me he would handle it and I have to trust him. Jace and I are leaning against his Dodge awaiting his arrival, a few people tried to approach us from our usual group of followers but Jace quickly deflected them, we don’t have time for hierarchy bullshit right now.

It isn’t long before I spot Linc’s SUV driving along the road, he pulls into the lot and parks a few spaces down, his tinted windows don’t allow me to see inside until his door opens. I’m surprised when I see the passenger door open too.

Elle stomps around the vehicle clearly pissed off and halts when she spots me and Jace staring her way.

She turns back to Linc, “Seriously?” she snaps at him in exasperation and he just shrugs, I look to Jace and he is just as confused as I am. When Linc said he would handle Elle I didn’t expect this.

“You can’t follow me everywhere,” she looks at him and actually stomps her foot on the ground like she used to when we were kids. I used to find it cute, now it’s kinda hot.

“Elle, we talked about this.”

“Yes,” she shouts, “We did and nowhere during that talk did we agree to dumb, dumber and dumbest being on my ass,” she gestures to the three of us and Jace laughs.

“Hey, princess, I’m all for being on that ass,” he teases, and she gives him the death stare the same time I do and he just laughs more. Fucker.

Linc takes a deep breath, “Just remember who the real enemy is here, Elle,” it’s the same thing he said to me last night and I see Elle tense slightly when he says it but I can see he’s got her.

“Fine,” she grits out, “but follow me to the bathroom and I’ll fucking gut you,” she adds with a smile before turning to leave.

“See you around,” Lincoln says calmly.

“Fuck you, superman,” she replies with rage but even I can see the friendship they have clearly formed between them, it should piss me off that I’m not included but I’m just glad he is letting more people in.

I laugh along with Jace at her anger and she turns to us.

“And fuck you both too!” she snaps and then storms away, and both my boys laugh but I am too mesmerized by her ass.

When she’s out of sight I return my stare to Linc to find him watching me.

“What’s going on brother?” I ask him.

“I told you the only eyes on her should be ours,” he shrugs but then turns more serious, “at all times brothers,” he looks at me intensely and he doesn’t have to tell me again.

I turn and stride after Elle without another thought until I find her leaning against her locker texting. I don’t alert her to my presence and the crowded noisy hallways allow me to blend in next to her quietly.

I can see she is texting that Taylor chick who is begging her to come out at the weekend.

TAY: Bitchhh come on we are only 18 once, don’t leave me with these plastic prep bores. Club 319 is bomb AF trust me!

ELLE: Fine but we are getting ready at your house! I have no idea how to get ready for a club.

TAY: Yessss I knew having you back would be fun! Friday is going to be awesome! And don’t worry bitch I will have you looking so good the men will fall at your feet.

“Is that what you want little King? For men to fall at your feet,” I whisper next to her ear and she squeals as my unexpected presence scares her.

“Fuck me, River. Do you have to be so creepy?” she says as she puts a hand to her chest attempting to calm her no doubt racing heart but all I’m focused on are the first three words she just said.

Fuck me, River.

Fuck hearing that has me hardening in my pants. What I would give to have my little Ells beg me like that. Clearly, I got lost in my own imagination because when I look back to her she is just staring at me like she is waiting for me to speak.

“Sorry what?” I say and she shakes her head.

“I said what do you want?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” I smile, pushing my body into hers, “I want you.” I hear her intake of breath as she looks around to see if anyone is watching us. Ha, like I give a fuck if they were. Every fucker in this hallway needs to take note that this girl is off limits and not for the reasons I originally stated.

“I told you, Ells, now I know there is nothing in my way,” I nip her ear as she releases a little breathy gasp, “I will make you mine.” I pull back and smile in triumph as I take in her lust filled eyes and the blush dancing across her cheeks before turning and walking to class.

Chapter 28

ELLE

What a cluster fuck of a day. When I left the house this morning to go to my car and found Lincoln waiting for me, I should have known it wouldn't stop there. Apparently, I am now the Rebels' newest fucking hobby.

First and second period I had the joy of being surrounded by all three of them and when I slipped out to go to the restroom, I exited to find Lincoln had followed me there. When I raised an eyebrow at him, he just gave me his usual shrug.

Third period I rushed to class early trying to claim a seat next to someone to avoid Marcus' flustering presence but he just towered over the person next to me for all of two seconds before they scrambled out of the seat for him. When I huffed in exasperation he just laughed.

I can't even breathe without one of them being by my side and by the time lunch rolls around I am ready to fucking flip.

I rush from class and thankfully I am quick enough to avoid any of the Rebels as I didn't share last period with any of them. I decide to grab some lunch off school grounds just for some peace and quiet. I keep looking around making sure I'm not spotted and then I get close to the exit and can taste the freedom when I feel hands on me.

"Not so fast, princess." Jace grabs me just as I am about to make it to the door.

"Let me go", I huff as I struggle against him.

"Ah ah, I've got orders to come get you," he releases his hold on me but then before I know it I am being flung over his shoulder and carried towards the cafeteria despite my colorful protests.

He drops me right next to the table they usually sit at which is unusually not surrounded by their groupies and just as I am about to rage at him, Marcus grabs me by the hips and plops me down into his lap. I can't contain the squeal of surprise that leaves me, and he smirks. I can feel every eye in here on us and it's clear they are wondering what is happening here and they aren't the only ones. I feel like yelling me fucking too guys, me too.

I fight to move off his lap when he grips my thighs to keep me pressed in his lap, I wriggle more trying to move and then I feel something hard against

my ass and I immediately still, I turn to look at him and his eyes are dark and solely on me.

“Don’t tease me, baby,” he whispers.

Before I can speak, he addresses the room, “Everyone listen up!” It’s ridiculous how quick they quiet down for him and I roll my eyes.

“Elle King is mine,” he adds, and you could hear a pin drop alongside my racing heart at his declaration. My mouth hangs open in shock and he smiles before cupping my face and smashing his lips to mine. I am in total shock that I can do nothing but accept his kiss and I try to ignore how perfect his lips feel against mine.

When he pulls back, he winks at me and then speaks to the crowd again, “As you were,” he exclaims, and the chatter slowly starts back up. His face is so smug that it infuriates me as he grips my hips again.

I drag the knife from its usual spot in my boot and flick it open.

“Get your hands off me or you are going to be spending your lunch bleeding out,” I snap at him and he just smiles bigger before dropping me into the seat next to him.

I fume silently thinking of my next move when his breath hits my ear, “Soon you will be begging for my hands on you,” his voice is a whisper and it sends chills down my spine and I have to repress the shudder I want to let out.

Linc arrives with two trays of food and places one in front of me. I look at it and it’s filled with foods I love. I give him a look and he just shrugs and sits across from me next to Jace who is already sitting across from Marcus smiling widely at what’s just occurred.

“I don’t see why I have to sit with you guys,” I huff out in frustration, purposely ignoring Marcus’ words and actions and focusing on the other two instead as I dig into my lunch.

“Aw don’t be like that, princess, we’re family,” Jace winks at me.

“You don’t even know me,” I say pointedly, jabbing my fork at him before shoving food in my mouth.

“Well let’s change that, what’s your favorite color?” he asks with such childlike excitement that I can’t help but go to answer him.

“Green,” Marcus answers for me and my head snaps back to him. “Her favorite color is green,” he adds, staring at me intently.

I swallow thickly, he’s right it’s green like the forest or at least it was until that night. I shudder as the memories of the last time Marcus and I were

in that forest assault me. Things were so simple then between us, just two childhood friends destined to be more. Chasing through the forest without a care in the world, I used to love watching the trees whip by us as we ran together. So pure, so innocent, so easy. Maybe if I spent more time paying attention to the more important things in life then I would have noticed Greg before it was too late.

“Actually,” I say in a choked whisper as I come back from my thoughts, I cough slightly to rid the raspyness of my throat, “It’s orange, now,” I say weakly.

When Cassie was born, they wrapped her in a beautiful orange blanket and placed her on my chest and for the first time since the attack I could breathe again. When I was allowed to take her home, I noticed a giraffe in the gift shop that was the same orange as the blanket and I just had to buy it, it’s still her favorite cuddly toy now. Now it’s her favorite color too, we always end up buying orange stuff for her. Even her room is decorated in a delicate peach colored orange.

“I guess I need to get to know you again,” Marcus says.

“You might not like what you learn,” I reply.

He reaches out hesitantly before gripping my hand in his on top of the table, “Ells, whatever happened nothing will change how I’ve always felt about you. We may have lost our way for a while and I’m sorry for that, but we will find our way back. Pinky promise?”

He holds out his other hand towards me waiting for me to link my Pinky with his, it takes everything in me not to cry as I am assaulted with hundreds of memories of us as kids making the same silly gesture over so many things. I think back to the time he Pinky promised he would be all my firsts.

“Come on, Ells, follow me?”

“Where are we going, River?”

“To our spot,” he looks at me and holds out his hand and I take it.

We make our way to the large tree in his garden and he immediately begins to climb it and I follow him closely. Once we get to the little makeshift tree house Michael made for us, he gestures for me to sit on the balcony and he sits next to me. I can feel his nerves, but I don’t know why.

“Have you kissed anyone since our kiss, Ells?” he asks suddenly, and I look at him shocked.

“What? Of course not!” I squeal at him and then I panic, “Why have you?” I ask and he shakes his head and the panic melts away.

I take a deep breath before I continue, "I don't want to kiss anyone but you, River," I whisper.

"Not even Asher?" he replies, and he looks so serious.

I frown, "Ash and I are just friends, it's not like that."

"What about what we heard your parents say?" he asks.

"I am not marrying Asher Donovan," I scoff in disgust at him for even saying something so ridiculous.

Marcus reaches out and captures my hand in his and it tingles under his touch.

"Ells, I want to be all your firsts. I'm gonna marry you one day and we will have kids and live happily ever after and I'll even let you keep Asher as a friend if I have too. Pinky promise me there won't be anyone else, only us. Give me all your firsts?"

He holds out his finger and I curl my own around it, "I promise."

He leans into me and I do the same and just as our lips are about to touch, we are interrupted.

"Ells Bells? Marcus? You up there?" Asher's voice shouts to us.

"Fucking Asher," Marcus mutters to himself and I laugh before he shouts out to him, "Yeah, we're coming, Donovan."

We were just a couple of kids at the time, yet the love felt so real. I already knew then that I would never love someone like I love Marcus Riviera. I willed him to have all my firsts, but fate had other plans.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, River," I say trying not to let the emotion I'm feeling pour out, I give his hand a squeeze before I pull mine back and go back to my lunch.

The rest of lunch goes by in a blur as we all sit silently in our own thoughts. I don't think Linc or Jace knew what to say to make either of us feel better.

"I'll drive you home after school," Marcus claims out of nowhere and I flinch, yeah that is so not happening.

"Actually, I've got some shopping to do so I'll be fine," I try to sound as casual as possible but even I can hear how high pitched my voice sounds and Marcus narrows his eyes at me.

"Can I join you?" he asks in a pleading tone that I wish I couldn't ignore.

"Linc already said he would take me," I say as I look at Linc and give him a look that I hope he understands.

He stares at me for a few seconds before looking at Marcus, "Yeah, don't

worry, brother. I've got it covered."

Marcus grinds his teeth before he stands abruptly and stalks away, I watch him go and then release a slow breath. I turn back to the table and find Jace staring between me and Linc.

"What's going on here?"

I don't hesitate to reach across the table and grab his arm, "Trust me, pretty boy, when I say you really don't wanna know."

The bell rings signaling the end of lunch before he can respond, and we all get up and head on our way.

I don't see Marcus again until the end of the day and even then, it is only a glimpse of him as I make my way over to Linc's car.

Linc is close behind me and I can feel him watching me as I stare after Marcus.

"Everything okay?" the same question he always asks me.

"Yeah, I just hate lying to him," I say honestly.

"So, don't," he responds like it's that easy and I turn my focus to him.

"Come on, Linc. You've only been giving the highlights of my life the last few years; you honestly think I can tell Marcus that?"

"I think you underestimate him."

"No, I think you do. You underestimate the feelings a couple of kids could have formed for each other." I turn and look back to the empty road Marcus left down. "If Marcus finds out it won't just change him, it will destroy him and he won't stop until he has burned down the world in vengeance," I shake my head and climb into the car.

Linc gets in quietly and we both just sit there in thought until I break it.

"I really do need to go shopping."

"Okay where to?" he responds instantly starting the engine up.

"North Side," I say simply, and we pull out of the parking lot and head to the devil's side of town in silence.

Linc insisted on coming with me of course, all part of his watch Elle at all times plan. I'd rage about it, but I know I don't stand a chance at winning this one. Ash and Zack are both in agreement with him, even Helen who I thought for sure would be on my side, safe to say I'm outnumbered.

I hate shopping and if it wasn't for Taylor, I would not be here, but she insists on dragging me to some club this weekend and I have no clothes that are club appropriate. Hence the shopping trip. I have already waved away two snooty sales assistants who looked down on me until I waved my black

card in their face and told them I don't need their help.

I am holding more hangers than I care to admit as I wave them at Linc and motion my head to the changing rooms. I slide behind a curtain and start trying them on. The changing rooms are quiet apart from the rustling of the clothes as I change so when I hear footsteps, they are loud. They sound close and past experience has my reaching for my knife quietly.

I grip it and spin towards the curtain as it's pulled back and just as I am about to get stabbed I see the last face I expected, "Mom?"

Looking pristine as always, Sarah King stares back at me before she looks around to make sure we are alone and pulls the curtain behind her enclosing us in the dressing room together. What the fuck?

"What do you want?" I ask her still brandishing the knife towards her, she eyes it with caution and what looks like pride.

"I came to warn you," she whispers looking over her shoulder like she expects someone to bust in here and to be fair with Lincoln prowling around it's a possibility.

"Yeah, you are about three years too late for that," I draw sarcastically while checking an imaginary watch.

She ignores my obvious attempt to deflect her and moves closer to me.

"He's coming for you Elle."

"And I will welcome him with a blade directly into his cold heart."

"Elle, I am serious you should have never come back here. You got away!" her voice raises slightly as she begins to pace back and forth in the small space muttering to herself, I have never seen her like this.

"Like you care you sold me to the devil!" I spit at her.

She stops abruptly, "No, the devil stole you and--"

I cut her off, "And you did nothing!"

"You don't know what it was like," she tries.

"Do you know what it was like, what they did to me?" I rip the dress I was in the middle of trying on when she burst in here over my head revealing my scarred stomach.

"Do you know what it feels like to have a knife slice you repeatedly at the same time a monster rapes you? Tearing you apart in more ways than one?" I spit the words are her barely holding back my rage and tears.

"But you escaped," she replies like that makes everything better and I laugh at her.

"Yeah no thanks to you! Someone who doesn't share my blood sacrificed

everything to save me. Sacrificed himself, his child, his everything all to protect me!" I am shouting now and no doubt someone will come back here to check on things any minute, but I don't care.

I start putting my clothes back on eager to get away from here and just as I am readying to leave Lincoln pulls back the curtain with a grimace on his face taking in the scene before him. Clearly, he is pissed that she managed to get to me without him noticing.

"Come on, let's go" I say to him. I push past my mother and focus solely on him, but she grabs my arm as I pass her.

"I know what it means to sacrifice a child," she says staring at me intently, her grip tight on my arm.

I yank my hand from her hard and level her with a look of pure disdain "Yeah? Which one, Sarah?" her eyes widen in shock, but I don't stick around to say anything else.

I march to the counter and throw the dress down with my card as Linc stands close to me in such a protective manner that I can calm myself easily.

Fuck Sarah King and her shitty warnings.

Chapter 29

ELLE

The rest of the week was about as much of a shit show as my Monday was. The Rebels followed me everywhere. Lincoln drove me to and from school, Jace grabbed me every lunch and Marcus touched me any chance he got. It was getting harder and harder to ignore him.

Which is why I am now sitting in Taylor's room gladly participating in what she is calling my makeover. I have never really had a girlfriend so not entirely sure what it entails but the pre drinks she made us have relaxed me and she is happily filling in the silences between us.

She has curled my already curly hair which I thought would be pointless but the tongs she used on me actually made my usually messy, wild curls seem sleek and smooth. She approved of the black satin dress I purchased and is now doing my makeup to match apparently.

"Soooo I heard a rumor at school this week?" she says.

"Oh yeah?" I say trying not to panic while also thinking about every bad thing she could have heard in relation to me.

"Yeah, apparently the South Side King has claimed himself a Queen," she says sweetly with a cheeky smile and I scoff.

"Yeah, well don't believe everything you hear," I say and pour myself another shot and knock it back.

"Please we both know you and Marcus are endgame, you forget I've known you both forever, you haven't been gone that long."

"A lot can change in three years," I say weakly.

"Okay well answer me this. Do you still think Marcus is hot?"

I roll my eyes but nod.

"Okay and does he give you that feeling in your stomach when he is near you?"

Why can't she just say butterflies I think in annoyance but nod again, my throat getting dry.

"And do you love him?"

"More than I should," I admit to both of us and she squeals. "Tay, not everything is as simple as that."

"Okay, sure but at least jump his bones," she replies, shrugging like it's

that easy and she pulls back looking me over. "Okay, done," she adds, triumphantly.

I turn to the mirror and gasp because she has made me look stunning. I have spent the last few years hating my appearance for drawing attention to myself but right now I feel amazing.

My hair is tumbling down my back in smooth silky curls and she has given me a heavy smokey eye with a bold red lip, a lot more makeup then I usually go for, but it looks great.

"Wow," I choke out, "Thank you".

"Girl, please. I barely did anything," she says tossing back a shot. "Now let's get dressed and hit the road. I am ready to party with people who don't have a stick up their ass."

I laugh, I can't help but feel young and carefree around her, how a normal eighteen-year-old who hasn't suffered the same fate as me should feel. We throw on our clothes and unlike my black satin mini dress, Taylor is sporting a bright orange pair of fitted pants and a black crop top to match her black heels. She looks insanely gorgeous with her ebony hair tousled into a messy bun on top of her head with a few strands framing her face.

A horn honks and I look to Taylor as she speaks, "Wow, that was fast. I only just called for a car," she muses but we grab our purses and head downstairs. Her parents aren't home for the weekend so there is no need for us to sneak out and we head straight for the front door.

Once outside I start towards the car and the dark of the night that's already settled allows me to miss the figure waiting by it.

"Wow, princess, you look even better than usual." Jace's voice freezes me in my tracks as I take in all three Rebels staring me down. They are leaning against Lincoln's SUV like we asked them to be here. All three of them look every bit the Rebels they are.

Lincoln has his hair tousled effortlessly as usual and is wearing a simple white shirt and grey pants. His muscles bunch through his shirt and he looks far from the computer genius I know him to be.

Jace has his man bun pulled tight with a few escaped strands pushed behind his ears, his gleeful smile fully intact and is rocking baggy jeans as usual but instead of a band t shirt he is wearing a fitted Henley. It's weird to see him in something different.

They both are super-hot in their own right, but they have got nothing on their leader.

Marcus looks every bit the dark king he is in his full black attire. Black shirt folded back at the sleeve revealing his muscular forearms and even in the dark I can see the veins prominent in them. Why are forearms sexy? Matched with fitted black jeans and black boots. I flick my eyes back to his and his stare is just as black. It makes me hot even in the cold bite of fall. The shots I knocked back must be hitting me because I can't help but think what that stare would look like if I kissed him right now and felt that hard body up against me and those arms pulling me in tight.

"The hell are you guys doing here? You're not coming," Taylor interrupts my lusty thoughts.

"Not yet, baby," Jace replies, winking at her and I feel sorry for her when he puts on the full charm on her like that, I can see her blush from here.

"In your dreams, Conrad," she quips back.

"And what dreams they are," he replies, cupping his junk and I snort a laugh before turning my attention to Linc.

"What are you doing here, Superman?"

He gives me that infuriating shrug of his, "Where you go, I go," he offers simply before throwing his thumb to the other two, "And these fuckers decided to tag along."

My gaze wanders back to Marcus as he pushes off the side of the car and stalks towards me not stopping until we are nose to nose. He towers over me even in heels and looks down at me and pushes a curl behind my ear.

"Ready to party, little King?" he asks me, and his rough husky voice makes me break out in goosebumps and I am too flustered to answer him. He gives me one more look, licking his lips before turning away and climbing into the back seat of the car.

Taylor comes to stand next to me, "You are so fucked," she whispers, and I can't do anything but nod because she's right.

Taylor calls shotgun so she sits up front with Lincoln, meaning I am in the backseat sandwiched between Marcus and Jace. The former of which clasped his hand onto my knee as soon as I climbed in and has left it there ever since. His touch makes me burn with an unfamiliar feeling and I am literally buzzing all the way to the club.

When we arrive at Club 319 there is a huge line, but Lincoln just pulls right up to the front and someone rushes out to take his keys from him and the rope across the door is pulled back for us without question. I notice Jace bro hugging one of the guys and slip a wad of bills into his hand while

whispering something in his ear and the guy nods.

Lincoln leads the way inside and I follow with Marcus right behind me. He is so close that I can practically feel him. We are shown to a booth in VIP and I roll my eyes, of course only the best for the Rebels. We settle and give our drink order and then I flick my gaze across the place.

It's a large open space room with our section filling the back wall with thick black ropes separating it from the rest of the club. One full wall is covered with a giant bar and there is a huge dance floor in the center. It's only just past 10pm but it is already packed tight with bodies swaying to the upbeat music from the DJ.

I sit and talk animatedly with Taylor, with Jace inputting every now and then and actively ignore Marcus' stare on me. His eyes haven't left me all night and if it goes on much longer, he is gonna burn a hole right through me. Thankfully, Taylor saves me after we have knocked back two drinks and tells me it's time to hit the dance floor.

I take one last look at Marcus and his eyes track me as I stand, and I flee after Taylor before I do something stupid like kiss him.

Chapter 30

MARCUS

As soon as she walked out the door tonight my cock was hard as steel. It wasn't even deterred by the furious look on her face at finding us waiting there for her. If anything, it only made me harder for her, old Elle was timid, complacent, sweet, new Elle is none of those things. She is different, changed, she is darker, tougher, and sexier than ever.

I hate her more than ever for leaving me for so long, all that lost time we could have been together but then one look at her has me under her spell.

She has been pointedly ignoring me all night, but I couldn't ignore her even if I wanted to, I never could.

I am mesmerized by her and that fucking little black dress she's wearing. The satin is glued to her like a second skin showing every single curve of her sinful body. It's not just my attention she's got, I can see every prick in this room lusting after her.

She's across the room now dominating the dance floor with Taylor. I swear the way her hips move to the beat it's like the music was made for her. I try to discreetly rearrange myself in my jeans, but my brothers miss nothing.

"If you don't tap that soon I think you might explode," Jace muses, cocking his eyebrow at my obvious erection.

"Don't talk about her like she's just a piece of ass," I snap, and he holds his hands up in mock surrender.

"Woah, brother, chill I know she makes your heart all warm and fuzzy," he teases and Linc laughs while continuing to survey the room, his eyes never straying too far from Ells like mine but for totally different reasons.

"I like her," he adds "she suits you."

"You think?" I reply genuinely interested in his thoughts when he has only just met her and barely knows her or us together.

"She's smart, got a quick mouth, hot as fuck and always armed and threatening to slice your cock off. I think you're made for each other," he smiles at me and I have to laugh as I think about how many times she has threatened me. No one else would still be walking if they had pulled the shit she had, yet on her I find it sexy as fuck.

“You got a plan to lock that down?” Jace questions me and I turn my gaze to him.

“Does he fuck?” Lincoln answers for me and they both laugh again. I shake my head at them and throw back the whiskey left in my glass in one gulp. It does nothing to ease the lust coursing through my veins.

“Well, you better think of something quick before someone swoops in and takes your queen,” he nods his head back to the dance floor and I swing my gaze to find some guy trying to mawl Elle into dancing with him. Fuck this she may not have agreed to be mine yet but that doesn’t mean anyone is allowed to put hands on my girl.

I jump up and immediately hear Linc curse behind me, but I don’t care I am out for blood. As I get closer, I can hear Elle trying to let him down gently with her back to me, but the prick is having none of it. Taylor spots me and I see her mouth, “Oh shit,” right before I brush up against Elle and knock the fucker on the floor.

“What the fuck man?”

“Marcus no!”

I am on him before he can even move and grip his throat, “She said she wasn’t interested you fucking prick!” I roar in his face.

“Dressed like that they are always interested,” he has the nerve to spit back at me and then tries to throw a punch in my face. I am too quick for him and dodge it easily and then grab his hand and pull.

Fuelled by my rage I feel his fingers snap beneath mine and it’s a welcome feeling. I am going to fucking break every last one for touching her. He howls in pain, but it does nothing to soothe me, I’ve got tunnel vision on only him.

“River, stop,” her voice calls to me.

I turn to see her looking only at me and she holds out her hand to me.

“Come on, let’s just go cool off somewhere,” she says coaxing me towards her and I find myself reaching out to her. When our hands touch, she links her fingers with mine and leads us from the carnage.

She pulls us to the back of the club and down a long corridor trying a couple of the doors along the way until the last one gives way, and she pulls me inside. It’s just a small supply closet but she shuts the door behind us and lets out a deep breath before turning to me.

I grab the back of her neck and pull her to me and slam my lips to hers before she can even speak. She gasps in surprise and it allows me to slip my

tongue into her mouth until it tangles with hers. Every fiber of my being lights up when I am around her but nothing shines quite as bright as when her lips touch mine. I realize for the first time that her lips are moving in perfect sync with mine and she kisses me back as hard as I'm kissing her.

Her kiss leaves me breathless as I pull back and press my forehead against hers and whisper with my lips still touching hers, "Fuck baby, I could kiss you forever."

I push that last bit and lock our lips together again. My hands leave her neck as they fall down to her shoulders and then her breasts, I squeeze them, and she moans into my mouth and the sound sends jolts of electricity through me.

I feel like I am wound tight and ready to break. My hands slide further down her body with my eyes trailing after my touch. I reach the bottom of her dress where it is pulled tight across her thighs. Her hand lightly touches my neck and it immediately breaks out in goosebumps. Nobody's touch has ever affected me like this. I push under her dress until my fingers trace the outside of her panties and I look back up to catch her gaze once more waiting for permission.

She offers me the slightest of nods, but I take it and push my fingers past the black lace and tease her folds. She is soaked already, and I can smell her arousal in the air around us and groan in appreciation,

"Fuckkk," I rasp out slowly closing my eyes before opening them up again. "You are so fucking wet, is this for me, baby?" I grit the words out in my lust filled haze and she nods again.

I push my fingers further inside and when I graze her clit she reaches out and grips my wrist halting me in my tracks. I still, looking from my fingers to her and she licks her lips and tries to speak.

"Marcus I've never...This is," her voice is barely a whisper, so she clears her throat and tries again, "I've never done this," she says quietly.

The shock I feel in that moment must be written on my face, that is the last thing I ever expected. I know Ash confirmed they weren't involved in that way, but I imagined there would have been other guys over the last three years.

"No one's ever touched you?" I ask to confirm, and she shakes her head. "No one's ever made you come. Have you ever made yourself come?" I push her and she shakes her head again.

"Fuck," I grit out, "Do you want this Ells?" She hesitates for a second

before she nods.

“God,” I huff out. “I wish we were somewhere other than a fucking shitty supply closet right now,” I laugh slightly but then turn serious. “I promise I will make you feel good baby and next time it will be somewhere I can fucking worship you.”

I kiss her again and try to pour as much emotion as I can into it, in the hope she will feel what I feel. I start to move my fingers against her clit and swallow another one of her moans.

Fuck if I could hear those moans for the rest of my life, I will die a happy man. She throws her head back unable to kiss me further and the ecstasy written on her face has me wanting to come in my pants. Fuck, she looks so sexy I need to see her.

“Look at me, baby,” her eyes snap open and lock with mine and I stare at her as I push one finger inside her and she clenches around me.

My thumb finds her clit again and I rub it hard and fast until she is shaking and I lean in close and lick her up neck to her ear before biting it and whispering, “Break for me, little King.”

Those five words are like an accelerant as she explodes around my finger clenching it hard as she comes all over my hand as I continue to fuck her with it.

“Fuck River. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” she groans out the words in a load moan and it’s the sexiest fucking sound I have ever heard in my life.

“Fuck, baby, yes. Come all over my hand for me,” I grit out into her neck looking down watching my hand fuck her. I have done this with plenty of girls, but I wish I hadn’t because not once I have ever been so turned on by getting someone else off.

When she comes down from her orgasm, I pull my fingers from her pussy and they glisten with her cream. I bring them to my mouth and suck them clean. Fuck that has got to be the best thing I have ever tasted, and I groan in appreciation.

I step back slightly and see the moment she comes back to her usual self. Her face turns serious and she quickly puts her dress right and takes a deep breath. She is getting ready to run. I crowd her once more and she tries to avoid my stare, so I grip her chin lightly and tip her head back until our eyes meet.

“Don’t run from me, Ells,” I plead with her hoping she can hear how much I need her.

“Marcus I--”

“No, Ells, please just stay with me tonight, okay?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she says softly but I can see she thought about it even for just a second first.

“Come on we can stay out on the roof terrace and sleep under the stars like we used to as kids,” I see her eyes widen that I remember something we haven’t done in years. “Taylor can come and the guys obviously,” I throw that in to twist her arm. She still remains silent, but I can tell she is thinking about it.

I lean in close to her and whisper in her ear, “I dare you.”

The tension releases from her shoulders and I know I have her.

“Okay.”

One word has never settled me as much as this one.

Chapter 31

ELLE

Okay?

Okay?

Why the fuck did I say okay? I don't know what happened, whether it was the drinks I kept throwing back or the fact I almost blacked out letting Marcus give me my first ever orgasm. Either way now I am standing awkwardly in his kitchen with Taylor and the guys.

Bless Taylor for being the queen that she is because she hasn't stopped talking for the last ten minutes, saving us all from the most awkward silence I had ever encountered. Marcus is standing right by my side and his bare forearm is touching mine causing me to hold back a shiver. All I can think about is what happened in the supply closet. Like seriously what the fuck was I thinking? I have worked so hard to keep the friendship door between us firmly closed and tonight I not only held it open but invited him in for fucking cake.

Lincoln excuses himself to head up to the roof to get things set up, whatever that means. Marcus nudges my arm and I turn slightly to look up to him and he nods towards the hall that I remember leads to his room and leaves to head towards it. I look to Taylor and she just shrugs and strikes up a conversation with Jace, so I have no choice but to follow after him.

By the time I reach his room he is coming out of his closet with a bunch of clothes in his hand.

"Here," he holds them out to me, "we have heaters up on the roof but it will still be pretty cold this time of year so thought you could use something warmer than that," he gestures towards my dress.

I look down and see he has given me a hoodie, some joggers, and a big pair of socks. "Thanks, this is great," I say before looking round the room and deciding this is the last place I should be right now. "I'll just go change."

Before he can say anything, I scramble from the room and make my way to the bathroom down the hall so I can change. I lock myself inside and lean back against the door trying to calm my racing heartbeat. None of this is what I imagined when I agreed to a girls' night out with Tay. I shouldn't even be here, it doesn't matter what Marcus wants or how amazing tonight felt, being

here just puts Marcus and my secrets in danger.

At this point I don't know what a bigger fallout would have, Elliot targeting Marcus to get to me or Marcus finding out about Cassie. Both would be a fucking shit show that I want no part of. I turn and make my way to the sink and look in the mirror. My lips are still swollen from Marcus' kisses, my hair is wild, and I can still feel the evidence of his magic fingers in my panties.

I huff out a breath and try to give myself a pep talk. This is just tonight. One night to be completely and utterly selfish. Pretend that Donovan doesn't exist and act like I am not an eighteen-year-old mom with a toddler waiting at home. Just chill with a guy I love and some friends and then tomorrow when the sun comes up everything will go back to normal.

I slide off my dress and heels and groan when my feet are finally on flat ground again, whoever invented heels is definitely a sadist. I pull the socks and joggers on and then throw the hoodie over my head. As soon as I slide it down, I am assaulted by Marcus' scent, it's musky and rich and has me inhaling deep. Fuck why is that masculine smell so sexy and addictive.

I gratefully find a hair tie in my purse and throw my curls into a messy bun. Once ready I give myself a once over and I look a little ridiculous with Marcus clothes being about four times too big for me but with limited choice I just go with it.

By the time I make it back to the main living area I can see that Tay is also sporting a hoodie fairly too large for her tiny frame. She is chatting away again to all three guys but as soon as she notices me, she cuts off.

"Finally girl," her statement causes all three Rebels' gaze to swing to me but my only focus is on Marcus as he takes me in and I can only imagine what he thinks I look like in his huge clothes.

I can see there is a huge pile of junk food sitting on the counter and an ice box. Linc and Jace make quick work of gathering all up and making their way to what I presume is the roof with Taylor quick on their heels. Marcus and I are still in a stare off until he steps forward and holds out his hand to me.

"You ready?" he asks, and he doesn't realize how many answers that question has.

Am I ready for revenge? Yes.

Ready for people to learn about Cassie? No.

Ready for what Marcus is trying to do with us? No, Yes?

Ready to pretend none of that exists and just enjoy tonight? Maybe?

“Yes,” I whisper, ignoring his outstretched hand but moving closer to him so we can walk to the roof together.

When we get up there, I am in awe. The whole rooftop has been decked with oak wood panels, there is a circle fire pit directly in the center with square seating surrounding it covered in cushions. There are a few heaters placed sporadically around and some benches, loungers and even bean bags to offer a lot of seating. There is a hot tub in one corner and a large BBQ in the other. It has everything you would need for the perfect garden hang out barring a swimming pool.

We make our way over to the firepit where the others have already gathered and take a seat. Marcus of course sits right next to me with his arms stretched out behind him, so I have no choice but to have his arms around me if I choose to sit back. Jace hands us all a beer and even though I am still pretty buzzed from the club I take it just so I have something to do with my hands.

The drinks and conversation flow and I soon find myself sinking back into Marcus and he takes the opportunity to rub small circles on the back on my neck which I try my hardest to ignore. I zone in and out of the conversation thankful that Taylor, Jace and Linc seem to be getting along well and talking between themselves which is fine until Taylor calls on me.

“God, do you remember that party Elle?”

“Sorry, what?” I concentrate on her having missed whatever she asked.

“Your tenth birthday party, you know the one with the pony your dad got for you,” she laughs turning back to the guys slightly, “it was awful, it shit everywhere and Sarah lost her mind.”

“Please tell me you have pictures of that,” Jace pleads as he laughs hard at her telling the story.

“Yeah I don’t wanna see that” Linc adds.

“That’s not even the best part, the party organizer was so wild trying to wrangle the horse that she knocked over the cake that had like ten tiers,” they are all laughing hard now and she’s right it was hilarious but there is only one memory from that day I remember.

My party is ruined, that stupid pony I didn’t even want pooped all over the lawn and then the silly woman who brought it knocked over my cake. I didn’t stick around to see anything else. I’m hiding in the pool house trying not to cry, I just want this stupid birthday to be over. My mom never listens to

me when it comes to this stuff, always just does whatever she wants to try and impress her stupid friends.

The door opens and I hide my face in my hands, so no one sees my tears, Daddy says that now I am double digits I need to grow up. He says crying is for babies.

My hands are pulled from my face and I panic until I lock eyes with my best friend and sigh in relief.

"It's okay, Ells," River says.

"No, its not, this stupid party is ruined."

"Well you didn't want it anyway right?" he replies knowing full well how I feel about ponies.

"Yeah but still I didn't want it to end up like this, that stupid horse has probably pooped over all my presents and my cake is a pile of mush."

"I know one present that didn't get covered in poop."

"Yeah where?" I ask and he takes a deep breath and wipes the tears off my cheek before leaning in and pressing his lips to mine. I freeze in shock, what the hell is he doing. I have never done this before, so I have no clue how to respond so I just push my lips against his and hope for the best. He pulls back and gives me the biggest smile I have ever seen on him.

"Happy Birthday, Ells."

"Actually, you had disappeared by that point, where did you go?" Taylor interrupts my trip down memory lane, and I am lost for words.

"Erm I--" I look up at Marcus and find his intense stare on mine with a smile on his face like he just experienced that memory with me. That is something that only the two of us knew about, a sacred memory.

"I don't remember," I reply, my eyes pulling away from his as I answer Taylor but I feel the little squeeze he gives my neck in confirmation that he remembers that day just as well as I do.

We continue to drink and attempt to soak it up with chips while all sharing light-hearted stories from our childhood, there is more than I thought there would be considering the families we all come from. It's nice to just hang out carefree with friends.

As the night winds down, Linc says he needs to check on some work and Taylor challenges Jace to some Xbox game I have never heard of. When they leave, I move over to a double lounge away from the lights to get a better view of the stars. I lean back and stare up at the endless pit of the sky and it isn't long before Marcus joins me.

We lay side by side in silence, the only sound is our breathing and the crackle of the fire pit. I wish life could always be like this, peaceful, still, calm. But that's not real life. I look over to Marcus and find him already looking at me, like he never stopped looking at me.

"Wanna make a wish?" he asks, reminding me of yet another one of our childhood traditions. Whenever we snuck out to lay under the stars, we would always make a wish out loud to each other.

I used to wish to grow up and be happy like my parents. To marry Marcus Riviera and have kids together and live happily ever after. Back when life was simple and wishes seemed easy.

I turn back to the stars, not being able to bear looking at him for another second, "Wishes don't come true in this town, River." I feel him look back to the sky with me.

"I know, when you left, I still used to make wishes," he admits quietly. "I used to wish for so many things, that my dad was still alive, that my life didn't change so much, that I could get over you. But you know what I wished for most of all, Ells?" he turns back to me "I wished you would come back to me."

I am grateful that the tear rolling down my face is on the opposite side of where Marcus is lying. The last thing I need is for him to see my heart breaking, for him, for me, for us.

He is still in love with the girl next door who he grew up with, he doesn't know I stopped being that girl the moment Greg Donovan took me. I wish he would hate me, despise me with a burning rage that makes him never want to talk to me again. It would break my heart but at least his would remain intact.

The silence stretches out between us when I don't answer him, but I don't know what to say that would change anything.

He breaks first, "Tell me something."

"What kind of something?"

"Something special to you."

I take a deep breath then whisper into the night, "I think about your dad every day, I owe him my life."

He doesn't respond, at least not with words, he reaches his hand out until it touches mine and he laces our fingers together and squeezes. It takes everything in me to squeeze back. That's the last thing I remember before falling asleep.

Chapter 32

ELLE

I'm a coward. I snuck out of Marcus' house before he woke up, I gently removed his arms from around me and left a cold empty space beside him. I thought I would make it out of there without incident but as soon as I got back into the loft Lincoln was waiting on the sofa for me like he knew I would appear. He didn't even speak before he got up from the sofa and grabbed his keys and made his way towards the garage as I dutifully followed behind.

The drive was quiet, but I could practically hear his thoughts screaming at me wondering what the fuck happened last night, but he would have to wait for answers because I didn't have them. I don't know what the fuck happened last night, one minute I was dancing with Taylor with a nice buzz going on and purposely ignoring Marcus and the next I was riding his hand like a fucking rollercoaster chasing the best high I have ever experienced. And did I stop it there? No of course not, I took things from bad to worse and went home with him.

"Don't beat yourself up," Lincoln's voice breaks into the silence.

"What?"

"You are thinking so hard over there you look like you might burst a blood vessel."

I frown but he continues, "Elle, you're allowed to be selfish and have some things for yourself, it doesn't make you a bad person or a bad mom."

"If Marcus finds out about Cassie then things will blow up."

"Or he might surprise you."

"Clearly you don't know your brother as well as you think you do," I throw back. "When we were kids Marcus used to say he would kill anyone who hurt me, he meant it even then he just didn't have the power to back it up. What do you think the king of the South Side is going to do when he finds out the son of the devil fucked me against my will and knocked me up when I was nothing but a child myself?"

He grimaces at that statement, but I feel nothing. I know Marcus and his temper; he just has a good handle on it most of the time but it's always there simmering under the surface. Look at last night, he beat that guy bloody on

the dance floor and all he did was try to dance with me even when I said no. If Marcus can lose it over something so small, then he would be out of control if he found out about something as big as Cassie.

“I need to keep Cassie off Marcus’ radar and him off Elliot’s, it’s the only way. Last night was a mistake that won’t happen again.”

I can tell he wants to argue with me, but he doesn’t bother. He knows that regardless of whatever friendship we are building between us that it isn’t his place. I lean in to kiss his cheek and get out of the car before he can say anything else.

“Thanks for the ride, Superman.”

“Anytime, Elle,” he replies simply.

It’s still early so I am hoping to sneak into the house undetected. Cassie was away for the night last night with Helen and Arthur visiting the twins and won’t be back until this afternoon so it’s just Zack that’s home.

I’m creeping down the hall when his voice startles me, “And where are you sneaking to, sweetheart?” he asks with a lick of humor in his voice, busted.

I straighten and turn to find him at the kitchen island with his laptop open and coffee in hand, no rest for the wicked.

“Sorry, I thought you would be sleeping,” I say innocently.

“Too many problems in the world for me to sleep,” he replies with a grim smile as he takes my oversized outfit in. I just nod and say nothing because I know he has his own demons to deal with.

He continues, “I spoke to Mom. She said they will be home around midday and thought we could head into town and grab some takeout for lunch, Italian maybe?”

“Sure, sounds great, I’m just gonna go shower and do a little homework, call me when you wanna go”.

I head to my room and go straight into my bathroom so I can try to wash away the night. I decide on a bath and double up on the bubbles.

Once out I towel myself off, smooth my hair into a sleek ponytail and throw on some jeans and a sweater. I grab my phone and find it’s completely black, clearly it died at some point last night. I grab my charger and plug it in and then grab my laptop so I can force myself into some schoolwork.

I am immediately distracted when my phone starts beeping with notifications as it comes back to life.

4 missed calls.

17 text messages.

I open the phone and find messages from Marcus, Asher, Taylor, and a new group chat I am not familiar with.

MARCUS: Are you safe? I woke up and you weren't here.

MARCUS: NVM Linc just came back and told me he gave you a ride.

MARCUS: You left me again...

MARCUS: I hope I didn't push you too far last night Ells

TAYLOR: Well last night was fun right....

Then there is the group chat which is titled 'The Fam'.

JACE: Princess welcome to the good life

LINC: Really Jace?

JACE; What man didn't last night fully confirm her as one of us?

MARCUS: Don't start

JACE: What she already loves you and now Linc, time to get her on my side too.

LINC: Not sure this is the way to do it

MARCUS: Fucking leave her alone

JACE: I will if you will *wink emoji*

LINC: Please don't start with the emojis

JACE: *computer emoji* *glasses emoji* *list emoji*

ASHER: I think I may have found something.

ASHER: I've got some free time today I'll come to you.

Good lord where do I even start. I start with the easiest and work my way from there. I text Ash back first and tell him I will see him later, then respond to Taylor and thank her for a great night. Regardless of my own decisions last night was still fun and it was good to get out.

Then I respond to Marcus

ELLE: I'm sorry for running away but it's better this way, I can't do this.

Simple and hopefully to the point, I doubt the group chat will be that easy.

GROUPCHAT - THE FAM

ELLE: You need to stop being obsessed with me pretty boy.

JACE: I knew you wouldn't resist *princess emoji* *crown emoji*

ELLE: my reply isn't an agreement.

JACE: *cry face emoji*

LINC: You're insufferable.

ELLE: How do you put up with him Superman?

LINC: It's not without its challenges.

MARCUS: You're not the only one out of the loop Jace.

-- Elle left group chat --

I leave before I even think much about it, the last thing I need is to be entertaining more of the Rebels' notions, I am already in too deep with Lincoln.

I turn my phone on silent and throw myself into my homework and wait for Zack to call me for lunch. It's better if I occupy my mind with schoolwork rather than thinking about the rebels, any of them.

Chapter 33

MARCUS

Before I even open my eyes I know she's gone, the space next to me is cold, empty, barren. I squeeze my eyes tight before opening them and revealing the inevitable. She left me, again. The reality pierces me right in the chest, I thought we made progress last night, but she still ran from me.

Lincoln said to push her, and I am trying but she pushes back at every turn. I thought after what happened back at the club things changed between us and then when she agreed to come here, I felt invincible.

She fell asleep next to me and I pulled her in close until she was entangled in my arms and I never wanted to let her go. I watched her for hours, memorizing every inch of her, the way her eyes flutter as she dreams, the way she groans as she moves, the way her hair falls down into her face and the way she feels cuddled in close to me.

I have dreamt of that moment more than I care to admit. Having Elle snuggled into me with my arms tight around her. That is how it should be every night. Her here with me, laying in my arms, my clothes on her back. Fuck, my clothes. I thought seeing her in that tight black dress was bad enough but when she emerged from the bathroom covered with my hoodie and sweats, fuck I have never seen her look so fucking perfect.

I knew when the sun came up so would her walls, she didn't even lower them last night, just allowed me a peak over the top. I want nothing more than to smash them down with my bare fists until every brick is destroyed. Only then will I be genuinely happy.

She is hiding something, and it has to be something big, but I can't see any secret changing the way I feel about her. I don't care about her connection to Elliot Donovan or to my father. I don't care that she left without looking back and I don't care that she trusts one of my brothers with her secrets but not me.

None of that matters. The only thing that matters is that she is here now, and I will do whatever it takes to keep her. Whatever she is hiding won't do anything to change the way I feel about my little King.

I stand and stretch out my muscles which are tight after spending the night on the lounge, but I would sleep on concrete if it meant spending a

night with Elle. I head back into the loft and find it empty which isn't unusual for a Saturday morning, we are always busy on the weekends.

I have some work to do so I grab a quick cup of coffee to wake myself up after only sleeping a couple of hours and then hit the gym for an hour. Once I'm finished, I shower and throw on a shirt and some smart pants, not my usual attire but I have some legitimate business to deal with today. I head to the garage and bypass my bike and jump into the rarely used black Porsche I have parked here. Not my style but suits driving round the North Side. I glide out of the garage and head on my way until I enter the other halves territory.

I hate being on this bullshit side of town. Everywhere I look I see overpriced crap and the people who think their shit don't stink with their noses up in the air so they can look down on everyone. The only reason I come to this side of town is to visit the bank to make deposits into one of our many accounts.

It's lunchtime on a Saturday so the streets are bustling with people and its irritating as fuck. I am walking to my car when I see the flash of blonde I'd know anywhere in my peripheral. I turn to see Elle gliding across the sidewalk with a man who has his arm around her. He looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place him, he's early 20's and he is clearly well off, I can see his Rolex from here. They are making their way towards a blacked-out SUV similar to Linc's as a couple of obvious bodyguards follow closely behind in their signature black suits.

They wait until they are both in the car before they both jump into the front seat. I don't know why but I follow them. Fuck I'm like a fucking creeper stalker right now but my gut is telling me something ain't right. She snuck out of my house at dawn because she clearly had plans with someone else and I am going to find out who.

I follow them to North Hill, of fucking course he lives here but is this where Elle lives, is this where she has been all this fucking time. The unease in my chest is suffocating, I have been so caught up with her leaving and her relationship with Asher Donovan that I never stopped to think there could be someone else.

My car is quick and allows me to slip in the gate behind them and cut into the trees without anyone noticing me. I follow them closely just inside of the tree line until a big house comes into view. It's one of the only houses on North Hill I am not familiar with as we never frequented it when I lived here.

I stop my car and get out moving to cover myself with a tree from their

view until they pull up in front of the house. The guards open the doors letting Elle and the mystery man out before they all start pulling bags from the trunk. Elle's laugh hits my ears and as the guy reaches out and pulls her into his arms, I see red.

I stalk from the trees with long strides, "I fucking knew it," I roar and all four of them turn to me. The guards immediately draw their weapons and aim them at me before Elle screams.

"No stop!" she tells them as they look to her and the man and he nods.

I shake my head as I move towards them slowly, "You asked me to trust you and I did but here you are with some fucking rich cunt playing house," I snort.

The guy looks both concerned and annoyed and it just pisses me off more as I appraise him closely and then I tut as I look back at her.

"I guess I should have listened when you said only rich cocks do it for you, huh King?"

"Watch yourself," the man snaps at me showing no emotion and I laugh stepping closer until I'm almost level with them, yet he doesn't even flinch.

"Don't worry, man, I'm done here," I look to Elle. "You're still the same lying slut I thought you were."

"Zack no!" Elle shouts. The punch comes out of nowhere and it's hard enough to knock me on my ass which in itself is impressive.

I wipe the blood from my lip and smirk as I stand and Elle steps closer to me but before she can say anything and try to worm her way out of this I speak first.

"Does the lover boy here know where you were last night?" I ask smugly.

"Marcus don't do this please," she begs.

"What is he talking about Elle?" mystery man questions.

"Nothing, Z," she snaps quickly at him and I smile big. I grip her and slam her back against the car in quick movements as I whisper in her ear loud enough for him to hear.

"Does he make you as wet as I do," I ask, and she visibly cringes.

"Fucking Christ," he says as he grabs me off her and throws me to the floor with minimal effort which again is impressive.

"I'm her brother you dumb fuck and if you put hands on my sister again you will fucking regret it," he seethes at me and I can see no trace of a lie on his face.

I am momentarily stunned as the word brother flashes in my brain like a neon sign. Brother? What the fuck? Elle doesn't have a brother but as I look back to her she seems in total agreement with him. What the fuck am I missing here? I stand and dust myself off as the man she called Zack stands back slightly but close enough to step in again if he feels necessary.

Elle moves to the side of the car, so she has her back to the house and looks up at me with those baby blue eyes.

"You really are keeping all the secrets, ey?"

"Marcus I really can't do this right now," she stresses to me, and I can see she means it, she seems on edge and it just pisses me off more.

"What's the matter, don't want the dirty South Side Rebel in your big fancy house? Scared I might steal something?"

"Marcus, it's not like that I swear. I just can't do this here, please!" She is pleading with me now.

"Oh yeah then enlighten me, princess, what's it like?" I throw Jaces nickname for her in her face but before she can answer the front door to the house opens and a little girl comes bursting towards us excitedly.

"Mommyyyy," she shouts happily and Elle recoils, her face shattering right before my eyes as I look around to see who the little girl is talking to before I look back at her.

A perfect carbon copy of the beautiful girl in front of me comes towards us and it's then I realize she is speaking to Elle.

Elle looks at me in utter defeat before she relaxes her face and turns to the girl and scoops her into her arms as she leaps at her. She brushes the hair off her face and drops a kiss to her forehead.

"Hey, my sweet girl. I was just coming to find you."

"Grandpa took me for ice cream!"

"Wow, he did? That's awesome," Elle looks to me and I can see the love and adoration she has for this girl, yet I can also see the sadness lingering there. This is why she has been trying to keep her distance from me, she didn't want this to happen. The girl finally realizes I'm standing there as her intrigued eyes find mine and I'm ready to feel like an awkward out of place jerk when her face changes to recognition.

"River," she screeches my nickname and struggles to get down from Elle's arms as she barrels towards me and captures her arms around my legs. I have no idea how she knows me, and I can think of no words to say to her.

I look around at the guards, her brother and I see an older man and

woman approaching behind the little girl, all wearing the same apprehensive expression. I look back to Elle and our eyes lock and I am stunned into silence.

Elle takes a deep breath before she confirms the obvious, “Marcus, this is my daughter, Cassie.”

Who knew six words could break my heart and change everything?

TO BE CONTINUED...

Thank you for reading the first part of Elle and Marcus' story.
They will return in the second book of the Black Hallows Series

Revenge of a Queen

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I hope you enjoyed it and are looking forward to more.
If you enjoyed it then I would love you forever if you could take a couple of minutes to review it for me.

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