

ROYALS OF ARBON ACADEMY
BOOK -3-



POISON THRONE

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ROYALS OF ARBON ACADEMY 3

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First published in 2020
Eve, Jaymin
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Poison Throne: Royals of Arbon Academy #3

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Editing: Heather Long (content) and Jax Garren (line)

*To the women who refuse to let the “rules” dictate their happily ever afters.
This is for you.*

CHAPTER 1

*R*afe is gone.

Those three words ran through my head like a fucking curse spelling my downfall. Tonight had been the dance. A time for celebration with many members of the monarchy in attendance.

It had ended in death and destruction. Earthquakes. Fire. Blood.

The resistance had attacked, and who the fuck even knew how many were dead now. Meghan. Claudette—I mean, I hated that bitch, but still... And then possibly Felipe, Rafe's father.

Running a hand over my face, I tried to wipe off some of the blood. Somehow I'd collected my fair share since the bombs had gone off, but truthfully, that paled in the face of Rafe being stolen away from me.

Fucking hell!

It had taken many resistance members, and we'd all put up a good fight. But in the end, their numbers and technology had been too much for us to withstand. Not without an army of our own to meet them head to head.

"We should strip them of their uniforms," Jordan said, bringing me back to the present. He was kneeling beside a black-clad resistance body, already removing the man's tactical vest.

Looking down at the dead bodies strewn all around us, I got what he was saying. If we were going to pull off the ruse we'd set in motion with the one living resistance fighter who hadn't made it back onto the chopper, then we had to play our parts.

"This one is about my size," I said, moving toward one of the prone figures.

Jordan watched me with hooded eyes for a beat, and I knew what he saw: robot Violet. This was the face I wore when the world got too much for me and I needed a break from the emotions. It was my Violence persona amplified until I

was barely flesh and blood.

This was how I would survive until we got Rafe back.

“Hurry up,” the resistance asshole, who was lucky to still be alive, hissed.

We might have made a deal with—aka threatened—him to get us into the compound that Rafe was being taken to, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t still kick his ass.

“One more fucking word,” I warned him, not in the mood. His eyes, the only part of his face I could see, went super wide, and I took that for his acknowledgement that I had reached the end of my patience today.

With a huff, I stripped the uniform off the dead woman before realizing I couldn’t get out of this dress myself.

“Need a little help?”

Jordan was at my back, hands resting on the bare skin above the laced section of my ball gown.

“Please.”

Normally this would have been the perfect opportunity to get a little naked and have some fun, but that was the last thing on either of our minds. His touch was quick and sure, and when the outfit loosened around me, I reached down for the black clothing of the resistance, shimmied into the pants, and then donned the shirt. Followed by her boots.

A black mask with two holes for the eyes was the final piece, and then Jordan and I shoved the near-naked people out of sight.

“They’re on the way,” fucker-with-a-death-wish murmured. “Code phrase to identify yourself when you enter is 'death to the monarchy.'”

Right... *How original.*

The sound of a helicopter closing in reached our ears. He leaned down and shouldered one of the remaining bodies still all in black and gestured for us to do the same with the others. “We don’t leave our dead behind,” he said.

Jordan and I both heaved a body onto our shoulders as well, and I tried not to panic that we could be walking right into a setup. I’d do it, no matter what, because I needed to get Rafe back. Just had to hope that before we were ambushed we at least made it to the resistance compound.

Rafe was worth the risk we were taking.

They’re waiting for you.

I hadn’t forgotten those words. Hopefully it meant that no one would kill me on sight... There had to be a way to use it to my advantage and get my prince back.

Then I would make them fucking pay.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Jordan murmured to me, leaning down

so we couldn't be overheard. "Rafe wouldn't want you to risk your life."

"You would leave him behind?"

Jordan jerked back like I'd struck him. "No! I plan on going, but I'd prefer you stayed here, where it is safe. Might be best so that we can relay information to you."

I loved Jordan. So many parts of him were absolutely perfect, but it was here that he and Rafe were total opposites. Day and night.

"I appreciate your concern," I told him with total sincerity. My words were almost drowned out by the helicopter; it was so close now. "But I don't need to be babied. And I never leave a man behind—especially if that man is Rafe or you. We're getting him back, and there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

There was no more time for conversation, and as he straightened, tension pulled the muscles tight in his broad shoulders. He wasn't happy, but he also didn't argue.

The helicopter appeared at the side of the building then, another stealthy-looking beast like the last one. We moved toward it with the resistance member, and from the rooftop we tossed the dead bodies across the narrow gap into the open doorway, then went back for more. The resistance soldier said they didn't leave their dead behind, and he was serious about it.

Then it was our turns to make the leap.

When I landed steadily, I was already prepared for a fight. I hadn't noticed the resistance asshole giving us away when he communicated with his team, but that didn't mean there wasn't a code word I'd missed.

This could legitimately be where we were ambushed.

Jordan landed behind me, protecting my back, and both of us remained in that stance as we waited for instructions.

Black headsets were handed to us, and I slipped mine on over the mask I wore, just like everyone else. Whatever meshy material they used in these outfits, it allowed sound to penetrate.

"Identify," a voice said in my ear.

The resistance asshole went first. "Death to the monarchy. Red East."

"Death to the monarchy. Red East," I bit out, not sure what the chick had sounded like, but hoping none of them would know the difference.

Jordan spoke up quickly as well.

We took our seats after that, everyone strapping in as the beast took off into the sky.

"The prince was secured," one of the pilots said. "We lost ten members tonight, but their sacrifice will not be in vain."

I almost lost my cool and killed them all before I reminded myself that I

needed to get to Rafe and these assholes were my best chance. Patience might not be my strongest suit, but eventually they'd get what was coming to them.

The helicopter moved very differently than a plane, its motions jerky and rapid. In a blink we were out of the school grounds, the darkness hiding most of the landscape below.

Jordan reached out and grasped my hand, and I felt instantly better. We didn't dare speak, aware that everything would be heard through our headsets, which meant I was stuck with a running reel of horror in my head.

I could barely believe everything that had happened tonight. Arbon Academy had been attacked by the resistance with some form of "earthquake machine" that'd ripped the ballroom apart. It had been a ploy to take out a bunch of monarchs while they were in one place, and it'd succeeded.

Rafe's father... he'd been hurt badly. Neither of us had any idea if he was even still alive. Jordan had lost his betrothed, who was like a sister to him.

Despite his calm strength beside me, I knew he had to be devastated. Still, he never faltered, remaining exactly who and what I needed in this moment.

I was fucking lucky to have him.

Giving his hand one last squeeze, I settled back in the uncomfortable chair. I wanted to close my eyes and rest, knowing that this was the lull before the shitstorm, but I was afraid to let my guard down. If this was a setup, the moment I relaxed, they would take full advantage.

This wouldn't be the first time I'd gone into a fight sleep-deprived—in fact, it used to be a common part of my training. I could make it work either way.

It grew even darker the farther we traveled from the school, and outside of the occasional buzz from a radio with tersely barked orders, there was nothing but silence in the chopper. I almost couldn't believe that we'd managed to get this far without detection, but maybe luck was on our side.

We traveled through the night, stopping once at a station to refuel. This was where they dropped off their dead, and I was pretty happy about that—smells had started to creep through the helicopter, and honestly, no one wanted to be chilling with a ton of dead fuckers. Bad vibes.

With more space to spread my legs, I settled in for the rest of this journey. It was frustrating not knowing where we were going, but there was no discreet way to find out, so I'd just have to make do.

How the fuck did they even manage to get around in an aircraft like this without having to log flight plans? Air security was tight, but possibly the resistance had "inside people" that took care of that shit for them. They were clearly not without power and contacts. Tonight wouldn't have happened otherwise, and since we were heading straight into the belly of their stronghold,

that really didn't bode well for our survival.

Rafe had better be in one fucking piece when we got to him. I knew he was part of the Society, as they called themselves, but this extremist branch of the resistance was not the same and I had no idea what they wanted with the Swiss prince.

They hadn't killed him on the roof, though, and they could have. So they must need him for *something*.

This knowledge was the only thing keeping my sanity intact.

CHAPTER 2

When we finally landed for the second time, it was almost night again, and I was fucking exhausted.

The pilots got off first, and as soon as they disappeared from the helicopter pad, the dude who'd smuggled us on whipped his head toward us. "We need to debrief with the leader," he said. "It's standard practice, but since the earlier team with... your guy"—he cleared his throat—"will have already reported in, and the others will be logging the dead soldiers, it should be short and brief. Follow me."

He spun on his heel and stormed off into the growing darkness, clearly much more confident back in his own territory. Jordan and I followed, cataloging everything as we walked.

The helicopter pad was on the top of a building, and the last rays of sun were visible off in the distance. "Skyscrapers...?" I murmured, slightly confused about where we were.

"It's a compound," Jordan whispered, leaning close to me. "See the fence way out there?"

He pointed to his right, and I followed that line until I saw the glint of a tall chain link fence. Between us and that fence were dozens—or more—of tall, shiny buildings.

"Why the fuck did I think they were living in huts or underground," I said, shaking my head. "This is modern... as modern as America and Arbon Academy."

Jordan was about to say something else, when the resistance asshole turned back and snapped, "Hurry the fuck up. They're waiting for us, and any delay will look suspicious."

His voice shook, and from the way he fidgeted back and forth, I could tell he

was desperate for us to move. And that might have been because he was worried about getting into trouble.

Or... another reason.

"Be ready for anything," I murmured to Jordan before we picked up speed and hurried to where the dickhead was waiting at a door that led into an internal set of stairs.

"This is Red East's main headquarters," the guy explained as we stepped inside, the metal door slamming after us. "The very top resistance members live here; the rest of us are spread out further within the compound."

"How many of you are there?" Jordan asked as we all started down the surprisingly wide staircase. It was fancy, and as everything else I'd seen, super modern and sophisticated.

How much fucking money did they have?

"Ten thousand here, twenty thousand in the Red West camp, and probably a million spread over all the resistance camps."

A. Million. People.

Fuck's sake. How were we supposed to find Rafe in a million people? I mean, my hope was that he'd been taken here, but maybe we'd been lied to from the start and now we were stuck in the Red East compound.

No. Just, no.

I couldn't let myself go there. I needed every ounce of my focus, and being beyond tired was not helping. I couldn't do the Rafe-might-be-dead-or-far-away-from-here thing as well.

The guy was silent for the rest of our journey down many, many flights of stairs. An elevator would have been a welcome sight, but since we appeared to be in some sort of closed-in stairwell, there was no way to tell what lay beyond.

When we reached the bottom level, we exited through the only door and found ourselves in a room filled with black-clad individuals.

The asshole who had been leading us spun at the last second and shouted so loudly it hurt my ears: "East target! East target!"

He was pointing at us, and everyone in the place erupted, diving forward, weapons out as they pointed swords and guns and other fun shit in our direction. Jordan and I moved closer together, our hands held out in front of us because there was no way we could take on this many armed people and survive.

Our only chance was to talk our way out of this.

Jordan got there before I did, ripping his mask off. "I'm a resistance member," he said with all the authority that a prince contained—spoiler alert, a fucking lot. "And I demand you take me to your leader."

Someone moved in beside him, swinging his gun barrel to crack Jordan in

the head. My prince was ready though, swiftly smashing his hand against that person's forearm, dislodging the weapon, and then uppercutting him in the jaw so that the only person going night-night was the idiot who'd thought it wise to attack.

Also, Jordan could fucking fight. I'd be fanning my face right now if we weren't in complete mortal danger.

Someone else moved forward, and I kicked into gear, breaking their nose with a well-placed jab to the face. He backed off screaming, and I resumed my position at Jordan's six.

"Don't hurt the target," someone shouted from the back of the lot. "Red East leader will kill whoever harms her."

Her?

They're waiting for you...

Fuck, guess that confirmed it—I was definitely the target and they couldn't hurt me without consequences.

This was going to be fun.

Jordan and I fought back to back, and we took down dozens of them before they overwhelmed us with sheer numbers. I saw the final strike coming, slamming against his temple, and when Jordan's gaze met mine, his eyes fluttering as unconsciousness crept across his face, I screamed out my fear and frustration.

"Don't hurt him!" I cried, fighting to get to his side, but far too many resistance fighters stood between us. They had just not stopped coming. Over and fucking over.

We'd fought strongly, but two could not beat an army. Not today anyway.

CHAPTER 3

The door clanged, and I didn't bother to lift my head. Same fucking routine, day after day, and there was no point in reacting.

I'd been here for three weeks.

Three weeks trapped in a cage, allowed out once in the morning for the bathroom—when they occasionally let me shower in freezing water—and once in the evening. Between those two outings, all I got was some nice torture as they attempted to break me. The orders to not hurt me had ended after that first day, but they had at least stopped short of sexual assault or rape. So far anyway.

"Good morning, little bug," my toilet warden said. The woman was in her sixties and had a taser she was not afraid to use and a kink where she chained my hands and feet up so I wouldn't fight her. There was no reason to hurt her again though. The first time I'd knocked her out, I'd gotten into the next room—the only way out from here—to find thirty armed resistance members standing around like they were expecting me.

Some of them hadn't been back the next day, but the number of these fuckers was limitless. They just kept replacing the ones I broke.

Since then, I'd been learning as much as I could and cataloging everything. Brute strength wasn't going to get me out of here. I had to be smarter.

"Is Jordan alive?"

That was always my first question of the day.

"Yep," she said in her heavy accent of indeterminate origin. I had no reason to believe she was telling the truth, I had not seen or heard him in twenty-one days, but it made me feel better whenever I heard that *yep*.

"Where is Rafe?"

Always my second question, and not because he was less important than Jordan but because I didn't even know if he was here.

She didn't reply, the same as always.

Fuck this place. Maybe I'd just knock her out anyway for fun.

But by the time I'd been returned to my cell—clean, starving, and exhausted—I couldn't be bothered attacking her. So she got a stay of ass-whooping today. Who knew about tomorrow.

"Red East leader will be by shortly," the woman told me, shaking her ample hips as she wandered out the door.

I didn't reply. What the fuck could I say?

The Red East leader was a short man with pale skin, white hair, and red-rimmed blue eyes. He had a heavy, harsh accent, his words cutting off short and sharp. He also had heavy fists, ones he used when he chained me to the walls and beat the fuck out of me every day.

Today he entered at the same time as my breakfast, so I didn't get a chance to eat before he was gesturing for me to walk to the wall. The large gun he had pointed at me, not to mention the second gun pointed by the man behind him—a different one each time—was enough to have me moving toward the cuffs.

When I was there, he locked them on, and I braced myself. "Are you ready?" he asked.

I tilted my head, for the first time not letting anger control me—instead staying calm and focused. "What is the point of this? You ask me no questions, you tell me no information, and you don't kill me. Is there an end game here?"

He paused, fists elevated as he prepared to lay into me. "What do you know," he said in a similarly calm tone to what I'd used. "You might just be ready to talk now."

"You were breaking me down?" I asked, my fuzzy brain trying to piece it together. "But you never even asked me any questions. How did you know I wouldn't talk before now?"

He leaned in very close, voice a low whisper, breath foul as it washed over my face. "Your temper has always been your downfall, Violence. You will not survive this world unless you learn to ride the calming waves, the ebb and flow of the tides, the push and pull of the sword. Not everything requires a reaction. Sometimes it just is."

My gut dropped, and if I could have moved my hands, I would have clutched at the pain in my chest. I'd heard those words before...

"You know my sensei?"

The Red East leader smiled, his teeth the least white part of him. "He wants to see you," he said, and just like that, my chains were released. "But if you cannot attend this meeting with a calm heart, you will go right back into this cage, for it's when you have nothing and are broken down to your base nature

that you will find—"

"Your true self."

My tone was bitter. My sensei was here, and I had no idea what to think about it. There was no one I'd respected more when I was growing up, and in my mind when I referred to him as "sensei," it was in remembrance of the person who had guided and half-raised me.

But there was another side of him—the hard nature that made him a formidable fighter. He was as brutal as he was breathtaking, and I meant that in every sense. Not to mention the way he'd just up and left me when I was a naïve sixteen-year-old...

Rubbing at the red welts on my wrists, I wondered if the marks might be permanent after all of these weeks of trying to fight against the handcuffs. "Has all of this been under my sensei's orders?" I asked, following the Red East leader out of the cage. He didn't say a word, just continued leading me through the lower levels.

It was clear that most of the underground network here was for prisoners. I'd never seen anyone in a cell close to mine, but I'd heard plenty of screams in my weeks here. None of them had sounded like Rafe or Jordan—I doubted either of my guys would scream like that no matter what—but my heart still shattered every single time there was a shout.

Not knowing if my princes were dead or alive was legitimately going to give me a heart attack.

Nothing else was said as we continued on, and I finally got to leave the depressing pit of their underground rooms, emerging into fresh air and sunshine. Closing my eyes for a second, I breathed deeply and let the sun bathe my face.

"Come," Red East leader said. "You can enjoy your freedom soon enough. Once you've heard our proposition, you will understand everything much more clearly."

That proposition better include information about where my princes were, or this newfound calm they had been trying to beat into me would fade away in a whirl of fists and violence. My name, my nature after all.

The building I'd been locked in looked like a huge shopping mall, short and wide, with a lot of gray dreariness to the design. It even had a parking lot, which was where they ushered me into a nondescript white van.

"Not even going to offer me candy first," I muttered.

He side-eyed me, but I was pretty sure he didn't get the reference. Fuck, he'd clearly never been a kid fighting for his life on the streets, and it showed.

The car was silent and smooth, powering out of the mostly empty lot. We drove for what felt like an hour. Just me, Red East leader, and another armed,

masked man. Finally, we left the urban landscape and entered a more natural setting until the car stopped in front of a gorgeous, ranch-style property.

"Of course," I murmured. No way would my sensei find himself living outside of his comfort zone—he hated concrete and people. Not in that order.

My door was opened by the driver, who left his gun inside the vehicle. Apparently they didn't fear me running from here. As much I wanted to remind them of who I was, there were more pressing things to worry about.

I needed answers about Rafe and Jordan before I did anything else.

Walking up the long, pebbled path, I headed for the grainy wood steps of the front porch. It took a lot of effort to move the last few feet to the door. I hadn't seen my sensei in a long time, almost two years to be exact, and things had not ended well between us. It was complicated and messy, our relationship, and in the time we'd been apart, I'd reached some dark conclusions about both of us. The respect I'd once held for this man was gone. But since he was the one standing between me and my princes, I had to suck up some courage and face my past.

The door swung open, and just like that, he took the option away from me.

Standing in the open space, wearing his trademark high-collared kung-fu outfit, was Uriel, my sensei. Many of the martial arts disciplines had lost their way after the Monarch War, disbanded so that commoners could no longer learn to fight. Uriel was of a secret, underground sect that still practiced in multiple disciplines. His training was second to none, and even I had never been able to come close to matching him during our sparring sessions.

"I've been expecting you," he said, voice deeper than I remembered.

I didn't move, waiting for him to get out of the shadows so I could see his expression. His eyes actually. They were the only part of him that told me which Uriel I was facing today.

"Come in," he said, stepping back.

Fucker. This, as everything with him, was a test.

With a small exhale, I crossed the last few steps into his house, following him into the light. As he turned and faced me, I barely caught the gasp that tried to escape. It had been so long since I'd seen him, and in that time, if anything, he seemed even more striking.

Uriel always reminded me of a fallen angel, and despite the fact that he was in his early forties, had a youthful appearance. White-blond hair, long and tied back in a thick braid, piercing golden eyes, that could stab with their intensity, and dark golden skin, that added to his overall "God-like" appearance.

The man who taught me how to defend and save myself. The man I tried to never think about more than I had to.

The man who'd stolen my innocence, even if I'd thought I was giving it freely to him at the time.

That was why I never came back to him. This was what I'd come to terms with over the past two years: I had been groomed by a predator. But I was quickly coming to the realization that he hadn't only been grooming me for sex, but for something much bigger. Something much more political. Apparently, I was finally about to find out his long-held secret.

What did Uriel have planned for me?

CHAPTER 4

Silence reigned supreme as I sat on the edge of the chaise lounge with my back ramrod straight. Uriel was content to wait it out, though. He knew I'd break first, I *always* broke first. Such was the impatience of youth.

After some moments, he gave an unspoken command to the black uniformed guards with machine guns standing inside the doors. They nodded and wordlessly left. The click of an old fashioned metal key turning in a lock echoed through the room in their wake, and then it was just the two of us.

Uriel and me.

He raked his gaze over me in a way that spoke volumes about how we'd left our last encounter. But still, he didn't speak. Just stared.

Eventually the tension got to me, like it always did, and I let out a growl of frustration.

"What am I doing here, Uriel?" I snapped the words with annoyance because I couldn't ask what I really wanted to ask. *Where are Rafe and Jordan? Are they okay, or have you already executed them like Claudette?*

Seeing him, *here*, that mess at Arbon made more sense. I should have known my sensei was a member of the Society. He hated the monarchies to the point of weakness, and never missed an opportunity to remind me of the injustices they inflicted on us. Which was hypocrisy at its finest considering the wealth both he and the Red East leader seemed to come from.

His eyes narrowed at me in silent reprimand, but I was done taking his shit. I wasn't that naive, love-struck teenager any more. I wasn't in awe of his strength and control, and I sure as shit wasn't blinded by my foolish, misguided, and utterly manipulated infatuation.

I sneered. "I think I earned the right to use your name the night you took my

virginity. Now, answer my damn question. What the fuck am I doing here?"

He sucked in a deep breath, his mouth tight and his nostrils flaring. Once upon a time, that would have instilled deep, bone trembling fear in me. Not anymore.

"I see the years of absence have done no favors for your discipline and respect, disciple." His voice was smooth and low, hypnotic, but I knew him better than that. He was pissed as hell at my brash manner toward him. "However they certainly made up for it in how nicely you matured as a woman." Again with that leering gaze.

I shivered, and not with desire.

"Are we just going to sit here and chat on old times, or did you have a reason to kidnap my friends, capture me then try and break me for three weeks? Spoiler alert, I'm not broken, Uriel. Try harder next time. Or, you know, just man up and tell me what you want." I kept my gaze flat and hard, my hands loose in my lap. I'd spent too many years under his often cruel training to forget everything so fast. Besides, much of what he'd taught me was invaluable to my place in the world now.

He let the silence stretch between us again, predictably, but then leaned forward with his fingers steepled. His golden eyes studied me in his piercing, intuitive way, but I wasn't afraid anymore. I stared right back.

"The Society would like to offer you a position within our ranks, Rose." He studied me for a reaction to this, and I couldn't help myself. I flinched.

It had nothing to do with his "offer" to join the people's army, but his use of my middle name. He'd only done that on rare occasions, usually after a particularly brutal or cruel training session that had left me a broken, hollow shell. Most of the time we'd been sensei and disciple, but there had been these moments that he showed rare displays of kindness, holding me tenderly and whispering everything I wanted to hear. He always called me by my middle name then, like a term of endearment.

I knew better, now. He was manipulating me, essentially brainwashing me to become his loyal, adoring soldier. As beautiful as a rose, with deadly, poison-tipped thorns.

"You had to know you were always destined for a higher purpose, my beautiful girl," he continued, sensing my moment of hesitation like a shark on blood. "A strength like yours couldn't be wasted in the slums of America, thrown away on cheap underground fights for paltry bets. No, Rose, you've been trained by the best." He meant himself, arrogant prick. "And now it's time you fulfill your duty to us all. To your people. To me."

My lip curled with disgust. "I don't owe you *anything*, Uriel. I paid my debt

in full the last time we met."

His mouth curved in a lascivious smile, and he dragged his tongue across his lower lip like he could still taste me there after two years. "Suddenly, I've found the need to charge interest."

It took all of my willpower not to react. Not to leap out of my chair and wrap my hands around his throat, choking him into unconsciousness like he'd done to me a thousand times before. Then maybe not let go.

"This is your opportunity for greatness, Rose." He continued speaking like he was oblivious to my murderous thoughts, but I knew he wasn't. Uriel could read me better than anyone. Better, even, than either of my stolen princes. "We, in the Society, have done our part. We've trained you, disciplined you, educated you. Our people have placed you in the perfect position, it's now your privilege to carry us into a new age. Starting with the death of the monarchies."

His eyes shone with an inner light as he spoke, excitement glittering through his cool and calm facade. He reminded me of the cult leaders or serial killers of the twentieth century. I'd seen an old documentary on Ted Bundy, about how he used his looks and charm to lure in young women, then raped, beat, and murdered them. Uriel had that air about him, except he hadn't tried to murder me. Yet.

I cleared my throat and licked my lips, forming words in my head before voicing them aloud. "Am I to understand you rigged the Princess Ballot to see me placed at Arbon Academy?"

He grinned, pride radiating from his very pores. "It wasn't hard. That so-called lottery has always been rigged, since day one. You didn't know that, did you? It's not random at all. It's designed to provide royals with a genetically compatible breeding partner. Turns out that all the years of selective marriages have drastically reduced the royals ability to conceive, and heavens forbid they allow the line of succession to deviate out of their bloodlines."

I did know all of that, actually. But I had no idea the Society had rigged it to place me as the winner. That was staggering in itself that they had grown so powerful behind the scenes to be able to pull that off. Nevertheless, I kept my face neutral and calm. No sense in showing my hand to the enemy—because that's what my sensei was proving himself to be. No friend of mine would set off an earthquake that killed innocents like Jordan's betrothed, Meghan. Nor would they kidnap the two people I cared for more than anyone else in this world.

"Lay it out for me plainly, Uriel," I said bluntly. "Tell me what exactly you want, and I'll take it under consideration."

His lips flattened, and I knew from experience that he was annoyed at me. He'd no doubt carefully thought out this dramatic presentation of what the

Society wanted, and I was ruining it all for him.

He frowned at me, then must have decided I wasn't in the mood for theatrics. With a sigh, he sat back in his chair once more. "You're to become the figurehead of the people's resistance, Rose. We're ready to go public and take the fight directly to the monarchies, and we need a face. You're that person."

I stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"You've been groomed for this since childhood, beautiful girl," he said with a coaxing lilt to his voice. Internally I scoffed, because he'd sure as shit groomed me for something. And I doubted that something was the resistance. "You're in the perfect position, from the perfect breeding, and with the perfectly mundane, impoverished upbringing that the vast majority will relate to. We did that for you, Rose. The resistance has guided every step of your life from the day you were born, and now it's your time to shine."

My heart thudded a bit harder in my chest, and my stomach turned to ice. He wasn't just tossing around casual metaphors; he was totally serious. The resistance had been planning on placing me in the Princess Ballot since *birth*, which meant...

"Who was my mother, really?" I asked, unable to help myself. Uriel was telling me they'd mapped out my whole life, meaning everything that had happened to me was due to their influence. The group homes, the foster parents, the *abuse*... it had all been by design. Forming my *easily relatable* upbringing, no doubt. Giving me a sob story that the masses of citizens below the poverty line would rally behind.

Uriel's lips pulled into a smug smile. "She was one of us."

I blinked at him, but that was enough to relay my shock.

"She didn't even die in childbirth," he told me, like he was doing me a favor. "She just never wanted to be a mother. She did her duty to the Society, then handed you over."

My heart shattered into pieces and turned to dust in the hollow cavity of my chest.

"Why her, then? If she didn't want children..." I trailed off, shaking my head. The blows just kept coming, and it was breaking me down.

Uriel folded his legs, bouncing his ankle. "Like I said, you came from perfect breeding. Your mother was the closest descendant we could find to a pre-monarchy royal."

My brows hitched somewhat. "What does that mean, exactly? I'm royal?"

Uriel scoffed a laugh. "Not even close. Your ancestor was a royal by marriage only, and even then she ended up divorced and disowned, prior to having any children. But she was known as the People's Princess before she got

caught in a scandal and was assassinated in a staged car crash. The common folk love a good rags to riches story, and here you are, ready to echo the original Lady Spencer." He clapped his hands sarcastically. "Bravo on snagging two crown heirs, Rose. You must have really built on those skills from our last training session."

Training session was definitely a euphemism in this situation. He was clearly referring to my skills in bed versus the skills of combat.

"Where is your wakizashi?" he asked, his tone changing dramatically. It was a dangerous tone. I had to be very careful about how I answered this or I might find myself fighting for my life.

"You bombed a ball," I said flatly. "There was nowhere in my dress for a weapon, and I was forced to follow before I could retrieve it. If you had given me even the slightest heads up that this was heading my way, I would have been better prepared."

I had to throw it back on him just enough that it didn't feel like everything was my fault, while still taking some responsibility. Uriel had rules. Lots of fucking rules. And if you broke them...

"You disappoint me, Rose," he said softly.

Fuck.

"And even worse, you ran from me."

Double fuck.

I shifted slightly into a better fighting pose, thankful that the loose-fitted outfit gave me a wide range of movement. Uriel followed that posture change, some of his anger fading away.

"Very good, little one. You remember well."

Little one. That's what my nickname had been when we'd first met and I was a child. When I'd hit puberty, it had changed to Rose. Him using it now, after everything, just made me feel sick.

"Pretty sure you're twisting the past," I choked out. "You left me. You fucked me and then left me, clearly having gotten what you'd wanted from me." The words burst from me, and I wished to take them back as soon as they were out.

"You weren't ready," he returned, and surprisingly, he was still calm. "You needed to find strength without me, enough to handle what you had been born to do."

My stomach swirled, and I wished there was a way to block my ears.

"You will lead a revolution," he finished, and now he just looked like a crazy man, a manic smile on his face. Clearly he'd waited a long time for this moment.

"And if I say no?"

I braced myself, but the strike never came. At least not from his fists.

"If you say no, then I will kill everyone you have ever cared about, including both princes and those twins you fell in with at Arbon."

And there we had it. My sensei had taught me from a young age not to form attachments, and he was showing firsthand why he'd had that rule. Using it against me.

"You should have looked for someone who felt passionately about this cause," I said to him. "But since you've given me no other option, I will stay here and learn more about what you're hoping to achieve."

"A non-answer if I ever heard one," he said, but he didn't fight me on it. He was clearly happy that I hadn't just tried to murder him and storm out the door. I wasn't that stupid though. There was no way I could beat him—he moved almost inhumanly, like there was an extra energy about him—and I'd never even been able to land a decent blow.

I would have to be smarter, get to the point where he trusted me again, and then I might be able to fight dirty. This fucker liked to pretend he was all about honor, but the truth was he had taught me a lot about lying and manipulating to get what you wanted.

Looked like I was going to dig out those old skills.

"We will set you up with your own apartment," he told me, gesturing toward the door like he wanted me to walk ahead of him. Having him at my back wasn't ideal, but I acquiesced because I wanted to build his trust again. I had to play the long game here, I had to be patient.

I could do anything to save my friends.

CHAPTER 5

Uriel took me to an apartment only a few blocks from his ranch. Fully furnished, it was monochromatic with white walls and floors and black furniture—exactly how I used to love house design, clean and uncluttered. But I wasn't the same person I had been back then, and he was going to learn that very soon.

"You should be very comfortable here," he said, calmly waiting near the entrance, magnanimously allowing me to take it all in. Probably waiting for my face and eyes to light up like they used to when he'd surprise me with a special treat. He wanted the old Violet back.

But that was never gonna happen.

I was done being his plaything. Done being groomed. Just fucking done.

"Who is my father?" I asked, knowing I'd never have a better time to get answers about my past. If I'd been aware that Uriel had been part of my life from birth, I'd have asked all my questions years ago.

"Your father donated sperm. You were created in a lab. Science is marvelous when used in the right way."

This just got better and better.

"Will you be returning my friends to me?" I decided to push my luck. "There's no real need to keep them. You've already shown that you can get to any of us, no matter the circumstances." He loved flattery; some might say it was his fatal flaw.

His smile was broad as he regarded me. "I've missed you, Rose."

I didn't reply, dead-ass staring him down.

"As for your friends," he continued, "let's just say if you show us your best side over the next few weeks, give this a real chance, then you will be rewarded."

Few. Fucking. Weeks?

He had to be kidding himself. "I'll give you four days," I negotiated.

He smiled, and fuck, it was so much like the one I used to love seeing every single day that I almost got emotional. He'd been the first man to truly break me.

Apparently I hadn't learned much since then.

"Ten," he countered.

"Six," I shot back.

His smile grew.

"Eight days in which you open your mind and learn everything that the resistance has to give you. Eight days and then you can have your friends back. But after that, your training will be over, and it will be time to step into the role you were born for."

If I had to hear that one more time, I'd probably lose my mind.

"I agree to those terms, but if in eight days you do not give me my family back, then all promises are null and void. I will raze this compound to the ground, and even if I die doing so, I will take so many of you with me that you'll need years to rebuild."

Not even a flicker of his megawatt smile. "I would expect nothing less, Rose."

He turned and left, and as the front door closed quietly—controlled, as were all things he did—I sank down to the floor and forced myself to swallow the screams that were trying to rise from my chest. He'd be outside waiting to hear a reaction, and if he so much as sensed that I did anything other than stand here calmly, there would be hell to pay.

I needed to get through the next eight days.

I needed to get my friends back.

Then I needed to destroy the resistance.



TURNED out this apartment was completely decked out for me. Regular clothing in my size, fight clothes in my size, toiletries to my liking—and by *my*, I meant the ones that had always been provided to me by Uriel.

For the first time in weeks I was able to shower without a taser-happy woman staring at me, and I slept in a bed. A soft bed with nice sheets that smelled of violets. Ironic? You betcha. My sensei knew exactly how to push my buttons, and the fact that I'd been named after flowers by a mother who'd died giving birth to me was something I'd held tightly to—the belief that I'd been

loved so much, at least for a few minutes.

But even that was a lie.

How the fuck could my entire life be manufactured to give them the perfect opportunity to emerge as a superpower, I had no idea.

I mean, it made sense when the facts were laid out, but it also didn't. I was a teenager, the absolute worst front person they could have chosen. No one trusted teenagers... most of the world didn't even like them. Hell, I didn't like teenagers, myself, and I was one.

But Uriel had been right about one thing. The world *loved* a Cinderella story. Rags to riches. Prince Charming and all that crap. They'd rally behind a pretty girl with a tough upbringing, but more than that, they'd rally behind a commoner *with a prince*. It made me worry what other plans the resistance had for my stolen princes.

And then there was the issue of the monarchies themselves. Or more specifically, of certain monarchies and their *breeding* programs. Maybe backing the Society wasn't the worst choice I could make after all.

Ugh, but how could I forget the callous way they'd triggered that earthquake? How they'd given no regard to the loss of life...? How Claudette had been *executed* in the ensuing panic? No, I couldn't throw my lot in with Uriel and his ruthless Society.

Surely there could be a middle ground somewhere. Like my sensei had said, I had been placed into the perfect position to become their figurehead, their *face* when the resistance took their fight public. Perhaps that could also be the perfect position to instigate some positive changes on *both* sides?

It was all so complicated and mind blowing, but I couldn't ignore the thread of hope, that tiny flicker of possibility that I could actually have landed in exactly the right place to *stop* a war. Not *start* one.

A sharp knock on my door startled me from my thoughts, and I cautiously made my way over to answer it. Uriel would have just let himself in, arrogantly thinking that he owed me no privacy. Why would he when he thought of me as his *creation*?

"Can I help you?" I asked the sharply uniformed guy standing there. He was young, maybe a few years older than me—the same age as Rafe and Jordan—and handsome, in a brainwashed sort of way.

"Hi, Violet," he greeted me with a bland, polite smile. "I'm Caine. I'll be escorting you to your first training seminar."

I stared at him a moment, debating my odds of choking him out and searching him for keys or something.

"Okay, sure," I finally replied with a sigh. Uriel was no fool; he wouldn't just

hand me the means of escape so easily. More than likely this guy was a test of my loyalty. Already. Damn, this was going to be a long eight days.

"Oh, cool," he said, sounding a bit surprised. "You're much less... uh... I was warned you might be a bit reluctant to start your induction."

I rolled my eyes. Definitely a test and a shitty one at that.

"Nope," I replied with a bright smile, "not me! I was basically born to be in the resistance. I'm very excited to be here."

Caine gave me a skeptical look but then shrugged and indicated I follow him. I was already dressed, so I stepped out of the apartment and closed the door behind me. There was no lock—of course—so I just left it and walked beside my escort in the direction of the main entrance.

"So, what are we starting with?" I asked him, maintaining my false cheer. Catching more flies with honey and all that crap. "Bladed weapons practice? Hand-to-hand combat? Meditation?" I groaned a bit on that last suggestion. I hated meditation, but Uriel insisted it was the key to a clear mind and supreme control over our emotions.

"Uh..." My somewhat handsome guide gave me a side-eyed look. "No. The leaders thought it might be best to start you in a history seminar. It's understandable, given your situation, that you might have some lingering sympathy for the monarchies."

I frowned slightly, not following the connection between subjects. What was a history seminar going to do to change my opinions?

We walked in silence for a few minutes, then my guide started pointing things out, like we were on a tour. The communal dining hall, the fitness centre, the *swimming pool*—for fucks sake—and various other things that I had no intention of ever using.

"What?" I asked, forcing a joking tone as we crossed a lawn, "No prison for naughty Society soldiers?"

He jerked to a stop, frowning, but not before I caught his eyes flick across the street to a concrete building with heavily reinforced doors and windows.

"I'm not going to help you break your friend out," he muttered, offended. "My loyalty is to the Society."

"Of course," I replied with a tight smile. "I was just making conversation."

And working out where they might be holding Jordan... and Rafe? I didn't think they'd been at Red East camp with me, and Uriel would want to keep his leverage close.

Caine led me into a building then stopped beside a door marked with just a number—twelve—and knocked sharply. A stern-faced woman of Asian heritage opened the door and eyed me like I was a piece of gum stuck to her boot. Behind

her, a single chair sat in the middle of an otherwise vacant room, and in front of it was a massive projector screen.

Leather straps dangled from the chair, and a chill ran down my spine. Somehow, I didn't think this would be anything like the history classes taught at Arbon.

The woman didn't greet me and certainly didn't introduce herself. She just grunted a noise and stepped aside, indicating that I enter the room with her.

Sucking in a deep, grounding breath, I did exactly that and forced myself not to flinch when the door closed behind me. Caine had abandoned me with the grouchy woman.

"Sit," she barked at me, nodding to the chair.

I moved over to it, eyeing the leather straps with suspicion. "I'm here willingly," I pointed out. "Are these antiquated torture techniques really necessary?"

The woman sneered at me, her wrinkled face screwed up with disgust. "You tell me, girl. If we brought the New American prince in here right now and put a gun in your hand, would you shoot him?"

My jaw dropped before I could catch it. "I would—what? No. Why should he die over who his parents are?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Of course it was. I knew it even as the words passed my lips, but goddamn, I *couldn't* tell them I'd shoot Jordan. They'd know I was lying and then probably force me to do it anyway as a punishment.

The woman gave me a disgusted look. "Sit in the fucking chair. We have a lot of work to do."

Swallowing heavily, I did as I was told. She was less than gentle as she strapped my arms and legs in, and dread pooled in my stomach. What was she going to show me that required such measures?

The screen flickered to life, and I braced myself.

I was about to find out exactly why this faction had become so radicalized. I could only hope that my mind was strong enough to remain impartial.

CHAPTER 6

The next three days continued in an identical manner. Every day Caine collected me from my room and escorted me to the "history class" where I was strapped to a chair for ten hours straight and forced to watch the most horrifying, gut-churning images.

It seemed like somehow the Society had gathered footage of all the most obscene, cruel, and inhumane acts ever committed by monarchies, dating way back prior to the Monarch War, even.

Watching the countless grizzly executions, torture sessions, public whippings, and electrocutions was bad enough, but it was the covert footage that left me weeping and sickened to the point of vomiting each day. The body camera recordings depicting children from poor areas rounded up and mass executed. The deliberate sterilization of both men and women in overcrowded cities. And the images of breeding farms where women were kept in medical comas while being impregnated and carrying children for the aristocratic elites.

After the fourth full session, I returned to my room trembling. My face was slick with tears and my sinuses hurt from sobbing and I could safely say that I *understood*. I understood why the radical faction of the Society hated monarchies so much. If all their members underwent the same "training" as I was being subjected to, it was no wonder they'd become so blind to reason.

But while I understood where they were coming from and how Uriel and his supporters—because that type of training held his mark all over it—had built such a loyal following, I hadn't bought into it.

It was only one side to the story. One very biased, heavily edited and influenced side, tailored to fit their own narrative. Yet every minute I was forced to watch those atrocities committed by the leaders of our world, the more I sensed myself breaking.

I wouldn't survive eight days of that. Uriel knew it too.

Hugging my arms around myself, I peered out my apartment window at the complex, just as I had done every night. I had to escape. I had to find Jordan and make sure he was even still alive... Rafe could handle himself, I had no doubt. But Jordy was the one they kept threatening me with. He was the one in immediate danger. I'd royally fucked up that first day when I'd screamed at them for leniency toward him. I'd shown my weakness, and they were using it against me.

I stood there for longer than I usually did, lost within my own mind as I planned my escape. Long enough that when my door clicked open, I was still standing there instead of "asleep" in bed like normal.

"You're awake," Uriel commented, striding across the room to stand at my back. Way, way too close at my back. "Can't quiet your mind, little one?"

The thread of satisfaction in his voice turned my stomach. He'd been letting himself into my room every night, but had been content to just sit beside my bed and watch me for an hour before sneaking out again. He always thought I was asleep, but I never was.

"Something like that," I murmured back, not looking at him.

He stroked a hand over my hair, and I tensed. Everything about him made me sick, thanks to the clarity of time, distance, and maturity. He'd *preyed* on me as a vulnerable child. Yet some dark, damaged part of me wanted to lean back into his touch. The scarred soul within me craved his affection and his approval.

My sensei must have sensed that wavering within me, and he pressed in closer. His whole body touched me, his breath hot on my neck. "I have big plans for us, Rose. I'm so glad you haven't made things more difficult than they needed to be."

My jaw clenched, but I didn't argue with him. It was pointless when it would only undo all the hard work I'd put into making him believe me to be compliant.

Uriel swept my messy ponytail aside and pressed his lips to my neck, causing disgust to crawl all over me like a thousand spiders. Still, I kept my gaze locked on the window. Or rather, on the compound. A few black-uniformed guys walked across the grass, and one turned to look up at me.

My heart stopped.

No, it wasn't possible. My mind was playing tricks on me from all the conditioning they'd been putting me through, I knew that. But fuck if my heart hadn't reacted too quickly, giving me a glimmer of hope. Because I could have sworn that Society soldier was the spitting image of Rafe.

My first instinct was to lurch forward, press my hands to the glass, and get as close as I could to see every line of that soldier's face. But I couldn't alert Uriel

to the fact that I was interested in anything out there. I had to look again, though, and this time the soldier was gone.

I forced my heart to calm.

Uriel was close enough to have felt my pulse spike, but hopefully he assumed it was due to his close proximity. Raising his suspicions in any way was inadvisable.

"How much longer are you going to condition me?" I asked softly. I needed to kick-start the next part of his plan because I couldn't deal with another day of those videos. I knew he'd have a list of training he was working through; Uriel was nothing if not thorough.

"We'll discuss that tomorrow," he said softly. "Now you need to rest, unless you'd like me to join you?"

That was the point where I could fake it no longer. For a second, fury clenched my fists, and I was about to spin and strike him where he stood. But a knock at the door halted my swing just in time.

"Yes?" Uriel called out, sounding annoyed.

"Sir," a female voice called, "there've been sightings of mainstream resistance in our territories. I figured you would want to know."

Uriel cursed and shook his head. "Those weak bastards," he muttered. "Never leave well enough alone."

He started to march toward the door, turning back to me once. "Get some sleep, Rose. You're going to need to be at your best tomorrow."

Then he was gone, and I let out a slow, shaky breath. There was a battle coming between us, and I knew deep down I probably could not best him. But I would die before I let him touch me again.

That was my promise to Rafe and Jordan.

It was my promise to myself.

CHAPTER 7

*I*t wasn't until many minutes after Uriel left that I fully registered what had called him away. At first I'd just been relieved that it was one more night I didn't have to deal with him, especially that fucked up comment about joining him in bed. But they'd mentioned mainstream resistance.

That was the side that Rafe and Jordan were part of.

Could that mean Rafe *was* actually out there?

But how would he have made it to that part of the resistance when he'd been kidnapped by Uriel's division?

I rushed forward and found myself at that damn window staring out across the compound. From the parts of the city I could see, there seemed to be a lot of activity out there. Everyone was tightening security and patrolling the perimeter. This new development would be keeping them busy, so I... I could go out there and see if I could find my princes.

If they were looking outward, maybe they'd not notice what was happening inside.

Turning from the view, I was in my wardrobe in a second, rifling through until I found exactly what I needed. Black long-sleeved shirt and pants, both with stretch and flexibility so I could climb. But also tight-fitted so they wouldn't catch on anything. There were gloves that I turned inside out because they were red on the outside, but the interior was black. Same with a knitted cap.

In truth, there had been very little in the way of dark clothing provided to me; Uriel had probably discouraged it so I wouldn't go out on stealth missions. But there was enough here that I could get most of myself covered. With some dark makeup across any still visible parts of my skin, I would blend in. Even better, I'd be basically unrecognizable.

When I was done, I silently opened my front door, letting it swing out before I stepped through. If anyone was waiting out there, guarding me, they would come and inspect my open door. I gave it a few minutes, standing just on the inside so I was out of sight. But no one checked, and I finally stepped out into a deserted hallway.

There were low lights, but I'd already memorized exactly where to step to stay in the shadows. It was almost too easy, and it had only taken a few days of playing my part to get them to loosen their watchful eye on me.

A few months here and I'd probably have Uriel's job. Apparently that was what I'd been born for anyway, and they must expect that sooner rather than later I'd embrace it.

Images flashed across my mind from the videos I'd been forced to endure. Images I knew would be burned into my brain for eternity. The violence hadn't just come from royals though. The resistance had killed dozens of people in their blast, and a lot of those people were innocents. No one had clean hands in this world. Not to mention I knew—and loved—more than one royal. They weren't all painted with the same brush, and some of them were so far from evil.

Like, fuck, the royals of Switzerland were about the nicest people I'd ever met. Was I supposed to believe they had a secret torture city where they killed people? Women and children? Babies with their tiny bodies cut up and burned?

I couldn't see it.

No fucking way.

Then again, I had the impression Rafe's grandfather had been a nasty piece of shit, so maybe there was something there.

I had to stop for a second and squeeze my eyes tightly closed to banish the images, otherwise I would probably give myself away with the sobbing and vomiting that those videos brought me to.

Focus, Violet. I had to compartmentalize this shit, or I was never going to make it through their conditioning.

When I got myself together, my focus back on track, I continued my journey out of the building and into the resistance city. It was quite dark; it was late and the general population here had gone to bed. This gave me free run of the facility, and the first place I decided to investigate was the “prison” building Caine had inadvertently let slip during my first tour.

I remembered where it was because I'd been keeping a mental map of this shithole since the minute I'd arrived from Red East camp. Every time I'd gone anywhere, seen anything, I'd added it to the grid in my head. So while I didn't know every part of the city, I had a good idea where most things lay, and the large building was only about a five minute run from my apartment—made

sense, Uriel would want to keep his leverage close.

My breathing was even for the first few minutes, but after that it got a little more labored. I wasn't exactly unfit, but neglecting my running over the past few months had done me no favors. By the time I made it to the large, non-descript building, I had to take a minute in the shadows to get my breath back. It had been a little farther than I'd thought, mostly caused by the fact that I needed to stay off the main path, taking the back roads instead.

But I was here now, and I needed to search for the princes before someone found me and hauled my ass back to my room. Not to mention, it was going to set me back in my "fake out these fuckers" plan if they thought I was trying to escape.

Hurry.

I had to be back in my room before morning, so no time to fuck around.

I noticed a back entrance, and hurried forward, hoping to find the door unlocked. That would be too easy of course, but right now, I really needed easy. When I reached for the handle, I noted the absence of any alarms on this side. No cameras either.

It almost looked like one of those doors they used just to take the trash out, especially since the large dumpsters were on this side of the building. Reaching forward, I jiggled the lock, only to hear the familiar click of a bolt.

Fuck's sake.

I wasn't surprised, but seriously, could I not just catch one fucking break?

Not bothering to waste time on the door any longer, I turned away and started to search the ground for objects that would help me pick the lock. I had a lot of skills, thanks to my sensei, some of which he'd really regret giving me.

He was going to regret a lot of his actions soon enough. A girl only had the ability to take so much, and when she snapped, it was the stuff of fucking poems. The murder-y kind.

The closer I got to the dumpsters, the more little bits and pieces of junk were on the ground. I managed to find a pin, one that I could straighten enough to work, so I just had to find something else.

Just as I got down on my stomach to reach under the dumpster, there was a clicking sound from behind me, and the door opened.

Fuck.

I was already halfway under, so I scooted the rest of the way into whatever disgusting shit was under here, holding my breath the whole time. Footsteps sounded just as I got out of sight, and I wondered if they'd seen my legs. It was dark and I was all in black, so if anything saved me, it was going to be that.

A whistling sounded as the person lifted the top of the dumpster and dropped

their trash inside. The moment they turned away—I had a perfect view of their black boots—I wiggled out as silently as I could. They were going to get back inside through that door, and I would save myself a ton of time if I could secretly follow.

Whoever it was, I was guessing he was a man from the size of his back and shoulders. An unfit man who huffed and puffed during the short walk to the door. He didn't bother to look around once as he used a key on his belt to open the door, disappeared inside, and let the door swing back on its own.

Stupid, stupid move. Uriel would have kicked his ass if he saw that.

Doors were to be shut by a person, not their hinges. It was a big rule of his. Hydraulic openings like these gave your enemy time to lurch forward and catch the door just before it shut.

In this situation, I was the enemy.

I caught the door and held it for a moment, giving the man time to be long gone, and then I slipped inside.

Doing what the resistance guy had just failed to do, I closed the door firmly behind me, hearing the click of the lock before I moved away from it. Now I was inside the jail block, searching blind, and I needed to be quick about it. Who knew if Uriel intended to return to my room and follow through on his *promises*?

A deep shudder ran through me. A few years ago, the idea of spending the night in bed with him, of spending my *future* with him, would have been a dream come true. Stupid, foolish, brainwashed teen that I was, I'd genuinely thought I loved him.

Boy, had I been wrong.

What I felt for Jordan and Rafe... that was as real as it came. Not that I'd ever admitted it to them—certainly not to Rafe—but the longer I was away from them both, the longer they were in danger because of me, the more certain I became.

I *was* in love. With both of them.

And to hell with leaving my loved ones to suffer at the hands of Uriel and his crazy radical faction. I'd find Jordan—and hopefully Rafe—and we'd get the fuck out of here. Screw saving the world, that wasn't our responsibility. We were too young and way too inexperienced. This was a job for King Felipe and Queen Jacinta... if they were both still alive.

Guilt washed through me, churning my stomach. If Felipe didn't survive, then it was my fault. Logically I knew the Society had relished the opportunity to take down so many royals all at once, but I still couldn't shake the feeling of responsibility. Would things have happened like that if they hadn't been targeting me? Would Rafe's dad be safely home with his kids?

Questions that would never be answered, even while the guilt continued to eat me alive.

A sound ahead of me made me pause, then I pasted myself against the wall and prayed that the shadows would help me blend. When no one came around the corner and the sound faded away, I breathed a sigh of relief. I needed to hurry the hell up and find Jordan, not dwell on my own melancholy thoughts.

Shoving my emotions aside, I worked my way through the building systematically. I relied on the training that Uriel had drilled into me for *years* and remained undetected. Silently, I searched countless rooms until *finally* I found the one I was looking for. Or rather, the occupant I was looking for.

"Jordy!" I exclaimed in a hushed cry through the meal slot as I recognized his shadowy form. In reality, as dark as it was and as hunched over as he was, it could have been anyone. But I knew it was him. I knew that was *my* New American prince. "Jordan, it's Violet!"

He was sitting with his back to one of the smooth concrete walls, his arms draped across his bent knees and his head hanging low. His dark hair seemed longer, hanging in limp, dirty strands in front of his face and obscuring it from view.

When he made no sign of having heard me, I grew worried. Had they damaged his hearing?

I needed to get in there. I needed to touch him and know that he was still okay... as okay as could be expected if he'd suffered a fraction of the atrocities Uriel was capable of.

"Hang on," I told him through the meal slot, my voice only slightly louder than the whisper I'd started with. "I'm coming to get you out."

I worked quickly with the pin I'd found in the alleyway, and moments later the door to Jordan's prison swung open and I rushed inside. My knees hit the floor in front of him, and I reached out to touch his arms, not hesitating for even a second.

Stupid. I should have known better.

The second my gloved hands touched Jordan's skin, he flinched violently away and curled in on himself defensively.

I breathed a curse, biting my lip as I mentally chastised myself for such a dumb move. Only an idiot would think the Society had just tossed him in a cell and left him alone for weeks. Considering what they called *training* for me... I shuddered to think what they'd have done as punishment to a crown heir.

"Jordy," I whispered again, sitting back on my heels and folding my hands in my lap to stop from trying to touch him again—even though every fiber of my being needed to reach out and feel that he was still alive, still breathing, still

mine. "Jordan, it's me, Violet. Can you hear me?"

He flinched again and shuddered, but it was all I needed to reassure myself that he could, in fact, hear and understand me.

"Jordy, we need to get you out of here," I told him in a gentle whisper, licking my lips to hold back the choking sense of urgency flooding through me. "We need to go, now, before they realize I've left my room."

No response.

"Jordan, please," I begged him, letting that edge of panic slip into my tone. "Please, we need to go. Now. Come on." I stupidly reached out to him, intending to take his hand and coax him up.

"No!" he shouted, slapping my hand away before it could make contact and then shoving me away from him hard enough to land me on my ass from the kneeling position I'd been in. "No," he repeated, finally raising his head enough to meet my eyes. What I saw there chilled me to my soul, and my heart cracked in two. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Get the fuck out of here, *Rose*." He sneered my middle name at me, and I knew.

Uriel had taken a personal hand in Jordan's hospitality.

I shook my head, refusing to accept that answer from him. "Jordy, I know you've been through some shit, but—"

"No, you don't *know*," he spat back at me, the cold venom in his voice burning me as surely as any acid. "Get the fuck out of here. I'm not going anywhere with you. Ever. You're dead to me."

Despite my careful mastery of my emotions and my meticulous compartmentalization while I had searched the jail block, my control slipped and his words cut me to the core. I stifled a short gasp, shaking my head in disbelief.

There was no way, *no way*, Uriel could have turned Jordan against me in just a few weeks. Was there?

Fuck. My heart ached for whatever my prince had been through.

Voices echoed from along the corridor, and I flicked a panicked glance at the open door. In a matter of moments we would be discovered and punished. It was now or never.

"Jordy, we can discuss this later, but right now is our *only* chance to get you out of here. Now pull yourself together and get on your fucking feet. We need to *go!*"

But he didn't budge. He didn't even try to get up. Instead, he just stared blankly at me.

"He knew you'd try this, you know? You just played right into his hands like the predictable little puppet you were raised to be." His whole tone was filled with disgust and disappointment. It sliced through me like razor blades. "In

here!" he called out, alerting the Society guards to my whereabouts and dooming us both.

I kicked and screamed as four burly men seized me, but the shocking jolt of a Taser rendered me useless before I could free myself. Seconds later, I slumped in their grip, my body hanging as tears rolling down my face.

Jordan didn't utter another word as they dragged me from his cell, but I forced myself to hold his gaze as long as I could. Until my head flopped forward and my captors hauled me into the corridor and slammed the cell door shut once more.

Fear of what was to come for me didn't even factor into my concerns. All I could focus on was the fact that I'd failed him. I'd failed Jordan, and Uriel had poisoned my caring, gentle prince against me.

I'd fucking *failed*.

CHAPTER 8

Blinking my eyes awake into the light of a new dawn, I found my mind riddled with confusion. I was back in my bed. How had I gotten back into my bed? And why wasn't I strapped to a chair in a punishment room for my pathetic jailbreak attempt the night before?

I tried to rub my eyes, but my wrist tugged against a restraint, and I groaned. Of course I wasn't just back in my bed like nothing had happened. My wrists were both restrained, and when I shifted my face to look around the room—

"Good morning, my lovely flower," Uriel purred, stroking a finger down the side of my face. He was lying on the bed beside me, the sheets casually tossed over his lower half while his upper body was totally bare.

A spike of fear hit me, and I quickly scanned my eyes down my own body— as much as I could see, anyway. Thank fuck, I wasn't naked. I was, however, in a delicate white lace nightgown. Certainly *not* what I'd been wearing when Uriel's guards had Tasered me, then "accidentally" punched me hard enough to knock me out when I'd started struggling again.

"You've been a naughty girl, Rose," Uriel murmured, ignoring the way I'd stiffened up all over and continuing to stroke my face like I was his pet. "Here I was thinking you'd come back to me. That you understood the vitally important role you hold for us all. For the *people*."

Bile rose in my throat, and I flinched away from his hand. "Save the bullshit, Uriel," I sneered. "This isn't for the *people*. This is your own god complex at play. You won't be happy until you eclipse the monarchies in both power *and* corruption."

Uriel didn't answer, but I felt the shift in his mood seconds before his open palm met my cheek in a stinging slap. It was hard enough to make my ears ring and stars dance before my eyes. I didn't make a sound. I'd learned the hard way

that would only make things worse.

"Apparently you've forgotten more of your training than I realized," my sensei spat. He tossed the sheets aside and straddled my hips, his fingers circling my restrained wrists and biting deep into my flesh. Thank fuck he wasn't naked, though. He wore light gray sweatpants, but they did little to cover how interested he was in my current predicament.

Fucker had always loved seeing me helpless. Took me too long to figure that out, but it'd been clear the night we slept together.

"Maybe I was wrong to leave you that night," he mused, tracking his golden eyes over my thin sleepwear as though he could see through it. "Maybe I should have taken you with me to continue your training."

I swallowed heavily. I'd done so freaking much to push *that night* from my mind, and now it was all for nothing. I'd separated my sensei from Uriel in my memories, made them into two separate entities. But now that he was here in the flesh, the lines were all blurred again. I needed to remind myself. My sensei had taught me to fight, made me resilient, trained me to survive. Uriel had tried to brainwash and control me. He'd lured a young, naive girl into his web... then taken her virginity and cast her aside as "not ready" for his grand plans.

At the time, it'd broken my heart. But it hadn't taken much time and distance to make me see clearly. Uriel was a predator. An abuser. He was totally deluded, and now all the pieces were dropping into place. His hatred of the monarchies had only been the tip of the iceberg. This *radical* resistance faction? This was the belly of the beast.

He'd done me a favor that night. Hindsight allowed me that much clarity. By leaving me behind when he'd relocated to Europe, he'd inadvertently freed me from his oppressive influence. Instead of pining for my lost "love," I'd stepped back and seen his behavior for exactly what it was. Grooming. Not just in a sexual way, either, if this resistance plot had really been in place since my birth.

Fucking hell. What a mess.

"What are you going to do with me now?" I stupidly asked. All those repressed emotions from so long ago had my mind stirred up, and my training slipped.

Fear flashed through me when Uriel smiled. "Whatever I want, love. But it's time for you to remember where your loyalty lies. To remember that you are here, alive right now, because of me. You owe me everything."

If this dick's next words were "I'm god in this compound," I was going to throw all caution aside and do my best to kill him. I was that close to losing my shit.

Uriel must have seen that glint in my eyes because he smiled and backed

away slowly until he was standing on the side of the bed, staring down at me. "Be ready in ten minutes or Jordan won't be alive to see tomorrow," he told me. He would do it too; I could see the death of the American prince in his cold gaze.

Then he walked off. Leaving me fucking cuffed and helpless.

Well, I was never really helpless, but ten minutes would be cutting it close. With a sigh and a few choice words about a certain power-crazy dictator, I got to work on freeing myself. With about thirty seconds to spare I got myself free—minus some layers of skin—and hurried to throw some clothes over the lacy outfit someone had put me in.

The violation of my privacy and body was a factor I'd deal with later—for now, I just had to get through whatever Uriel had planned and hope that all of us would be alive to fight another day.

In my head was a running montage of Jordan's face. The darkness in his eyes. His spirit had looked like Rafe's, the light almost completely extinguished, and it fucking hurt to see him like that. Was there any saving Jordan, even if I freed him today? Trauma left a scar on your soul; even if you couldn't see it on the skin, it was always there.

"Hurry up!" A voice snapped me out of my daydream. I looked up to find the front door to my cage-masquerading-as-an-apartment was open. The man standing there was someone in the military, his face almost completely covered by a black mask, his eyes turned away from me so I couldn't see them.

Sucking in a deep breath, I composed myself, forcing years of training to the forefront so I could go into my "robot mode." It was a self-defense mechanism that allowed me to separate from my emotions and just get through whatever was coming my way.

"Follow me," the voice snapped, and then he turned and marched away. I hurried to keep up because I had a lot of work to do to rebuild trust. It was essential I did so that I could escape and get the guys out, and Jordan had undone days of groundwork already. I was back to square one. Or possibly square minus one because now Uriel knew I'd been faking it before.

When I caught up to the guard, I was surprised at how tall and broad he was. My training always had me cataloging people when I met them to figure out if they were a threat or not. This guard was not just huge, he also moved in a predatory way, his long legs eating up the distance as we strolled across the compound, and not once did he look back at me, which was a huge indication he was powerful and secure in his power.

No one disobeyed this man. He had to be important to the extremists. Important to Uriel, and for a brief moment, I debated if I should just kill him. Probably save myself the trouble of having to do it later. Not to mention I had

this bucketful of rage to work off, and this guy would not be an easy competitor.

Common sense fled, and I changed the way I was positioned to give myself the best chance to attack. My to do list started to run in my head on an endless loop. Full focus, no second-guessing myself.

Take him down. Go into hiding—I knew how to exist in the shadows. Figure out where Rafe was and how to save Jordan. Get the fuck out of here.

Those were my tasks, the only reasons for my existence right now, and I would not stop until I was successful.

Just as I launched myself forward, the guard spun, wrapping his long arms around me before we both disappeared into a dark, shadowed spot behind a building. He moved so fast that it was a full few seconds before I even threw my first punch.

"Always with the violence, little Violence. You never learn."

Everything in my entire fucking body froze as I trembled against familiar muscles.

"Rafe?" I choked out.

I could still barely tell it was him—his military outfit hid him completely—and if it wasn't for those blue-as-fuck eyes staring down at me, I'd never have known.

My hands were shaking as I reached up and slowly pushed the mask from his face, freeing up his dark hair and his lips. "Fuck," I sobbed.

We stared at each other, and after my moment yesterday with Jordan, I was scared about who I might find in the place of the prince I loved. Rafe had always been more unpredictable. More volatile. I wondered if this experience had pushed him to a place so dark that he would tip over the line he walked.

"Have you been with the military the entire time?" I finally asked, desperate to know everything. "Have you seen Jordan?"

Rafe's face darkened, and if murder had a face, it would be his. The fury was almost palpable in the air around us. "I escaped after a week and left enough evidence so they'd think I took off to get help. I've tried to break Jordan out, multiple times, but he insists that by staying where he is, he's keeping you alive. The asshole won't leave."

I gasped, my hand pressed to my chest as it felt like my heart was shattering beneath my palm. The pain was so great I would have doubled over if Rafe weren't right there keeping me standing.

"He told me that he was done with me." I gasped over and over. "He pushed me away. But he's protecting me?"

Rafe's chuckle was dark. "Of course he fucking is. His part is Prince Charming. Mine is your darkest nightmare. We play our parts pretty well, don't

you think?"

His asshole nature was enough to knock some sense into me. Briefly, in my grief, I'd forgotten that we were all in a very dangerous situation with a very dangerous man running the show.

"Are you supposed to be taking me somewhere?" I asked Rafe.

I would not allow him to go into a cage, not when he was free and we could work together, and that no doubt meant we had to play this game a little longer.

"Yes. You're due back in the reprogramming room. We should hurry."

He fixed his mask, and my heart ached at his beautiful face hidden away from me again. "When can we talk next?" I whispered as we set out on the path again. "We need to plan our escape."

Rafe just shook his head. "I need you to stay alive. I'm watching your back, but I'm also watching Jordan's and can't be in two places at once. Don't worry about the plan; something is in the works."

He refused to talk to me again, and afraid that we might be overheard, I kept my mouth shut and an annoyed expression on my face as I followed him. I was desperate, though, to reach out and touch his back. The movement of muscles beneath his shirt was all but mesmerizing.

Why didn't he kiss me?

Rafe might not have acted like Jordan—he seemed reasonably normal, actually—but there was a tension wrapped around him that I didn't like. And he'd barely touched me.

The building of my nightmares came into view, and I shuddered. Despite the fact it was all surrounded in well-manicured lawns with no potential for an ambush, I knew that what waited for me inside was way worse than any sort of random attack.

As we neared the back entrance, a scream died in my throat when Rafe jerked me into his arms, lifting and carrying me into the side alley, his grip biting and possessive.

"What—"

My words were cut off when he ripped his mask down and crashed his lips into mine. His tongue demanded entrance, stroking against mine in the same instant I gave it. He lowered one hand, slipping it down the front of my pants to rub me through the material.

Everything was a blur as I lost myself in that kiss, rocking against Rafe and his clever fingers that could bring me to the edge of an orgasm through my pants and in a situation like this.

The pressure and pleasure built, and I barely managed not to scream when I came, Rafe's mouth swallowing my moans. We must have set some sort of land-

speed record with how fast it was, but that was just what Rafe did to me.

His touch was my fucking Kryptonite.

He lowered me to the ground, my knees like jelly as they locked back under me.

"I'll see you soon," he murmured, pulling his mask up over his lips and nose again.

I nodded, not even fucking sure what had just happened, but knowing I needed to get into the building right now. Stumbling off on shaky legs, I was almost out of the alley when he called back.

"Oh, and Violet?"

I turned.

"If Uriel gets into your bed one more time, I will go on a murder spree that will make the Monarch War seem like a children's program."

The air shimmered between us with a fucking lot. Anger, lust, pain, power, and... love.

It was there, even if Rafe never admitted it.

It was there.

CHAPTER 9

That brief encounter with Rafe gave me the strength I needed to survive the grueling day of reprogramming Uriel had planned for me. When the horrific, edited images swarmed the screen in front of my eyes, I switched off and pictured Rafe's eyes as he told me he'd see me soon. Those words, that touch of his lips... of his hand... that was what allowed me to hold my sanity.

More than anything, though, it was his reassurance that Jordan *hadn't* turned on me. The more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right. There was no way I could have made it out of the compound with Jordan that night. My plan had been flimsy at best, and it'd clearly been a test that Uriel had set up. He'd known I would take any opportunity presented to me and had probably gloated to Jordan about it.

If they were using Jordan's safety to keep me in line, I had no doubts they were doing the same to him with *my* safety. And my foolish Prince Charming wouldn't ever risk me, even though he knew I could handle it.

Those shining beacons of hope buoyed me and kept my head above water as Uriel increased the pressure over the next few days, but by the time our eight-day agreement had come to an end, I was losing faith.

Two things were clear. One, that Rafe's idea of *soon* was vastly different from my own. And two, that Uriel had no intention of honoring our agreement.

Day eight came and went, and my sensei gave no hint he even remembered our deal, let alone made any moves to free me. I couldn't speak up about it, either, or I'd completely ruin the small level of trust I'd rebuilt. My total compliance in his reprogramming had finally started to sway him, and the suspicion and anger was fading from his interactions with me.

Day nine, it all went to shit.

Uriel burst into my apartment before dawn, waking me up and setting my pulse racing. He was scruffy and smelled vaguely of whiskey and cigars, like he'd been up all night celebrating something.

"Uriel," I said cautiously, sitting up in bed and reaching for a sweater to put an extra layer of fabric protection between us. "What's going on?"

He crossed the room and yanked the sweater out of my hands, tossing it away before looming over me. "Don't presume to question me, Rose," he replied in a dark growl. His eyes were glassy and the alcohol on his breath was practically flammable.

Fear flashed through me as he climbed onto my bed, straddling my legs and pushing me back into the pillows with a rough hand. Sober Uriel was capable of some atrocious things, but he was predictable and with all my knowledge of how he worked, I could sometimes manipulate him.

Drunk Uriel? Capable of fucking anything. The last time I'd seen him intoxicated had been the night I'd stupidly thrown myself at him, believing my naive sixteen-year-old self in love. He'd used me, then tossed me aside with a few callous words about how I "wasn't ready" for him. At the time I'd thought he meant my lack of experience in bed, but now I knew better. He'd meant that I wasn't ready to fall into his plan to topple the monarchies.

"Uriel—" I started to say, but his hand wrapped around my throat, cutting off my voice.

"You think you're so fucking smart, don't you?" he snarled, his face twisting with anger as he tightened his grip around my throat. I was no stranger to being strangled by him and knew how to survive long enough for him to get over whatever had triggered his murderous rage. He always stopped eventually, even if I had passed out by that time.

Except this time something was different. His eyes glittered with darkness, and he was growing hard against me. His tightening fingers constricted against the veins of my neck, cutting off the blood supply to my brain as well as air to my lungs, and fear coursed through me at a million miles an hour. I couldn't panic, though. I couldn't show any reaction. He'd trained me better than that.

A commotion at my door pulled Uriel's alcohol-impaired attention, and his hand eased long enough for me to suck in a huge, gasping breath.

"I told you, *no interruptions!*" my sensei roared at whoever had just opened the door.

The guard—I assumed it was a guard—said something back, but I couldn't make out the words. My ears were whooshing with my thundering pulse as blood returned to my head and air into my lungs. Fucking Uriel. I'd forgotten how scary his rages could be.

"Fuck!" he cursed, releasing me completely, but he cracked a hard fist across my face as he climbed off the bed. "Don't fucking move, little flower," he snarled at me. "We're not even close to done."

I pressed a hand to the side of my face, watching as he stormed out of my apartment, not even trying to hide how tented his pants were. When he left with two of the three black-clad guards who had been standing near my front door, I collapsed back into the pillows and let my heart thunder.

My face was throbbing, promising a bruise across my cheekbone. It fucking *killed* me not to fight back against him. If that had been anyone else, they'd be currently trying to pick pieces of their shattered jaw up off the floor. But when it came to Uriel, I knew better. He *always* bested me in a fight, even when he didn't have the upper hand. Worse than that, he was holding Jordan's health and well-being in his iron grip.

My front door slammed shut, and I covered my face with both hands. I wanted to cry and scream and rage, but nothing came out. Nothing. As badly as I was resisting Uriel's reprogramming, some old habits had started sinking into my bones again. Never showing emotion was one of the first things he'd drilled into me as a child, so it seemed reasonable that would be the first thing to return.

A shoe scuffed on the carpet, and I sat up with a jerk. I'd thought I was alone—stupid me for not checking—but the remaining guard was still there with me.

A brief ripple of apprehension radiated through me before he took two steps closer and I locked eyes with his deep sapphire-blue ones.

"Rafe," I breathed, scrambling up and launching myself into his arms.

He caught me, but his body was stiff and I could feel the tension and anger radiating off him in waves. "What did I fucking tell you, Vi?" he growled, even as his arms banded around me. He held me to his body, my feet off the ground, but his mind had gone to murderous places.

"Like I fucking *asked* him to come in here and try to kill me?" I snapped back, pushing him away and dropping my feet to the floor. "I'm not exactly carrying on some kind of creepy affair here, Rafe; I'm just trying to get us *all* out alive."

His eyes were hard, his dark brow furrowed as he inspected the marks blooming on my face and neck. "I'm going to kill him with my bare hands," he told me, "and then—"

"No," I snapped, cutting him off. "No, if anyone is killing Uriel, it's *me*. We just need to figure out how to get out of here first."

Rafe's eyes narrowed at me, anger burning bright, but after a minute he released a frustrated sigh. "That's why I'm here. It's happening today. The heads of all the Society factions are meeting here to discuss the next steps, and there's a

plan in place to get you out."

My brows shot up. "And Jordan too?"

"Of course," he replied. "But he can handle himself; you're my priority."

My heart thumped a little harder at that statement—at the fierce protectiveness in his voice—even though I felt Jordan needed to be the priority. He had never suffered torture like this before. Who knew what it might be doing to his mind...?

"When Uriel comes to take you to the meeting around midday, *don't go*," Rafe implored me with his eyes. He hadn't removed his half mask, so I could only see his eyes, brows, and part of his nose. I couldn't kiss him, despite how badly I ached to do so. "I can't stress this enough, Vi. Do *not* go to that meeting, okay? I'll come for you when the time is right."

He started to leave, and I grabbed onto his arm.

"Wait, what the fuck? Rafe, you can't be serious. That's it?" I gaped at him in disbelief. "Just... *wait here until you get rescued*? You're kidding me, right?"

Rafe's eyes flashed with anger and something darker. "No, Violence, I'm not kidding. Wait here until you get rescued. Don't do anything stupid in the meantime, and we will all be back in the Switzerlands by dusk."

Shock held me immobile as he stormed back out of my apartment, slamming the door behind him. *What in the fuck..?*

Something had changed with him. I had suspected it when he'd first come to me, but now I was positive. Things weren't the same between us, and a horrible part of me wondered if they ever would be.

"Fuck," I cursed, sinking onto the side of my bed in defeat and rubbing at my aching, bruised throat. Uriel hadn't been careful; the bruises on my neck and cheek would already be showing. They definitely throbbed hard enough, that was for sure. "Shit fucking dick cunt balls."

Sometimes it helped to just curse out loud. This wasn't one of those times. My words fell empty into the air and dissolved without taking any of my anger and frustration with them.

Pulling myself together, I went through to my bathroom and quickly got ready for the day. The last thing I wanted was for Uriel to come back and find me still in my thin pajamas, regardless of his order not to move. I could only hope whatever distraction Rafe and his allies had created would keep Uriel busy enough that he would forget about me.

Yeah, wishful thinking.

Just as I was tying off the hair tie on my tight braid, there was a knock on the door. Uriel didn't knock, though, so at least it wasn't him in person. Small mercies.

"Good morning," my familiar escort—Caine—greeted me, sounding almost sincere.

"Trust me, Caine," I replied with a scratchy voice, "there's nothing *good* about this morning."

His eyes widened, taking in the bruising down the side of my face and around my neck with shock. The marks had darkened while I'd showered and dressed, so I'd deliberately chosen a low-neck T-shirt and braided my hair back to ensure everyone could see how Uriel treated his "rose." Maybe it would snap some sense into his loyal sheep or, if nothing else, make them more cautious. Especially the women.

"Uh..." Caine gaped at me, at a loss for words.

I rolled my eyes. I knew better than to try and convince him to help me. He was one hundred percent on team Uriel, and I'd only be wasting my breath trying to sway him to my side.

"We need to be somewhere?" I prompted him, and a blush hit his cheeks.

"Um, yes. Yeah. Yes, I was to take you to the training center today." He awkwardly indicated that I follow him, and I let out an irritated sigh. Trying to maintain the illusion of normalcy while knowing today was the day that Rafe would break us out? It was going to be one hell of a test on my patience.

I closed my apartment door and let Caine lead me out of the housing building. Rafe said it was the meeting around midday that I needed to avoid, so I'd stay alert but avoid suspicion for the morning. We started to cross the main yard, but a group of black-clad soldiers got in our way.

"Well, well, well, looks like someone is giving you the kind of attention you deserve," a familiar voice sneered, and my shoulders stiffened.

Brandon *motherfucking* Morgan.

"You're not supposed to be here," Caine said. "My orders are to take his rose to the training center."

Both of us ignored Caine. "I should have known a snake like you would be here under the thumb of Uriel," I said, wanting both to irritate him and actually find out how his appearance here had fucking happened. "You were born to be fodder for a more powerful man."

Brandon's face was hidden; the winter outfits of these soldiers were very covering. It was a benefit for Rafe, but in this situation, I'd have preferred to see Brandon's face and read all of the emotions there. I learned so much from that.

It was clear he disliked my words, though, from the tension in his shoulders.

"I'm here to take down the monarchy so I can be a leader, as I should always have been."

I snorted. And it turned into hard-core laughter until tears ran down my

cheeks. "Oh fuck," I choked out. "That's a good one. You're a sheep, Brandon. Born powerless and will die powerless. That's your legacy."

With a muffled growl, he stepped forward, only stopping when one of the other men with him reached out and grabbed his arm.

"I'll be seeing you soon, gutter whore," Brandon snarled, pointing his finger at me.

At this point Caine started to edge me around the group, his hand out to prevent anyone from coming closer to me. "Uriel will not be happy about this, soldier," he said gruffly. "Despite what you see, our orders are still to protect her at all costs. Even from each other."

Brandon's group pulled him back even further, and I gave a little smartass wave as we passed, reminding him that I wasn't scared. Not of that loser.

"Hope it didn't take too long to recover from our last fight," I called over my shoulder. One last reminder for him.

He lost his shit, cursing and punching the building nearby, but I was being marched away at that point and didn't get to see the show. That was fine, though, because I'd accomplished my goal. Brandon would come find me, and I would kill him this time.

Uriel's men were going down, one by one, starting with those who'd hurt me and my guys.

Brainwashing got under way after that, right on schedule, and honestly, if I didn't hate Uriel so much and love two princes like I did, I'd be on the side of the resistance too. The absolute atrocities I had witnessed over the past days of conditioning... they were enough to give me nightmares for the rest of my life.

No matter what developed from all of this, change was needed in the system. It was flawed. Broken. And it had been that way for too long.

Did I have a solution that didn't include killing all the monarchs and replacing one broken system with another? Because Uriel was way too crazy to be any sort of leader. So, nope. I had no solution, but I was eighteen years old with zero experience running anything. Surely there were others out there who had plans. There had to be.

"Lunch time," a voice called, and the images faded from the display in front of me. It was almost immersive, the screen experience here, so I got the double benefit of feeling like I was right in the midst of the murder and mayhem. The only step closer would be if I could smell the death rather than just see it.

Caine unlocked my wrist cuffs, and I massaged the skin there as I shakily got to my feet. After a few more weeks of this, I had a scary suspicion that I'd be lost in their propaganda world, unable to tell one reality from another.

Just as he was leading me toward the small area I was allowed to eat in, there

was a buzzing on his palm reader. Mine had been gone since I was imprisoned, and every single time I saw one on someone, I longed to contact Mattie or Nolan, to hear their voices and find out who had survived that night.

They both better have.

And Rafe's dad. My heart ached at my last memory of him, unconscious and covered in blood. His injuries hadn't looked good. Hopefully those medics were really fucking spectacular at their jobs.

"There's been a change in plans," Caine said abruptly. "Lunch has to wait. Uriel needs you now."

Rafe's warning from this morning flashed in my mind, blaring red because he'd been dead serious. I couldn't go with Uriel, no matter what happened.

"I need to go back to my room first."

I ground to a halt, and Caine took a few more steps before stopping and turning back to me. "What do you mean? I'm to take you to the meeting stadium. There will be a few thousand of us gathering there to plan our next attack."

Caine clearly thought that I was all on board the royals-must-die train.

"I—I just got my period and need a tampon."

He froze. Apparently anything else he had been prepared to argue over, but the thought of me bleeding through my pants had him hesitating. "I have to be there to head up Uriel's protective detail," he kind of muttered.

Reaching out, I placed my hand on his forearm. "Look, I know my way around now. I can run back to my place and then get to the stadium before it starts. You don't have to come with me. That way you can do your job."

His eyes bored into my soul as he tried to ferret out any deception, but he'd never find it. I'd been trained by Uriel himself. Up close and very personal.

"Yes, okay. But don't worry about getting back. I'll send a car for you. It's not that close." That was his compromise to ensure I didn't run.

"Yep, great!"

As long as it wasn't Uriel, I'd have no problems taking the driver out, and then I'd have a vehicle to utilize.

"Do not go anywhere but back to your apartment," Caine warned me.

I kept my face neutral. "You have my word. I'm interested to see what this meeting is all about. I don't want to miss any of it."

Caine nodded. "Okay, then run."

I patted his shoulder as I sprinted past, not bothering to look back. Just the thought that something was finally happening was all I needed to run like my life depended on it.

CHAPTER 10

*A*fter weeks of torture and “reprogramming” without exercise, I was decently out of shape. So I was a little out of breath by the time I got back to my room. Rushing inside, I changed into clothes that were dark, easy to move and fight in, and would keep me warm. I had no idea what the rest of this day would bring, but as long as I was out of this shithole and away from Uriel, I could deal with almost anything else.

There was a knock at the door just as I finished fixing my braid.

The driver was here.

Crossing over as silently as I could with shoes on, I slowly opened the door, smile in place to lull them into a sense of security. No one ever expected women to just attack them without provocation.

"Are you ready to leave, miss—"

A sucker punch to the mouth shut him up. As he lurched back, I hit him again, this time across the temple, and he went limp. I grabbed onto him before he hit the ground and gave us away, hoping I'd hit him hard enough to buy me at least half an hour.

Dragging him back inside, I turned him on his side so he didn't choke on vomit or anything. Sometimes the knockout blow would mess with them in other ways. As an after-thought, though, I tied his hands and feet in case he woke up early.

When I was done, I gave myself a few seconds to check I had everything in place, removed the weapon from the driver—it was only a baton, but I could do some damage with that—and then left the place, hopefully never to see it again. Screw waiting around like a damsel in distress. I saw my opportunity for escape and I was taking it.

Just as I stepped onto the main street, where the black town car idled at the

curb, a distant explosion lit up the sky and echoed a boom. I wasn't close enough to feel any effects, but on instinct I hit the ground, just in case anything came flying this way.

Chaos ensued. Screams, sirens, shouts, gunfire, helicopters. You name the fucking noise, and it was happening in a cacophony of stimuli. No one seemed to notice me standing near the front entrance to my building, and since this was clearly the event Rafe had been talking about, it was time to act now.

Only problem was I had no idea where to go. Rafe knew full well I wouldn't stay put like a princess in a tower, so he should have given me a better plan. One day soon my prickly prince and I would have a long conversation about his attitude, and hopefully, things would change after that.

We just all had to survive to have that chat.

Deciding that getting away from my apartment was step one—if Uriel survived, he would come straight for me there. Sure, it'd make it harder for Rafe to find me, but that was preferable to Uriel finding me. Logically, I should have just gotten into the idling car and waited for Rafe there. But a reckless, impulsive part of me was itching to get to Jordan. So, I moved along the path, keeping my head down. The baton I'd stolen was in a loop on my belt, not hidden but also not in my hands.

A decision I greatly regretted when someone slammed into me, knocking me off my feet and into a shop front. It was glass, and the way it cracked under my shoulder told me I was about to go through it. I dropped to the sidewalk and rolled, ignoring the small scrapes from the rough ground below, needing to get away from my assailant.

Heavy hands lifted me, and Brandon's face came into view. No mask this time, so his hatred was on display clear as anything. "Told you I'd see you again, you piece of shit."

Not even remotely distracted by his threat, I allowed my mind to sink into robot mode, and in two hard strikes, I had crushed both of his hands, forcing him to drop me. I landed gracefully while he snarled and bellowed.

"If you think I'm leaving you alive this time, you're mistaken," I said, striking him again, this time right in the sternum.

He gasped, his face going red, and in desperation he charged at me. I sidestepped, but he threw an arm out, sending us both through the glass window I'd been hoping to avoid.

Thankfully, I managed to turn enough that he went down first. I didn't escape unharmed, the glass slicing my clothing in several places, but I was pretty sure it missed all the important parts—everything still moved as I lifted my body to swing my elbow into Brandon's face. His jaw cracked under my hit, and he

howled in pain, even as his hands were scrambling on the ground trying to find some glass to cut me with.

"Violet!"

Rafe's shout distracted me, and I nearly ended up with a cut carotid. Luckily, I was still eighty percent focused, and that was enough to avoid Brandon's strike. I rolled off him, getting plenty more cuts in the process. Rafe stormed over the threshold, his boots crunching in all the glass, but I didn't give him the chance to play hero this time.

In one quick movement, I slammed my boot into Brandon's temple, and when he stopped moving, I snapped his neck with a sharp kick. It took me about three seconds to end the life of someone who had tormented and almost killed me.

Rafe remained where he was, glittering eyes staring into my soul. "Stop it," I said roughly, trying to compartmentalize the fact that I'd just killed someone. Even if he'd deserved it.

Some days, I was exactly the person Uriel had trained me to be.

A fact that should scare everyone.

"Come on," he said, dismissing the lifeless body of Brandon Shithead Morgan at our feet, "we need to get out of here before things get violent."

I arched a brow at him, and he gave a one-shoulder shrug.

"More violent," he amended. "The core Society wants to clean house. This camp will run red before the day is over."

"We need to get Jordan out," I told him, already racing in the direction of the prison cells. I had to just cross my fingers and hope that he'd still be there. Rafe didn't argue, following close behind me and ruthlessly helping me dispatch the guards we found on the cell block.

I was no slouch on my own, but with Rafe at my side, we were unstoppable. Moments later, we had taken out all the guards in the area and I'd lifted the access cards and keys from one of the unconscious men.

Unconscious or dead. I didn't stop to check his pulse.

"This way," I told Rafe, leading him back through the corridors to where I'd found Jordan previously. The other prisoners were in an uproar, banging on their doors and hollering at us to let them out. I wanted to unlock every single door in there, but Jordan was my priority. I'd never forgive myself if we lost him because we wasted time letting strangers out of their cells.

Jordan's cell was silent, and a chill of dread ran through me, making my hands shake as I tried to find the right key.

"I've got it," Rafe said in a quiet voice, taking the keys from my trembling fingers and quickly cycling through them until the door gave a satisfying click as

the lock disengaged. He held out a hand to stop me when I tried to rush past him, but I just shoved him aside and ducked through the doorway.

"Jordy," I breathed in relief, spotting the dark-haired man curled up against the far wall. His whole cell was totally empty. No bed, no chair, nothing. Just an empty cell with a broken prince inside.

Fuck. This was all my fault.

"Go away, Violet," he groaned in a pain-filled voice. "I don't want you here."

I swallowed past the lump of agony his words hit me with and crouched in front of him. "Well, too fucking bad. We're getting you out of here."

Jordan didn't even raise his head, just exhaled a long, defeated sigh. "Stop doing this, Violet," he whispered in a cracked and raw voice. "He's only going to hurt you more. Go away. Go back to him before he knows you're here."

"We don't have time for this," Rafe hissed at my back. "The fighting will be here any second now. We need to go *now*."

"Go then!" Jordan shouted, finally lifting his face and showing deep, shadowed bruises. "Leave! But don't drag Violet down with you. Uriel *knows* you're going to try this. It's all a fucking trap. You're walking right into his trap. He's going to catch you, and then he'll hurt her again." His words dissolved into unhinged laughter and I didn't think twice.

I punched him in the side of the head, knocking him out.

"Come on," I told Rafe, swallowing all my emotions and hardening my resolve. "Let's get him out of here."

Rafe didn't say a word, just slung his best friend's unconscious body over his shoulder and carried him out of the cell.

The way was clear as we hurried back outside, no guards having yet found the bodies of the ones we'd dispatched, and in just a few quick minutes, we were in one of the Society's black armored vehicles. Rafe drove, and I sat in the back seat with Jordan's head in my lap.

"I'm so sorry, Jordy," I whispered, gently running my fingers through his short hair. In the light of day, I could see the marbling of old and new bruising all over his face. I knew all too well that the rest of his body would echo the same effect.

Rafe glanced at me in the mirror, and I met his eyes.

"It'll be okay, Violet," he told me in a gruff voice. "Jordy's a tough fuck. He only stayed to try and keep you safe. Stupid bastard."

A flood of emotions welled up in my throat, and I bit the inside of my cheek. Words were too hard, so I just nodded back. He'd better be okay. He had to be. Because without Jordan... Rafe and I were doomed. We were just too fucking damaged.

CHAPTER 11

It took several hours of driving, an exhaustive check point with the Society—the good part, not the faction run by Uriel—and a short helicopter ride, but around midnight, the three of us finally reached Rafe's parents' palace.

"How's your dad?" I asked him in a quiet voice as we waited for the medics to unload Jordan from the chopper. He was still unconscious, but this time it was a sedated sleep, which the Society medical team had assured us would just help him heal from the multiple injuries he'd sustained in Uriel's care. Fortunately, though, most of the damage was superficial and would heal in weeks, if not days.

The damage done to his mind would be another issue to address, and not something we could assess until he was awake.

"He's doing okay," Rafe replied, swiping a tired hand over his face as the medics carried Jordan ahead of us up the front steps of the palace. Some staff hurried out to help, but King Felipe was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Queen Jacinta or the twins. "He's still recovering, but it sounds like it wasn't as bad as we thought."

Relief hit me like a ton of bricks. Ever since Rafe had said we were returning to his parents palace, I'd fretted over how to ask about King Felipe. He was so kind to his kids—to all of us—and he was exactly the type of leader we needed. He was the one who could fix the mess we'd found ourselves in, I just knew it.

Reaching out, I linked my fingers together with Rafe's. "That's good. I'm so glad he's going to be okay."

Rafe's steps paused, and he frowned down at our linked hands. "Yeah," he agreed, sounding wooden. He extracted his hand from mine—causing my heart to sink straight to my feet—and turned his face back to the huge palace. "We

should get some sleep. I told the staff not to wake my mother, so we can fill them in on everything in the morning."

"Wait!" I shouted after him, halting him in his tracks. "You haven't given me anything. What happened after we were all taken? How many people died in the earthquake? What about Mattie and Nolan? Are they okay? Rafe, *please*, tell me something useful. I'm losing my fucking mind with worry here."

He turned slightly back toward me, his jaw tense. "Lots of people died. Lots of monarchs died. It was a total fuck up of epic proportions."

I held my breath, my heart in my throat.

"The twins are fine. They're back at Arbon being their usual annoying selves."

My whole body sagged with relief at the good news, but apparently that's all Rafe felt like sharing with me. He followed after the medics without another word, and my heart sank. Things had *definitely* changed between us. Because of Uriel? Or because of my unwitting involvement in a resistance faction that almost killed his father *and* his best friend in a matter of weeks? Oh, not to mention his fiancée, but I doubted he was all that distraught over losing Claudette.

Fucking shit. Uriel had a lot to answer for the next time we crossed paths. I wasn't stupid or naive enough to think he'd died in the Society "cleaning house" at his camp. My sensei was like a cockroach. The whole planet could implode and he'd still be alive, crawling around in the rubble.

I caught up to Rafe as he finished directing the medics to one of the guest rooms where Jordan could be set up.

"I guess... I'll see you in the morning then," I mumbled when he made no acknowledgement of me standing there. It made me feel scared and guilty and worried and... and angry as hell. Did he think I'd somehow done this all on purpose? That I'd been involved in the Society all along?

Because if so, he could go straight to—

"Violet," Rafe called out after me as I started up the stairs. I was heading for the room I'd stayed in with Mattie when we'd all come out for that blissful week before the Spring Ball.

I hesitated on the stairs, my hand on the rail as I turned back to look at him. I thought maybe he was going to apologize for his cold attitude or maybe just make an excuse that he was over-tired and stressed... or something. But nope, not Rafe.

"The guest rooms are all full," he told me, his voice clipped and unemotional. "Extra medical staff are here to care for my father and Mom didn't want them too far away, so she put them in the guest wing. You can sleep in my

room tonight. We'll sort something else out in the morning."

My brows shot up, but he ignored me. He just brushed past and led the way up the curving staircase without another word until we reached the ornate double doors at the end of the third-floor corridor.

By the time he was holding the door open, indicating that I enter, I was fuming mad.

"What?" he snapped as I stomped past him with folded arms.

I spun around, arching a brow as he stood in the doorway—not inside nor outside the room, as if he didn't want to be shut in with me but also didn't want to let me out of his sight.

"What's going on here, Rafe?" I demanded, feeling my anger bubbling over. "I get that you're pissed at me, but can you spell out *why* exactly? Because I'm too damn tired to spend the rest of the night assuming the worst."

His brows hitched, and he took one step into the room. Enough that the door could swing shut behind him. "You've got that look on your face, Vi," he commented, his sapphire eyes running over me in a way that made me feel totally seen, stripped naked, and *judged*. "The look that you get when you're in the fight arena. You want to hit me, don't you?"

He had totally ignored my question, and I wasn't sure I really cared. There was a flicker of something in his eyes that I grabbed onto like a life raft. Something more than just cool apathy or frustration. At the end of the day, I'd rather spend forever locking horns with Rafe than have him ignore me like I didn't matter.

"You're damn right, I do," I snarled back. "What the hell is going on? This cold, aloof bullshit you're rocking today doesn't suit you, Rafe."

His eyes flickered, and the corner of his lips pulled up in a mocking smile. "So? Hit me, Violence. Give me your best shot."

I knew he was just taunting me, making some point that I was totally missing. But he should know better by now. There was no dare I wouldn't take.

My balled fist struck out, catching him across the face and causing him to stumble back a step from the sheer force of it. Yep, he definitely hadn't expected me to follow through. Arrogant idiot.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed, rubbing his cheek and glaring at me with fire-filled eyes. A second later, he launched forward and I braced myself for retaliation. I'd been wanting to pair my skills against his in a real fight for ages, and even if this wasn't exactly how I imagined it happening, I wouldn't back down.

He didn't fly at me with fists swinging like I expected, though, instead his strong fingers grasped my wrists where I held my hands up defensively, wrenching me off balance. Our lips collided in a crash, and the next thing I

knew, my feet were off the floor as Rafe's strong arm banded around my back.

My shock quickly melted to arousal, my violent fighting instinct shifting effortlessly into sex as I climbed his body, linking my ankles together behind him as he walked us across the room. Our kiss ended abruptly as he slammed my back into the wall beside his dresser, but not for long. With one hand he shed his black shirt, then reached for mine.

Clothing flew across the room in a tornado of undressing, and when Rafe's strong hands lifted me back up, there wasn't a scrap of fabric between us.

This time when our lips met, there wasn't a scrap of confusion between us either. We both wanted the same thing. We both *needed* to feel that electric connection between us, that same pull that had drawn us together over and over, despite how we both fought the attraction.

There was no foreplay this time. I clawed at Rafe's back, spreading my legs wide and angling my hips to his in a silent, desperate plea. One he fully intended to answer. The head of his cock pushed inside, the burning stretch just painful enough to have me moaning. My own arousal helped him slide the rest of the way in, seating himself deep inside, and my body arched as he started to move.

Rafe didn't give me any chance to adjust, slamming hard into me over and over until I was clawing at his shoulders and screaming his name. It was almost as if something possessed him as he fucked me because I'd never seen him with quite the same light in his eyes—focused determination.

Meanwhile I was unraveling, the pain fading out completely as the pleasure took over, sending my head into dizzying spins as my legs wrapped tighter around Rafe. "Fuck, Rafe," I sobbed as he slammed into me harder and harder, our lips crashing together as he swallowed my moaning screams.

My orgasm hit me hard and fast, and I couldn't breathe or think or do anything other than react, my head slamming back into the wall as I gasped for breath. Rafe didn't stop or slow, and my body decided that we'd try and break a world record for longest orgasm.

My breaths heaved in and out as I finally stopped pulsing around his cock, and he swung me around, dropping me down onto the bed. There was no time to wait and see what was going to happen next because he was already sliding into me; this time, though, it was slower, more controlled, as he teased my pussy, seating himself deeply, before sliding all the way out again.

"You belong to me, Violet Spencer," he said, his eyes so dark as he stared down at me. He was holding himself up a little, staring into my fucking soul as he moved. I couldn't keep still under him, legs moving as the tingles started in my gut again.

"If anyone," he muttered, leaning down, "touches you again," his teeth

landed on my skin, "I will fucking kill them."

He bit down into one of the bruises on my face before his tongue swirled over it after, chasing the pain away. Piece by piece as his cock plowed into me, his teeth marked me in every spot that I'd been marked by Uriel and Brandon, replacing their bruises with his touch and his teeth.

The pain had me groaning, and when he finally lifted his head, there was the smallest of grins tipping up one corner of his lips. "You like the pain, don't you, Violence?"

I groaned again, unable to fucking talk because I was legitimately drowning in the sensations of him moving so slowly into me, all the way in and out, over and over, touching every fucking nerve ending I had inside.

"Turn over," he ordered, those eyes pinning me to the bed.

I blinked up at him, the urge to fight when I was ordered strong when I was with him. He must have recognized that in my face because he brushed a hand down my cheek, slowing his strokes. "Just this once, do as you're told, Violence." *Not helping, asshole.* I was just about to gut punch him—no matter how good this felt, I deserved respect. Then he added a, "Please."

Fuck.

Narrowing my eyes on him, I used my elbows for leverage. My body screamed at me as I pulled myself slowly off his cock before I flipped over and lifted my ass into the air, giving him exactly what he wanted.

Rafe's groan was low, almost inaudible, and I was about to turn and see what he was doing when his hand landed firmly on the small of my back. The touch was heavy, possessive, and as it slid slowly across my curves and over my ass cheeks, I started to pant at the slow torture he was inflicting on me.

He rubbed slowly, one hand on each cheek, and I jumped when he slapped me with a cupped palm. Right side and then left. Small, spluttered groans and gasps fell from my lips as I rocked back against him, desperately searching for some relief from the tension coiling inside of me.

"Loves the pain," he murmured before he rubbed a gentle massage on the tender spots.

"Rafe, you're torturing me," I told him, begging for more.

His fingers slipped lower to find I was literally dripping down my legs and so turned on by what he was doing that the second he touched me, I cried out, rocking harder.

"Fucking hell, you're killing me Violet," he grumbled, removing his hand. This time when I backed up, he didn't resist, his cock stretching my pussy to the point where pain and pleasure merged again.

"Your cunt could start wars, Cinderella," he muttered. "And I'm too fucking

gone to resist it."

I didn't know what to make of that, but luckily there was no time to answer because I was too busy screaming his name as he fucked me hard. There was so much force in his strokes that I found myself sliding across the bed until eventually I was holding onto his ornate, hand-carved wooden headboard, holding myself up while Rafe slammed into me from behind, both his hands on my tits as he held me steady.

Everything was building and spinning out of control again, and as he released my right nipple and slid that hand down to stroke across my clit, I came harder than I'd ever come before. My knuckles ached, white across the tops as I held on for dear life, and then the world flashed in black and white as my brain frizzled to a halt.

Rafe didn't stop, though, his cock swelling as he got closer, stretching me further and igniting nerve endings I didn't even know I had. Just as I thought I was about to come again, he pulled out of me, flipping me over so I was face to cock with him.

Despite my confusion, I didn't hesitate, wanting to taste him. Sliding the head into my mouth, I groaned at the taste of both of us combined. Sucking him even deeper, I lifted my hand to assist, and when Rafe fisted his hands into my hair, his breathing heavy as he started to make small sounds, I felt a heady sense of accomplishment.

He jerked in my mouth seconds later, and I swallowed it all, relishing this moment with him, until eventually both of us collapsed on the bed, completely wrecked.

For many long moments we just lay there, sweaty, breathing heavy, hearts trying to hammer out of our chests. Eventually though, the events of the day and everything else caught up to me as aches and pains made themselves known.

"I killed someone today," I said, no inflection in my voice; I wasn't sure how I felt about it. "I've gotten close before. Set people up to be killed, even. But never actually struck the fatal blow."

Rafe was silent. So silent I wondered if he was just going to roll off the bed and pretend that I was nothing other than a fuck he'd found in the local bar.

"Those religious assholes that locked you in the closet," he said, voice husky. "You set them up?"

I nodded, wincing at the pain in my neck. "Yeah. They were murdered in what looked like a robbery gone wrong. I don't know who did the actual killing, but my money is on Uriel. It was professional, no evidence left behind, and eventually the case was closed."

"How did you even meet Uriel?" Rafe snapped, much quicker with that

question.

I shrugged. "You know, I can't really remember. He just showed up one day and started teaching me to fight."

"And no one ever found out?"

"Nope. None of my foster families cared where I was, as long as I wasn't bothering them. They made it all too easy for me to be groomed into the person Uriel needed me to be."

Rafe was unusually tense at my side—even for the prickly prince. "You knew what he wanted you for?"

Ah, that made sense. "No. I thought he wanted a young fuck toy and that had been the entire point of building our bond. It wasn't until we ended up with the extremists that I understood the true depth of what he was doing."

I quickly detailed my mother's involvement with it all and the reason I was so important to both sides.

The silence after this was so heavy, and the longer it went on, the more I was kicking myself for putting up with his bullshit. Like, I mean, why was I sticking around here with someone who clearly couldn't stand me? Whatever had happened in the past few weeks, Rafe was simply not the same with me... We were almost back to our first meetings, and it hurt so much that all the cuts and bruises couldn't compare.

Just when I'd convinced myself to get up and leave, to sleep on the floor if I had to—wouldn't be the first time—Rafe swung his legs off the bed and stood up.

Fuck! Now it was going to look like I was just following him again—

My internal argument was cut off when Rafe leaned down and lifted me into his arms. For a second he held me close, face all but buried in my hair like he was breathing me in. Then he straightened and walked us into the bathroom.

It was huge, with an ornate, bespoke ceiling like his bedroom and a giant shower-tub-thing in the center of the room. Almost like he had a pool. Rafe flicked a switch near the door, a stream of water tumbled out of the ceiling, and now his pool had a waterfall.

"It's filtered water from the lagoon outside," he told me softly. "The healing properties of the water will help your cuts and bruises."

And now he was being caring again, and I didn't know how to unpack all of the emotional baggage he was leaving me with. When he set me down in the tub, I shifted so the warm water tumbled over me. I grit my teeth at the initial sting, but the pain soon calmed and I could have cried at how good it felt to be standing in this water.

"Relax," Rafe said, indicating I should take a seat in the built-in bench on the

side of the bath.

I blinked at him, realizing that he was not getting in with me.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said at my confused expression, and then he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER 12

It took me longer than I'd like to admit to give up on waiting for him to return. I understood the words "see you tomorrow," but part of me didn't quite accept that he had just dropped my ass into his bath and then bailed.

Fuming, I cleaned myself with what I found in the incredible array of bottles in his shelves, and even found packaged toiletries so I could brush my teeth, wash my face, and moisturize once I was out.

Figuring I'd sleep naked and worry about clothes tomorrow, I left the towel on his floor, hoping he'd get in trouble. Then I decided it wasn't fair to the staff that no doubt cleaned this place, so I picked it up again, wiped all the benches down, and dropped the towel into what looked like a hamper.

When I got back into his room, I ignored the wall we'd fucked against, focusing just on the bed. We'd fucked a lot on that too, and as the scent of Rafe wafted up at me, that dark rich spice that was just so uniquely his, I pondered sleeping on the floor.

If I weren't in so much pain from my cuts and bruises, I would have, but tonight I'd just have to deal with his scent all over everything.

Snuggling down into the impossibly soft mattress with equally soft sheets and blankets over me, I sighed, my head aching with so many emotions. Despite my exhaustion, the memories of everything kept me awake for a long time. Jordan's beautiful, hurt face, the anger with which he'd spoken and acted, and the fear in my heart that I was slowly losing both the princes.

And even worse... maybe it was for the best. There was no world that existed where I could keep them both anyway, and maybe this way, with no one having to choose, we'd all be able to move on and live our lives.

They'd both go on to marry princesses and rule kingdoms. And I... I'd end up

exactly where I'd started.

With nothing and no one.

And on that depressing-as-fuck note, I fell into the most restless, nightmare-filled sleep I'd had in forever. When I woke again, my heart was pounding and the sheets around me were damp with sweat.

Sunlight streamed through the windows, and I rubbed at my gritty eyes while trying to slow my breathing. Whatever I'd been dreaming about had been chased away with the light of day, but the panic it'd spiraled my body into remained.

Rafe hadn't returned, and rather than walking around the Swiss palace stark naked, I borrowed some clothes from his closet. They hung loose on me, but again... better than being naked.

It was a new day, which meant we needed to talk with Jacinta and Felipe about everything that had happened with the Society. We needed to pass the responsibility back to the people in charge because no one could seriously expect an eighteen-year-old orphan girl and her two princely lovers to actually save the world. Right?

I found the queen in a sunroom overlooking the natural springs, sipping on a delicate cup of tea and scrolling through the news on a holographic reader. She was so effortlessly stunning, even without makeup on or her hair done. She wore a blush-pink satin robe, and her feet, poking out from under the table, wore fluffy slippers.

Such a stark contrast to her moody, scowling firstborn, who ate his breakfast like it'd personally offended him. Or maybe that was because he'd just spotted me standing there.

"Violet, sweetheart," Queen Jacinta greeted me with a warm smile. She pushed back from the table and stood up with her arms outstretched, indicating for me to embrace her. "I'm so relieved to see you're okay." She hugged me tight, like I was one of her own children, then kissed my unbruised cheek. "Or as okay as a girl can be with a shiner like that. I hope whoever hit you came off second best, darling." She clicked her tongue in irritation and ran a gentle thumb over my tender cheek. "Anyway, my awful son should have woken me up the instant you all returned last night. I feel so rude for not receiving you after the ordeal you went through."

Rafe didn't react to her teasing insult, just took a gulp from his coffee instead.

"Not at all," I murmured back, shaking my head. "We didn't want to wake the whole palace up. How is King Felipe?"

Jacinta indicated I sit down, and a servant hurried over with a plate and silverware for me.

"He's doing so much better now," she told me with a warm smile. "He's absolutely overjoyed that the three of you are home. These last few weeks have been... so distressing." The warmth in her smile slipped, and I felt for her. Not only had her husband been critically injured in the resistance attack and her firstborn son captured by rebel leaders, she would have also been expected to single-handedly run the world's most powerful kingdom in their absence. Oh, and parent the twins... who were probably a full time job in themselves.

No joke, Queen Jacinta was a goddess.

"I'm sorry we added to that stress," I told her with sincerity. "I hope we can sit down with you and King Felipe today to explain everything that we know."

"Of course," she replied with a nod, then frowned slightly. "Did Rafe not provide you any new clothes?" She shot an annoyed look at her son, who just shrugged. He still hadn't looked at me. Not once. "I'm so sorry, Violet. I don't know what's gotten into him this morning."

There was a bump under the table, and Rafe jerked, shooting his mother a glare. I got the distinct impression she'd just kicked him, and it was way too funny not to smile.

"She's fine," Rafe muttered, flicking his cold gaze over me for the first time since I'd joined the breakfast table. "Those are clothes."

I glared back at him, but his gaze had already returned to his breakfast. Must be the best breakfast on the planet, as engrossed as he was.

"Those are *your* clothes, Rafael," Jacinta scolded. "Honestly, it's like trying to teach a cat how to flush the toilet. I apologize, Violet. I'll ensure new clothes are sent up to your room immediately." She indicated to her assistant, who nodded back to her while typing on her palm reader. "Are you in the blue room?"

I gave a frown of confusion. The blue room was where I'd stayed with Mattie the last time we were visiting.

"She's in my room," Rafe replied before I could say anything, "because of the medical staff using the blue room." He met his mother's curious gaze steadily, and she gave a slow nod.

"Ah, the medical staff," she agreed, shifting her eyes back to me. "Silly me, I forgot. Not to worry, though. Angelina will get clothes sent to Rafe's room for you."

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion at Rafe, but he wasn't looking at me. He'd finished his food and pushed his plate away as he stood up.

"I'm going to check on Jordy," he told Jacinta, dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

I startled. "Wait, I'll come too." I started to push my chair back from the table

again, but Rafe shook his head.

"I'd rather see him alone, Violet," he told me without meeting my eyes. "No offense, or anything." He left without another word, leaving me with my jaw ajar and my death glare burning into his back.

What the *fuck*?

"Isn't it so utterly infuriating when people use *no offense* to excuse their totally reprehensible behavior?" Jacinta commented as casually as if we were talking about flower arranging. "I'm tempted to tell you not to take it personally, sweetheart, but that was so clearly personal. Do you want to tell me what's going on with you two?"

My face flushed with heat, and I ducked my head back to my empty plate in front of me. Now that I was looking at it, I was freaking starving.

"Uh, it's complicated," I murmured, reaching out to the piles of food lining the middle of the table and serving up my plate. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to Rafe's mom about how her son fucked me in his bed last night, left his hand prints on my ass and his taste on my lips, then bailed the fuck out.

Jacinta made a thoughtful hum under her breath, then indicated something to her staff and assistant, who all hovered around the fringes of the room. A second later they all filed out and left us totally alone.

"Look, Violet," Jacinta said with a soft smile as I shoveled syrup-covered waffles into my mouth. "I know it's weird, talking to your boyfriend's mom about your sex life—"

Oh fuck. I choked on my food. She knew. She knew Rafe and I were... involved.

"—but I want you to know you can come to me with anything. Don't think of me as Rafe's mom... just as Jax. I'm pretty smart, you know? I could give you advice from a, uh, more experienced perspective?" Her expression and body language were open and inviting, not judgmental in the least. But shit, she had no clue. Surely.

Also, the problem wasn't discussing my sex life with Rafe's mom... it was discussing my sex life with the queen of the Switzerlands and one of the worlds most powerful rulers.

Yeah... No. This was a conversation I *should* have been having with Mattie. My soul sister. I needed to sort out this shit with the guys, then give my best bitch a call to catch up and really check that she was okay.

But what exactly could I say here? Without sounding like a rude asshole to the queen, that was.

"Um," I started, then took another huge bite of food to buy myself time.

Jacinta let out a sigh, stroking her palm over her long black hair. "Okay, I'm

sorry. This is making you uncomfortable, and that was never my intention. I just... Rafe told me how you don't have any family, and it occurred to me that maybe you have no one to talk to for advice. You know? The kind of advice a mother is meant to give her daughter. Lord willing, I won't need to have this conversation with Lucy-Liun anytime soon." She held up crossed fingers and gave me a rueful grin. "But I'm here for you... if you need me."

Shit. Her words struck me straight in the heart, and suddenly I wanted to tell her *everything*. Because she was right. I didn't have a mom. I didn't even have anything remotely close to a female role model in my life and a small—okay, large—part of me desperately wanted to take Jacinta up on her offer. She was the kind of mom I used to wish for. Instead, I had a woman who'd basically sold me off to the *bad* resistance, then walked away without a second glance.

When I didn't say anything, Jacinta reached out and poured me a coffee from the silver pot in front of her. "Here, mine is spiked with whiskey. Helps me deal with politicians first thing in the morning."

Her mischievous wink set me off laughing, until I inhaled a bit of waffle and almost died choking. When I finally recovered, it felt like I'd shifted more than just the chunk of waffle from my throat. I'd shifted something in my mind. In my reluctance to open up to people.

"It's just... it's a bit of a mess," I told her with a sigh, then took a gulp of my coffee and started coughing again. "Um, that's not spiked. It's straight whiskey."

Jacinta waved her hand dismissively. "Nonsense. There's a little coffee added for color." She grinned broadly. "Now, I assume you mean that it's a mess because of Jordy's involvement?"

My face must have drained of color. It had to have. There was no way I'd maintained a neutral expression at that comment.

"I'm not judging you, Violet," Jacinta assured me with a laugh. "In fact, I commend you for shirking the rules of expectation and going after what you want. You, my dear, are exactly the kind of leader our future needs."

My brows shot up. "Wh-what?"

"Sorry," she said with a grin. "That was off topic. So, things are complicated because you're in love with two men who are not only the crown heirs of their kingdoms, but also selfish alpha males and best friends to boot?"

I blinked a couple of times. "Um, yeah. That about sums it up." I didn't even flinch over her use of *love* in that sentence. It was true, after all. "Except now they've both suffered horrible treatment and pain at the hands of the bad-resistance and apparently that's all my fault because they've been grooming me to be the figurehead for their revolution and now I'm pretty sure Rafe and Jordan both hate me." It all fell out in one, long, run-on sentence. But such was the

nature of emotions... they didn't adhere to grammatical rules. "And for a moment there I thought Rafe and I were going to be okay because he fucked me like he *owned* me last night, but then basically as soon as he was done, he just *poof*"—I snapped my fingers—"up and left. Now he's being a surly bastard like I kicked a puppy in front of him or something."

I stopped there, sucking in a deep breath and feeling dizzying relief at offloading all that information from my chest. But then... I cringed.

"Sorry, that was more than you needed to know," I whispered to the *fucking queen of the Switzerlands* as I realized I'd just said her son *fucked me like he owned me*.

Whoops.

Jacinta gave a small chuckle. "It's totally fine, Violet. My son is an adult; I think we can be blunt. So, I have a couple of very quick questions for clarity." I nodded, my cheeks still flaming. "First, *bad-resistance*? Is that what we're calling them? It seems very unoriginal."

My jaw fell open, then I started laughing. Of all the things she could have asked... that was top of the list? Yeah, that sold me. Jacinta was a total winner.

"I don't know," I laughed. "It's less confusing than calling them all *Society* and then needing to clarify which part we're referring to."

"Hmm," she replied, tapping her perfectly painted fingernail on her chin. "I'll think on it. I'm sure my press manager will come up with something catchy. Now, I need you to be in perfect understanding of something here, Violet." She shifted in her chair so she was facing me more directly, reached out, and took my free hand in hers. My other hand was still clutching a waffle-laden fork.

"Um, this feels serious," I muttered, trying to lighten the mood.

"It is," she replied. "I need you to understand, with total confidence, that *none* of those things were your fault. None of them. Not the earthquake or the capture or anything that might have happened to the three of you in the *bad-resistance* camp. None of it, okay?"

I opened my mouth to disagree, but her stern look shut me up quickly.

"The people in charge of the various resistance factions have been in their positions of power for a long time, Violet. Everything they do has been carefully planned out, and *none of it* is your fault. Just because they tried to mold you into their chess piece, doesn't make you responsible. You're a victim, just as much as those poor people who died in the earthquake."

Her eyes were locked on mine, and I couldn't have looked away if I tried. All of her words were printing onto my soul with indelible ink and chipping away at my hardened tough-girl armor more than anyone I'd ever met.

Maybe this was what it was like to have a mom who cared?

Tears welled in my eyes, and I swallowed heavily to hold them back. "You haven't seen Jordan yet. He's—"

"Not your fault." Jacinta was firm. "I know that boy probably better than I know my own son. Rafe gave him an option to get out, but he chose to stay *for* you. Understood? Any and all horrors he experienced, the blame lies squarely at the feet of the men and women who inflicted them."

I took a shuddering breath, but nodded. She was right, in a way. Jordan had the opportunity to escape and leave me to my fate, but he'd chosen to stay... Surely that meant he still cared for me.

"Now," Jacinta continued, her eyes narrowing with determination. "As for my son."

I cringed. "I'm sorry; that was an overshare."

She gave an annoyed click of her tongue, but I knew it was aimed at Rafe, not me. "Well, overshare or not, I raised him better than that. What kind of man walks out on his woman right after sex and makes her feel like she did something wrong? No, absolutely not okay. I'll have to have words with him about that."

My heart fucking stopped. "What? No! Oh my god, please don't."

And that was how I died. Of mortification.

"I won't tell him you told me," she assured me... like that was really reassuring. "But please tell me he at least made you come. If he got his rocks off and didn't—"

"Oh my god, Jacinta! Stop!" I shrieked, covering my face with my hands in total, all-consuming embarrassment.

She laughed a low, self-amused sound. "I told you, call me Jax. I get the feeling we're going to be family for a good long time yet." She shot me a wink when I finally peeled my hands off my bruised face. I couldn't help it; her words made me all squishy inside. I'd never experienced anything even close to the emotions she was stirring up in me.

"Now," she continued. "How are my boys handling the sharing aspect of your ménage relationship? Are they playing nice, or are they like dogs fighting over a bone?"

I reached for my coffee and took a huge sip. I loved Jacinta, I really did. But I also wanted to throw my drink at her.

"They're..." I started to say, then broke off with a heavy sigh. "Yeah, option B. I know they're both just waiting for me to choose between them, but..." I shrugged, and Jacinta gave me a knowing smile.

"But you can't because you've fallen just as hard for both of them."

"Yeah."

"I figured." She gave me a gentle smile and patted my leg. "It'll be okay, Violet. Those boys love each other more than if they were blood. They'll never put their egos above their friendship, and *neither* of them would ever want to see you hurting. No matter what my pigheaded son might make you think."

I groaned. "So what do I do?"

Mattie would know. She'd have it all sorted like it was as easy as... I don't even know what. Washing my underwear or something. *That* easy.

Jax gave me a shrug, reaching out to top up her own *coffee*. "You have fun, Violet. You're eighteen and in a uniquely special position where you *can* just have fun. The fate of the world, the war between Monarchs and the Society? It's not your job to fix. Just take things one day at a time, and I think everything will work out in the end."

"And if it doesn't? If the press finds out the heirs of both New America and the Switzerlands are involved with the same dirt poor orphan? What happens then? There surely can't be a happily ever after when you take all those future responsibilities into account." Doom and gloom were creeping up on me once more, and I was losing sight of all that warm, fuzzy hope Jacinta—Jax—had just filled me with.

She shook her head. "Stop it. Stop what-if-ing. If we all lived in what-ifs, then nothing would ever get done around here. Live your life; enjoy your youth, your beauty, your privileged circumstances; and *ignore* the noise. All that other crap to do with lines of succession and political marriages? It's future-Violet's problem. A million things could change before you and the boys ever need to go public with your relationship, so why stress over it?"

I blinked at her several times, letting that sink in.

Fucking hell, she really was smart.

"Now, I'm going to go and check on Felipe and let him know you're all here safe. He'll want to see everyone as soon as possible." She pushed back her chair and patted me on the shoulder. "If we weren't talking about my own son, I'd say that I envy you, Violet. You're a lucky girl." The teasing wink she shot me as she left the room left me speechless, and I did the only thing I could think of to help gather my thoughts.

I drank more "coffee."

CHAPTER 13

*B*y the time I was done with breakfast, some of the tension had filtered away. I wasn't drunk or anything, but I had a good understanding of why Jacinta didn't stress a little booze to start her day.

This world was too fucked up to face it completely sober, at least not every day.

No one had come to find me, so again I set out to figure out what the hell was happening now. Frustrating as it was, just because Rafe and Jordan were giving me the cold shoulder didn't mean I'd accept being pushed into the background. I was an integral part of this, and even if I wanted to hand it back to the responsible adults, I needed to make sure Felipe and Jax knew everything first.

I needed to find Felipe.

Thankfully, I remembered where his study was, and despite a few curious looks at the blond chick wandering around in Rafe's clothing, no one stopped me or questioned what I was doing free-ranging around the castle.

In fact, I was almost certain that a few of them bowed to me as I passed, but I must have been mistaken. I sure as shit was no royal, but possibly they assumed I was. Or maybe I'd imagined the entire thing.

When I reached the closed door, I hesitated, second guessing myself, before I quickly pushed that aside and lifted my hand to knock. Just as I rapped my knuckles against it, I heard voices inside. They were too muffled through the heavy wood to make out the conversation, but it sounded like more than one man was talking.

"Come in, Violet!"

That shout was definitely from King Felipe, and I blinked at the door, wondering how the hell he knew it was me. It only took a quick glance up to see

a small camera-like device, and I had my answer.

Nervously, I entered, then closed the door firmly behind me. Light filled the room from floor to ceiling windows, and a roaring fireplace sent warmth through the whole space. A familiar face came into view in one of the high backed, hand-carved chairs right near the king.

"Mr. Wainwright?"

He got to his feet, hurrying over toward me. "I'm so happy to see you alive and well," he said in a rush, his eyes taking in the purple bruising on my cheek with a critical eye. "When we received word from Rafe that you'd been taken, we immediately started planning our course of action. I was not letting one of my team go down by those extremists."

Maybe I was slow today after my shitty night's sleep, but it took me a few moments to piece together the meaning of what he'd said. "You lead the good resistance?"

His lips twitched. "Haven't heard it referred to as the 'good' resistance before, but in essence, I am one of the twelve that make up our top council. We're scattered around the world with many recruits beneath us."

By this time, Felipe had gotten to his feet as well to move around the large table toward me. He looked great, and I stepped away from Mr. Wainwright so I could accept the hug he was offering. "I'm so glad you're alive," I choked out. "I spent weeks not knowing, and in my worst moments, I feared I'd never see you again."

Why Jacinta and Felipe felt like the parents I'd never had, I couldn't say, but there was something special about both of them.

Felipe squeezed me even tighter, and when he pulled back, his face grave, it reminded me so much of Rafe that my chest got tight and those tears that had been threatening to fall emerged again. "When I woke up to learn that you three had been taken," Felipe started, his face drawn, "it was my worst nightmare. Thankfully, Rafe had gotten in touch with George, and I knew that you were alive and we had a plan."

George?

Mr. Wainwright winked at me, and I remembered that was his first name. Well, he'd always be a Mr. to me.

"Rafe never told me anything," I admitted.

There was a scuffing sound at the door, and in walked the asshole himself. "You didn't need to know," he said shortly. "I kept you alive, and that was as much as needed to happen."

It was only Felipe's hand on my shoulder that stopped me from kicking Rafe's ass because I legitimately was at the end of my ability to handle his

moods. I'd been through a fucking lot as well, we all had, so why was he punishing me for that?

What had I actually done?

"Let's sit," Mr. Wainwright suggested, leading the way back to the chairs. "We have a lot to discuss."

Last time I'd visited Felipe's office, I'd been on the couch with Rafe and Jordan; this time I was on my own as Rafe took the other single chair across from his father.

When Felipe sat, it was maybe a little more gingerly than he had last time; otherwise, there were no visible signs of the injuries he'd sustained. "We've heard some of Rafe's account, but it would be nice to hear from you, Violet," he said, "along with any thoughts you've had on fixing this mess."

I paused. "You want my thoughts? I'm not sure what relevant experience or knowledge I could give to assist. I'm nothing."

Three sets of eyes latched onto me, varying emotions deep in all of them, but I didn't flinch. I was made of tougher shit than that, and if they really wanted my thoughts, I would give them uncensored.

"The Society believes that you are very important," Mr. Wainwright said. "Uriel taking you like that proves that there's more to you than we originally thought. I'm guessing that there is probably a lot we can learn from you, Violet."

"Yes," Felipe said confidently. "You are one of the most mature, self-assured, and capable young women I've had the pleasure of knowing in my many years. You remind me of my wife, and that woman could run circles around some of the current monarchs, if she set her mind to it."

In some ways she already did do that, and being compared to Jacinta was the highest compliment I could think of receiving.

Rafe remained silent like the piece of fuck he was. Well, his mouth did at least... His eyes, on the other hand, were practically glittering with some unsaid emotion.

"I was groomed to take over the bad-resistance," I started. "Pretty much from conception. My mother was a higher-up in their organization..."

I went on to tell them everything I'd learned from Uriel. Everything I'd lived through in my training, my life, my existence. All the ways the circumstances of my birth had screwed me before I'd even known that there was a war going on.

"He won't give up," I told them, wanting them to stop underestimating him. "I'm aware that you blew a large hole into his plans yesterday, but I know that man, and this is only going to make him worse."

He'd go underground and try and take them all apart.

"You think he'll come for you?"

Rafe spoke for the first time, and while I felt an urge to pretend I couldn't hear him, I didn't want Felipe to take back his "mature" comment from before.

"Yes. He's not one to allow his possessions to go free. He claimed me long ago, and in his head I belong to him."

Rafe's jaw clenched, and if he kept that up, his teeth would break. Still, he didn't say anything, and I tried to push through the heaviness in my chest.

"What Uriel and his people did," Mr. Wainwright said, cutting through the tension, "is not what the Society stands for. We were formed originally to try and break through the classism that monarchies created, to equalize the world a little so that it wouldn't always be the haves and have-nots."

"With all the *haves* being the royals," Felipe added. Ironically, as he was a royal.

Mr. Wainwright nodded. "Yes. And now Uriel has undermined what we were working toward with his attacks. Our aim was building toward an accords, one that has been in discussions for many years."

"Theoretically," Rafe added.

Nods all around. "Yes," Wainwright admitted. "Many of the royals have been opposed to the release of any power or control..."

He trailed off, and I found that interesting, like maybe something else had changed. "Is there any chance for these accords to go ahead?" I pushed.

The king and the leader of the resistance exchanged a look, and at Felipe's nod, Mr. Wainwright leaned forward toward me. "Actually, there is a chance. As I said, Uriel damaged the relationships we were building by attacking under our name, but there has been a silver lining emerging from that rubble."

If this old dude didn't get to the point soon, I was going to start throwing punches. My hands must have twitched, drawing Rafe's attention, and the knowing smile on his face told me he was calling me Violence in his head.

"A lot of the senior royals died in that attack," Mr. Wainwright continued. "Many that were heavily set in their ways. In their place the younger generation is stepping up, and it appears that they are much more open to the vote we are trying to establish."

Felipe nodded, looking pleased. "Especially the Australasias. Those old bastards would never have agreed to anything that removed any power from them, but Alex seems to be much more open to the discussion. With King Munroe of New America on board as well, we have the three strongest monarchies on our side, and that's the first time in a few decades."

I cleared my throat, face scrunching up as I tried to comprehend what they were saying. "Alex?" I repeated. "Alex is being open and reasonable?"

The Australasian prince I knew, was a mini-sociopath like his father. I guess

I could give him some credit for showing a little less inclination toward domination, but not a lot.

"So you're going to try and push this ahead now?" Rafe asked, leaning back in his chair. Fucker had the perfect leg spread going on, all relaxed and confident. I wondered if he ever had a moment where he was unsure about himself.

"Now is the best opportunity," Felipe confirmed. "We just wanted to double-check Violet's information and make sure she didn't hear of any other plans from Uriel."

I shook my head. "Just more of the same attacks like he undertook at the Academy. More bombings, more deaths of royals, and—once he'd completely demolished the foundation you all built the monarchies on and once the heirs were dead—he would step up as the supreme leader." True dictator style. Uriel's only problem with the way the monarchies ran the world was that he wasn't in charge. It had nothing to do with making a better life for regular people, no matter how much he pretended it was.

There was another knock on the door, and Felipe glanced down at his palm reader. But before he could say anything, the door opened and Jacinta stepped through. She didn't have to wait for an invitation; that woman was queen here.

"Sorry I'm late," she said breezily. "I had a few pressing issues with the twins." Leaning down she pressed a kiss to her husband's lips, lingering there for a moment. I hadn't seen them being affectionate like that the last time I'd been here, but maybe almost losing him had changed something between them.

Or maybe they had always been like this, and I just hadn't seen it before.

"Where were we?" she asked, taking a seat next to me and glaring at her son for a beat before facing Felipe.

"Our next step is to stop this war between the Society and the monarchies," Felipe said matter-of-factly.

Jacinta chuckled. "On to the easy part, then, I see."

Felipe's look was filled with mirth and a little heat as he smiled at his wife, and I again had the urge to punch Rafe in the throat. Bastard shouldn't be so damaged... Look at his fucking parents! They were like Prince Charming and Cinderella. The badass versions.

"We were going to ask Violet if she had any ideas," Mr. Wainwright interjected, folding his hands primly in front of him, "based on anything she learned from her time with Uriel."

All eyes looked to me, and Jacinta gave my hand a little squeeze in support. She thought I could do this, and I decided that speaking honestly was the only way I'd get through this.

"Something has to change. This is a fact, as I see it. I spent nine days enduring their brainwashing to see the evil in the monarchies, and while the many atrocities committed under royal rule were eye-opening, it didn't make me want to abandon it completely. It made me want to see a better system rise from the rubble."

"What sort of system?" Felipe asked, tilting his head to the side in consideration.

I cleared my throat. "Look, this is way above my pay grade. I don't have any experience with ruling anything and I know there are complexities that go far beyond my understanding, but surely there is a way to have a monarchy with some input from the people. A voting of sorts on at least rights and regulations that allow the average person more freedom and opportunities for the future."

There was a heavy silence, and I wondered if I'd fucked up in trying to allow the people a say as well. Surely that was what both sides wanted? A compromise?

Otherwise we'd be at war forever, neither side giving an inch, surrounded by so much death that there could be no winners.

CHAPTER 14

Just as the silence got uncomfortable enough that I was searching for an escape, Felipe nodded. "I think we can make it work."
Mr. Wainwright jerked his head around, blinking his eyes. "You've never considered any of the Society proposals before."

The king shrugged. "I'm a changed man. My life was almost stolen from me in senseless violence. It gave me a lot of time to think about my choices, choices for my kingdom, the future for my family... and my people. They are important to me, and maybe I've been lax in bolstering them toward the sort of future they deserve."

Rafe was paying close attention now, and for the first time in ages, he wore a softer expression—something that had started happening before we were taken by Uriel. I hadn't seen it since that night though, and despite the fact that it wasn't directed at me, some of the heavy weight on my chest lifted.

"I have a plan then," Mr. Wainwright said. "We've been working on it for a long time, but without the support of the monarchies, it would never have come to fruition."

Felipe nodded. "I'm ready to listen."

Mr. Wainwright looked like he was holding back tears, but he got it together quickly. "We propose that a People's Court be formed beneath each monarchy. It won't overrule the monarchy, but will be part of the council. We have written up a detailed breakdown of how it would work, but in short, it would allow the people's elected representatives voting rights on a number of issues. The People's Court would also be able to bring forth their own propositions, which the monarchies will be required to take into consideration."

He went on for the next few hours laying out the foundation for the plan. It was so much more detailed than I could have ever come up with on my own—

surprise, surprise—but I felt like it was a great compromise. It would give some power to the people and take some from the monarchy, but not abolish it completely for a new system of rule.

“With the three superpowers on board, we can make this happen,” Wainwright finished, sounding a little hoarse. He’d been talking nonstop for hours.

“Are you sure about Alex?” I pushed, still unable to believe he would agree to anything of the sort.

Rafe looked at me for the first time in what felt like a lifetime. “From all the reports we’ve received out of the Australasian court, Alex has had a pretty dramatic personality shift since the death of King Steve. His parents were the ones corrupting him, and he’d been on the receiving end of their cruelty enough to not want to ever disappoint them. But with their deaths, he is free to make his own choices and has agreed to a meeting between the Society and the monarchies.”

“Yeah, but the compromise of power being suggested here is quite substantial. I just don’t want you to feel too confident.”

“I’ll convince both Alex and Munroe that this is our best option moving forward without all the unnecessary violence and death,” Felipe interjected. “I also have multiple other monarchies in my ear. I think we can get this foundation put into place.”

Jacinta looked happy by the end result as well, her face relaxed as she waved her hands. “I love this path. It’s a good compromise, and I’m not afraid to lose some of our control. If we treat our people right, they won’t rebel against us, and that leads us to a brighter future.”

She stood suddenly. “And with that, I think it’s time for lunch. Violet and Rafe must be exhausted as well. I suggest after lunch you visit Jordan and then take a swim in the springs.” Her gaze met Wainwright’s and then Felipe’s. “Don’t forget they’re just young adults. This is not their responsibility to take on.”

Felipe got to his feet as well, smiling indulgently at Jacinta. “Yes, love. I won’t forget.” He turned to me. “If you’d like, though, I can let you know when the meeting will be called. You might find it interesting to be part of it.”

“I’d love to see history in the making,” I told him truthfully.

“You’re part of history in the making,” Jacinta reminded me, linking her arm through mine. “But before that happens, let’s eat.”

The lunch spread was impressive, but considering it was literally serving a king and queen, it was probably just normal for them. I hadn’t even realized how hungry I was until we’d sat down to eat, but when my stomach rumbled loudly, I blushed.

"Sorry," I muttered, feeling like the worst kind of bad-mannered idiot.

The monarchs just laughed, though. Not in an unkind way, either. It allowed us all to settle into a friendly sort of meal where the only tension present came from the intense way Rafe stared at me when he thought I wasn't looking.

In fact, I didn't look at him once during the meal. I was sick to fucking death of his drama, and if he wasn't man enough to just pull me aside and hash it out, then I didn't have any emotional space left to give him.

When I'd eaten my fill, I politely asked to be excused and inquired as to where I might find Jordan. I needed to see him, to know he was okay. Or... that he was *going* to be okay. And Jacinta's idea to go swimming in the springs was pulling at my mind. It would probably be incredible for his injuries, if his medics allowed him outside.

"I'll take you," Rafe announced, pushing back from the table.

I wanted to tell him where to shove his help, but while Felipe, Jacinta, and Mr. Wainwright were all watching... maybe that wasn't the best idea. So I gave a tight smile and nodded my acceptance.

Rafe stalked out of the dining room without waiting for me... he just expected me to follow on his heels like a good little puppy. It made me all punchy and shit.

My fists balled at my sides as we passed through the corridors, and then my temper caught the best of me and I launched a swift fist into his side. Or I would have if he hadn't spun around with lightning reflexes and grabbed my wrist to halt my punch.

Fucker.

"Now, now, Violence," he teased in a dark voice, "is that how we deal with our relationship issues? Throwing punches without warning?" He twisted me around so that my back was to his front, my arm locked in his grip between our bodies.

"You're lucky I wasn't aiming for your balls," I snarled back. "Fuck knows you deserve it after that bullshit last night."

Rafe let out a low chuckle, his breath stirring my hair. "Oh, you mean when I made you come four times and scream my name? Or when you swallowed my —"

"How about when you fucked me, then dumped me in a bathtub and disappeared in a puff of smoke? What the hell was that even about? Where'd you sleep last night, Rafe?" I was angry as shit, but I was also turned on as hell. Something about the push and pull between us triggered a primal part of my soul that just wanted to roll over and stick her cunt in the air like a cat in heat.

Rafe shifted his grip on me, pushing me against the wall right beside a huge

portrait of some long-dead Swiss leader. His hard length ground against my ass, and there was no denying the fact that he was just as aroused as me.

"I didn't realize we were the type to cuddle after sex, Violence," he told me in a dark whisper. He kept my wrist captive in a lock between us, but his free hand worked its way down the front of my pants. I was still wearing his borrowed clothes with no underwear—because mine had been gross as fuck—so his fingers met bare flesh. "Or are you really just angry because you woke up hot and needy and I wasn't there to get you off?"

Anger welled up in me, but before I could tell him to go fuck himself, he slipped a finger inside me. Dammit. My rage-filled retort just dissolved into a breathy sigh, and my hips surged forward, begging for more.

God damn him. I knew what he was doing. He was reminding me how badly my body craved his and deflecting from his shitty attitude and behavior. With monumental mental effort, I struggled out of his grip and moved away from him.

"Fuck you, Rafe." I snapped. "I don't deserve your bullshit. When you're ready to discuss what's actually got you all twisted up, I'm all ears. Until then, keep your hands, and your dick, to yourself. This shop is shut until further notice."

Good fortune smiled down on me, and I spotted a nurse leaving one of the guest rooms further along the hallway. Considering Felipe was still in the dining hall, I took a gamble that I'd find Jordan in there.

Thankfully, my gamble paid off because Rafe stalked off with a scowl like a thundercloud, and I wasn't keen on wandering aimlessly around the palace for the next hour.

"Jordy!" I exclaimed, seeing him sitting up in the king-size bed. He was covered in bruises and scabbing wounds, but otherwise he seemed okay. Physically, anyway. There was a shadowed darkness in his eyes that made my heart squeeze painfully.

His lips curved in a plastic smile when he saw me, and he indicated for me to come closer. "Violet, I'd wondered if maybe you'd forgotten about me."

Sourness turned my stomach. "What? No, I would never. Why would you think that?"

He gave a slight, one-shouldered shrug. "I dunno. Rafe was here for ages this morning, and all he said was that you were busy. I sorta figured maybe you had better things to do."

Wow.

"Um, what the fuck?" I scowled, sitting carefully on the edge of his bed. "Rafe specifically told me *not* to come and see you this morning. In fact, he was being a total douche-wad about it too. I would have come sooner, but we had to

discuss everything that happened with Felipe and Jacinta, and... Jordan, did you know Mr. Wainwright was really high up in the Society?"

I was babbling a bit, but I didn't care. Jordan had never been the sort of guy who'd make me feel uncomfortable. He always made me feel safe and secure. Cherished.

But the silence stretched between us, and my mood quickly dropped. How stupid of me to think just because we were free of Uriel, the effects of his torture would be gone. They clearly weren't, if the tension in Jordan's jaw was anything to judge on.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly when he said nothing back. I reached out to take his hand in mine, but he jerked away before our fingers touched.

Ouch.

"I'm fine," he lied. "The medics have said I should be good as new in a few days. No lasting damage." His voice was tight, and it sent waves of concern and desperation washing through me.

I bit my lip, thinking. I had never been a great one for talking about my own feelings, and my bonding moment with Jax over breakfast had pretty much drained me of all capacity for emotional discussions. But something was clearly wrong. I couldn't just take Jordan at his word... not when I cared so deeply about his well-being.

"I'm sorry to hear about Meghan," I told him in a quiet voice. "I know you weren't in love with her or anything, but—"

"I don't want to talk about her," Jordan snapped, cutting me off. His jaw tightened, and his gaze shifted to the window. His whole being radiated tension, and I was at a loss for how to fix it. But I needed to try.

"Jax suggested we go for a swim in the springs," I offered with a hopeful inflection in my voice. "The minerals in the water are supposed to help speed the healing process up."

He gave a bitter snort. "You believe that?"

I bit the inside of my cheek, letting the pain ground me. "I believe it can't do any harm. And I believe that you're really mad at me for everything that happened to us, but I don't want to just walk away from all of this. So I don't know." I shrugged, feeling hope slipping through my fingers. "Maybe I just want an excuse to be alone with you for a few minutes."

The nurse across the room, who'd been silently packing up her equipment, froze and gave us an awkward smile. "If my opinion is of any use," she whispered, "I think it's a great idea to take a swim. Those minerals are unlike anything else on Earth." She shot me a subtle wink before turning away from us.

Jordan's jaw was still tight as a bowstring, but he jerked a sharp nod. "Fine.

I'll meet you out there."

I grabbed onto that flimsy thread of hope and ran with it. Nodding quickly, I had an awkward little hesitation as I instinctively leaned forward to kiss him, then remembered things were all kinds of crazy between us and stopped again.

"I'll, uh," I stammered, standing up and running a nervous hand through my hair, "I'll get changed then."

I hurried back out of Jordan's room and spent the quick walk back to Rafe's room mentally berating my weird awkwardness. I'd never been such a nervous wreck around a guy before, and things with Jordan had all been so *natural* when we'd started seeing each other. This was all new territory for me, and I felt like I was messing it up monumentally.

Thankfully, Jax had made good on her promise to have clothing sent up to Rafe's room for me. There was a garment rack just inside the door with way more outfits hanging from it than I needed. Outfits for *all* different occasions, including an evening gown. Luckily, though, that meant there were also four different swimsuits to choose from.

I changed quickly into a red bikini, then grabbed a towel from Rafe's bathroom. I was in a hurry to get to the springs, not wanting to lose even a moment of time alone with Jordan. Maybe I could somehow get him to open up to me. He'd been tortured horribly, that was for sure. And he had every right to blame me.

But the selfish part of me still wanted to gain some kind of forgiveness. I wasn't ready to end things... with either of my princes. Not after Jax's pep talk over breakfast about just enjoying our youth together.

The bottom line was, I loved them both too much to give up without some sort of fight.

For Jordan, that fight was going to be an emotional one. It was going to require we both open up and talk out all our issues with an open mind and open heart.

For Rafe...

"Where are you going?" the devil himself asked as I rushed down the hallway that led to the outdoor spring. "Taking a swim?"

"What's it to you?" I snapped back, pausing to glare at Rafe. He was leaning against a doorframe like he'd just been leaving that room when he saw me.

His lips curled in a mean sort of smile. "When you're wearing my favorite color? Seems like an invitation."

I glanced down at the red bikini I'd chosen, then back at Rafe. "Nah, I just like how this one makes my tits look. I'm sure Jordan will appreciate it too, but I'll let you know later."

I shot him a sassy wink and hip pop, then spun around and made a speedy exit. When I was free and clear, I released a long sigh.

For Rafe, that fight would probably end up as a physical one. Whoever was left breathing at the end would be the victor.

Dysfunctional didn't even scratch the surface on this three-way relationship I'd somehow found myself in.

CHAPTER 15

Jordan was already at the springs when I got there, standing in the water with just the top half of his back visible as he stared across the spectacular view of mountains beyond the royal compound. My heart pounded hard in my chest, and I was torn between throwing myself into his arms and just playing it cool like this wasn't shredding me to pieces.

Dropping the towel on a chair, I made sure my hair was secured in a high ponytail before stepping into the warm water. Just like last time I was here, the water soothed me as it wrapped around my cuts and bruises, and as I got closer to Jordan, my eyes locked on all the battered skin I could see, I prayed that it was as healing as everyone here liked to think.

All of us needed a little healing, and not just for our physical injuries.

When I reached his side, he didn't turn toward me, and I didn't push him. We both stared at a picture-perfect image. Eventually, I had to catalog his injuries—it was just something I did. Cuts and bruises across basically every visible surface of skin. Whip marks on his arms and shoulders. A few burns on the underside of his chin leading down his throat.

"It wasn't that bad," he said.

I cleared my throat, trying to regain my equilibrium. "I've been tortured," I managed to get out. "It's pretty bad."

Jordan's laugh was derisive. "There is worse pain than physical injuries."

At this stage I had no fucking clue what he was talking about.

"Talk to me," I begged. "Don't shut me out. I'll do whatever I can to fix this."

That seemed to snap him out of the morose mood he was in. Morose turned to anger as he abandoned the view and finally met my gaze. "Did you fall back into bed with him? He had images of you, so many that I welcomed the torture

so I didn't have to focus on you fucking the man putting his cigar out on my skin."

I blinked at him, my brain screaming while my breaths hissed in and out forcefully. "I wasn't with Uriel," I said. "I slept with him once when I was sixteen. Any images would have been from that... or photo manipulation. I swear to you."

Jordan examined me, those dark eyes of his shadowed, and I was so desperate to see them back to normal because he trusted that I wasn't lying about this. "I think I just need a few days," he finally said, and I almost choked on the lump in my throat when he ran a finger over my cheek, voluntarily touching me. "I promise to work on sorting out the mess that is my head. Can you give me some time?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

Jordan's smile was almost normal as he turned and waded back through the water, leaving me there. I didn't follow him with my eyes, unable to stand the sight of someone else walking away from me. Focusing on the view, I blinked over and over, fighting with everything I had not to cry.

A battle I lost as the first tear slipped free. It burned against my cool skin and started an avalanche of agony that I couldn't stem. How had everything gone from perfect to a fucking mess so quickly? Even for me, that was impressive. Weeks of being trapped in a prison of Uriel's making had taken its toll on me as well, and I'd finally reached the end of my ability to handle it.

The pain in my gut was so bad, equally matching the pain in my chest, as I leaned forward and braced my hands on my knees to stop myself from crumbling into a little ball.

"Five more minutes," I sobbed out loud. "You have five more fucking minutes to fall apart before it's time to get your game face on."

Saying the words out loud should have helped me calm my shit, but if anything, it had the opposite effect. My knees crumpled a little, and just as I was going down under the water, arms wrapped around me, catching me as they dragged me back into a firm chest.

"I'm sorry, baby," Jordan whispered by my ear, holding me with a firm grip that must have hurt him. "I fucked that up. I keep doing that."

Another sob. More fucking sobs. I couldn't shut it down, couldn't make it stop.

"I'm the one fucking up everything," I choked out. "You don't even know the whole story. I've been a disaster since birth with a destiny that no one would want."

His hold didn't ease. "Rafe told me everything, and I don't give a shit about

any of that. Rafe and I both need to pull our heads out of our asses."

He released me just enough that he could turn me to face him. "I haven't even asked how you're handling everything," Jordan whispered, anguish in his voice. "I didn't want you to have to deal with me when I'm like this, but hurting you more... it's not an option."

"I'm sorry," I sobbed, my face feeling hot and swollen. "I'm so, so sorry they hurt you."

When he leaned over and pressed his lips to mine, more tears fell—the pain was agonizing. Everything about this felt like a goodbye moment, and I wasn't sure I could handle that.

When Jordan pulled away, his eyes were red, and even if there were no tears, his pain was just as transparent as mine. "You're leaving me, aren't you?"

His eyes narrowed. "Not a fucking chance, Violet."

I—What?

This time when he kissed me, there was not a single ounce of "goodbye" in it; if anything, Jordan kissed me like he'd been desperately craving this his entire life. It started slower, soft as he explored my mouth and I did the same to him in return. I needed this even more than I'd realized, and neither of us were in a rush.

Savoring it was a good way to describe it.

"I was so fucking worried about you," Jordan breathed, pulling back. "The things Uriel said he would do to you—the things he said he *did* do to you—made me lose my mind."

I was going to kill him. Uriel had fucked with my life one too many times, and I didn't care how long it took, one day I would end that son of a bitch.

Jordan distracted me from my murderous thoughts by lifting me up in the water, bringing our faces closer together. As I wrapped my legs around him, trying to be as gentle as I could, he started to walk backward, heading toward a familiar alcove.

"Last time I didn't get to finish what I started," he murmured, kissing me between each word. "This time I won't stop."

Normally I would have threatened to kill him if he did. But it felt like we'd all come too close to that recently, so I just pulled myself closer and said, "Please don't. I need you."

Jordan's face fell. "I'm sorry, Vi. I hurt you, and that was never my intention. My own fucked up thoughts sent me down a dark path."

Not wanting to cry again, I lifted my head, needing to get back to the kissing. Jordan obliged, and as my lips parted and his tongue stroked across mine, my body responded in kind, rocking into the hard length pressed against my thin bikini bottoms.

"Is this hurting you?" I gasped when he released me.

"Not even a little."

His hands went to my waist, lifting me higher so that he could reach beneath my swimsuit and stroke across my clit. Wetness gathered at his touch. I was so ready, craving this moment with Jordan. Apparently both of us were impatient because he didn't undress me, choosing instead to pull my swimsuit aside as I freed him from his shorts. His long, hard length was silky under my touch, and as he lifted me a little higher, I slid down onto him, groaning as he filled me completely.

"Jordan."

"Violet," he replied. "You feel so fucking good."

The water helped as he started to move inside of me, stroking in and out with long, sure movements that had whimpers falling from my lips as my body responded fully. No more words were spoken between us, but Jordan never took his eyes from mine and when I came, his lips swallowed my cries.

Carrying the bulk of my weight, he moved farther into the pools to where it was shallow enough that he could lay me back on the smooth, natural stones that had been worn over time until they were like marble. Setting me down gently, he moved harder and faster, and I wrapped my legs around him, needing to be as close as I could to my sweet prince.

His tongue caressed my nipples through the swimsuit top, and they were so sensitive that I knew I wasn't going to be able to hold out for much longer. As my moans got louder, the spiraling in my center exploded, and I cried out his name.

"Baby, holy fuck," he groaned, following me as he jerked inside of me, both of us coming for what felt like ten minutes.

The next part was almost as good as the sex. Jordan didn't drop my ass in the water and storm away; instead, he helped me fix my swimsuit. Then together we floated in the water, chatting about nothing and everything at the same time.

I'd be an idiot not to notice that he was different. There was a sliver of steel at his core that hadn't been there before, a violence that was quicker to appear in his eyes—especially when I spoke about Uriel and any plans of the *bad resistance*—but he didn't take it out on me again. I had to hope and pray that meant we could move back to a relationship like before.

A few hours later, I was wrinkled as fuck and it was time to get out. I'd been avoiding it because going back to reality meant going back to whatever was left of the world I'd been trying to rebuild before.

With towels around us, Jordan and I made our way into the house, only to find Rafe waiting in the main hall, leaning against the wall in what would have

been a casual stance, if not for the tense expression on his face.

I knew him well enough now to know he was unhappy. "Call Mattie," he said, thrusting a palm reader at me.

Instinctively I reached out and grabbed the device, noting it was brand new and top-of-the-line, even fancier than the one I'd originally been gifted.

"Why? Is she okay?" I burst out. After Rafe's earlier statement that she and Nolan were okay, I'd checked up on my best friend as soon as I could and had been happy to learn that she'd been saved during the academy blast by Zach. He'd moved up a couple rungs on the ladder with that action, so he was exactly two rungs off the ground.

"No, she just wanted to talk to you," Rafe replied. His gaze left me to run over Jordan. "You're looking better, brother. I'm happy to see that."

Then he spun on his heel and disappeared.

The heaviness was back in my chest, but I pushed it aside. "Want to join me for dinner?" I asked Jordan.

His smile was sad. "I should probably get some rest. Healing up is taking a lot longer than I'd like."

I chuckled sadly. "You were tortured for nearly a month and have been healing for two days. I don't think you're being very fair."

His rueful smile was my reply before he brushed a hand across my face and then headed toward his room. Angry at myself, heartsick, and hurting, I made my way to Rafe's room to get changed into something comfortable and ask the staff if I could just have dinner in my room, as I wasn't feeling up to being social again.

I tried calling Mattie, but she didn't answer. So I sent her about sixteen text messages instead, telling her how much I missed her beautiful ass.

The dinner tray arrived twenty minutes later with salad, bread, and some chicken tenders on it. Simple and delicious, it was one of my favorite meals, and I wondered if that was a coincidence or not.

By the time I fell into bed that night, I was exhausted and broken. I'd been here before and knew I'd claw my way out of the darkness, but for now I'd embrace the pain and let it carry me away.

CHAPTER 16

“You’ll be heading back to the academy today,” Felipe announced at breakfast. “We don’t want you to miss any more classes, and it’s best to get back to normal.”

Jordan and I both lifted our heads from where we’d been shoveling pancakes in. Rafe didn’t even react, so he probably already knew.

“I know I don’t have to tell you all to be careful,” Felipe continued. “Uriel and others from the extremists are still out there, and the school does not have security like our home.”

His eyes met mine. “Stick with my boys, Violet. You’re part of this family now, and we will protect you.”

I shot him a loving, cheeky smile. “I can protect myself, Felipe. And our boys.”

The king shook his head at me. “I’m too old to get another call saying you’ve been hurt or kidnapped. See that I don’t live through it again.”

“I will,” I said seriously. “I’m not letting anyone steal this life from me.”

That seemed to satisfy him, and I went back to breakfast so I didn’t have to think about everything else that was happening today. My palm reader buzzed.

Mattie: **Are you back today, bitch? Thanks for blowing up my messages last night, by the way.**

Trying not to laugh, I quickly messaged back.

Yep. Should be on a plane in a couple of hours.

Mattie: **I have so much fucking gossip to share with you. Also, I need you to talk me down from Zach. I’ve been dreaming about his cock, and I don’t know what to do about that.**

This time I couldn’t stop my laughter, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. “Mattie,” I said by way of explanation.

Who knew you only had to be rescued by your forced fiancé and you'd be all over that boy?

I could almost hear Mattie's scream of frustration.

Mattie: He's a total asshole too. And apparently I like that.

My eyes flicked up to Rafe, who was talking to his mom, the two of their heads close together, looking serious. They both turned at the same time, then, and met my gaze. I had a sneaking suspicion that whatever they'd been saying, my name had come up.

Girl, same. I typed quickly to Mattie. **As much as I wish I didn't.**

After promising to find her as soon as I got back to the academy, I went up to Rafe's room to pack the clothing Jax had insisted I take with me. Adding that to what was in my closet at the academy, I'd never been so well dressed in my life.

"You ready, Cinderella?" Rafe said, entering the room in slow, sure strides. "Plane is waiting for us."

I ignored him.

He'd heard me last time when I'd said that I was done until he started treating me the way I deserved to be treated. I hadn't done anything to him. This was not my fault. I was going to keep repeating that every single time I felt self-doubt creep in.

Zippering up the small, black overnight bag, I slung it over my shoulder and turned to march from the room. Rafe, with that unreadable expression he did so well, had almost let me pass before his hand shot out and he wrapped those long fingers around my forearm.

"I know what you're doing," he murmured.

I shook my head, the sadness I felt streaming to the surface. "You have no idea," I told him. "I don't play games when it comes to my heart, and Uriel appearing like that again was the biggest reminder of all that I will never let someone debase me again, even if I love them."

Shock spread across his face, blue eyes wide as they stared at me. I was almost certain I'd never seen Rafe speechless before. Not like this.

"See you on the plane," I said, pulling my arm free and marching from the room.

He caught up to me in seconds and, before I could do anything, grabbed the straps of my bag and lifted it up off my arm. "I don't need your help," I snapped. "Stop touching me without my permission."

"Vi," he said, and his tone ground me to a halt. "I need to do something right now or..."

He trailed off, but I knew what those unspoken words would be. He had to do something, or he was going to lose his shit. See, that was the part that hurt the

worst. Rafe and I got each other on a level I wasn't sure anyone else ever would. In some ways, I understood exactly why he'd been pushing me away since we got back, or even before that. He'd gone into soldier mode at the compound for the extremists, and he hadn't been able to pull himself out of it since. Soldier mode didn't allow for softer feelings. It didn't allow for love or happiness or joy. You had one fucking job and you did it.

"Never speak to me like shit again," I warned him, releasing my hold on the bag. "I'm not your punching bag when you're angry."

I didn't wait around for his answer, spinning on my heel to hurry off toward the front of the house. The car would be waiting there.

Rafe remained with me, my silent shadow. I legitimately had no idea if anything was fixed or not between us, but it was the start of something. Probably next time we'd sort the rest out with fists and weapons, and part of me really looked forward to that.

Jacinta and Felipe were the only ones to wave us off, giving each of us a tight hug. Jordan winced a little, and Felipe chuckled. "Sorry about that, son. The nurse told us you were all clear to return, but these things take time, I know."

"Totally fine," Jordan said. "It's just a dull ache now. I'm good as new."

He wasn't. The bruises had faded to a nice shade of yellow and green, his cuts scabbed over, and the scrapes were barely visible. He looked like someone who had been in a pretty serious car accident, but there was no doubt he was healing up. And that was all that mattered.

A single car waited out the front, already running, and one of the security hurried over to open the doors for us. Rafe took the driver's side, and I was about to get into the back seat when he shot me a look. It wasn't as growly as usual, but it was the same sort of look he'd given me when he'd wanted to take my bag.

For fuck's sake. We had to work on this boy's communication skills. And his caveman possessiveness.

When I slid into the front seat, I noticed that he actually half-smiled as he shifted his seat into place. Yeah, me doing what he wanted made him happy, and it looked like he was learning that honey worked better than vinegar when it came to me compromising.

Once our bags were in the car and Jordan in the back seat, we all waved to the king and queen of the Switzerlands, and then Rafe drove off of his estate. The path was familiar—we had taken it not long ago when we'd visited before the dance. The dance that had changed everything.

"Feels like a lifetime ago that we last made this journey." I sighed, looking out the window. "Can't believe it was only a month."

Jordan leaned forward, his hand landing on my shoulder. Rafe's chest did a

rumbly thing while his mouth made an annoyed sound. Jordan and I exchanged a glance before we turned to the broody one of the group. "Rafe is having trouble remembering his manners," Jordan said, kissing me on the cheek. "He might need the same wake-up call you gave me."

I snorted. "If you think I'm going to cry in front of that bastard so he can mock me for my weakness, you're insane, America. Rafe gets no more ammunition to use against me."

The prickly prince growled again. "I'm right fucking here; no need to talk about me like I'm not."

"When you act like this, I kinda wish you weren't here," I said. It was the truth, even if it was a little mean.

We were about halfway down the long, winding road to the airfield now, and we all lurched forward when Rafe slammed the brakes on, pulling the car to a halt off to the side. Once it was in park, he turned toward me and cupped my face with his hands. My eyes were the only warning he needed, boring into him as a reminder that no longer was my body free for him to touch. His hands dropped away.

"I never want to see you cry," he told me. His face was serious and without any attitude for once. "You cried in your sleep a few times at the extremists' camp, and I wanted to burn the entire fucking place down."

He'd been watching me even more than I'd realized, which would have been hard while trying to remain undercover and keep an eye on Jordan. I wondered if he'd slept much in the past month. Or had he spent that entire time awake, brooding, and letting the darkness consume him?

"I'm tired, Rafe," I whispered, feeling it in my bones. "Tired of fighting and being scared and hurting. It's... a lot. You are a lot. Like I said before, I don't play games, and this feels an awful lot like one."

His smile was wonky, but it seemed genuine. "It's not a game to me, Violet. Never was nor will be." Then oh-so gently, he leaned over and pressed his lips to mine, the first soft touch he'd initiated since our return. "I'll prove it to you."

Jordan snorted from the back seat, and when I turned to him, he didn't appear to be remotely upset by this conversation. If anything, his eyes were brighter with fewer shadows than he'd been sporting recently.

Rafe released a long breath, and then released me to go back to driving. We were on the road again in a few seconds, and minutes later we pulled into the outer perimeter of the private airfield his family used to store their planes.

It took almost no time at all to board the small jet, as they were expecting us. Jordan and Rafe each took a seat on either side of the narrow aisle, and I hesitated a moment while trying to decide where to sit.

"Ma'am," the flight attendant politely prompted me. "Please take a seat; we're ready to take off."

Rafe reached out, snagging an arm around my waist, and hauled me into his lap to hold me tightly against his chest.

"Uh, Your Highness," the pretty flight attendant said, frowning at my "seat" with confusion and annoyance. "For safety reasons—"

"She's fine here," Rafe snapped, cutting off her protest with an angry growl. "Let's go."

I gave the woman a small shrug. Who was I to argue with the crown prince of the Switzerlands, after all?

The flight attendant released a small frustrated sound, but nonetheless, made her way back to the cockpit to tell the captain we were ready for takeoff. Rafe didn't say anything else; he just shifted my weight to a more comfortable position in his lap and linked his arms around me like the most secure safety belt on earth.

I sighed, relaxing against him. I knew what he was doing; he was trying to mend things between us without having to use any real words. Well, newsflash, that wasn't going to cut it this time. If we had any hope of a future together, no matter how brief, then we needed to have some serious discussions about feelings, expectations, and boundaries. All three of us.

My gaze met Jordan's across the aisle, and he gave me a soft, knowing smile. It brought Jax's words back to the forefront of my mind. These guys were closer than brothers. They wouldn't force me to choose... would they?

I seriously hoped not. The idea of hurting one of them was so unappealing I'd be more likely to walk away from both of them than choose.

CHAPTER 17

A shrill squeal followed by a crash-tackle hug onto the grass in front of Arbon Academy was the best kind of welcome I could hope for.

"You're back!" Mattie screamed, almost deafening me in the process. "I missed you so freaking much, you have no damn idea! Noles has been driving me fucking *insane*."

"Hey, screw you," her twin replied, plucking Mattie off me by the back of her shirt. "Get out of the way; I need to smother New Girl with all my affection."

I'd only made it halfway back to my feet before the other red-haired twin launched at me, knocking me back into the grass. Nolan wrapped his arms and legs around me like some kind of overgrown, four-legged octopus and started peppering kisses all over my hair in a way that set me off laughing uncontrollably.

I'd missed the twins—of course I had. But I hadn't realized just *how much* until the two of them were right there in the flesh and fighting over who got to shower me with more love. They were completely ridiculous, and I loved them to pieces.

"Friends with a guy for twelve years and this is the reception we get?" Jordan commented in an exaggerated mutter. "Nah, that's cool, Noles. Not like we weren't also held captive in an extremist camp for a month or anything."

Nolan pulled away from me just far enough to give me a devilish grin, and I snickered in response. Jordan needed to be more careful what he joked about around the twins.

Seconds later, Nolan had Jordan wrapped in a bear hug as he tried to kiss his friend's face, and Jordan pushed him away in good-natured disgust. He was laughing, but I knew it had to hurt his still-fading bruises. Thankfully, Nolan let him go a moment later, and I didn't have to go all cavewoman on his ass.

Rafe gave his friend a short nod of greeting, but Noles was apparently feeling suicidal and tried to hug him as well.

Mattie and I laughed together, her arm looped around my waist, as the boys tussled on the grass like they were back in the sandbox. It was cute as shit.

"So, I missed a bunch of gossip, huh?" I asked as we wandered up the steps and left the guys behind. "I'm almost scared to ask."

Mattie groaned dramatically. "Oh, girl. So much gossip. I mean, not the least of which was about you three and what happened to you in the aftermath of the earthquake. For, like, at least a day everyone was saying you all got killed, but like, obviously they've never met you guys." She snorted a laugh. "As *if* you could be killed that easily."

I grinned. "You know me so well."

"Fuck yeah, I do." Mattie hip bumped me, and I snickered.

"So, Zach's getting under your skin, huh?" I wagged my eyebrows at her, and she gave a melodramatic groan.

"Oh my *god*, where do I even start? Let's order food up to your room and chat there. He's got a terrible habit of lurking in the shadows and popping out when I least expect it, like some kind of fucking stalker." She rolled her eyes, but there was a blush to her cheeks that told me she didn't totally hate it.

"Who's a stalker?"

Mattie let out a small scream, whirling around to smack her *betroted* in the chest. He really had just appeared out of nowhere, or so it seemed. Most likely he'd just come from around the corner and heard us talking.

"What the fuck, you psychopath! You could have given me a heart attack," Mattie snarled, parking her hands on her hips.

Zach ignored her outburst, instead meeting my eyes with a curious stare. "Violet," he said, "nice to see you made it back in one piece."

I scowled at him. He'd probably known something would go down that night, and he'd said nothing. I didn't think for a fucking second that it was a coincidence he'd managed to get Mattie safely out of the room right before the quake struck.

"No thanks to your friends," I replied, my voice acidic. "They almost killed Jordan. Did you know that? They tortured him for almost an entire month. Something *you* probably could have prevented if you'd given us a heads up."

Zach's face blanched. "I didn't know. I'm not allied to Uriel's faction."

"Right," I said with dripping sarcasm, "of course you didn't. Come on, Mattie, I have some new swimsuits to show you that Jax bought for me." I shot Zach a sneer. "I hope that doesn't make you insecure... You do know Mattie bats for both teams, right?"

Looping my arm back through hers, I dragged my friend away from her playboy fiancé and hurried up the stairs to the girl's dorm wing.

"Sorry," I muttered to her when I was sure we were out of earshot. "I didn't mean to—"

"No apologies needed," Mattie cut me off, her voice bubbling with laughter. "The look on his face right then was fucking priceless. Oh my god, I wish I'd caught that on camera. Arrogant son of a bitch... It's about damn time he got a taste of his own medicine." She was positively gleeful, skipping ahead of me down the Persian rug that lined our corridor. "I've totally been playing this all wrong with him."

I rolled my eyes. "Don't count on me to be your fake girlfriend, babe. I'm all for helping you make him eat his mistakes, but I have a couple of princes who might get bent out of shape if I start sitting in your lap at lunch time."

Mattie gasped in mock horror. "Um, excuse me? It'd totally be *me* in *your* lap, but you have a fair point. I definitely don't want to end up on Rafe's bad side."

We ended up in Mattie's room, and she called our in-room dining order to the kitchens. It was the weekend—thank goodness—so none of us were expected to show up to classes for another day and a half. It would give us a chance to settle back in and get the lay of the new hierarchy.

Claudette was gone, along with her parents, which left her little sister Victoria as the ruler of the Britains. Drake's parents had been killed, making him king of Denmark. But the best news? The king of Siberia had been killed in a totally separate yet coordinated attack from the bad-resistance. I shouldn't have been happy about any murders, but after learning what they'd been doing with their forced-breeding programs? Yeah. I was glad for that death.

We had to hope his wife—who inherited the throne—wouldn't continue his policies.

"King Felipe truly believes they might have the support now to bring about a council for the people?" Mattie asked, shaking her head as she leaned back on her elbows, looking every inch a princess with her perfect hair and designer clothing.

I shrugged. "Felipe and Wainwright were confident."

She mulled that over. "What exactly will this council entail? How will it even work? I mean, it would be cool to see some change, and while I'm not sure if my parents will vote yes or no, they definitely aren't happy with the constant state of turmoil. This might be a nice compromise."

Hitting me with the hard questions. "Basically, the part I understood anyway, was that there would be a council for the people incorporated into each royal

kingdom. In doing so, it would be the tipping point to stop the resistance from... resisting. It sounds like the monarchy won't lose too much power, more of, as you said, a compromise. There's no guarantee, though... not when it comes to power. People always think they're happy to share it right up until the moment fantasy becomes reality."

"So true," Mattie said with a sigh. "But the good news is that a lot of the new monarchs haven't had time to play with their power yet. So maybe they'll learn how to share before it's too late."

"I fucking hope so," I said, feeling tension settle in my chest. "Just the thought of dealing with Uriel ever again makes my skin crawl. We need to remove the resistance as a beacon of hope and instill a different system."

Mattie was out of her slouched position now. "Tell me everything about this Uriel."

Over the next hour I spilled my entire life to her—every single, horrible moment that led to my kidnapping, including the sex and rejection. "The thing is, if I hadn't won the ballot," I said with a dry laugh, "I would have been much more open to the idea of destroying the monarchy. In hindsight, it was legitimately the worst move the resistance could have made."

"They didn't expect you to find us," Mattie said confidently. "They thought the assholes here, like Alex and Claudette would increase your hatred."

I nodded, having come to the same conclusion. "The resistance was never going to let the Alex thing happen; they already had ways to get around that. But even if I had ended up marrying into that family, no doubt they'd have used me to take them down."

I didn't know all the details but it didn't matter anymore. That path—those plans that had been crafted since my birth—had been destroyed long ago, basically the moment I fell in love with my little circle of royals.

"I'm so happy you're okay," Mattie said huskily. "After you went missing, I couldn't stop crying. Nolan and I flew home so we could use our satellite tech to try and find you. You were so off-grid, though, that I got nothing." She coughed a little to hide a sob. "Thank fuck Rafe finally got in touch so I at least knew you were alive."

Our hug went on for a long time, and I felt a little lighter when we pulled apart. Since seeing Uriel again at the compound, I'd been carrying around this darkness that I couldn't put away. Piece by piece, my friends were helping me step back to the Violet I'd been before the world went to shit.

"You're the best fucking friend a girl could wish for," I told her truthfully. "And I'm lucky to have you."

Mattie shrugged. "I know."

We both cracked up laughing just as a heavy knock sounded on her door. "Come in, Rafe," Mattie said with an eye roll. Boy had a very distinct heavy hand on him, that was for sure.

He marched in, Jordan and Nolan right behind him. "Why isn't your door locked?" he growled.

Mattie just raised her eyebrows at him, unperturbed by his attitude. "Uh, maybe because it's three in the afternoon and the school is bustling with students."

His jaw started doing that twitchy thing that meant he was losing his shit internally and just hadn't figured out what or who to punch yet. "I'm sure by now you've heard about Uriel," Jordan said, our peacemaker. "He's highly-trained, skilled, and very evil. He will stop at nothing to get Violet into his grasp. We can't take any risks with her until he's dead and buried."

I lifted my hand in the air. "Dibs on killing him."

Mattie turned wide eyes on me. "Is he really that dangerous? Like... more than you and Rafe?"

I tried not to laugh at that. "Yes. More than me and Rafe. Combined."

"Well, fuck," she breathed, before launching herself off her bed to lock her door and slide the deadbolt across.

Rafe crossed his arms. "He's sneakier, not better. I just need to lure him out of the shadows first."

"Mine," I repeated.

Nolan chose that moment to laugh, grab some of our leftover junk food, and collapse into the chair, shoveling it into his mouth. "Only my family would fight over who gets to kill a dude," he said, laughing even harder. Bastard was going to choke on his food if he kept that up. "I love my life."

Rafe shook his head, but didn't say anything. Nolan was a pain in the ass, but he was our pain in the ass, and sometimes the relief that came with his lightheartedness was exactly what we all needed to start healing. Feeling more like our old selves.

"Safe and secure," Mattie chirped, and when I looked over to the door, laughter spilled out before I could stop it. She'd dragged her side table in front of it and piled all her shoes on top.

She shrugged. "If anyone shakes my door, all the shoes will fall off, and we'll have a warning."

Jordan wrapped his arm around her when she walked by. "How are we going to get out though?"

Mattie wrinkled her nose. "Hmmm. No idea. Guess you'll all just have to live here. We can make it work."

That had all of Nolan's attention. "I suggest a rotation of who sleeps with whom, minus Mattie and me because we're not into twincest."

Rafe looked like he was refraining from speaking his mind, and I had to admire his restraint.

The rest of the afternoon was the most normal I'd had in a very long time. To think that only a few days before this I was being brainwashed in a compound filled with extremists and murderers... It was difficult to comprehend the entire thing.

As night fell, I grew more tired, and when I'd yawned for the tenth time, Rafe reached down and scooped me off the bed and into his arms. "Violet needs to sleep," he said. "Someone is going to have to de-shoe the front door for us."

Mattie snorted. "No one murdered us, did they? I'd say a hundred percent success rate."

"Put me down," I said to Rafe when he started to walk. "I'm not that tired."

He muttered something about being a pain in the ass, but he did set me on my feet. When the door was clear, I hugged Mattie and Nolan before strolling off toward my room. Rafe and Jordan both caught me, each of them taking a hand and dragging me to a halt.

"Rafe's room is the safest," Jordan said. "We will be sticking together." There was a bite in his tone, like some of his demons were creeping back in.

"Okay."

Their astonishment at my lack of argument might be a little insulting, but I was definitely happier when we were together.

That way I could protect them too.

CHAPTER 18

Rafe's room was twice the size of mine, and his bed was larger too, so when I crawled in later that night, showered and dressed just in one of his shirts, there was plenty of space between the three of us.

No one moved closer—we stayed as we were for this weird, awkward moment—and then, in almost the same instant, both princes rolled over into me, draping their long-ass arms and legs all over my body, cocooning me in their heat and protection.

"We got you, Vi," Jordan murmured. "You can sleep. No one will touch you tonight."

It probably didn't take any great leap of imagination to know how badly I'd been sleeping the past month. First while locked in a cell and beaten, then constantly on guard for Uriel's late night visits. But still, my chest felt tight knowing that they were here with me. Finally, all three of us were together, and there was barely even any anger simmering in the air.

It almost felt... peaceful.

Jordan was the first to pass out; his injuries had him hurting and more tired than usual, and he needed the rest. Rafe was wide awake, his breathing even as he traced his fingers over my skin, almost absent-mindedly.

"Sleep, baby." His voice was a husky whisper. "You need to rest."

Wiggling a little, I moved out from under Jordan so I could turn to face Rafe. In the near darkness, I couldn't see much, but I knew his eyes were on mine.

Leaning forward, I searched for his mouth, and he moved to find mine in the same instant. The kiss was soft—an almost foreign concept for us. "Rafe," I whispered. There were so many unspoken things that we needed to say.

"It'll keep until tomorrow," he told me. "Tonight we sleep."

I nodded, not sure he could see it. Closing my eyes, I stayed the way I was,

facing Rafe, needing to try and regain some of the closeness we'd had before the kidnapping. Eventually, his soft caresses on my back and rhythmic breathing lulled me to sleep—only to have me jerked awake a few hours later by a cry.

I dragged myself up from the dead sleep I'd been in—my body dangerously weighed down by exhaustion.

"Jordan," Rafe said shortly, way more awake than me. "He's having a nightmare."

It took way too long to orient myself and figure out what that meant. If we'd been under attack, I'd be dead. I couldn't let myself get this tired again.

Jordan writhed on the bed, his skin burning hot when I reached out and touched him. He growled and jerked away, but didn't wake.

"Don't touch her!" he mumbled with ferocity. "Don't hurt her."

"Fucking hell." I wanted to cry; the anguish in his voice was killing me.

"Jordan," Rafe said, trying to snap him out. "Brother. You're having a nightmare."

Just more moans and sad sounds. When I couldn't take it any longer, I threw myself onto him as gently as I could, while still wrapping my arms around him and holding him close. "Jordan, I'm here," I said. "Everyone is safe. We're all okay."

I kept saying it over and over, holding him as he tried to jerk free, until eventually he calmed and fell back into a deep sleep. My entire body trembled as I kneeled beside him. I tried to shift away, but his arms tensed around my waist, pulling me back to him. And I let him.

Moving carefully, I got comfortable again with Jordan wrapped around me like a blanket, and kissed his hair.

"He was having nightmares about me," I whispered into the darkness, knowing Rafe was still right there with us, despite his silence.

He released a long breath, lying down behind me and brushing my tangled hair back to expose my shoulder. "It wasn't about *you*, Vi," he replied in a hushed voice. His soft lips touched my shoulder, pressing feather-light kisses to my skin. "It was about losing you. About those sick fucks hurting you. It's his biggest fear right now."

My heart squeezed painfully, and I stroked my fingers through Jordan's hair as he snored softly against me. His head was tucked into my chest, like he was listening to my heartbeat.

"How can you even know his biggest fears?" I replied with an edge of sadness and desperation.

Rafe shifted closer, molding his body to my back and tucking his arms around me, just above where Jordan held my waist. "Because it's how I feel, and

Jordan has a better heart than me."

I wanted to argue with him over that comment, but it was neither the time nor the place. So, I let it go and relaxed into their combined hold. He was wrong, though. Rafe's heart was far bigger than he let anyone see. Especially when it came to his best friend... and me.



WHEN I WOKE AGAIN, it was to the sound of heavy rain falling outside and soft whispers above my head. I was warm and cozy, though, so I made no attempts to get up. Instead, I just yawned and mumbled a sleepy "good morning" to let both guys know I was awake.

They still sandwiched me, and in the light of a new day, my thoughts turned dirty.

"How did you sleep, Cinderella?" Rafe asked me, dragging soft kisses up the side of my neck. Like that wasn't doing all kinds of delicious things to my body. I groaned and arched my back, pushing my ass against him and finding he was in *exactly* the same kind of mood.

Well... isn't that an interesting development.

"Pretty good," I replied, my voice still a hushed murmur as I cracked my lids open and found myself face to face with Jordan. "How about you?"

A slow smile curved his lips as he stared back at me, and Rafe's palm smoothed over my hip, grabbing me possessively. Suggestively.

"Better than I have in a long time," Jordan replied with just a hint of shadows in his eyes. I knew what he meant, though. For the past month he'd have barely slept at all, and when he did it would have been tense, panicked sleep fraught with nightmares.

Struck by the calm serenity in his gaze, I let my instincts take over. I reached out and cupped his face with my palm, bringing his lips to mine for a tender kiss that said all the emotional shit I was too broken to say out loud. He groaned and kissed me back, turning it from a sweet, caring moment into something much, *much* more.

"Fucking hell," Rafe muttered in my ear, and I froze.

I hadn't meant to push things so far, so fast. They were barely okay with sharing me on the best of days. What the hell had I been thinking, initiating sexual contact while both of them were in bed with me?

Rafe's fingers tensed on my hip, but instead of pushing me away in anger, he pulled me closer. His hard length twitched against my butt, and Jordan's lips

moved to my throat, coaxing me with intoxicating kisses.

Hold up. Is this... are they okay with this?

Jordan's hands shifted to my breasts, and I let out a small, breathy moan when his fingers found my hard nipples through the thin cotton of my shirt.

Rafe let out a growl of frustration, his kiss on my shoulder turning to a bite.

"Nope," he declared, even as his hips rocked against my ass. "No, I can't do this."

My heart sunk to the floor and cracked in two. Was this the breaking point for him? The moment that he realized he was most definitely *not* okay with sharing me with his friend? Was he going to make me choose?

"Rafe," I protested, slipping my hand under the covers to link my fingers with his where they remained on my hip. Despite his words, he hadn't made any move to get out of bed or even to stop touching me. Lord knew his dick was still hard as rock against me, too.

Jordan sighed, but it was a resigned sound. "Bro, don't—"

"I don't mean *never*," Rafe corrected, cutting off Jordan's protest. "I just mean..." He trailed off, kissing the back of my neck again for a second like he wanted to memorize the taste of my skin. "I just need some time to get used to this. Us. All *three* of us. It's seriously fucking with the caveman part of my brain, and I need to take it slow."

My heart lurched with hope. Was he saying that... he was okay with this? Indefinitely?

"I get that," Jordan commented, leaning back slightly on the pillows with a tiny wince of pain. "The first time I saw your hands on our girl, I wanted to shove your head in a fountain. Then hold it there."

"What?" I squeaked in shock, but Rafe let out a small chuckle as his fingers traced small circles on my hip without unlinking our hands.

"You could fucking try, Jordy," he replied with a teasing tone. "It's been a while, but I *do* recall that Fallen Angel kicked Sushi's ass in the fight ring the last time."

My jaw dropped. "Sushi?" I repeated, and Jordan grinned.

"What?" He shrugged, his dark eyes glittering. "My grandmother's line came from the Fractured Isles just before the Monarch War. From Japan, specifically. It seemed like an amusing homage to my heritage at the time."

I snickered a laugh. "That's adorable."

Neither of them had moved away from me. Both of them still had their hands on my flesh, and I was willing to put money down that they were both still hard, even though Jordan wasn't close enough for me to know definitively.

"So what do we do now?" I asked in a more serious voice. I shifted in the

bed slightly, enough that I could see Rafe from the corner of my eye.

Jordan didn't answer, waiting like I was to see what Rafe would say.

The silence stretched for a long moment, then Rafe grabbed my chin and brought my lips to his for a bruising kiss.

"Now I'm going to take a shower. A long one. And Jordy is gonna fill you in on the discussion we had while you were still asleep." He kissed me again, hard, then let me go and slid out of the bed.

I made a small sound of shock and confusion as he stood up, totally unconcerned with the shape of his boxers. "Rafe..." I protested, not entirely sure what I could or *should* say in response. Had he seriously just told us it was okay to fuck in his bed? Because that was the subtext I'd pulled from his words.

He grinned and shot me a wink. "Have fun, Sleeping Beauty." He gave Jordan a meaningful look, then disappeared into the attached bathroom and closed the door firmly behind him.

Confused as fuck, I turned my attention back to the prince still in bed with me. "Alright, spill. What was this discussion you had while I slept?"

A sly grin spread over his face, and I noted that his bruises looked heaps better already. Most of them had faded into the greenish yellow that barely hurt anymore.

"I'll have to show you," he replied suggestively, snaking his hand back over my waist and pulling me flush against his body. "And when Rafe says he's taking a long shower, he really only means five minutes. Ten, *maybe*. So we'll have to be quick... if you want to, that is?"

My brows shot up. Apparently I hadn't misread Rafe after all.

So... did I want to fuck Jordan while Rafe was just twenty feet away, naked and wet in the shower and probably taking care of himself? Uh, yeah. That was a resounding yes.

CHAPTER 19

The shower was still running as the stars cleared from my eyes and my breathing slowly returned to normal, and I stared at the closed door. Had he heard us? Did I want him to?

Yes. One hundred percent, yes. I wanted us to be a unit. A team. I didn't want two boyfriends who knew about each other but pretended the other wasn't sleeping with their girl. And yeah, I wanted to see what it'd be like to have them both in bed together with a whole lot less clothing and a whole lot more fucking involved.

Anyone who wanted to judge me for wanting that could go jump off a damn cliff. They clearly hadn't met my playboy princes or felt the tease of four hands on their body...

Jordan groaned and pushed up, then dipped back down to kiss me again. "Go. I'm going to run back to my room to get changed."

I frowned in concern, my attention pulled from the still-running shower. "Are you sure you'll be okay alone?"

Jordan's lips curved in a wide smile, and he traced my cheek like I was the most precious object he'd ever handled. "You're incredible, Violet," he whispered in awe. "And yes, I'll be fine. My room is just down the hall, and it's not me Uriel is after."

My mood soured, and I grimaced.

"Go and let Rafe know the coast is clear. His water is probably running cold by now." Jordan snickered a smug laugh, then quickly pulled his clothes on and slipped out of Rafe's room with a parting wink.

I hesitated only a moment longer before sliding out of the bed. I picked up my shirt from the floor, then changed my mind and tossed it aside. Rafe knew what we'd done. He'd basically *told* us what to do. So why pretend otherwise? If

he wanted to get used to the idea of me with Jordy, I was doing him no favors by hiding.

Besides, I needed to rinse off too.

Nerves flooded through me as I turned the door handle, but I shoved them aside. There was no place for second-guessing while navigating the mechanisms of a ménage relationship with two insanely alpha males.

I pushed the door open. Rafe was still in the shower, his forehead against the tiles, his eyes closed while the water sluiced all over his hard, tattoo-wrapped muscles.

He looked up at me when I kicked the door shut and leaned my shoulders against it.

We just... stared at each other for a moment, then I gathered up my courage and stepped closer to him.

"Mind if I take a shower?" I asked, casual as *fuck*.

Amusement flickered across his face, and he stepped aside, indicating that the shower was all mine to use. That small movement drew my attention south, and my brows shot up to realize he hadn't been taking care of himself in the shower after all. In fact, it seemed like he'd just been torturing himself.

I stepped under the decidedly cool spray and shivered as the water coated me. With a teasing smile, I turned to grab Rafe's body wash.

A dark chuckle was all the warning I got before his hand wrapped around the back of my neck. He spun me around in one smooth motion, pinning me to the wall with his body and crushing his mouth to mine. I welcomed that like I'd welcome a fucking macchiato first thing in the morning.

Wholeheartedly and full-bodied.

"Nothing satisfies me except you, princess," Rafe groaned against my lips. "My fucking hand is useless."

I slid mine down between us, wrapping my fingers around his thick length. "What about mine?"

I stroked him, rougher than I'd normally be—mostly so I could see if he liked it.

"Fuck yes. Just like that." Rafe said, eyes closing as his head dropped back a little. He still had me caged into the side of the shower, his bulk taking up all the room, along with the oxygen in the air.

Not sure why, but I obeyed him. As I moved my hand faster, the feel of silky skin on top of rock hard flesh had me clenching my thighs together. No need to worry if I had the sexual stamina to handle two boyfriends; clearly when it was my princes, I had all the stamina in the world.

Just when I was starting to get into his low groans and that look on his face,

his eyes shot open and he wrapped both hands around my hips, jerking me up against the side of the shower. He slammed into me in the same instant. Fuck knows how he coordinated that so well, but I was in no head space to think about it.

I was being fucked within an inch of my life.

Rafe kissed me as he used the wall and one hand to hold me up. I liked how much he kissed during sex—it was almost the antithesis of his normal personality, but during sex... his kisses... fucking hell.

"I'm not going to last much longer," Rafe told me, eyes locked on mine. "I've been staring at your tits for half the night with your ass pressed along my fucking leg, and now that your cunt is wrapped around my cock..."

I came. My head cracked into the wall as a scream ripped from my lips. Rafe groaned, his lips landing on my throat as he followed suit, coming into me for what felt like a fucking hour and leaving both of us completely wrecked by the time we were done.

We sank to the shower floor, and I was grateful that this school didn't have shared bathrooms. Because I was lying down until my legs worked again.

Rafe dragged me into his lap and reached up to adjust the water so it was finally warm as it crashed against my trembling limbs. We sat like that for so long I wondered if he'd fallen asleep. Cradled against him like I was, I couldn't see his face, but I could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath me.

Moments like these could destroy the tough shell I'd spent a decade perfecting.

"If we stay like this," Rafe said, startling me after all the silence, "maybe the rest of the world will fuck off and leave us alone."

Sucking in a deep breath, I wiggled my way around so that I was facing him with a leg on either side of his torso. His cock was still mostly hard against me, but I managed to ignore it for the more pressing conversation we needed to have.

"Why were you so angry at me?"

Rafe's face was expressionless, but his eyes were raging fires of blue. I didn't think he was going to answer—everything about him screamed that he was not going to answer—but then he shocked the shit out of me by reaching up and lacing his fingers into my hair, holding me so I couldn't even move an inch away from him.

His strength was scary, in the best fucking kind of way. He'd never used it against me, only for me, and that was the sort of asshole prince I needed in my life.

"You reminded me that I hate to be out of control," Rafe said. "When that helicopter took me away from you, there was a moment when I wondered if I'd

see you again. I realized that if the answer to that is ever no, I'm not sure I can continue to exist." He swallowed roughly, and I tried to remember to breathe.

"When I saw you the next time, it was with that fucking asshole's hands all over you, touching you in a way that made it clear he'd touched you before. Something inside of me snapped. I decided that I was no use to you or Jordan when I was so emotional, so I fucking shut it down. I had to. For all of us to survive, I couldn't do what I desperately wanted, which was walk over and snap Uriel's neck."

He dropped his head, chest heaving with emotions. "I let you down."

"No!" I snapped back, my voice cracking. "I understand being a fighter, Rafe. Being a warrior. Turning off emotions to get the fucking job done. I would not have blamed you for that."

"I blamed me," Rafe said with force. "I fucked up and I couldn't turn it off. The further I fell down the hole of shutting you out, the worse it got. You deserve better than me, but I'm not a good enough person to let you go."

I shrugged, my heart hammering in my chest. "Pretty sure of the three of us, only Jordan is good. Here's hoping he doesn't decide to throw our broken asses away one day."

"No worries about that," Jordan said drily, and both our heads jerked to the side to find him perched against the sink, arms crossed as he watched us. There was no unease on his face—someone had gotten to the party quicker than Rafe, apparently.

"Mattie is at the door demanding we get to breakfast," he added. "She brought clothes for Violet."

"Get off that sexy hunk of a prince and get out here," my friend shouted, her words clear even through the closed door.

Jordan laughed. "If I didn't come in and get you, she would have."

I was laughing myself as I attempted to stand, but Rafe's hand, still tangled in my hair, kept me from moving. I turned confused eyes on him, and found his face close, lips lifting to press to mine. This kiss was softer than I was used to from him, and in it was a moment of healing, of acceptance, of love.

"Mine," he breathed as he pulled away.

"And mine," Jordan added.

With my fucking heart doing dumbass flips in my chest, I sighed. "Whatever this is between us, it's important to me. You're both important to me. I just hope..."

I let it remain unsaid, but we all knew the truth.

I hoped that no one ripped our world apart again. I feared that just one more tear would sever our fragile bond forever.

CHAPTER 20

Going back to school was like the first day all over again. I'd returned to my original schedule—not stuck in all of Alex's senior-level classes—but at this point I'd missed so much material I was lost. Students stared at me constantly, and I felt about as fucking welcome here as a fish in a shark school. Now that I knew about Uriel and all of his plans for me, this ballot thing made more sense.

Royals were assholes. Arrogant assholes.

It was easy to hate them.

It was also easy to love them. "You ready for lunch?" Jordan asked, looping his arm around me, shirt unbuttoned at the collar, no tie, and his hair a mess like he'd run his hands through it a dozen times this morning.

"Like you wouldn't believe," I said. "Today has fucking sucked. I think I'm going to have to repeat this year; after Alex screwed with my classes, I'm so behind."

Mattie had warned me about falling behind, and she was right—there was no way to catch up. It hadn't exactly been my choice, though.

"I'll chat to the teachers," Jordan said, shooting daggers at a group of chicks that were blatantly staring and talking about us as we walked down the hall. "See if we can modify the system and give you some leeway."

I shook my head, stopping where I was. "I don't want you to pave royal gold on my path to the future, America. I need to stand on my own feet, learn how to fight my own battles. I've already made an appointment with Dean Morgan, figuring he might have some advice. He'll probably be a huge prick about it, but it's worth a try."

Jordan's face pulled into concerned lines. "Is that a good idea? What if he knows you..." He trailed off, not wanting to mention Brandon here.

I shrugged. "If he knows, best I find out now so I can watch my back around him as well. I doubt he could, though, no one was around to witness the attack. It was chaos."

Jordan didn't look convinced; if anything his concern only grew the longer he stood there and contemplated what I'd said.

"When's your appointment? One of us should be there."

Starting to walk again, I checked my palm reader. "Haven't had a confirmation message yet. I'll let you know when I do."

Jordan, again, did not look satisfied by that, but he didn't argue with me. Instead he tightened his arm across my shoulder, keeping me anchored to his side. Between Jordan, Rafe, Mattie, and Nolan, I'd been alone exactly zero times today. I didn't like that they were jeopardizing their own educations, though, by missing classes to be in mine, but they assured me that they had it all worked out.

When we got to our table, Rafe was there alone, on his palm reader. I was pretty used to seeing him like that, but usually it was with a dark scowl on his face. Today he was smiling, and when I took the seat next to him, he flashed me the image so that I could see the twin's newest drawings. The budding artists loved to send their big brother all their creations.

"How's everything back home?" I asked, sad that we were no longer there. Everything felt safe in their compound, protected from the world.

"Good," Rafe said shortly, dropping his hand and focusing fully on me. Having his attention like this was enough to send heat dripping through my veins. "Dad said the meeting has already been initiated through diplomatic channels. They should have an official date within the week."

His eyes darkened as he finished because I was clearly only halfway paying attention. Despite the important conversation. "You're distracting," I muttered. His stare was measured, those eyes fucking slaying me.

He looked like he was about to lean over and kiss me, when Mattie dropped into the chair opposite mine. "Girl, I'm so ready for wine and pizza."

This was enough distraction that I managed to pull myself together. No matter how comfortable the three of us were with our relationship now, the rest of the world wouldn't be. And I didn't need the drama. Not today.

"Well, at this rate I might as well ditch the rest of my classes," I told Mattie. "There's no possible way I can catch up. Not even if I study all night every night for the rest of the year."

Nolan was the last to arrive, just as I uttered my morbid words. "New Girl, I will legit do all your assignments for you if it means you don't leave," he said, shooting puppy-dog eyes at me. "You're the yin to my yang."

I snorted. "You know the yin is the darkness, right?"

Nolan smiled. "Of course. And I stand by what I said."

Jordan cleared his throat. "I think if we can get a modified schedule going for Violet, and the rest of us help her study, we can catch her up."

Rafe leaned back in his chair, muscles stretching his dress shirt as he stretched his arms behind his head. "I already spoke with Morgan, and he agreed to a new schedule. The files should arrive—"

My palm reader beeped, interrupting his speech. Annoyance unfurled in my chest as I let out a deep breath. Flicking the screen up, I blinked at the files transferring to each of my classes.

"You just have to finish these assignments and learn this course work for end-of-term exams," Rafe continued, not realizing how pissed off I was.

"Dude," Jordan whispered from the corner of his mouth, trying to get Rafe to shut up. Apparently "Good Samaritan" was on a roll, though, and needed to get all his good deeds out.

"And you're going to get all the credit for class attendance since it wasn't exactly your choice to be absent..."

He trailed off as I got to my feet. Trying to keep my voice low, because I didn't want to create a scene, I lifted a shaking hand. Fuck. I was really angry about this. I couldn't tell if I was overreacting or not, but I wouldn't let myself be railroaded by my princes. Not even when I loved them.

"I never asked for you to interfere," I bit out, staring him down. Rafe didn't look surprised; if anything he was ready for my attack. Bastard knowing me was not going to get him out of it.

"Maybe you missed it while we were fucking this morning," he said, not keeping his voice fucking quiet. "You're mine, Violet Spencer."

Mattie's eyes got super wide, and the bitch looked like she wanted some popcorn to go with this show.

"You don't think I'm capable of handling my own shit?" I asked, my voice and resolve shaky. He was fucking wearing me down already, not to mention having half-announced to our friends that we were fucking this morning. It was throwing me off my game. "You think me weak and beneath you?"

Rafe was on his feet now too, towering over me. No way could we continue this conversation here; it was drawing too much attention considering how we were supposed to be keeping our relationship under wraps. I needed to end the argument quickly.

I poked him in the chest, my eyes narrowed. "Back the fuck off, Angel," I growled under my breath. "You crossed the damn line and you know it."

With a scathing glare, I spun on my heel and hurried my ass out of the room,

knowing one of them would be right on my tail. As I'd said earlier, I went nowhere alone. I loved that they were protective, but Rafe had taken it a step too far. I needed to handle my own shit, my own way.

Deciding I would find Dean Morgan and make my own arrangements, I headed in the direction of the administration wing. Ducking through a few halls, I passed the soccer field and wondered when the guys were playing next. They'd missed a couple of games and apparently the big tournament was soon, but neither had mentioned if they were going to be playing in it.

I sensed movement a second before a hand shot out to grab me. *Not fucking today.* Spinning around, I shot my leg out, kicking them in the side, satisfied with the thump and groan.

"Ms. Spencer," a familiar voice said, and I straightened from my fight pose.

"Sorry, Mr. Wainwright," I told him, hurrying forward to help him up. "I'm a little on edge. Call out to me next time or something."

He waved me off, hands on his knees like he was trying to catch his breath. I probably had knocked the wind out of him. "I'll know better next time," he said, nodding at me as he finally straightened. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Okay," I said, stepping back a little.

"It's Alex," he continued. "As we said in Felipe's office, he is being much more reasonable than his parents, but after Felipe's people sent out the invitations to all ruling monarchs, Alex has responded with a request."

I had a bad fucking feeling about this request.

"He wants you to be there when the vote happens. But he's also insisting that his invitation be hand-delivered by you."

I stared at the older man, trying to wrap my head around this fuckery. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Honestly, I don't have a clue. There was nothing else in his request."

My brain ran over a multitude of possibilities. Was Alex working for Uriel? Was he up to something even more sinister? I already knew he was capable of a lot. "I'll be at the vote anyway," I said slowly, "so that's easy enough. As for the invitation... if it means he will be part of changing history, then I'll deliver the damn thing." I leaned closer. "You tell him though, that if he votes against this change, I'm going to murder him in his sleep."

Mr. Wainwright's lips curved into a half smile. "I'll leave that to you. I'm sure you'll get the point across much better than I would."

If I got my point across as well as I wanted to, Alex would not be happy. Since we needed him on our side, I'd have to dig deep for some acting skills.

"Okay, when do I have to see him?"

"He's in Australasia at the moment, but I'll find out his schedule. Probably in the next week."

I nodded. "Yep. I'll be here."

There was an awkward pause, and I sort of danced on my feet. "Okay, well, I'm going to head off to find Dean Morgan. I need to get my schedule all adjusted."

Mr. Wainwright seemed confused, his eyebrows drawing together. "Rafe already spoke with him, I believe. You should have your new schedule by now."

"Rafe overstepped," I shot back. "He thinks I'm weak."

The confusion faded, and the older man shook his head. "You should consider that the prince's actions had very little to do with thinking you weak and everything to do with caring about you. When you care about someone, you want them to be happy and successful. He wants you to live your best life and graduate from school as you planned."

His words hit me hard, and I swallowed. Alex had talked only of knocking me up and locking me in his Australasian palace. Rafe, on the other hand, had gone out of his way to ensure I could stay in school.

He'd been trying to give me what *I* wanted. And I'd basically thrown it in his face.

Fuck. I was a piece of work sometimes.

CHAPTER 21

I didn't end up going to Dean Morgan's office. After my reality check with Wainwright, I took a closer look at the new schedule and assignment info that had been sent to me. It wasn't hard to see that, although it would allow me to catch up and stay at the Academy, it wasn't a free pass.

Rafe hadn't transferred me to bullshit, cakewalk classes. Quite the opposite, everything he'd lined up in my new schedule was going to require some hard work and focus. More importantly, lots of the assignments had to be delivered in person as oral presentations... meaning there was no viable way for me to skate through on my friends doing the work for me.

"Violet!" Jordan called out from down the corridor. I'd stopped halfway to the Dean's office and sat against the wall as I read through my new course load, so I hadn't seen him coming. "You can't just do that," he scolded as he drew closer, his brow creased in a frown. "Now more than ever, you can't just run off alone. What if Uriel has guys here? What if they took you and we had no idea? He could have you halfway around the world before we even noticed you hadn't reappeared."

He was ranting, but there was some very real panic shining through his eyes. Instantly, I felt like a total shithead. It had been a selfish move, taking off like that. My friends—and my lovers—weren't trying to smother me for the fucking fun of it. They were trying to keep me *safe*. Because they *cared*.

Yeah, it was a foreign concept for me. But I needed to start getting used to it because they weren't going anywhere soon. Or I certainly hoped not.

Pushing myself back to my feet, I looped my arms around Jordan's neck and pulled him close, standing on tiptoes to touch my forehead to his.

"I'm sorry," I told him with total sincerity. "I let my temper get the best of me

and didn't think shit through. I never meant to worry you, I promise."

His brow was still drawn tight, and his coffee-colored eyes swimming with concern, but I suspect he'd been preparing for me to argue with him, not admit fault and apologize. What could I say? I was turning over a new, more considerate leaf.

"Jordy," I coaxed, "I'm sorry. It'll just take a while to remember other people give a damn what happens to me." I touched my lips to his in a gentle kiss, praying no one was around to see us. But the corridor had been empty the whole time I'd sat there, so it'd be pretty shitty luck if that changed now.

Tension still radiated through his body, and I pressed myself closer, trying to kiss the worry away. I'd taken off and scared him too damn soon after he'd spent a month being tortured, trying to keep me safe in his own way. He must have gone into automatic panic mode, and it was taking a whole lot of effort to let it go.

Eventually, he pushed me away just a fraction of an inch and released a heavy sigh. Some tension melted from his shoulders as he did so.

"I'm sorry, too," he murmured. "I totally overreacted. I just—"

"Shh." I cut him off with another kiss. I knew why he'd reacted like that; he didn't need to explain. I used to think Rafe and I got each other on an emotional level, in the sense that he and I both punched first and asked questions later. We were both driven by hot tempers and a total disregard for consequences. But more and more, Jordy and I were clicking. Despite what Nolan had teased, Jordan really was the yang to my yin. He brought out a softer, more caring and considerate side of me that I hadn't even known existed. I'd thought everything good in me had been crushed to dust years ago... but every minute with Jordy showed me it wasn't crushed, just dented.

His hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers threading into my loose curls, and our kiss turned heated. Scorching-level heated. Before I fully realized what we were doing, he'd relocated us into an empty classroom and kicked the door shut without taking his lips from mine for even a second.

"Have I told you how beautiful you are, Violet Spencer?" Jordan asked in a husky voice as his hands found my waist and he lifted me onto the teacher's desk.

I grinned, bubbles of affection and lust tickling through me. "You tell me that pretty often, actually," I replied between kisses, "but I love it."

He kissed me harder, his tongue meeting mine in a desperate tangle and his hands parting my knees to make space for him to press closer. "Well," he said after some time, shifting his lips to my jaw, then my neck, "have I told you how great you make this uniform look?"

I couldn't formulate any kind of response except for a breathy moan as he sucked at my neck, probably leaving a mark. That kind of thing used to seem so trashy, but god damn, it felt good. Like he was sucking somewhere else at the same time... somewhere much lower.

Jordan's hands slid up my outer thighs, pushing my skirt up as he went and letting it bunch around my waist to expose the navy-blue satin panties I was wearing. Not even the dark color could have hidden how turned on I suddenly was, though.

I groaned when his fingers brushed over the satin, teasing me through the thin fabric.

"Jordy, you'd better stop before we get caught." But I didn't want him to. There was something so incredibly sexy about a quick make-out on a teacher's desk while in our academy uniforms. But... he was the crown prince of New America. He didn't need the drama if our unconventional relationship went public.

He nipped my neck with his teeth and brought another gasp of arousal from my throat. Damn him. He was really learning my cues *fast*, and he knew perfectly well that I didn't want him to stop.

"We should be quick then," he whispered in my ear, his breath sending shudders through me, "and we should be *quiet*." He pulled away long enough to give me a teasing look with his finger across his lips, then he was on his knees.

"Oh *fuck*," I exclaimed on a heavy exhale as he looped his fingers under the sides of my panties and wiggled them down my legs. That left me bare-assed on the polished wooden desktop with the crown prince of New America on his knees between my legs. How was this actually my life?

"Shh," Jordan teased, giving me a pointed look even as he gripped my thighs and flicked his tongue over my aching cunt. "Let's see if I can make you come before anyone finds us." With that challenge, he shot me a wink and went to work.

It only took a few moments of his mouth on my pussy before I decided to hell with anyone walking in and catching us. It'd be worth it. We could just say that Jordan had, uh, dropped something? I mean, something other than my panties.

My hips surged forward to meet his mouth as he latched onto my clit and sucked, making me groan way louder than I should have—given our location. But what was a girl to do? Seriously. When he pushed his fingers into me, fucking me with his hand while his mouth worked over my clit, I was done for. I came hard, just barely managing to clap my own hand over my mouth to stifle the scream that wanted to ring out.

Jordan laughed as he kissed my inner thigh, then stood back up to peel my hand off my face. He kissed the center of my palm, then my wrist, then draped my arm around his neck.

"You're so fucking gorgeous, Violet," he told me in a rough voice drenched in sex and... something more. Something deeper and more meaningful that I was almost too scared to put voice to. Almost.

But my risk-taking shouldn't only extend to my fighting life. Didn't my personal life deserve the same?

"I think I love you, Jordan." The words left my lips before I could second-guess them.

His brows shot up, and his tongue dragged over his lower lip like he was still tasting me. "You think? Or you do?"

I blinked a couple of times, processing what I'd actually said, then frowned. "No, I do. I definitely do. I *know* I love you, Jordan. You bring out the light in me, and you make me want to be a better person just to see you smile at me the way you do..." I bit my lip, shaking my head as the heat of a blush hit my cheeks. I was so shitty at expressing my feelings, but it was something that needed to be said and not just implied. "I know this thing with us... and Rafe... I know it might not be forever. You might decide you need a queen who will be a beacon for your people and then—"

"Violet," he cut me off. "Stop it. I love you too, and I *do* think it's forever. I believe in soulmates and *you're mine*."

My heart stopped and dread built. He believed in soulmates? But...

He sighed, stroking my cheek with the backs of his fingers and staring so deeply into my eyes I swore he could read my fucking shadows. "You're mine, just like you're *his*. Love is infinite, Violet, and there's more than enough capacity within you for two soulmates."

Holy shit. It was like he'd just lifted a thousand pounds of stress and anxiety from my mind and suddenly I was floating.

Jordan cupped my face, bringing our foreheads together and staring intently into my eyes. "Maybe I haven't been clear enough with you, but I'm laying it out here now. And I'll happily tell Rafe the same thing. I'm in this with you one hundred percent. If it means abdicating my future throne, then so be it. A crown and a title would mean nothing if I didn't have you."

My heart skipped a beat, then started again in what I imagined to be a slightly different rhythm. Jordan had imprinted on my very being, and now we both knew it. This wasn't a casual fling, this was true love.

Except...

"What if Rafe doesn't feel the same way?" I murmured, giving voice to my

deeper fears. "What if he's still waiting for me to choose? What if he chooses his kingdom and his future over us? I couldn't blame him if he did... It's such a huge thing, and the expectations and—"

Jordan cut my downward spiral short with a lingering kiss. I could taste myself on his lips, and arousal flooded back through me, diluting all those anxious fears.

"Talk to him," Jordan urged when his lips left mine. "I can't speak for him; that needs to be a conversation between the two of you." He flashed a quick, teasing grin. "As hard as that's gonna be for you two, you'll have to use your *words* and talk about *feelings*."

I groaned. "Are you sure we can't just beat the shit out of each other instead?"

Jordan smirked. "I mean, you can do that too. I'll totally cheer for you, beautiful."

I beamed, kissing his lips gently. "You'd cheer for me over your best friend? Now that's love, right there."

He laughed, an infectious, intoxicating sound that I wanted to hear for the rest of my life. "I'll let you in on a secret, Vi," he whispered, his face full of mischief. "I love Rafe, but I'm not *in love* with him. And I definitely don't want to turn him over on this desk and fuck him until he screams."

Amusement and arousal battled within me as I pictured that exact scenario. With me bent over the desk, though, because that's what Jordan was implying.

"We'd get caught for sure," I murmured, even as heat flooded through me and my hands trailed down the front of his shirt. "Someone will need to use this class..." My fingers found his belt, and almost without conscious thought, I started tugging the leather free of the buckle.

Voices from the corridor reached us just moments before the class door started to open, and we scrambled to right our clothing before our compromising position could be spotted.

"Oh thank fuck," Jordan breathed as I scooted off the desk and smoothed my skirt down. "It's just you."

"Who were you expecting?" Rafe replied, his dark gaze taking us both in. Jordan's hair was mussed up, his lips swollen and pink, and his belt undone. Me? I couldn't find my fucking panties.

Jordan gave an easy laugh, doing up his belt once more. Damn. "I dunno, a teacher or something. How'd you find us?"

Rafe gave him a cryptic smile back. "Intuition." He stooped and swiped something off the floor, then held up the scrap of navy blue satin with a smug grin. "Lose something, Cinderella?"

My eyes bugged out. Yeah, this was going to take some getting used to. "Yes, I did."

I reached for my panties, but Jordan got there first and swiped them out of Rafe's fingers with a growled "Mine," before stuffing them into his pocket and leaving the classroom.

Shock held me frozen for a second, trying to understand what the fuck had just happened. Did... did Rafe and Jordan just switch bodies for a second there? Because that was one hell of a possessive-caveman move...

Rafe's dark gaze glittered as he looked me up and down, his lips curving in a sly smile. "And mine," he added, even though Jordan was already out of the room. It didn't matter, though. It was his way of reaffirming for me that he was *okay* with us. With our dynamic.

My heart raced.

"Rafe..." I needed to have that chat with him. The very same one Jordan and I had just had where we'd laid our hearts bare and affirmed that we were, in fact, on the same page.

He ran a hand through his hair. "We should go," he said when my words trailed off into silence. Damn my baggage. "It's going to be bad enough sitting through international diplomacy with you this afternoon, knowing you're not wearing anything under that skirt."

Reaching out, he grabbed my hand and wove his fingers through mine, tugging me out of the class with him. "But let's be clear about something, Cinderella." His voice was low and quiet, his lips against the side of my head as we walked. "Whatever Jordan said to put that look on your face and in your eyes? I feel it too. All of it."

Ugh, be still my beating heart. Maybe Rafe wasn't as shit with words as I had assumed.

Smiling, and full of *love* I leaned up to kiss him. Talking could wait for later, when there was less chance of being walked in on. And fewer clothes. Rafe and I always communicated best when we were fighting or fucking, so why should our declarations of love be any different?

Simple. They shouldn't.

But now the afternoon's classes would be a torture of anticipation.

CHAPTER 22

Mattie crashed my plans for a naked, emotional evening with my princes, but I couldn't even be mad about it. She came thundering into my bedroom not two minutes after Nolan had escorted me back from Introduction to Human Physiology, and the look on her face told me everything I needed to know.

"Sit," I ordered her, pointing to my bed. "Stay."

Crossing my room, I snatched up a box of tissues and tossed them over to her before dialing up the kitchens on my palm reader. Mattie sobbed into a handful of tissues while I placed an order for six pints of ice cream—one in each of her favorite flavors—then ended the call and crawled onto the bed with her.

"Zach?" I asked softly when her crying eased off, and she gave a jerking nod. Anger and violence burned through me, and I vividly pictured sliding my wakizashi blade through his chest. "Talk to me, girl. What am I murdering that fucker for? Because I will happily deliver you his balls in a designer purse for making you cry."

Mattie mopped at her face and gave me a mournful look. "He... *ugh*. He kissed me."

Truth be told, those were not the words I'd expected to come out of her mouth, and for a second I was shocked into silence. "And it was bad?"

Mattie started to wail, and my concern grew further. "Noooo..." she sobbed. "I liked it. A lot. I've spent so many years hating that bastard, and then he goes and rescues me, keeps a protective eye on me, buys me expensive gifts, and then"—she sucked in air, an affronted look on her face—"the fucking asshole kisses like a fucking sex god. It's too much for a princess to handle."

My adrenaline started to cool at that point, and I shook my head at her. "Girl, I was legitimately about to bring out all my moves and destroy him."

Mattie tilted her head to the side like she was considering this. "I mean, that would solve a lot of problems for me."

Sitting beside her on the bed, I took her hand in mine. "You know that this vote includes provisions to abolish arranged marriages and the "perfect breeding" program, right? If it passes, you will finally have a choice in who you marry."

Mattie's lip trembled. "What if I have a choice and still choose Zach?"

That set her off into more sobs, and I couldn't help but laugh at the pure dramatics of her. "He might just be your match," I choked out through my laughter.

Mattie glared at me, wiping away her tears. She calmed after that, having got out the bulk of her upset. "I mean, he's an asshole," she said sniffing, "but so am I. We kind of do work together."

"Like me and Rafe," I said, reminding her that she wasn't the only fucked up one in the room.

Mattie's watery smile grew wider. "Yeah, a bit like that."

She worried at her lips, and I knew there had to be something more to what had happened with Zach. "Mattie," I started, and she crumbled immediately.

"Hetoldmehelovesme."

The words were a tangled rush, and I blinked as my brain tried to catch up with her frantic speed. "Loves you?"

She nodded. "Yeah. And then he kissed me."

"Did you kiss him back?"

"I did." And she was wailing again.

My amusement over her misery continued to grow because she reminded me so much of myself. I always set out to sabotage my own happiness; it had been a personality trait of mine since long ago. But I'd made a conscious decision recently to stop anticipating the bad and start enjoying the good.

"Life is short, babe," I said, drawing the full attention of those huge, shiny green eyes of hers. "Don't shy away from possible happiness because you're scared. Zach might have been 'forced' on you in the beginning, but I saw the way you watched him on the soccer field. There was no hate in that gaze... It was want and need."

I hugged her suddenly, taking her completely by surprise, judging by the low gasp. "You deserve to be fucking worshiped. If Zach thinks he's the person for the job and you want that asshole's tongue between your legs, I say give it a chance."

Mattie's cheeks were pink. "I want that and so much more. Sex is easy though, you know? It's the heart stuff that's scary."

Oh yeah. I fucking knew that better than anyone.

We stayed together for the next few hours, the guys checking on us as we ate our way through pizza and ice cream like both were the last food in the monarchy. Eventually Mattie left and went back to her room, and I found myself standing at my door, hand pressed against it.

I was exhausted, and I still had a ton of coursework to get through tonight. The library was where I should be heading, but I was just too tired to make myself walk out the door.

My palm reader buzzed, and I glanced down.

Angel: **Are you finally alone, baby?**

Baby? Fuck, he was going to be the death of my heart. All of these loving moments between us had me confused and happy as hell.

Gotta head to the library and try to get some of this work done.

His reply was immediate.

Angel: **Do not go anywhere without one of us. Don't make me say it again.**

I snorted out my laughter, a little energy returning to me.

Or what?

A second of little dots across my screen meant he was replying.

Angel: **My hand misses your ass, Cinderella. Red is your fucking color, and I enjoy punishing you.**

Jesus. Fuck. Fucking fuck.

I squeezed my legs tightly together to ease the ache there, all the while dropping my head against the door to catch my breath.

My fingers flew across the letters.

What, like that's meant to be a punishment?

I wasn't an idiot, but a part of me seriously wanted to push Rafe. Maybe it was all my words about following your heart and how life was short to Mattie, but I felt a great urge to see how far I could get with my prickly prince.

Angel: **Violet...**

Catch me if you can.

I shut my palm reader down, pulling my shoes on in the same instant, then I grabbed up the few books I needed and hauled ass out of the room. It wasn't that late, not even nine, and a lot of students were still around. The library was open until midnight today, so I wouldn't be alone.

It didn't feel overly dangerous to take this risk, just a little naughty, and keeping my men on their toes was a fun game. I hadn't run off or lied—Rafe knew exactly where I was going—and knowing that prince, he'd be on my ass before I was halfway to the library.

The halls were actually quite deserted as I ran through them, and the thrill of the chase only increased when I was sure that someone was following. Turning back a few times, I didn't see anyone there, but I felt their eyes. That heavy stare.

My palm reader buzzed consistently on my wrist, but I didn't check it. One misstep and Rafe would have me—I really hated losing to him. A small group of seniors were just ahead on the path, a few halls from the library, and I had to slow to get around them. As I sidled past, I glanced back more thoroughly, blinking at the shadowed figure ducking into a classroom.

It was definitely a male, tall and broad, but why was he hiding? Rafe wouldn't hide from me... He would haul me over his shoulder and drag me back to his room.

"Violet!" a familiar voice growled, and I swung startled eyes on Rafe. "You're in so much trouble, Cinderella."

He must have noticed my expression then because his playful anger faded into something serious. "What did you see?"

"Someone was following me," I got out through my clenched jaw. "At first I thought it was you, but... it wasn't."

"Uriel," Rafe bit out, and then he took off along the hall.

I was right on his heels.

He thought he could take Uriel on, and maybe he could—I'd yet to see anyone fight like Fallen Angel. But I would never underestimate my sensei. Rafe and I together would have a much better shot.

"Which room?" Rafe asked, when it was clear no one was in the hall any longer.

Moving back a bit, I stopped at the spot where the dark figure had disappeared. "Here," I said.

This door led into a chemistry lab, and as Rafe eased open the door, the light from the hallway spilled into the entrance, showcasing the high tables and lab equipment.

As he stepped inside, he turned to me, lifting his hand to give the universal signal for "get the fuck behind me." Wrinkling my nose at him, I shook my head. Just because I understood that signal didn't mean I was blindly following it.

Our silent argument was a waste of time, so we compromised by entering the room side by side. When we reached the middle, I was the one now telling him to go right and I would go left. The room was huge, more of a lecture theater than a classroom, so it made sense to split up.

Rafe shook his head, but I didn't give a fuck, already moving on silent feet toward the panel near the lecture podium where the lights were controlled. Uriel was a pretty big man, so there weren't many places he could hide in here.

Especially once the lights were on.

Knowing Rafe, he probably had cat-like night vision. I, on the other hand, preferred a well-lit fighting space. I flipped the switches and the overhead halogens flickered to life. Moving quickly, I made my way to a table nearby. One that had a lab coat draped over the chair and would be the most logical hiding place I could see.

When I reached it, I slowly lifted the long, white material, my eyes straining for the slightest movement. My position was vulnerable, allowing someone to reach out and grab me from under the table, so I turned my body a different way to reduce my risk.

Lifting the last of the coat, I struck out, only to find the table was empty.

A hand landed on my shoulder as I turned away, and with a silent cry, I struck out, slamming my palms into a rock hard shoulder. Rafe's face appeared before me, and I halted my next strike.

"Nothing?" he said softly.

I shook my head, confused by his lack of reaction. I'd hit him a good one, but the boy didn't even act like he'd felt it. Typical.

"He's gone," I said, relaxing. "Maybe it wasn't even anything. I mean, I saw a shadowy figure disappear into a classroom. Maybe it was a teacher."

Rafe nailed me with an exasperated expression. "Or maybe it was Uriel disappearing into the secret passageways and you almost got yourself fucking kidnapped again because you didn't listen to me."

I jabbed him in the chest. "Hold up, dickhead. I didn't get kidnapped last time; you did. I came to your rescue willingly."

He opened his mouth to argue, then the truth of what I'd said seemed to register. "That still doesn't give you the right to take chances. Not any more. You know why?"

I crossed my arms, setting my face into a smooth, expressionless mask. "I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"Because now you have to stay alive for more than yourself, Violet; you have to stay alive for me and Jordan as well. It's a huge fucking responsibility, one we expect you to take seriously."

"What do you mean I have to stay alive for you?"

Rafe wrapped his arms around me in a sudden, desperate movement. "If you die, then so the fuck do we. So stay alive!"

I buried my face into his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart against my cheek. "If you die, I do as well," I whispered against his chest.

This was how Rafe and I declared our love for each other. There was nothing traditional about us, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I pulled back, and his

lips were on mine, a scorching, claiming kiss that rendered me without either thought or care.

All I wanted was this moment with him. To feel and taste and touch.

He pulled away far too soon, his hand reaching down to lift the bag that was draped across my shoulders and hanging against my thigh. "Come on, let's get you to the library. Jordan's meeting us there."

With one last look around the empty room, we walked together in silence, our steps syncing as we moved. The library wasn't as crowded as normal—the later hour meant many of the students were already gone for the night—so there was plenty of room for me to settle in between Jordan and Rafe.

In hurried whispers we told Jordan about the possible Uriel sighting, and my American prince's face stayed hard and unyielding as he ran his gaze over me, no doubt checking for injuries. "No more time alone," he bit out, and when I started to protest, annoyed that everyone was underestimating my own badassness, he cut me off. "I mean it, Vi. I will literally tie your ass to my bed and sit next to you every single day until this is over if you don't start being more cautious."

Our whispered conversation was tense, and I shot Rafe a glare as he leaned back in his chair, smug that for once it wasn't him ripping me a new one.

"I'm not being unsafe," I finally managed to get out. "I'm not wandering off the academy grounds on my own or even going to the deserted sections of the school. The hall between my room and the library is always full of people, and I warned Rafe what I was doing."

Jordan took my hand, and when his eyes softened, going all pleading, I knew I'd lost this argument. "Please, Vi. For us, please do not go anywhere alone."

Ah, fuck. "Okay, but you two had better be okay with tampons if I need someone to accompany me to the bathroom during school hours."

Neither of them even flinched. Apparently blood was no issue for my two guardian angels. Or maybe they just somehow knew I was one of the lucky people who didn't get a period with an IUD.

Even so, nothing fazed these two. Except apparently me wandering off on my own.

Figured.

CHAPTER 23

The rest of my week was spent in class, studying, and existing in this weird bubble of perfect with my two princes. Sex was even working out, with both of them being considerate enough to give me alone time with the other, and so far no one was acting butthurt about missing out.

This was the best version of dating two men that I could have imagined, the only problem being that everything was too perfect. It worried me that soon it would all crumble around me.

"Are you ready for your game today?" I asked Jordan. Rafe had already taken off for an early morning warm-up. This was their first soccer match since returning, and Jordan had been given a clean bill of health, with his injuries all but healed. I was still worried though.

"I'm excited to get back on the field," he told me after he finished brushing his teeth, so now he just watched me as I braided my hair to get ready for the day. Both princes seemed to enjoy this domestic life we were building together. Our perfect bubble. Jordan moved a little closer, his eyes on mine in the mirror. "I heard that Alex is back as well."

I paused, my fingers halfway through securing the hair tie. "He's back from Australasia?"

Rumor had it that he'd been there wrapping up all the business to do with his parents' deaths. Claiming his crown. Riding some waves... or kangaroos. Whatever the fuck they did over there. It had been nice not having him here to deal with, but apparently my luck had run out.

"I need to talk to him," I muttered, finally finishing my braid. I swung it over my naked shoulder, and turned to find Jordan right behind me.

"Why would you need to talk to him?" he asked, voice laced with concern

and a stronger emotion.

Letting out a long breath, I grimaced. "Mr. Wainwright said that Alex will only go to the vote if I personally invite him. Figured it was worth giving him this last little thing if it meant that we could secure enough of the powerhouses to get the people's court approved."

Jordan's hands twitched as he closed his fingers around my waist, pulling me closer to him. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"Honestly, I forgot right up until you said Alex was back."

Jordan looked like he wanted to curse. A lot. "Once Rafe hears about this, he's going to murder Alex long before you get to talk to him, so let's not rely on his vote."

I groaned and rolled my eyes. "It doesn't need to be like that. He was really sweet to me once. I mean, before all the creepy shit with Nurse Reller." My cheeks heated slightly with embarrassment as I thought of the sex we'd had, back when Mattie had teased me for describing it as *great*. Though now that I knew better, I could see what she was getting at.

Jordan gave me a skeptical look. "The shit with Alex isn't *just* because of you, beautiful. That made it a whole lot worse, no doubt. But this has been ongoing since Jasmine." He grimaced, looking angry and sad all at the same time.

My stomach sank. Jasmine. Alex's deceased fiancée and Rafe's best friend. How could I have forgotten her so easily?

"I sort of got the impression it was King Steve who killed her," I said in a small voice. I didn't want to be insensitive at *all*. She'd been Rafe's best friend, but she must have been friends with Jordan too... given the boys had been tighter than brothers since they were kids.

Jordan nodded, running his hand through his hair and making parts of it stick up. "Yeah, I think so too. After what you found out about her sleeping with King Steve..." He shuddered in disgust. "That explains why her bruises and shit only showed up when the royals were visiting. We all assumed it was Alex taking out his frustration over his shitty parents on her, but King Steve was always known for being a violent bastard. I loved Jasmine, as a friend. But she was definitely a social climber. If she'd thought there was any prospect of being a queen before her time, she'd have taken it."

I blew out a long breath and sat on the edge of the bed beside him. "I'm sorry you lost your friend, Jordan."

He gave me a sad smile, brushing my cheekbone with the backs of his fingers in the gentle way he had. "So am I, beautiful. But the past is the past. I just don't want Alex taking advantage of any situations with you, okay? Please

don't go and see him alone."

I wrinkled my nose. "I think the whole 'come alone' part was pretty heavily implied. I can't imagine it would endear him to the cause to bring my two lovers along."

Jordan scowled and clearly wanted to argue the subject, so I hopped up and grabbed my bag for the day. "Come on," I said, "let's go. Mattie will be bored as shit waiting for us while Noles and Rafe are at practice."

Jordan sighed heavily. "I should be there too."

"You *should* be taking it easy. Your doctors were dead clear that you could play the game, but no additional practice session the same day." I gave him a stern look, linking our fingers together as we left Rafe's room. Our room, as I was starting to think of it. No one had even given us a second glance when I'd all but moved in earlier in the week.

It paid to be dating the two most powerful students, I guess. Although how that had impacted the rumor mill buzzing about us, I had no idea. Maybe people assumed I was just platonically sharing a bed with two scorching-hot princes? Crazier things had happened.

"Besides," I added when Jordan continued to frown, "if you'd gone to practice, I couldn't have sucked your dick in the shower this morning." I gave him a sly grin, and he stopped dead in the middle of the hallway. Grabbing me by my braid, he tilted my head back and kissed me with an intensity that told me just how much he appreciated that bonus feature of his morning shower.

"Whoa," someone exclaimed, and we jumped apart like we'd been electrocuted. "Uh, sorry. Didn't mean to..." The guy trailed off, his face flushing red.

I didn't recognize him, but I seriously doubted he was panicking about seeing a girl in the boys' dorm. As affectionate as Jordan, Rafe, and I were with each other, we'd mostly kept any public displays to a bare minimum. Barely gossip-worthy. But this... was concrete proof if this guy wanted to run his mouth all over the academy. And to the world press.

Jordan let out a frustrated sigh. "Jonas, I'm gonna need a word with you." He speared the younger guy with a sharp glare, which seemed to panic him further.

Eyes wide, the guy held up his hands defensively. "I didn't see anything, dude. I swear."

"All the same. I need to walk Violet to the dining hall. Meet me outside the locker rooms in ten minutes, and we can chat." Jordan's voice held a thread of threat, and my eyes widened.

I didn't say anything more, though, until we were well out of the boys' dorm on our way to the dining room. Even then, I didn't say anything; I just pinned

him to the wall of an alcove—behind an actual suit of armor—and showed him exactly how sexy I found that authoritarian tone.

Some minutes later, after we'd gotten thoroughly carried away, Jordan smoothed my skirt back into place and shot me a wink as he dried his fingers on his own pants. "Come on. Mattie will be getting cranky as hell, and I need to go pay off that prick so he doesn't talk."

Flushed and panting, I nodded while trying to force my legs to stop shaking.

"Uh-huh. Yup. Cool." I wasn't quite at the coherent-sentences stage of post-orgasm yet. Then again, I'd definitely come out better in that exchange. Jordan reached into his uniform trousers and rearranged himself with a grimace. I grinned. "Think unsexy thoughts, babe. Nolan in a G-string."

Jordan shuddered. "Yep, that'll do it."

Laughing, he joined our hands once more and escorted me the rest of the way to the dining hall.

CHAPTER 24

"Fuck," I muttered, "I really wish they weren't playing today."

Mattie shot me a commiserating stare. "It's Honor Cup today; none of them would have missed it."

That made it even worse. My princes hadn't bothered to tell me the full story about this soccer match. I'd heard bits and pieces about the Honor Cup, but I'd been so busy studying that I hadn't really looked too much into it. For all I'd known, this "Honor" was just another team or a special trophy.

But, nope. It was a round robin game that went all day, and teams from around the world were here to honor the fallen monarchs. The fact that Arbon had been the location of the "fall" was ironic. Why the fuck would everyone fly back in here? Trying to get murdered as well?

"If there was ever a day for Uriel to stage a coup," I whispered near Mattie's ear, "it's the damn, freaking fuck of a day that has people from all over the world here."

That was why Rafe and Jordan hadn't said anything to me, because they'd known I'd stress out and not be able to focus on school. It was also, I'm sure, why I'd noticed at least four plainclothes security surrounding me in the stadium, and neither Rafe nor Jordan had left me alone for two seconds all week.

"Senior royals aren't here," Mattie reminded me. "What's left of them anyway. Attacking in a crowd this size would be stupid. Plus, no one important is here; he wouldn't really have any impact."

Wishful thinking. Very wishful.

"Except Alex," I corrected her with a grimace, "newly crowned king of Australasia... because he's such a fucking sports fan."

Mattie wrinkled her nose. "Right. Except Alex."

Lifting my palm reader, I shot off a quick message to Rafe. The first game

was about to start: Arbon versus New America. At this stage, I didn't know which team Zach was playing for, but either way, it was going to be an interesting match.

You are in big fucking trouble. Why didn't you tell me? I don't even have my W.

Putting anything about a weapon in a message was stupid; these things could be hacked, even if I knew Rafe would have all the tech to stop that. As my worry grew, I sent another message to him.

This is the perfect time for an attack. And I have picked up on four security guards. They're not the best. Maybe I should be guarding them?

I didn't figure he'd reply to the string of messages, each of which got shorter and angrier. Especially as the announcements started, welcoming the two teams out onto the field. They were quicker games than usual so they could fit five or six matches in today.

My palm reader buzzed just as the players emerged onto the field.

Angel: **Eight.**

I blinked at it, and then shifted my gaze around the perimeter of my attack zone. That's where the security would be. It took me a few more seconds, and I was kicking myself afterward for not noticing, but I identified three fast. One eluded me though, and I decided that was the head of this team.

Rafe was nothing if not thorough, and he expected the best at all times.

"They're starting," Mattie said, and she sounded nervous. Turning to the field, I wasn't at all surprised to see Rafe smirking at me, Jordan staring with worried eyes as he perused the stand around me, and Nolan doing a backflip in the middle of everyone.

He nailed it too.

"Supposed to wait until you score a goal to celebrate," Mattie said, finally tearing her eyes from Zach long enough to shake her head at her twin. "But Nolan likes to just celebrate life."

I shrugged. "Eh, life is short. I say celebrate waking up every morning."

Mattie made a noncommittal sound, her attention already back on her wayward fiancé.

"Talked to him since he kissed you?"

She worried at her lips. "He's tried, but I keep avoiding him. I don't know what to do with my feelings. Every time I try and unpack them it's such a mess, so I throw it all back into the emotional suitcase."

Surprisingly deep analogy there. I mulled that over in my head. "Maybe you're making it more messy than it needs to be. By not talking to him, you're creating scenarios in your head that probably don't exist."

Zach was in the center of the field, speaking with the lineman. Mattie had her eyes on his broad shoulders like she was memorizing every line. Her breath caught when Zach whipped his head around and nailed her with a look—a long, unreadable stare that said he was not happy. It said other things as well, and I wasn't surprised my friend was squirming where she sat.

"Just talk to him," I told her. "There's something between you, and I think you should explore the possibility that he might be the perfect match for you, even without the genetic testing."

I'd never known her to be a coward in this type of situation. My friend was fierce and proud. This guy had messed her up, and she didn't know how to handle it.

"Fuck," she groaned beneath her breath. The next words she muttered weren't in English, but I got the general idea. She was mad at herself.

Thankfully, the game started, and I went back to splitting my attention between my guys and the crowd, searching for any sort of disturbance. I felt like I should sense Uriel if he were here; that guy always had a negative energy about him, like he sucked the life from a room with his mere presence. Surely I'd feel that.

"Your princes are on fire!" Mattie shouted, jumping up to cheer with everyone else. I'd missed it, but apparently Jordan had saved a New American attempt at goal and shot the ball to Rafe, who'd managed to run it in from the back of the field. The score on the wall read Arbon four, New America two.

"Zach probably wishes he'd changed soccer affiliations as well, right?"

Mattie laughed. "Oh yeah, he hates losing. Especially to his brother." She side-eyed me. "If you married Jordan and I married Zach, we'd be legit sisters."

I snorted. "Nothing legit about those two and their family drama."

"Wouldn't have to be our drama."

So true.

Arbon wrapped up the first game with a six-to-two win, and I loved the smirk on Jordan's face as he shook hands with Zach. For once, Zach didn't push any agenda, just gave his half brother a nod before leaving with the rest of his team.

"Jordan looked okay, didn't he?" I asked Mattie as the field was filling with the next two teams. "I don't know if he should play again."

"He looked great. Color and movements all perfect. I wouldn't stress about it. He's a tough guy, and he knows his limits."

Loving people was stressful, especially when they were "tough guys."

The next match was between two teams I didn't know, and I spent the time searching the crowd again. Rafe shocked the shit out of me when he appeared

twenty minutes in, marching through the crowd as they waved and fawned all over him. Ignoring it all, he leaped over a few rows to land right near Mattie and me. No one was sitting on either side of us, despite the hectic crowds, and I knew that was probably the Swiss heir's doing as well.

"What are you doing here?" I choked out, blinking at him. "Don't you have another game in twenty?"

Rafe sank into the chair beside me, draping his arm around the back of me. Gasps rang out, and I tried not to let the red seep into my cheeks at being the center of attention. No one was even watching soccer now.

This crowd was so much more than just Arbon students, too. Rafe had just basically announced this shit to the world.

"You're the eighth, aren't you?"

It hadn't made sense that I couldn't find the last of his security detail. He smirked down at me, but didn't reply; instead we remained like that, snuggled together for the rest of the game. When there was two minutes to go, Rafe pressed his lips to my cheek, growled something about staying put, and then left in the same flamboyant show of skill and agility, leaping down the stands.

For some reason, my heart slammed against my chest at that simple gesture of togetherness. We hadn't spoken much, but that was the most couple-like thing that we'd done in our entire relationship.

Lifting my palm reader, I sent Jordan another message.

Promise you're okay to play again.

Jordan: **I promise. Doctor gave me the all clear, and I feel great. Don't worry, Vi; you're not getting rid of me that easily.**

A laugh rocked my chest. **That's the thing, Prince Jordan, I don't want to get rid of you. Far from it. Good luck out there.**

A second's pause and then one last message.

Jordan: **I love you.**

I stared at that for far too long, and when Mattie finally looked over to see what had me absolutely floored, her face lit up. "Girl, is that the first time he's told you?"

"No," I shook my head. "But it's the first time in writing, and seeing those words..."

I wondered how many times I would read that message over and over. Being loved... it was like a drug. One to which I'd grown insanely addicted.

CHAPTER 25

*A*rbon won all their matches; New America was second with their only loss to our team. Rafe, Jordan, and Nolan all played like world-beaters today. I didn't really know the rest of their teammates, having had my hands full with the royals I did know, but even they'd all had lifted spirits from the returned princes.

After all the games, awards were handed out, and then there was three minutes silence to honor the fallen. Three minutes for me to worry and stress about when Uriel would make his move. But at the end of that moment, there was nothing except somber conversation and movement as people started to fan out.

"Big party tonight?" I asked Mattie, since that was the norm.

She shook her head. "Nah, Dean Morgan specifically requested no celebrations today. There will be a formal dinner that everyone is to attend. After we're expected to pay our respects at the monuments and then bed."

Lifting my palm reader, I checked the student portal, finding a message there that was almost word for word what Mattie had just said. Yeah, I really needed to remember to check that shit more frequently.

"Are we allowed to head to my room and get ready for dinner?" Mattie asked, well aware of my new set of rules.

I forced my smile not to appear, because I should be annoyed by their protectiveness, but I really wasn't. Maybe Jordan's words were still running through my head, or imprinted on my heart, but at this moment, I'd sit here forever if that kept me safe enough to love them for another day.

"I'm supposed to wait by the entrance," I said, so we got to our feet and started to follow the rest of the crowd. The "secret" security guards had nowhere else to hide now, so they got to their feet as well, following at a safe distance.

By the time everyone was finally out and only a few stragglers remained inside, Rafe, Nolan, and Jordan were at the entrance. Seeing them fresh from the showers, hair slicked back...

Damn.

Rafe's palm reader buzzed before he could say anything, and when he turned away to take the call, Jordan wrapped his arms around me, his bag hitting the ground at the same time. "Great games today," I said, accepting his kiss. Over his shoulder I noticed that the security had faded away with the reappearance of the princes, and I wondered if they'd be back later.

"I missed it," Jordan said, and my full attention was back on him. "Being out there with my team, playing ball, kicking ass." His face was lit up, eyes brighter than they'd been in a long time. Some of the horror from the extremist camp was fading. He hadn't had a nightmare for two days, so it was looking better all around.

"I kicked ass... you just looked pretty," Nolan said. "And you owe me a thousand bucks. Told you I would manage twenty backflips without getting booted from the field."

Ah, that explained all the weird flips he'd been doing whenever he had a spare moment. Jordan just laughed, lifting his palm reader to hit a few buttons before he slammed it against Nolan's.

Their money switched hands just like that, and I blinked at having so much cash you could make thousand dollar bets and not blink an eye.

Yeah, I was so batting outside my league with these guys.

"Next time I'll find something you're not willing to do," the New America prince said. "Just wait."

Nolan looked positively gleeful at the very prospect.

Rafe returned then, and my attention was all on him. His face gave nothing away, but then again, I never expected it to.

"Felipe?" Jordan asked, and I wondered what made him guess that. Were they expecting a call for some reason?

Rafe nodded. "Yep. Everything has gone ahead for the meeting of the monarchs. It's going to be a one-day event, the Society will present their proposal, and then they will go from there. Monarchs can debate and discuss, then vote."

"When?" Nolan asked, just as his palm reader buzzed. Mattie's did the same, along with Jordan's.

All of them lifted their palm readers.

"Tuesday," Rafe said while the others checked their messages. "It's to be held in the Cayman Islands, since they're still outside of monarchy rule. It's top secret,

royals and high-up resistance members only. The vote is for the royals, though; resistance is just there to lay out their plans for a better world."

"We got the invite," Nolan said, speaking for his twin as well.

"Me too," Jordan added.

"We're going to have to leave first thing tomorrow morning if we want to get there before the vote," Rafe said, typing something into his palm reader. "They've not given us much time to get organized. The rule states that if a royal does not show, their vote automatically goes to the majority. So best to be there."

Felipe was probably hoping that some wouldn't make it, hence the short notice. Only helped if the majority present went the way we wanted the vote to go, though. Personally, I was just happy that early next week this would all be over. If the people's courts were introduced, and I really fucking hoped they were, then Uriel would have lost his power. A resistance was useless if there was nothing to resist against.

We were heading for a brighter future, I just knew it.

"Please tell me we're all taking Rafe's plane," Mattie said with a sigh. "You have the best face masks, the water is so fresh, and I really love your staff."

Rafe looked amused. "Yes, my plane is ready and waiting."

"Your parents' plane," I said, refusing to think I was dating someone that owned their own plane. Yeah, nope. Not going there.

Rafe laughed this time. "Sure, Violence. Whatever you need to believe."

Great, that was settled.

First thing though, I had to speak to Alex. The Australasian prince—uh, king—hadn't been at the game today, and with a bit of luck, had decided not to show up at all. Then again, this was Alex... I doubted he'd just changed his mind. He'd probably been there somewhere, watching from the shadows and rubbing his hands together like an evil, storybook villain.

Why was he even back, though? He was the king of Australasia now, and I seriously doubted his kingdom's monarch council was all just, "Oh cool, go back to Arbon and finish your degree; we got this."

Nor would Alex have been okay with immediately handing power over to someone else. Didn't he have a little sister to care for too? She must be so broken, losing both parents so suddenly like that. Or maybe she wasn't, seeing as King Steve had been a deplorable bastard.

God dammit. Now I was feeling *bad* for Alex.

I needed to get this chat with him over with, sooner rather than later. And I knew exactly who could help me out.

CHAPTER 26

Nervous energy had me picking at the stitching of my chair while I waited for Dean Morgan to finish his call in the next room. I'd hoped I might find Wainwright in the Dean's office, but I'd been sorely disappointed.

Still, Dean Morgan could make this meeting with Alex happen, so I was simply going to pull up my big girl panties and face the father of the guy I'd killed.

I was confident he didn't know. Surely if he did, I would no longer be enrolled. Certainly I wouldn't be enjoying all the freedoms I currently was. But guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders nonetheless. Was Dean Morgan in the Society? Did he know Brandon had sided with Uriel?

The door clicked open, and Dean Morgan hurried in with a tense, distracted look on his face. "What can I help you with, Miss Spencer?" he asked, sounding annoyed as hell to be dealing with me. "I was of the understanding that Prince Rafe had already fixed your schedule to your liking."

There was an edge of derision in his tone that immediately flared my anger to life. Like I'd asked to change my schedule because I *felt* like it. Like I'd missed a month of classes because I was *lazy*. What in the actual fuck?

All my nervousness flew straight out the window as cold rage flooded through me.

"Alright, fuck this," I said with a sigh. "Let's just drop the bullshit, shall we?"

Dean Morgan's eyes bugged out, and his jaw damn near hit the floor. Apparently he wasn't used to that kind of language from ballot winners. Well, guess what? I didn't give a flying fuck.

"I know all about the 'lottery' being rigged for genetic marriages, and I know you and Nurse Reller were fully aware of it, helpfully pushing all the poor,

clueless orphans into the arms of their prince charmings. I even know you've been complicit in tampering with girls' birth control along the way, so seriously? Save the shocked act for someone who gives a damn." I drew a breath, then carried on before the Dean could splutter any pointless denials. "I'm here for just one reason, and then you can go back to turning a blind eye to all the nefarious crap going on under your fucking nose. Clear?"

Dean Morgan's eye twitched, but I kept my stare flat and confident. He didn't scare me.

He stared back at me for a long moment, like he was deciding whether I was serious or not, then finally inhaled deeply. "Very well, Ms. Spencer. What can I do for you?"

His tone was all acid and resentment, but he'd made his choice. He had to have learned by now I was no ordinary, timid student who would be cowed by the title on his door. Nope, not me.

"I understand Alex arrived back to the academy today," I announced, keeping my spine straight and my eyes hard. Guilt had started seeping into my mind, as the longer I faced Dean Morgan, the more time I had to remember how I'd killed his son just two weeks ago and he probably had no idea.

Fucking hell, I had a lot of bad karma to balance out after this treaty was—hopefully—signed.

Dean Morgan's lips pursed. "And?"

"And I need to speak with him," I elaborated. "Preferably before Rafe and Jordan return from their team meeting." I gave him a tight smile. My princes had been called into a meeting with their team to debrief on the day's games before the formal dinner, and I'd been left with Mattie as my backup. Of course, they'd intended for us to sit directly outside the team's training rooms like good little puppies, and I'd dragged her away for this quick visit to the dean the second the doors had closed.

By Mattie's guess, we had maybe half an hour. Forty-five minutes at best. After all their warnings not to "run off" without sufficient back up—Mattie didn't count—I doubted I could get away with another incident. If we weren't back before their meeting let out, I suspected I'd be sitting at dinner with a pair of stinging ass cheeks. And not in a good way.

Strangely enough, I almost expected that kind of punishment more from Jordan than Rafe. My New American prince was hiding all kinds of dangerous layers, and the flash I'd seen this morning—when he'd all but threatened the guy who saw us kissing—was just the tip of the iceberg.

Dean Morgan took his glasses off and polished them, then placed them back on his face and clasped his hands in front of him.

"I can tell you where to find him," he replied in a cool tone, giving me a hard look, "but I want you to tell me something in exchange."

Curious, and cautious, I gave a noncommittal nod.

"Ms. Spencer, I hope you'll permit me to also speak frankly, as time is of the essence. I understand that you spent some time as a guest in the Red East faction of the Society." He cocked a brow, and I gave a bitter snort.

"A *guest*. Sure. What's your question, Winston?" I dropped his formal title in a clear deviation from polite etiquette. This prick had manipulated dozens of girls—and some boys—into what was, at best, arranged marriages without one party ever knowing about it. At worst, human trafficking.

His nostrils flared with irritation. "Was my son there?"

I froze, the prickles of guilt now full-blown stabbing pain. "Yes, I saw him there," I replied with a slow nod. It was the truth, after all. And as much as I hated Brandon for what he'd done to me, I couldn't leave his father to suffer, never knowing what'd become of him. Or at least not without giving him a hint. "There was a lot of fighting the day we escaped," I offered in a gentler tone of voice, "if he was on the wrong side—"

"He wasn't," Dean Morgan snapped, cutting me off. "He wouldn't side with those extremist psychopaths. I raised him to respect the monarchies."

My brows rose at the lie. Or maybe he believed it? "All I'm saying," I rephrased, licking my lips, "is that *if* he was on the wrong side, I don't know how many of Uriel's followers made it out alive."

The Dean's face was tight, his frame radiating tension, but he just stared at me for a long moment before giving a short nod.

"Very well. King Alex of the Australasias is in the visiting monarch's wing. Fourth floor of the Westervelt Tower. I'll call ahead and advise him that you're on your way."

I let my breath out in a rush. "Thank you," I said sincerely.

This was my best, and probably only, chance to speak with Alex without my well-meaning princes hovering. They wanted to protect me, and I understood that. But Alex wasn't a threat to me, not now that his parents were gone. The more I'd thought on it, the more confident I was that King Steve had been the one pulling all those strings from behind the scenes. The Alex that I'd dated and started falling for... that was the real Alex. Everything else had been out of fear of his father. Then again, he had been sleeping with Claudette. So there was that.

I didn't waste any more time with the Dean—we'd already wasted enough, and the longer we were gone from the guys, the more anxious I grew. What if Uriel had people still here? Brandon had been here for years, undetected as a radical. Mr. Wainwright was operating right under everyone's noses, keeping an

eye on the future leaders of the world and probably using whatever he discovered here to help the Society. So... Uriel's men—and women—could be anywhere.

We needed to hurry.

Picking up Mattie, who had waited just outside the door, we all but ran through the corridors toward the guest apartments. We should have just gone straight there to check, but with so many people visiting for the Honor Cup, it could have taken ages to find the right floor.

"Rafe's going to murder us when we get back," Mattie muttered as we ran up the four flights of stairs to the rooms Alex had been given.

I grimaced. "So will Jordan. Rafe's possessive bullshit is really rubbing off on him these days."

Mattie snickered. "No shit. It's hot as hell, though, isn't it? I mean, not them, 'cause they're basically my brothers and I couldn't ever think of *them* like that, but, like, in general. It's hot."

Grinning, I shook my head. "Shh, let's get this over with." I raised my fist and knocked quickly on the door of the apartment.

There was a pause as we waited for someone to answer, and movement caught my eye from the stairwell we'd just come from. I frowned, craning my neck to see what had just snagged my attention, but the door opened right at that moment.

"Violet," Alex's familiar voice hit me like a bucket of ice water. "I wondered how long it'd take you to show up."

I scowled. "Yeah well, I lost your number when I was kidnapped and tortured for a month. Had to go old school and visit the Dean to track you down." I was flippant as fuck, but he cringed at my words nonetheless.

He stepped back, holding the door open for me to enter.

"Thanks, Matisse, you can wait out here," he said, blocking Mattie when she tried to follow me inside. Okay, so maybe he wasn't *totally* a nice guy without his father's influence. But how much of someone's shitty personality could be totally attributed to their upbringing? That kind of molding didn't just disappear overnight, no matter how much someone wanted to change.

Still, no one talked to my bestie like that.

"Quit being a fucking douche-wad, Alex," I snapped. "Mattie isn't going to wait in the fucking hallway. We don't trust you enough to be alone with you." I rolled my eyes dramatically and pushed him aside so my friend could come into the apartment with us.

A small smile touched his lips, but he didn't push the issue. Instead, he closed the door and turned to face me with his hands tucked in the pockets of his

pants.

"You look good, Violet." His voice was calm and... strange. Sincere? Maybe that was it.

I cocked my head to the side, perusing him back. "So do you, Alex."

That wasn't a flirtatious comment; it was the truth. He was polished and put together in an expensive, tailored suit without a tie, and the top couple of buttons on his shirt were open. His blond hair was impeccable, and he seemed to be freshly shaven. But it was more than that... He seemed calmer. The whole time I'd known him, Alex had carried a level of tension. A deep-seated anger and resentment toward the world. All of that was gone now.

Mattie cleared her throat dramatically. "This is cute and all—by the way, I also look amazing—but we're kind of on the clock here." She gave me a pointed look, and my cheeks heated. Apparently I'd been staring at my ex for way too long.

It wasn't due to any deeper feelings, though, just genuine curiosity.

Alex's smile turned slightly mocking. "Of course, you wouldn't want to keep your guard dogs waiting. I'm amazed you managed to sneak away for this long."

I let out an annoyed sigh. "Alex, cut it out. You asked me to come here in person, so here I am. Let's make this quick."

Alex indicated that we move over to the seating area and poured us drinks. I took a polite sip of mine before placing it back on the table and clearing my throat.

"Okay, let's cut to the chase. There's a meeting between monarchies this coming Tuesday at which there will be a vote to create a People's Court which will give the Society a voice and a vote in any world politics or human rights issues."

Alex didn't say a word while I spoke, just sipped from his drink and eyeballed me like he was examining my fucking face in a police lineup. When I finished getting all the information out, he still remained silent.

My trigger-fast temper, something I'd had trouble controlling ever since I was detained by Uriel, started to rear its ugly head. Thankfully, before I murdered my second arrogant male in a month, he spoke.

"You are a good match for me."

Gag. "We were never a match," I told him. "It was all manipulated by the extremists because I was finally the right age to enter the ballot."

Alex cleared his throat, lowering his glass back to the table. "Be that as it may, we were still a good match. I didn't even have to try that hard to enjoy your company."

I pretended to swoon. "Oh, if I wasn't already getting fucked by two princes

with the skills of sex gods, then I'd be all over you with that compliment."

The darkness that he'd probably never fully purge from his soul flashed in his eyes, and I instantly bit my tongue. Yes, he deserved to hear that and my temper was all kinds of frayed being around him, but this was so incredibly *not* the right path to get him on our side.

I needed to shift gears, fast, before my anger and resentment toward my ex-boyfriend ruined everything.

"Look, Alex, you wanted me to issue you the invitation," I said, changing the subject. "I'm not sure why you wanted that, but here I am..."

As I trailed off, I looked at Mattie for help, but she shrugged, clearly having no idea what to say.

"I owe you an apology," Alex bit out, and I almost fell off my chair. "Despite my many flaws, hurting women who don't like it is not one of them." The memory of Claudette's moans in the corridor when I discovered their secret echoed through my mind and I internally gagged. "I know I betrayed you. I caused you pain, Violet, and while an apology is not really worth shit, it's all I can offer right now."

My brain malfunctioned, and by the time I'd gotten that shit circuiting right again, Mattie was in full flow. "...don't deserve to have even touched Violet. If you want to give her something more than your scrawny dick and half-assed apology, you'll show up at the fucking vote and do the right thing."

Alex lurched forward in his chair, and I didn't even have to wonder this time what had offended him. Scrawny dick was a little harsh, but when you had something to compare it to...

"Please, Alex," I said, cutting him off before he could go into full-shithead mode. "I know your parents were assholes. I know they put a ton of pressure on you to be evil like them. But you don't have to do that anymore."

He didn't look convinced.

"Be on the right side of history," I said softly.

I had to convince him. If anything good could come from the ballot and all the bullshit, let it be this.

CHAPTER 27

He wait was going to kill me, but I forced myself not to squirm or react. Alex remained as he was, lips pursed, and then, with a long exhale, he nodded. "I will be at the vote," he told me. "I will listen to the plans, and I will vote without considering what my father might have pushed for. That's the most I can offer you."

I'd take it. "Thank you."

As he stood, I did the same. Our gazes held as he tried to convey a lot through that expression. It didn't really matter to me, though; I was basically done with caring about him in any way except for what we needed from him.

"Good luck with your monarchy," I said, grabbing Mattie's hand as we prepared to leave. "Try and care about your people as well. It's important."

He just watched me with those glittering eyes all the way until we were out the door and back down the stairs.

"Pretty sure he's not over you, Vi," Mattie said, sounding concerned. "He had that obsessed look about him."

I shrugged. "As long as he votes the right way on Tuesday, I don't give a fuck if he jerks off to a photo of me every single night."

Mattie coughed before screwing her face up into a horrified expression. "I just... why you gotta put those images in my head? It's not natural."

"Says the girl who has a drawer full of sex toys and can't choose a favorite."

Mattie dramatically slammed her hand against her chest. "That'd be like choosing a favorite child, girl. It's wrong."

My best friend had no shame. "Children and vibrators should not be mentioned in the same sentence."

She did look a little grossed out then, but thankfully no more discussion was required because we were back in the main academy halls, which were packed as

people interacted before the dinner tonight.

I picked up my pace, instinct telling me that it was probably already too late, but to save myself from their anger, I had to get back to the princes. My relieved breath when the lockers came into view was a little dramatic, but honestly, they were going to be pissed as fuck.

I'd tell them, of course, and hopefully with me safe and sound in front of them, the fallout would be less dramatic. If I'd not been there at all...

Yeah, best I didn't think about that.

"Not out yet," Mattie said, sounding triumphant. "Did you get any messages?"

I'd switched my palm reader to silent when I went into the meeting with Dean Morgan, not wanting any interruptions, and had completely forgotten to switch it back again.

The moment I slid my finger across the button to release the *do not disturb* mode, the reader went fucking insane. One buzz after another. Each sounding angrier than the last.

Fuck.

We were at the lockers now, and holding my breath, I stepped forward, pushing the door to open up the room. It was dark inside, no sounds of any players or coaches.

Fucking fuck.

"They're gone," I said to Mattie. "We're in big trouble."

She held both hands up, face drawn as she looked at me. "What's this we? There's no we! I'm not strong enough to handle that punishment. You're going to have to take one for the team... since this was your idea and all."

She was so dramatic in her freaking out, but then again, knowing the boys as I did... was it really dramatic?

"Where is my badass best friend?" I asked, hands on hips. "Come on, you took on the Australasian king for me."

Mattie scoffed. "I would take on a prehistoric fucking creature for you. But I won't take on Rafe."

Well, damn. Guess I couldn't really fault her for that. Velociraptors had nothing on my prickly prince.

"Okay, new plan," I said in a rush, having just spotted the furious faces of the princes at the end of this hall. "What are the odds we can escape, change our names and identities, and live as exotic dancers for the rest of our lives?"

Rafe locked me in his gaze, and I gulped, unable to tear my eyes from him. Mattie turned slowly, her eyes wide and shiny. "Think it's too late for that, but if you want to run, I'll try and hold them off."

That almost brought a tear to my eye. "You're the bestest friend ever."

Mattie nodded. "I know. Now run, babe."

I wouldn't leave her to face them alone. Even if I was the one Rafe and Jordan would be pissed at the most. And I couldn't really blame them. It had been risky to go off on my own, I knew that, but I'd just needed that dealt with. Plus, time had run out to see Alex if we wanted him at the vote.

"Rafe looks really mad," Mattie said. "It was nice knowing you."

I snorted. "He's not going to kill us."

Right?

The way he was stalking along the hall, Jordan just behind him and Nolan trailing last, I wasn't sure that was strictly true. I'd seen Rafe mad before... but not like this.

Maybe I should run.

"Don't even think about it," Rafe rumbled, only a few feet away. He must have noticed the panicked look on my face as I glanced behind to the only possible escape path.

"I can explain," I said in a rush, holding my free hand up. The other one was still tightly clutched in Mattie's—I was pretty sure one of us was sweating.

Rafe didn't give me a chance to expand on that statement, his hands wrapping around my waist so fast that I couldn't even catch my breath before I was over his shoulder, my hand torn from my best friend's as he marched down the hallway.

Over his shoulder, I saw Mattie's wide eyes, but Rafe was stomping so fast that she was gone from sight in the next few minutes.

"It'll be fine," I heard Nolan say, and then we turned a corner and I heard nothing else.

"Rafe, come on. I was gone for ten minutes," I said, trying to reason with him.

No answer, and I could practically feel his fury radiating off him in waves of heat.

"I was fine."

Still nothing and now I was starting to get annoyed. It wouldn't be that hard to free myself from his Neanderthal-caveman hold, but I decided to give him one last chance.

"Dude, you are not my father. Put me right the fuck down and let's talk about it."

He ignored me, his strides getting longer and angrier as he moved through the school. Faces were gaping at us, clearly not sure what to make of the most powerful prince in the world carrying me around in this way.

Rafe and I were too pissed to care though.

"One," I said, starting to count when we reached the entrance to the soccer field. "Two... I'm giving you to five and that's it."

He picked up speed. "Three."

Faster and faster, we were across the empty field now.

"Four, motherfucker."

I was going to enjoy making him hurt.

"Five."

At five he dumped me on my ass, right on the thick fighting mat in his private little gym. Curls fell across my face as I jumped to my feet, and I pushed all my hair out of the way so I could glare with the full force of my anger.

"What the fuck, Rafe? You don't get to manhandle me whatever way you want."

Before I could spit more words at him, he wrapped his hands around both of my biceps and powerwalked me back until I hit the wall. "You belong to me," he whispered, threateningly. "Mine. And until you learn to fucking listen to me..."

His lips were pressed together, the fullness thinned with his anger.

"What?" I asked, swallowing hard to hide my fear and arousal. "What will happen if I don't learn?"

Rafe's teeth pressed against his lip as it curled up, and I fought against the urge to lean forward and bite into the softness as well. When he got all alpha, it did shit to me that I couldn't explain. Maybe I was broken or something, but at times, his overprotective rage was like pre-sex porn. It turned my body against me, and against my better judgement I wanted his punishment now.

"Looking at me like that won't save you today, Violet," Rafe warned.

Jesus. "Let's fight about it."

His pupils dilated, his hard cock lodged firmly between us as he stared. "Fight?"

I nodded, trying to catch my breath. "One fight. If I win, you shelve the punishment."

"And if I win?"

I was really going to fucking regret this.

"You have free rein to fuck me up however you want. I won't fight you at all."

I had him.

He stepped back, and as he did, I noticed Jordan enter the room. He didn't look as angry as Rafe, but for my gentle prince, there was a lot of darkness across his brow. And he'd clearly heard my suggestion.

"You sure you want to do this, Vi?" he asked, stepping right up until he was

behind Rafe.

I nodded. "Yeah. I've wanted to try my hand against Fallen Angel for a long time. Seems now we have the perfect opportunity." Jordan nodded, and my heart hurt a little. "I'm sorry I worried you."

Rafe's face went darker, if that was possible.

"I thought I'd be back before you were finished, and we need Alex at that vote. He agreed to go." I wasn't making it better. If anything, they both looked angrier than ever.

Time to shut my mouth and find my Violence persona.

CHAPTER 28

Jordan let out a frustrated sigh but just folded his arms and leaned his back against the wall. "I'm not stopping this because you two need to deal with your shit," he told us, and Rafe grunted a sound of approval.

I heard some irritated subtext there though. "But?" I prompted, holding his gaze and doing everything possible not to pay attention to Rafe. That was basically impossible with his hard dick still crushed between us and my panties growing damper by the second... but I owed it to Jordan to at least *try*.

"But you only have forty-five minutes until the formal Honor Cup dinner. That means I'm giving you thirty minutes to get this shit sorted and fifteen minutes to clean up and change. Understood?" He arched a brow at me, and when I nodded, he shifted his gaze to the back of Rafe's head.

"Thirty minutes will be more than enough... *this* time." Arrogant son of a bitch. "It'll only take five minutes to hand Cinderella her ass, then I'll have twenty-five left to show her what happens when she *repeatedly* disobeys me."

Jordan made a sound, and Rafe's gaze flicked to his friend for a second, then locked back on me. "Us," he corrected. "You promised Jordy you'd stop scaring him like that. And now look where we are." There was a dark, purring tone to his voice that said he was way too fucking excited about this fight. Or maybe he was excited to win? Well... it wasn't happening.

"Get on with it then," I snarled, shoving him in the chest to move him away a step. Because holy shit, if he kept grinding that dick on me, the only fight happening would be over who got to be on top. Him, preferably. I loved when he fucked rough.

Rafe let out a low chuckle, stepped away to create space, and adjusted his erection in his pants. Fair enough, I wasn't above fighting dirty and that was an

all too tempting target sticking out like it had been.

"You staying, bro?" he asked Jordan, turning his back on me in a painfully obvious trap, as if I was that fucking dumb to try and attack while he was "distracted" with Jordan. Crock of shit. He was taunting me.

Jordan gave a short nod. "I'll stay and make sure you don't kill each other." He eyeballed Rafe hard. "Violet's face is totally off limits, Rafe. The last thing we need is her showing up at the dinner tonight with a black eye. She only just healed from the last bruise, too."

I grinned at the fact that Rafe was being given limitations but I wasn't. On a deeper level, though, I recognized the line Jordy was drawing. Sparring was totally fine, beating each other up was not. We were competitive, violent, and altogether fucked up. But we were not abusive.

"What, but she can hit my face?" the Swiss prince asked, joking. He'd definitely heard the same subtext as I had.

Jordan shrugged. "You easily could have caught an elbow to the face during one of the matches today. No one would question you being bruised up." He said it so fucking casually, but the wink he shot me was pure evil.

I read between the lines there. He wanted me to hand Rafe his ass and punch holes all through that inflated ego of his. Well, luckily I was in the mood to give Jordy what he wanted.

This time when Rafe's stance shifted to argue with Jordan's rules, I saw my opening. This wasn't a trap anymore, it was an actual opportunity to catch him unawares.

"That's unfair," Rafe protested. Not because he had a problem with *not* punching me in the face, but because he wanted us both handicapped in the same way. Had to love a boy that was all for equal injury opportunity regardless of sex. "You know she'll use—"

Smack.

His words cut off with a whoosh of breath as my kick caught him right in the abdomen and knocked the air from his lungs.

Jordan snickered an evil laugh. I flashed him a grin, but that was all the time I had. Rafe hadn't earned his name in the fight rings for his good looks. He was lethal, and that had been a lucky shot.

Blow for blow, we matched each other flawlessly as our fight took on a more serious tone. Neither one of us was willing to lose; we were *both* too pigheaded to concede defeat to the other. Thank fuck we had Jordan to mellow us both out, or Rafe and I wouldn't last a week as a real couple.

"Careful," I taunted Rafe when his fist narrowly missed my cheek. Sometimes our ingrained fight training took over, and he probably hadn't even

known he was going to throw that fist until it was in motion. "If you break Jordy's rules, it'll be *you* getting spanked later."

An evil smile curled Rafe's lips, and he huffed a laugh as he bounced from foot to foot, his hands up in a mirror image of me. Neither of us wore gloves or even tape. Neither of us used weapons, either, because as badly as I wanted to metaphorically kill Rafe, I didn't want to *literally* kill him. He was way too good in bed, so I wanted to keep him around.

Oh yeah, and I was a little bit in love with his infuriating ass.

Fine. A lot in love.

Fucker.

"You say that like spanking is the worst that might happen to you, Violence. But we both know I'm more creative than that." His sapphire blue eyes sparkled with anticipation, and my stomach flipped. Maybe I wanted to lose after all.

He took my moment of hesitation as weakness, but I'd played this game too many times to allow that to happen. Being underestimated because I was a chick was deliciously perfect.

Being underestimated because my opponent thought my vagina was the brains of the operation... even fucking better.

His flip kick was designed to send me flying and, no doubt, end the fight immediately. Dropping to my knees as his powerful leg swung toward me gave me the perfect angle to power drive my fists, one after another, into his ribs as he crossed above me.

Once set in motion, the boy had no choice but to continue, and he'd thought me too distracted to react.

"You see," I said, when Rafe rolled over and was back on his feet in a second. "My speed is unmatched. Along with my reflexes. It was learn quick or die—"

His hand dropped to his ribs, and he looked impressed. "It's been ten years since someone has landed a hit like that on me," he said, and it was clear that the fire in his eyes now had nothing to do with anger and everything to do with us and this flame of attraction that had sparked to life long before either one of us were willing to admit it.

"We're evenly matched," I noted, and for once, he didn't disagree.

"We are equal partners," he replied, taking a step closer, showing not an ounce of discomfort, even though his ribs had to be killing him. "When you disappear on your stupid suicide missions, you're risking all of us."

Guilt rocked me back on my heels. "I know. I'm sorry. It's just... In my life, when bad shit has to be handled, I have to get in and do it immediately. Otherwise I'll procrastinate forever. Alex was that shitty job that needed

handling, and every time I go near him with either of you, it just ends in you all bitching at each other. Nothing else happens."

So I'd just gotten it done when I could.

"She's wired that way, Rafe," Jordan said from where he remained perched on the sidelines. "Just like you are."

Rafe took another step toward me, neither of us turning to Jordan because we knew that would be the end of this battle.

"I don't want to change you," Rafe said, huskily. "But I do want you on my team. Teams work together."

A snort of laughter, and in that same burst, I launched myself forward, wrapping my arms and legs around Rafe and rolling him down onto the mat.

He'd been ready for me, and as I rolled, he used his bulk to situate us so that we landed side by side. He'd been hoping to land on top of me, but I was too fast for that.

Launching myself across him in the split second before he moved, I got my arms and legs wrapped around his, locking him in place as I twisted his right arm at the perfect angle to break it.

He could have gotten out of it; I could tell by his first struggle that there was a weakness in my current position. Someone of Rafe's training would know it as well. But he didn't; instead he gave a few halfhearted attempts to move while I applied a little more pressure to his arms and tightened my legs.

My mistake was forgetting about his other arm. It snaked down the front of my pants, fingers sliding into my underwear and over my pussy. His fingers were inside me before I could release my next breath, and I could have screamed at how good it felt.

"Let me go," he said, "and I'll make you come."

I shook my head. "No. Fucking concede, and then you can make me scream your damn name."

He fingers slid in and out, thumb scraping over my clit and sending tingles through my body until I felt light-headed. Fuck's sake. No! I could not fall for the weakness of my body here. Rafe's punishment was one thing, but his arrogance needed no extra points. I couldn't let him win.

"Concede!" I demanded, forcing all breathiness out of my tone, even though my toes were literally curling. I twisted his arm a fraction more, and it had to be killing him, but the bastard still kept finger fucking me like this was all normal.

Jordan moved so he was over both of us. "You're going to have to break his arm," he told me, and I swallowed hard.

"Rafe, please don't make me do that."

His fingers moved faster, and as my body lifted to try and move with him, I

forced it to remain still.

I don't know what the hell possessed me in that moment to kiss him, but I released my hold on his arm and slammed my mouth against his, kissing him as he continued to work my body like he knew it better than his own.

"If neither of us can concede, will you accept a tie?" I breathed against his lips.

He opened his mouth, and my tongue tangled with his as I skirted the outskirts of an orgasm. Just when I was about to tip over the edge, Rafe jerked his hand out, flipped me over to my back, and in a similar lock hold to what I'd used, got me all wrapped up. And this time I knew I couldn't get out.

He was stronger with long-ass limbs that held every part of my body down. His arm wrapped around my throat, and as it closed around my wind pipe, I wondered how far he'd go.

Would he choke me out completely?

We struggled like that for a moment, and then I went limp. From his angle Rafe probably couldn't tell if I was passed out or plotting, and I hoped that it was enough to loosen his hold.

"How about medium punishment," Rafe said, loosening his grip just enough to let me speak, "and I promise not to leave a mark anywhere that can be seen?"

My body was already wound up so fucking tight from all the fighting and then his magical fingers. Those words made it so much worse. "How about we call it a tie, for bragging rights, but I allow you this *medium punishment* so you feel like you won something?"

His hold lessened slightly more.

"You know we're evenly matched," I said, my words coming out easier without his arm locked quite so tight across my throat. "And we're out of time."

"You definitely are," Jordan said, his voice lower than usual. The sexual energy in the air was getting to all of us.

"Deal," Rafe said, and then he released me. I rolled off him, my body screaming at me from all the abuse. "Strip!"

I spun and blinked at him. "What?"

His face was expressionless, those fucking eyes drowning me with intensity. "Strip."

Fuck. Me.

No, seriously, fuck me now. I'd resisted as long as I could.

My gaze shot to Jordan, questioning, and he scrubbed a hand over his face.

"Fuck's sake," he muttered with a groan, shaking his head. "I can't stand here and watch this without going all possessive and punching Rafe in the face."

Rafe snorted a laugh. "You could *try*."

Jordy just rolled his eyes, his hand going to his pants to adjust himself. "You've got five minutes. After that, it's on you to explain why you're so late to the dinner."

With one last pained look, he slipped back out of the room and closed the door behind him.

"I'm waiting," Rafe prompted when Jordan's footsteps faded away, leaving us totally alone. It was probably for the best, given how possessive they both were of me. Actual three-way sex would more than likely end up in some kind of bloody massacre when Rafe and Jordan realized they were really only okay sharing me when it was out of sight.

I raised my brows at Rafe, and his dark gaze swept my body.

"Strip," he repeated. "Unless you don't want to come in the next five minutes?"

It was safe to say my clothes had never hit the floor faster than in that moment. If five minutes was all we had, then I wasn't messing around.

I frowned as my panties dropped, noticing Rafe hadn't reciprocated.

"You just gonna stand there with all your clothes on? I thought we were on a time limit here." He grinned and I narrowed my eyes in suspicion. "Rafe..."

"Quit giving me that look, Cinderella," he replied with a teasing edge. "We don't have anywhere near enough time to do everything I want to do to you. For now, I'll be satisfied with something small. Come here." He held a hand out to me, and I eyed it warily.

"Why do I feel like I'll regret this?" I muttered, but took his hand anyway.

The second our fingers touched, his grip tightened, and he hauled me across the space between us. My naked body pinned to his, Rafe walked us across the padded mats until the backs of my knees hit his weight-lifting bench, and he pushed me to sit.

Wordless, but holding my gaze with unblinking intensity, Rafe sank to his knees and spread my legs wide—way wider than he needed to, but that was just typical Rafe, constantly needing to show me he was in control.

When his mouth came down on my aching cunt, I let out a low moan. My hips surged up, eager for more, and my fingers tangled in his black hair. If this was how he wanted to punish me, maybe I'd break his rules more often.

His sinful tongue lashed at my pussy, torturing me in the sweetest way until his fingers sank back into me and I screamed. I was way past the point of coherent speech, so I just threw my head back and let him work me over.

When I came, I saw stars. Fucking *stars*. My vision spotted, my ears rang, and—

"Fuck!" I shouted at the sharp pain of Rafe's teeth on my inner thigh. But

then he sucked the injury and I came again. *Bam*, just like that. By the time I'd eventually come back to Earth, my whole body was like jelly and the leather bench beneath my ass was slick with the evidence of my intense orgasms.

Rafe didn't rush me as my chest heaved and I untangled my fingers from his hair. He just kissed along my inner thighs, then ran the tip of his tongue over the vicious bite mark he'd left.

I shuddered and groaned at how much it hurt, but also at how much it turned me on again. If we had more time, I'd definitely be ripping his pants off and riding him like my personal pony.

"What the fuck was that for?" I growled when my breathing slowed a fraction. My voice was hoarse from screaming and my mouth was dry, but I was in a euphoric bliss so my growl held little to no anger whatsoever.

Rafe's grin was pure evil. "I told you I'd leave a mark," he replied, licking the mark again. He'd sucked it right after biting, so not only were there teeth marks, he'd ensured it would bruise enough to create a purple hickey. Classy as fuck.

"Caveman," I muttered, biting my lip as his hands cupped my ass and slid me closer to him. He sat up on his knees and brought his lips to mine for a slow, lingering kiss that tasted like me.

"I wish I could make that permanent," he murmured against my lips. His hands were tangled in my messy hair, and I knew there was no way in hell we were making it to the dinner on time. "The way you've permanently marked my soul." He pulled back from my lips just far enough to meet my gaze, but his grip on my hair didn't falter. "In case there could be any level of confusion, let this be totally clear. I love you, Violet Rose Spencer. Violence, too. You're my entire fucking world, and I will see the streets run red with blood before I let Uriel get his hands on you again. Understood?" The raw emotion in his voice struck me straight in the heart, and for a second it was like I couldn't breathe.

In my silence, Rafe claimed my lips once more and kissed me like I was his goddamn oxygen.

"Violet," he growled when I still said nothing. "Do you understand? Don't casually make me commit murder just because you wanted to run off for a chat with Alex."

I shivered, remembering the casual way he'd killed Nurse Reller for assaulting me. Yeah, he was more than capable of everything he promised. And more.

"I understand," I whispered back, my voice still hoarse. "And... I love you too, you prickly fuck. But what about..."

"Jordy?" He arched a brow as he shifted back a few inches. He didn't respond immediately, instead taking a long, steady breath and releasing it. "He's

my best friend, closer than a brother. And he loves you so much it hurts... which, I think, is the same for you. Would I rather have you all to myself? Hell yes. But you and I would kill each other before we even graduated Arbon. Jordy balances us out. He's the missing ingredient to prevent us detonating."

Relief washed through me in such a tangible wave that it left me sagging in Rafe's arms, my forehead to his neck. "That's exactly how I feel," I mumbled into his warm skin. His arms banded around my naked body and crushed me tight to his.

"Then we're on the same page?" Rafe asked, his hands roaming my bare back in a way that could escalate all too quickly if we let it.

I nodded, pressing a kiss to his neck. "Definitely." I raised my head back up, and this time it was me who claimed *his* mouth in a soul-deep kiss. After all, we were equals.

"We'd better go," Rafe said when the kiss broke off, but the way his fingers gripped my naked ass and his hard length ground against my core, I could tell he was all too willing to blow off the dinner entirely.

But then again, if we were serious about being involved in these world-changing events, then we needed to start putting our responsibilities first. There was always time for sex later.

Reluctantly, I peeled myself out of his grip and started putting my clothes back on. When my pants brushed the mark he'd left, I hissed a breath of pain. Rafe, the motherfucker, just laughed.

Goddamn possessive piece of shit.

He pulled me in for another long, unhurried kiss before we left the gym, then held my gaze steady for a moment.

"I love you, Violet," he reiterated in a husky voice, and my heart raced.

"I love you too, Rafe," I replied with total sincerity.

A satisfied smile curved his lips, but it was quickly followed by a small frown. "But let's get something clear. I never want Jordy's erect dick anywhere near mine. We're cool to share, but not at the same time. Clear?"

I laughed at his phrasing, but nodded and grabbed his face for another kiss.

In that moment, everything was right in my world. Uriel couldn't have been further from my mind, and the problems of our world seemed unimportant. Nothing mattered except the fact that both my playboy princes had told me they loved me.

I'd never felt luckier in my whole life.

CHAPTER 29

By the time we'd cleaned up and dressed in our finery, we were late to the dinner. It'd been worth it, though. When we swept into the dining room together, Alex's eyes narrowed in a way that sent a spark of satisfaction through me. I shouldn't have cared what he thought, but it hadn't been so long ago that he'd taken my blossoming love for him and shit all over it.

So yeah, it made me smile.

"Damn girl," Mattie commented as we took our seats, "You look next level gorgeous. Holy crap."

I grinned back at her. "Thanks, babe. Jax chose the dress for me while I was staying there." I smoothed my hands over the buttery-soft, silver silk. The dress had a full skirt, but it draped my body like it had been made just for me. I'd never felt more like a princess.

Mattie snorted a laugh. "I didn't mean the dress; I meant that freshly-fucked glow you're rocking. Frequent orgasms really bring out the shine in your eyes."

I rolled my eyes but couldn't wipe the smile from my face. "We didn't fuck," I muttered back, my gaze meeting Rafe's across the table with a silent promise.

His lips curved in a smile, and he mouthed *later* at me.

You're damn fucking right, later.

Jordan was across the room chatting with a couple of the New American soccer coaches, but quickly made his way over to us and slid into the vacant chair beside me.

"You look stunning," he whispered, leaning in to place a subtle kiss behind my ear. "I can't get over how lucky I am to call you mine."

The table jolted, and Jordan winced like someone had just kicked him in the shin.

"Ours," Rafe snapped, correcting him.

Jordan just gave an easy shrug and grinned like he couldn't help fucking with his best friend. "Okay sure, ours..." He dropped his voice lower, whispering the rest directly in my ear. "In public. *Mine* when I get you alone later and strip that dress off."

A thrill ran through me at his words, and I bit back a grin when Rafe glowered from across the table. He was too fucking fun to rile up, that was for sure.

"Is this seat taken?" someone asked, standing behind the chair next to Mattie and pulling all of our attention.

Nolan glared from across the table. "Fuck off, Zach."

Mattie tensed beside me, not turning her head to look at her fiancé. As far as I knew, she'd been avoiding him ever since their kiss. Talk about awkward...

"I wasn't asking you, Nolan," Zach replied with a snarl. "Mattie, can I sit?" His gaze was intense on my beautiful friend, and her cheeks were tinted with pink as she studied the cutlery.

When it became clear he wasn't just going to disappear from the force of her thoughts alone, she gave a stiff shrug. "Sure, whatever. Do what you want."

Zach sat down, but that only spiked the tension higher. Nolan glowered across the table, and Mattie all but pretended he didn't exist.

"Mattie," Zach said quietly, talking to the side of her face, seeing as she refused to look at him. "Come on, we need to talk. You can't just pretend it didn't happen. We need to discuss—"

"Shut the fuck up, Zach," Mattie hissed, cutting him off with a vicious glare.

His brows arched, and I had to hand it to him... he had balls. "No. If you won't talk in private, then we'll do it here in front of your friends."

I spluttered a shocked laugh, then covered it with a sip of my wine when Mattie shot me a look. But come on, Zach was seriously taking his own life in his hands.

"Fine," my friend snapped, her jaw clenched and her eyes flashing with fury. "But not fucking *here*." She grabbed him by the wrist and dragged him out of his seat, then stalked out of the dining room with him tight on her heels. Like a puppy. Too freaking cute.

I grinned until Nolan glared at me, then I quickly wiped it away.

"You're not seriously supporting that mess, are you?" His scowl grew. "She deserves better than him."

I gave him an easy shrug. "Yeah, she does. But she likes him, whether she admits it or not. So just let her figure it out. If he hurts her, I'll cut his dick off. Deal?"

Nolan still looked all kinds of mad but gave me a short nod. "Deal."

For some time, we just enjoyed the meal as friends. Rafe and I had been late enough that we'd missed the official speeches but not so late that we'd missed the food, so I got to enjoy a full dinner.

When the dean announced the string quartet and invited people up to dance, I was feeling blissfully happy. Too content, some might say.

Rafe's snarl and glare gave me a heads up a second before a familiar hand rested on my shoulder.

"Violet, would you care to dance?" Alex asked, his voice smooth and devoid of the malice I'd grown used to from him. I shrugged off his hand, but he didn't let it deter him. "I feel like our conversation was cut short earlier. Perhaps you could elaborate while we dance?"

Rafe shot halfway out of his seat, but Jordan was closer and shoved Alex away faster than I could scramble out of my seat.

"Stop it," I hissed, wiggling myself between Jordan and Alex as they stood toe to toe, posturing. "Stop it, both of you. This is not the kind of scene we need right now."

When neither one of them backed down, I gave Jordan a firm push in the direction of the table. "Sit down. Alex isn't going to rape and impregnate me in the middle of the dance floor."

A furious snarl came from Rafe, and I rolled my eyes. "Yes, Alex, let's dance before you get your stupid ass killed over a dick-measuring competition."

The Australasian *King* gave me a smug smile. "I think we all know I'd win that contest anyway."

I snorted a laugh. Like a legit laugh. It was *funny*. "I think I'm the only one who could judge that, Alex, and believe me... you wouldn't." From the corner of my eye, I caught Rafe and Jordan shoot each other a smirk. With a sigh, I jerked my head to the dance floor. "Come on, then."

Before either of my princes could object any further, I made my way across the dining room. If Alex was smart, he'd follow.

"So, I take it you're fucking both of them, then?" my ex-boyfriend commented in a quiet voice as we reached the other dancing couples. His hand rested lightly on the small of my back, and I turned around to face him.

I arched a brow. "What do you want, Alex? I thought we said everything we needed to say earlier."

He smiled that panty-melting, golden-boy smile of his. That fucking smile that'd sucked me in from the first time we'd met. "We did. But I missed you, Violet. Tomorrow morning we all fly out to the Cayman Islands for the monarchy vote and then..." He trailed off with a sigh. His hands gripped me in a perfect dance hold and he led me around the floor with practiced ease, but his

mind was a million miles away.

"And then what, Alex?" I prompted when he didn't continue. It was bound to bite me in the ass later, but a tiny part of me still cared about him, still believed he could be better than he was.

He gave me a sad smile. "Then I go back to Sydney and become the ruler of my kingdom. Alone."

I frowned. "What about your sister? She's there with you, isn't she?"

Alex shook his head. "Not what I meant, Violet."

I knew that. But it was an uncomfortable subject, so I was dodging it.

"Alex, I told you earlier. We were *never* a match; it was all the Society meddling." I tried to keep my rejection soft because I needed him to vote our way at the meeting. I couldn't risk pissing him off when we'd come this far, but at the same time, I never wanted to lead anyone on.

"Maybe not a genetic match," he replied, staring into my eyes in a way that made me feel all too sorry for him. "But you're my match in every way that counts. I really fucked things up with you, and I'll regret it for the rest of my life."

Unease pricked at me, and I searched the room for a convenient excuse to end our dance. What I saw instead gave me chills, and I tripped over Alex's foot.

"Whoa, are you okay?" he asked, catching me before I could make a total idiot of myself.

I shook my head, feeling my pulse race. "No, I just..." My gaze scoured the dance floor, but people were moving too fast for me to get a clear lock on anyone for long. "I thought I saw someone."

"Someone you don't want to see?" Alex questioned, frowning at me in concern. I wasn't paying attention, though, my eyes searching the crowd of dancers until I locked on a familiar head of ice-blond hair.

Furious and shocked as hell, I wrenched free of Alex's grip and pushed my way through the crowd to confront my sensei. How dare he?

"Uriel," I snarled, clapping my hand down on his shoulder and spinning him to face me—to fucking *fight* me—but then faltered. "Oh, I'm so sorry," I apologized to a man who was most definitely *not* the leader of the bad-resistance. "Sorry, I thought you were someone else."

The man frowned at me, but I mumbled more apologies and backed away before I could cause more of a scene. I bumped into someone, but it was a familiar, comforting warmth that encircled me before I panicked.

"What just happened, Violet?" Jordan murmured in my ear, then gently spun me around to seem like we were dancing. "Did Alex try something?"

A looming shadow a few feet away told me Rafe had jumped up to help too,

but Jordan had just reached me first. I got the feeling the rest of our lives would be a series of ongoing competitions between them, and I kind of loved it. It gave me insights into their friendship. Their brotherhood.

I shook my head, my cheeks flaming with embarrassment. "No, not at all. I just thought... ugh, I thought I saw Uriel. But it was just some other blond dude, and now I feel like a paranoid idiot."

Jordan's mouth pursed in thought as he gently guided me through a simple waltz. "You're not paranoid at all," he told me in a serious voice. "I don't blame you for seeing that fucker in every shadow; I have been too." A darkness filled his eyes for a second. "But it's only a few more days. Once this vote goes through, and it *will*, then he loses all his power."

I nodded, but my stomach was all in knots. "I hope so," I whispered.

"You know what you need?" Jordan murmured, a smile crossing his lips as he twirled and dipped me.

I couldn't fight the small answering smile creeping over my own face. "What?"

His cognac eyes sparkled with mischief. "A distraction."

And just like that, he danced us straight out a side door, then grabbed my hand and started running down the staff corridor we were in. By the time he'd found a tunnel entrance and pulled me inside, I was laughing uncontrollably.

"Jordy, what the hell?" I asked between bouts of laughter. "You're going to get us in trouble! What if Rafe—"

"Shh," he replied, smirking as the secret door slid closed behind us. He hit a button to turn on a light, revealing we were totally alone. "Rafe was watching; he knows you're safe with me. Besides, we'll be quick... right?" The wink he gave me, though, promised he had no intention of being *that* quick.

Jordan was *usually* the levelheaded one. So if he was throwing caution to the wind, then who the hell was I to argue? My arms snaked up and around his neck, our lips meeting as his hard body crushed me against the wall.

That session with Rafe before dinner had left me all aching and needy, though. As hot as it was to make out with Jordy in a secret corridor, I wanted more. I wanted him to fuck me fast and dirty, then go back to the formal dinner with the evidence still clinging to us both. Yeah, I was a bit messed up, but so what?

"Jordy," I groaned, hitching my leg up around him and finding my long skirts in the way. "Ugh, fucking dress."

He gave a warm laugh as his hands gathered up the excess fabric. "Here, let me help," he so gallantly offered, pushing my dress up to my waist and boosting me up with strong hands under my thighs.

My back against the wall and Jordan's hands on my bare thighs, his hard length grinding me through our clothes... yeah I was going to come way too fucking quick. Then again, we did have to get back before too many people noticed we'd disappeared...

"Violet," Jordan murmured, kissing along my jaw, "I hadn't intended to take things this far. Or fuck, maybe I had..."

I laughed. "No complaints here. You're totally right; we both need to clear our heads a bit." I snaked my hands between us and fumbled with his belt. From the position we were in, it wasn't the easiest task. We made it work, though.

When he pinned me with his hips and brought one hand around to move my panties aside, his fingers brushed over Rafe's mark and I hissed with pain.

Jordan froze. Then he leaned back enough to look down and see what had just made me gasp like that.

"Possessive motherfucker," he muttered, lightly running his fingers over the bruise in a way that made my whole body quiver. "He just *had* to mark his fucking territory, didn't he?"

I squirmed in his hold as his fingertips trailed higher and hooked under the side of my panties. "Jordy..." I groaned, "please..."

He didn't make me beg any more. Two breaths later, he was buried deep inside me, and his hand returned to my ass to hold me up while we fucked.

It was fast and dirty, and neither of us bothered to stay quiet as we took what we needed from each other. Uriel had haunted both of our thoughts far too much if we were both imagining him in every shadow, but this was the perfect way to chase him away.

My orgasm crept up on me without any warning, and I screamed out when my pussy clenched around Jordan's cock. He kissed me hard, swallowing my moans and screams, but he didn't come with me. Fucker.

Instead, he waited until my climax ebbed, then pulled out and dropped to his knees, shifting my legs to his shoulders in a move that only a trained fighter could pull off. I knew what he was up to before his mouth even met my throbbing cunt. I'd known he was going to do it from the second he saw Rafe's primitive *claim* on my inner thigh.

"Jordy, *fuck*," I groaned as his long fingers held the fabric of my panties aside so he could torture me further. I swear, it was like he and Rafe were keeping a scoreboard of my orgasms or something... like Jordan instinctively knew Rafe had gotten two from me earlier and he needed to match that.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't complaining. Not in the least.

It took me almost no time at all to crash into another intense climax, and Jordan used the distraction to leave his own mark on my other thigh. He didn't

use his teeth like Rafe had, but the purple hickey he left would probably take just as long to fade.

It was strangely perfect for the two of them. Different methods, same result. Except Jordan and Rafe were marked on my heart so much more permanently than those bruises.

The second my legs stopped shaking enough to safely hold me, I scrambled out of his hold and turned the tables. Rafe had left me wanting earlier, so there was no freaking way I was letting Jordan walk back into that party unfinished.

"Violet, you don't have to—" he started saying, then cut off with a sharp inhale when I took him fully into my mouth.

I sure as fuck didn't have to, but I wanted to more than I could put into words. Not that I could speak at the present.

Jordan's head dropped back as I sucked him as deep into my mouth as I could, then ran my tongue over his silky hardness before licking across the slit at the end. His taste mixed with mine had me groaning, and as he grew harder, I moved my mouth faster, hands coming up to play with his balls... because why the fuck not?

"Vi, baby, if you don't want me coming in your mou—"

He didn't get to finish. I scraped my teeth over him and cupped his balls at the same time, and he jerked in my mouth, coming hard. After swallowing every last drop, I licked him all over from root to tip.

"Jesus, fucking, Christ," Jordan managed to choke out. "Where did you learn to do that?" He paused. "Actually, don't answer that. I don't want to know, I don't care, I'm just fucking lucky to have you."

A burst of laughter left me as he helped me up, then the pair of us straightening our clothes to a somewhat respectable appearance. "Let's just say, it's certainly different when you're in love with—"

I paused at the scuff of a rock nearby. *Was that...?*

Jordan grunted as a shadow swung toward him in the near darkness, striking him hard in the temple. As he crumpled and before I could react, strong hands latched onto my arms and hauled me away.

CHAPTER 30

*M*y screams echoed along the corridor, and it wasn't because I was afraid. Nope, I was pissed right the fuck off. My attacker had my arms pinned expertly and managed to drag me about fifty yards through the darkness. My attention was torn between trying to free myself, and tracking where we were so I wouldn't be lost when I got free. So far as I could tell, he'd taken me off the main path and through a series of smaller tunnels.

Twisting in his hold, I used every technique I knew to free myself, but... my assailant anticipated each move I was about to make. At that moment, I knew who had me.

Uriel.

Acting completely out of character, I threw myself to the side. I didn't do what he'd always taught me and aim for his body. "I knew I fucking saw you tonight," I snarled, managing to get my arms and legs free. He grabbed a handful of my hair, but I was happy to lose those strands to get away.

"Always warned you about this," he said when I was on my feet facing him, a lock of blond grasped in his closed right fist.

"Yeah, yeah, always trying to cut my hair off like the sociopath that you are."

One of those creeps that killed and kept body parts. While I didn't know that for a fact, there was every chance Uriel had a hidden collection somewhere.

"I'm going to kill them, Violet," he said conversationally. And what the fuck did you know, he stuffed my hair in his pocket. "I'm going to kill them and make you watch. Then I'm going to tie you to my bed and torture you until you're as broken on the outside as you are inside."

Sick of his fucking monologuing, I attacked. Using the point of my heel as a weapon, I sliced it across his side, landing a decent hit. He'd let me, of course, so I'd come into his reach, but I'd known he would want that. As he grabbed for

me, I latched onto his right hand and wrenched a finger to the side.

His sharp intake of breath was the only indication I'd hurt him, and the slam of his fist into my chest was the result because I'd had to drop my guard to get both attacks in.

As I hit the wall, I cushioned the blow as best I could and had no regrets. His finger was at least dislocated, if not broken. That was a significant injury to fight with; I just had to make sure I didn't end up with anything as debilitating.

"You can't beat me," he said, stalking toward me. As he got closer, I could see his face clearer. The darkness was almost completely encompassing, outside of a small light Uriel had attached to his collar. As it brought his face into focus, I was surprised by the gauntness in his features.

He looked exhausted. Weaker. He'd not escaped that attack on his compound with no consequences, that was for sure.

"What are you even doing here?" I asked, slipping away from the wall so I wasn't boxed in. "Shouldn't you be trying to take down the monarchy before they destroy the legacy you've been building?"

His snarl was animalistic, and that, more than his appearance, was telling about his current mental state. Gone was the cool, calm, and hyper-focused sensei, and in his place was someone who'd totally lost touch with reality.

"I can't do it without you," he bit out before launching into a roundoff flip that landed him right before me. He slammed a punch into my side, while I managed to smash two more into his chest. One landed solidly against his right ribs.

There might have been a crack, but I didn't get a chance to test that theory before a shout echoed from behind me. "Violet!" Jordan roared.

Uriel had taken me off the main path, no doubt so that he'd have no interruptions as he beat me into submission. Jordan had found me though.

I opened my mouth to shout, but a hand slammed over it, and I was pummeled back into the wall, rocks biting into my bare skin above the dress's neckline. "Don't get your lover killed," Uriel whispered, his face right near mine as he held me. "Best to come with me now, and that way no one else will get hurt."

Just as he knew my fighting style, I knew his psychological warfare. He was trying to freak me out, wanted me to give in. But my boys could handle themselves, and now was my best chance to escape while he thought I was distracted by Jordan.

My power drive landed in the same rib I'd hit before in an uppercut of sorts, modified by the current angle he held me. There was a crack this time when my shot landed, and Uriel actually cried out. It was clear that he'd had no suspicion I

was going to hit him. The old Violet wouldn't have. He'd been able to use friends and acquaintances against me, and I'd always complied.

That Violet had died long ago though, and this one would fight to the bitter end to save them—not by conceding, but by killing a motherfucker.

"Violet!" Jordan shouted, sounding closer.

"Over here," I hollered back.

Uriel straightened before falling into his favorite fight stance, the one that gave him the most movement and power to all four limbs. I dove out of the wall space I'd been in, heading for the opening that Jordan would have to use to get into this section of tunnel.

He'd be at my back, and together we could take this bastard down. Once and for all.

"You've hurt your last person, *sensei*," I spat. "I'm going to take great pleasure in destroying you."

Uriel showed no discomfort now, but I knew I'd hurt him.

His next series of strikes were so fast that even in full light I would have had little chance of blocking them all. As it was, I managed to block two, deflect one, and the fourth whipped across my side, knocking me almost to the ground.

From that position, I swung out my leg and crashed it into Uriel's, throwing him way off balance. Swinging up with my fist, I glanced a hit off his balls, and when he cursed, I had to smile.

"You always told me to find the weakness in my opponent," I muttered as I got myself back into a fight position.

"Weak, Violet. You've always been weak and pathetic."

This time I attacked, following his little light. The darkness hid me, and right now that was a weakness for Uriel. Our hits were matched, each of us landing a few and blocking others. His strength gave him an advantage, but my fury masked my pain and adrenaline gave me strength to land more than one solid blow.

My roundhouse kick managed to hit his already injured ribs, and for the first time, he landed on the ground, a huff escaping him. Just as I was moving in for the kill, Jordan and Rafe burst into the tunnel, finally finding the right path to me.

Guess our fighting hadn't been quiet.

Uriel's light vanished. As I dashed toward the last place I'd seen him, a much larger illumination lit up the area.

Jordan had a flashlight in his hands, lighting up Rafe's furious face as he strode right to my side. Huffing, I looked around for Uriel, but he'd disappeared into the shadows.

"He's been here all along," I huffed, wiping at the blood trickling from a cut on my lip. "Learning these secret tunnels, existing in the shadows, biding his time."

Rafe turned all of his attention on me. Jordan too. The pair of them examined every inch of my skin, noting the bruises and marks littered across my body.

"I'm fine," I said, as their angry expressions grew darker and breathing heavier. "I got him just as good, don't you worry."

Uriel hadn't been at the top of his game, and that might have saved me.

"Broke his finger and a few ribs," I added, when they didn't immediately congratulate me for finally having the lady-balls to fucking throw a hundred and ten percent into killing my former master.

I'd feared Uriel for as long as I'd known him. This was a huge milestone for me.

"We need to get her out of here," Rafe said to Jordan, not quite ignoring me, since his hands were still all over my body, checking for injuries. "Who knows what traps he might have set in here. We're fighting blind."

My feeling was that he wouldn't be back tonight. Three against one when he was injured were odds not even Uriel would take—not if he knew how my boys fought, and something told me he had studied them closely.

Tomorrow we'd be on a plane, so he was too late.

Rafe lifted me into his arms and started sprinting through the tunnels, Jordan and the light right on our heels. I hadn't realized just how far I'd been taken by Uriel until I traversed the way back... with my eyes, of course, because this asshole of a prince wouldn't let me walk.

"I'm fine, Rafe," I said to him when a more familiar tunnel came into view. "Let me down."

All I got in reply was a rumble in his chest. Great, we were back to caveman talk.

When we exited the secret entrance, the hall was thankfully empty, so a ton of awkward stares and questions would be avoided. "We can't stay in any of our rooms tonight," Rafe said in a tumble of angry words. Lifting his palm reader, he quickly called Mattie. "I'm bringing the flight in early," he snapped as soon as she answered. "Pack your bags and meet us at the front in thirty minutes."

"Sure," she said quickly. "Is everything okay? Is Violet okay?"

"Fine," Rafe barked, then hung up before she could say another word.

"That was rude," I said, trying to keep my tone light.

The adrenaline was wearing off now, and my body ached as he continued along the hall until we reached his room. I'd be in a world of hurt tomorrow, that much was clear.

Once inside, the silent prince walked me into the bathroom, the third in our trio trailing behind. Rafe placed me on my feet, his movements gentle, despite the rigid fury in his face. "Strip," he said. My lips twitched as I thought about the last time he'd said that. This time, though, there was definitely nothing sexy about it.

I didn't argue. He needed this from me, and I personally needed to assess the damage as well. Not just to the gorgeous dress gifted from Jax, but to my body.

As the silver silk slid to the ground, Rafe's teeth clanked together as he glared. Looking down at the wisps of lace that my barely-there underwear set consisted of, I knew immediately his reaction had nothing to do with my thong and everything to do with the bruises already on my body.

"What the fuck, Violet!" he cursed. "How long were you fighting him before we found you?"

"How did you even get there so quickly?" I asked, suddenly remembering he hadn't been in the tunnel with us.

"Jordan activated his distress signal, and I found him in the halls." He glared down at me. "Why didn't you activate yours?"

Right... The distress button thing that I had completely forgotten about.

"No time," I said, crossing my arms to hide some of the damage. "Uriel wasn't really there for a tea and chat. Dude was trying to kick the fuck out of me and then drag me off to his secret lair so we could take over the world."

Rafe's stare was not amused. Luckily I wasn't trying to be funny. That had been his legit plan.

"How does he think he has any chance of success now?" Jordan asked, the reasonable one.

I shrugged. "No fucking idea. Maybe at this stage, he just plans on rebuilding. Maybe, hiding out, he hasn't heard about the vote yet." The vote that would really change everything.

Rafe left me abruptly, striding over to turn the shower on. Since that was the best fucking idea he'd ever had, I quickly removed my underwear. "I'll pack your clothes," Jordan said as I turned toward the shower. "Be back soon."

I grabbed his forearm. "Be careful. Uriel could be lurking around."

He lifted his palm reader. "Don't worry. I'll hit the alarm if I run into trouble."

Unease flickered through my chest, but Uriel was likely off planning his next attack. He'd recover first, surely. Unless he'd completely changed from the man I knew.

"There and back," Rafe barked from where he was testing the water. "You have ten minutes."

Jordan dropped a kiss on my cheek before shaking his head at Rafe. "You're not the boss of me, fucker. I'll be back in fifteen."

Then he took off before Rafe could murder his best friend.

Striding over, the steam of the shower caressed my skin, and I was dying to wash off the fight. I needed to feel normal, and hopefully the hot water would ease my aches.

"I'll get you some painkillers," Rafe said as I was about to step in. Just as he turned away, I reached out and wrapped my arms around him. Falling against him, I squeezed my eyes shut as I held on. There was a beat of hesitation, and then he wrapped me up in the tightest, firmest, best fucking hug I'd felt in a long time.

Rafe's hug game was strong.

His hold pressed against my bruises, but I welcomed the pain. It made me feel alive, and considering that I'd almost been killed a few times recently, being alive was something I would never take for granted.

"You scared the fuck out of me," Rafe huskily grumbled near my ear. "I'm not strong enough to handle the stress."

"I'm sorry," I whispered back, meaning it. Loving someone was stressful, so I totally understood what he was feeling now. The thought of either of my princes being in danger made me want to do something really bad.

He kissed me fast, his lips pressing to mine as our tongues met in a tangle of need.

"We don't have time for me to love you like I want," Rafe said against my mouth. "So get in the fucking shower, and if you touch yourself, I'll burn the academy to the ground."

I snorted out some laughter as I pulled away. "Little extreme, don't you think?"

Rafe shrugged. "Whatever it takes to murder that fucker so I can spend my time being the one who touches you."

Fuck. My legs trembled a little, and there was a new ache in my body, one right between my thighs.

"Violet," Rafe warned, and I swallowed my moan.

"I promise."

His eyes were dark as they stared me down, then with one more hard kiss, he turned and left the room, no doubt to pack his own clothing since we were leaving tonight.

Stepping under the hot spray, I swallowed down my moan. Bringing him back into the room might end in an orgasm. But it would also mean we'd miss the flight, and I wanted to get away from this place. Away from Uriel.

Seeing him tonight made me want to scrub my skin raw to remove the taint of his touch. I reached for the body wash, lathered it up, and washed every section of my body until my skin was rosy pink and any bruises, except my 'princes', were hidden under the abuse of my own hands.

Fuck Uriel. Fuck him right to hell where he belonged.

At least I'd hurt him. I should have finished the job while I had the chance; the odds of ever again finding him injured and distracted like he'd been tonight were slim.

CHAPTER 31

Everyone was tense and silent as we boarded Rafe's jet, and given the late hour, it was no surprise when most of us spent the entire flight sleeping. I, for one, had a whole shitload of bruises to heal from, and the index finger of my left hand was in a damn splint, bandaged to the next one. So sexy.

When we disembarked from our overnight flight, the sun was already high and I felt like a bag of warmed-up death.

"We have a couple of days before the vote," Jordan said as we all piled into a stretch limousine. "I think it's best, for everyone's sake, if we all lay low."

The look he shot toward the twins told me who that warning was aimed at.

Mattie snorted a laugh. "Fine by me. Besides, our parents are due to arrive tomorrow. They'll want our *attention*, no doubt." She rolled her eyes a bit as she said that, and a pang of worry hit my gut.

"Mattie, are your parents going to vote against the Society's pitch?" I asked, nervous to hear her answer.

I shouldn't have worried, though. The twins exchanged an evil smirk, and it was Nolan who replied. "Nope, they'll vote in favor," he assured us. "Because if they don't, I'll abdicate my position as crown heir, and my lovely sister *Matisse* is next in line for the throne." They both chortled a laugh, and I doubted I'd ever seen them act more like twins.

"Mother would rather bow down and lick Felipe's shoes than suffer me as the crown heir," Mattie informed me with a wide grin. Whatever her issues were with her parents, they didn't bother her too deeply.

I released a breath and sagged back in my seat. "That's good. We need this vote to work. Not just for the people's resistance, but to stop this barbaric breeding program that some kingdoms are involved in." I shuddered hard,

remembering the way Nurse Reller had tried to fuck with my reproductive system. No woman should be forced to carry a pregnancy she didn't want.

"It will work," Rafe said, his voice hard with determination. "Or I'll personally deal with any monarch who opposes."

The twins snorted a laugh at his bloodthirsty promise, but Jordan and I eyed him more carefully.

"Don't do anything stupid, asshole," Jordy muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Rafe and I to hear.

Rafe flashed his teeth in a mockery of a smile. "Wouldn't dream of it."

The property we were taken to was surrounded by a staggering amount of security, but that was to be expected, given how many important leaders would be flying in over the next few days. Especially considering the carnage at the Spring Ball.

Smartly uniformed staff met us as our car rolled to a stop and we all piled out. Mattie gave me a wave as one of the women offered to escort her and Nolan to their rooms, and Jordan grabbed my hand.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath. "I thought they weren't arriving until Monday."

I looked around for who he was talking about and spotted a vaguely familiar man exiting the main entrance with a beautiful woman by his side.

"Is that..." I squeaked, recognition flooding through me and a seed of panic taking root.

"Jordan's parents?" Rafe finished for me. "Yup, sure is."

There was no time to escape, but I quickly tried to pull my hand free of Jordan's grip. He wasn't letting go, though.

"Jordy!" I hissed, pulling my hand harder as his parents approached, but he held tight. Then it was too late. His parents were already exchanging pleasantries with Rafe, who'd taken a couple of steps forward to meet them.

"Son," King Munroe, *the king of New America*, said in greeting to one of my boyfriends as he stared hard at Jordan's hand clutching mine.

If I could wish for the ground to open up and swallow me whole, this would be the perfect fucking time.

"Father," Jordan replied, *finally* releasing my hand. I let out a small sigh of relief far too soon, though. He'd only let go of my hand so he could snake his arm around my waist and pull me close. "I don't think you've met Violet yet."

King Munroe frowned slightly at our more-than-friends body language, then let out a sigh. "No, I suppose I haven't. Not in person, anyway. Violet, it's nice to meet you." He held out a hand for me to shake, and I managed to do so without having a heart attack.

But, like... this was the king of New America. *My king.*

Meeting Rafe's parents had been intense, and Alex's had been scary as fuck, but King Munroe and Queen Diane were the monarchs I'd grown up with. They were the faces on our currency, on our news channels, on *everything*. Suddenly my whole thing with Jordan blew up to intimidating proportions inside my head, and I started sweating.

"My wife, Diane," King Munroe continued, introducing his queen, and she also shook my hand with a vague smile. They seemed kind, but I got the feeling they were irritated with the way Jordan was laying claim to me in front of them. I mean, fair enough. Just a few months ago he'd been all lined up to marry a princess and secure a political alliance for them. Now... well. Now he was with me. The Princess Ballot winner.

"Jordan, your mother and I would like a word with you," King Monroe said, flicking a glance at me. "If you don't mind, Miss Spencer?"

My eyes bugged out, and I tried to peel Jordan's hand from my waist. "Of course. Don't worry about me. It was nice to meet you both." I bobbed my head to the king and queen of New America, then shot Jordan a warning glare when he still didn't let me go.

He flashed a quick smile at his parents. "Sure, just give us a second?"

Without waiting for his parents to actually walk away, Jordan cupped my face with his free hand and brought my lips to his for a kiss that totally eradicated any questions they might've had about our more-than-friends status. "I'll come find you later, beautiful," he told me with a smirk after he ended our kiss.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," I whispered back to him, then licked my lips as I caught my breath.

His grin widened and he winked. "I'll look forward to it, then."

"I'll take Violet to her room," Rafe gallantly offered, and Jordan gave him a nod over my head before finally releasing me.

As my New American prince walked away with his parents, his mother looked back at me with a curious expression on her face. It wasn't an *unkind* look, though. So here was hoping they wouldn't find some reason for me to suddenly be expelled from Arbon.

"What the hell was that all about?" I hissed to Rafe as we made our way inside the enormous mansion. "Why did he just do that?"

Rafe gave me a smile and arched a brow. "What? Lay claim to you in front of his parents so they understood in no uncertain terms that he wasn't interested in whatever betrothal offer they wanted to talk to him about?" He said it so casually, and my heart thumped painfully fast in my chest. Would they have

found a replacement for Meghan so quickly? How? Using the genetic tests?

"Hey, quit worrying," Rafe told me, linking our hands together as we walked down a long, marble-tiled hallway. "He was taking a stand and showing them he'd already made his own choice."

My chest tightened, and warmth spread through me. These boys really were serious about this thing with me. Serious enough that they were willing to risk their parents' disapproval, if I was reading that situation with Munroe correctly.

"Here," Rafe announced, stopping in front of a door. "The housekeeper told me we were in room seventeen."

Sure enough, a gold-leaf number seventeen was on the door, and Rafe opened it with the old-fashioned key hanging from the handle.

"We're... sharing a room?" My brows shot up in surprise as I stepped into the gorgeous room with, yep, just one bed. A big one, but still just one.

Rafe pushed the door shut behind us and closed the distance between us. His huge hands cupped my face in a crazy possessive move that instantly made my panties wet and my nipples hard.

"We're not letting you out of our sight for even a second, Cinderella. You're ours, and the next delusional motherfucker who lays a hand on you will be eating steel for breakfast. Clear?"

A deep shiver ran through me at the violence in his voice, and I rose up on my toes to meet his kiss. For ages, we just stood there and kissed. When we parted, both our breathing was heavy and quick.

"Besides," Rafe added, swiping his thumb over my lower lip and eyeing me with raw hunger. "My parents already know you own my heart, so why bother hiding it while we're here?"

I groaned. "I swear, if you keep saying romantic shit like that, you'll kill me of heart failure."

Rafe snickered, backing me up until my legs hit the edge of the bed. I dropped to sit on the edge of the mattress, grabbing his belt and unbuckling it before he could make any other moves. I knew he wanted to finish what we'd started before the dinner last night, but first...

"Violet..." Rafe growled in a warning tone as I unzipped his jeans and tugged them down his thighs.

I looked up at him from under my lashes as I freed him from his boxers and stroked down his length with my hand. "What?" I replied with a smirk.

He didn't protest any further, though. Instead he threaded his fingers into my messy curls and inhaled sharply when my mouth closed over his cock. His tight grip in my hair controlled my pace, and I learned pretty fast that I could take him deeper than I realized.

When he came, it was with a statement that I wanted permanently etched across my heart.

"Fuck, I love you, Violet."

I licked my lips and lay back on the bed to grin up at him. "I love you, too, Rafe."

He groaned and flopped down beside me, not bothering to do his pants back up. For a long time, we just lay there in silence, staring into each other's eyes. Then Rafe's gaze turned dark, and he dropped his hand to cup his dick.

"Strip for me, Violet. If I don't see my cum dripping from that perfect pussy before Jordan gets back, I'll *actually* die of heart failure."

And with romance like that, how was a girl to say no?

Seriously. How?

CHAPTER 32

The couple of days between our arrival and the vote passed like the blink of an eye. I barely even left our room except for meals. Mattie and Nolan were spending "quality time" with their parents—Mattie had put it in quotations when she messaged me—so we didn't see them at all. Which sort of suited us fine.

Jordan's parents had wanted to talk to him about new marriage prospects. But he assured me that they'd let the subject drop when he told them he was already in love and had no intention of fucking it up with a political betrothal.

How I'd gotten lucky enough to be loved by Jordan and Rafe was beyond me, but I was never going to complain about my blessings.

Both of my princes had to attend multiple meetings with their parents regarding the vote and what it would mean for their monarchies after the fact. No one called on me, though, so by the time the vote came around, I was wondering why I'd been invited at all.

Not that I was complaining. Far from it. I was actually relieved that Wainwright hadn't come to me with any grand propositions to make me *their* figurehead, like Uriel had planned.

But even without being hands-on involved, I was still a bundle of nervous energy as we made our way to the conference hall for the meeting.

"Hey." Jordan tugged on my hand, bringing us to a stop in front of a jaw-dropping floor-to-ceiling window at the end of the corridor. "Just take a breath, beautiful. This is going to be fine."

"He's right," Rafe added, folding his arms and nodding at the stunning scenery past the window. The property had its own private beach—that we hadn't been allowed to visit due to security concerns—but the crisp, white sand and aqua-blue water were calling to us something wicked. "As soon as this vote

goes through—and it will—we can fuck off and have our own private vacation. Just us."

I drew a deep breath, then let it out in a long sigh. "Okay. Yeah, you're right. Once this vote is done, then we're free. Right?"

Neither of the boys answered me, and I knew why. Because that wasn't true. Even if the vote went through with a landslide "yes," we still had the threat of Uriel lurking somewhere out there. Rafe and Jordan were both still the crown heirs to their kingdoms' thrones, and I was still just Violet Rose Spencer. Orphan. Commoner. Certainly *not* fit material to become queen of two of the most powerful kingdoms in the world.

Then there was the fact that, come the end of the school year, the guys would graduate and I would have another three years at Arbon Academy. I wasn't one totally prone to pessimism, but the future looked bleak for the three of us.

Happily ever after had never seemed so fucking far away.

Still, I could have died that night in the tunnels or any of the other many times I'd cheated death, so I'd just take my wins where I could. Right now I had two princes, I loved them both and they loved me, and we might actually be on the right side of history.

Continuing through the large estate, we ended up in a corridor that was filled with a bunch of other royals. You could always pick them out. With their designer clothing, perfectly styled hair, and reticent attitudes, the royals were a cast all of their own.

I'd grown so used to being with my friends that I mostly forgot their royal titles, focusing instead on how amazing they all were, but now, it was slapping me in the face that I'd stepped into these sacred, upper echelons of humanity. At least in status and money.

Rafe and Jordan were greeted constantly as we strolled through. Curious glances were thrown my way, but no one really gave a fuck who I was.

"Stop trying to introduce me," I hissed at Jordan. "No one cares about the nobody."

He shot me a dark glare. "Say that again, and I'll have Rafe punish you tonight."

I scoffed. "I like having my ass spanked, so you all can stop threatening me with that—"

My words choked off when I realized that Felipe and Jax were standing there before us, the queen of the Switzerlands smirking in my direction while I turned all shades of fucking red.

"Are you all ready for the vote?" Felipe asked, taking pity on me and not bringing up the last thing I'd said.

“I’m worried,” Rafe said, looking around the hall. “The monarchs aren’t known for their brains or altruism. What makes us think this is going to go our way?”

Felipe held both hands out, looking calm and relaxed. “Don’t worry. We’ll sweeten it with some excellent trade and tax incentives. After all, there’s a reason I’ve been buying up shares in the world bank, son. Nothing like a bit of debt forgiveness for a country to suddenly see things my way.”

Rafe shook his head while I opened and closed my mouth like a fucking fish. Was he legit?

The world bank was what kept the world functioning by controlling ninety percent of the world’s wealth. If Felipe was a majority shareholder in that...

“Fucking hell. I knew you were stupid rich but this is like... you’re more than just a fucking billionaire,” I muttered to Rafe. “What’s the next level up even called?”

“Trillionaire, I think,” Jordan added, joining in on my whispered conversation.

My stomach lurched and I swallowed hard. Coming from the impoverished upbringing I’d had, that level of wealth was mind blowing. Rafe just laughed—probably at my stunned face—and it was the sort of open, light-hearted sound that I’d never heard from him before. In fact, judging by the way everyone turned toward us, no one had ever heard the prince laugh like that.

“Come on,” he said, shaking his head. “Let’s find our seats.”

As he turned to walk away, Felipe reached out and squeezed my hand. When I turned to him, he mouthed *thank you* at me, and then released me into the care of his son. My heart was pounding so hard I felt like everyone could hear it.

Was this what true happiness felt like? Fucking addictive.



OUR SEATS WERE HIDDEN in the crowd of supporting diplomats, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized we wouldn't be required to actually contribute. My guys may be the crown heirs to their kingdoms, but the ruling monarchs were the only ones invited to speak or vote.

As all the kings and queens filed in and took their places, my eyes widened at the impressive display they cut. Each of them wore their crowns like an extension of their body. Even the young monarchs, newly coronated in the aftermath of the Spring Ball earthquake, looked like they'd been born to wear those crowns.

I guess they had been.

Alex searched the room with his gaze, and when he found me, he gave a small nod. Whether that nod meant *we're all good, I'll vote yes* or *I'm holding a grudge and about to make you pay...* I had no idea. I could only cross my fingers and hope for the best.

The actual meeting itself went on for hours, with Felipe outlining his proposal for granting the resistance a seat at the big kids' table and what the ramifications would be for the existing monarchies. Wainwright spoke on behalf of the Society but was then dismissed from the meeting room while the kingdoms discussed his pitch in depth.

Surprisingly, several kingdoms—including The Guays—were vehemently opposed to giving the common people a representative. Maybe Mattie being their ruler wasn't as big a deterrent as the twins had thought.

When it finally came time to cast votes, my heart was in my throat and I'd bitten all my nails to the quick.

"All in favor?" Felipe asked, and a rush of hands were raised. Too fast for me to count.

"All opposed?" Hands went down, others went up. Fewer. Fewer hands went up, I thought, and not Alex's. He must have voted yes. Mattie and Nolan's father, too.

Felipe banged a little wooden hammer and nodded his head. "Motion passed. The Society has gained permission to form a People's Court."

Whatever else he said faded into a rush of voices as people all started talking at once. Whether they were pleased or angry about the outcome, they all wanted to voice an opinion. Me, though? I was in shock.

That'd been so quick. So easy. It was almost unbelievable. Of course, I knew this was only the beginning and that it would take a long time for everything to truly come to fruition, but this was the first step. One in the right direction.

Alex met my eyes across the room and gave a sad smile, then turned away to chat with the young queen of the Britains beside him. I vaguely recognized her as Claudette's younger sister and a friend of Alex's. Maybe there could be something there?

"Fuck yeah!" Nolan whooped as we all made our way out of the conference hall and the twins ran over to meet us. "Told you they'd vote in favor." He smirked as he threw his arm around my neck, and I laughed.

"Gave us a scare for a minute there," I muttered, sharing a smile with Mattie. For the most part, everyone around us was all smiles. I hadn't known just how many of the kingdoms' elite had wanted a change like this. The common people needed a voice, and it was heartening to see that progressive leaders like Felipe

and Jacinta weren't the only ones who agreed.

"So what happens now?" I asked my princes as we wandered back through the estate. "Another fancy dinner or ball or something?"

Rafe gave me a half-smile. "Actually, not this time. Security concerns are high enough with all the monarchs gathered that it was deemed safer to disperse as quickly as possible. By this time tomorrow, there won't be a single monarch left in the Cayman Islands and this estate will have become the new base of operations for the People's Court."

I sighed, gazing longingly out the window to the pristine white sand and crystal clear waters. "Lucky them. I'd kill for an office view like that."

Rafe pulled me out of Nolan's hold and closed me tight in his big arms. "I'll buy you an island, babe. Say the word and I'll make it happen." He murmured the words in my ear, and I jolted back in shock.

He just laughed, the prick, and let me go to keep walking.

I shot Jordan a panicked look and shook my head. "He's joking, right?"

Jordan grinned. "Doubtful. Never can tell with him, though." He linked our hands together, and we followed our friends out into the sunshine.

"Violet," someone called out from behind us, and I spun to find Felipe and Jacinta emerging from the main building.

I smiled at my boyfriend's parents—easily the best parents I'd ever known. "Congratulations, Felipe," I replied. "You must be relieved that went so seamlessly."

He nodded. "We are, absolutely. Jax and I wanted to personally update you on the other matter under discussion today." His brow dipped somewhat, and my stomach clenched.

The *other* matter. The Princess Ballot and genetic matching for arranged marriages. Not that I had a problem with people finding their genetic matches, not at all. But both parties needed to be fully aware and consenting.

"We were able to use the data dump that Jordan set up prior to the Spring Ball," Jax told me with a reassuring smile. "It allowed us to identify which kingdoms were the worst offenders. We've arranged private discussions with each of those leaders later this afternoon, and we're confident we can garner an acceptable result."

I arched a brow, the cynic in me creeping out. "An acceptable result?"

"Transparency and informed consent," Jax clarified. "After my initial chat with Queen Tatiana, of Siberia, I have complete confidence that all the breeding programs in her kingdom will be shut down. She was most revolted by the whole thing."

I breathed a sigh of relief and Jordan squeezed my hand. "Thank you, Jax," I

replied with total sincerity. "You two are pretty amazing leaders, you know that?"

Rafe's parents both laughed, and his mom pulled me into a warm hug. "You will be too, one day," she whispered to me, then kissed my cheek and headed back inside with her loving husband by her side.

I had no idea what she meant by that comment—I sure as hell wasn't going to be marrying my princes any time soon—but I couldn't deny the wistful hope as I watched Felipe kiss her hand while they walked. Those two, they were couple goals.

All I needed to do was work out how to apply that to *both* my princes and secure our very own happily ever after.

CHAPTER 33

"Here's a fight tonight," Rafe whispered to me as we disembarked our flight back in the Switzerlands. He'd been on his palm reader for the past couple of hours, and now there was a mischievous glow to his face. "You up for it, Violence?"

"Yes!"

No thought or hesitation required. I was itching to work off all the emotions raging through my body. It didn't matter that they were on the lighter side with happiness and excitement prominent, I still needed an outlet.

"I'll get you on the cards. Start hoping there's someone worthy to go up against."

"What about you or Jordan?" I asked. "You guys are the best. We'd put on a hell of a show."

His smile grew. "Not tonight, babe. Tonight we're on the same side. Besides, Jordy and I are already on the list for other match ups."

I kissed him. The fact that we were at the stage where it was fine to randomly kiss each other was almost beyond belief. The fact that this was my life was a little too much to handle.

Another reason I needed this fight.

Mattie interrupted us before anything else could be said or done, and she linked her arm through mine to drag me to the waiting vehicle. "You've had her for days," she said. "My turn now."

Rafe shook his head but didn't argue, falling in with Nolan and Jordan as they got into the second car. Normally they wouldn't have left us alone, but since they were following right behind, they must have figured it was okay.

"So," Mattie said, dropping her head back against the seat as the car took off. "That was hectic, right?"

I swallowed hard. “Yeah, being there with so many monarchs was intense. And I wasn’t sure the vote was going to go our way.”

She smiled before reaching forward to hit a button. A small divide between us and the driver settled into place, and I winced at the fact that I’d almost shared information that was in no way public yet.

Whoops.

“It’s a really amazing step forward,” Mattie said, “and I’m thinking about applying to be a royal liaison to the People’s Court. I’m never going to be queen of my country, and I’d like to use my diplomatic skills for something useful.”

It took me a moment to wrap my head around that, but the more I thought on it, the more sense it made. Mattie was smart, passionate, and kind. She’d taken a ballot winner like me, an orphan with no family, money, or title, and cared for me like I was one of her own. She would treat the people right.

“I think you’d be amazing,” I told her. “You could make a real difference.”

She smirked at me. “With the added bonus of pissing off the parentals, I really can’t see a downside.”

We both laughed, and thankfully she didn’t discuss her horrible mother any longer. No way could I act like that woman was anything other than a mean-spirited, snobby bitch. We might have only had two stilted conversations during my time in the Caymans, but that was more than enough. Fuck knew how she had such amazing children; Arbon Academy probably had a shit ton to do with that. The twins barely even knew their parents, and in my opinion, that was for the best.

“It still astonishes me that she agreed to the alliance with Zach,” I said, watching her face closely. Whenever his name was mentioned, her eyes dilated. It was a telling sign.

“Zach is still the son of one of the most powerful monarchs in the world, illegitimate or not. He has money too, thanks to that, and my parents are always about increasing our country’s wealth.” She leaned in closer and whispered dramatically, “They have small-country syndrome.”

I snorted out some laughter. “Fuck. Small country energy is the worst.”

Mattie laughed hard, and I loved that we were free to have this moment without the threat of anything to mar it.

“So, are you coming to the fight tonight?” I asked her with a teasing smile. “I bet Zach will be there. They’re resistance-run, aren’t they?” Then I frowned. “I guess we can’t call them the resistance anymore. Uh... Society-run?”

She gave me a narrow-eyed look. “As if I’d miss seeing the infamous *Violence* in action. Hell yeah, I’ll be there cheering from the front row, babe. But if you get hurt I’ll have to bust some nuts.”

I laughed at the mental image of Mattie going all nuclear on my opponent. "It'll be easy," I promised her. "If Rafe and Jordan aren't fighting me—or Nolan, either, I guess—then I seriously doubt there will be many other fighters who can kick my ass."

Mattie grinned wide. "Confident. I like it. Well then, I can't freaking wait. What do I wear, though? Fucking hell, we need the whole afternoon to sort out outfits. Wait, do you even still have your costume? And where's your blade?"

I smiled at her fussing. "All safe in my room, I checked last week. Good thing I didn't have my weapon on me at the Spring Ball or it'd be long gone now. Don't worry about what to wear, though. You'll see."



MATTIE MUTTERED curses under her breath the whole way through the hidden tunnels, and it did nothing but amuse the rest of us.

"Seriously, you guys," she spoke up just before we reached the fight arena, "how come I couldn't wear a cute outfit like Vi? She looks hot as fuck, like spontaneous combustion hot. And I'm stuffed in this fucking ski mask like some kind of—"

"Like everyone else *not* fighting tonight?" Nolan replied with an eye roll. "That's the point, Matisse. Anonymity."

Mattie grumbled some more. "It's unsexy, that's what it is."

I just shared a grin with my guys. Mattie was adorable as hell, and we all knew she was worried about not looking cute in front of Zach. And that said *everything* about how much he was under her skin.

The fights this time were in a completely different section of the hidden passages that I hadn't been to before. This part almost looked like it had been an underground railway at some point, with huge train tracks we had to walk over to get to the main space.

"I'm digging this fucking vibe," Mattie said, head tilted up as she stared at the heavy beams crisscrossing the stone walls. Hundreds of years ago, there would have been shop fronts or ticket windows but now they were nothing more than relics of a time long passed.

"Is the secrecy thing a moot point now?" I asked, noticing no one was trying to shut Mattie up. "Or is it just a waste of time trying to keep her quiet?"

Nolan snorted. "A little of both. And you can't talk. Your first time here you asked me about a million questions in eighteen seconds."

I nailed him with a deadpan stare. "That is legitimately not even possible."

Asshole.”

Nolan reached out and brushed a hand across my cheek. “You’re cute when you get feisty.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t show him just how feisty I could be because we were right in the midst of the crowd. The atmosphere was a little different tonight; for some reason it felt lighter, less cloak and dagger. Maybe it was that my purple outfit was covered in a robe, so fewer eyeballs were on me, or maybe it was that the news of the successful vote had already reached the resis—*Society* who ran these underground fights.

Either way, I was loving the new feel, and it sent trills of excitement through me. This was often how I felt just before a fight, and... it was fucking addictive.

“Welcome to fight niight” The announcer’s voice blasted through the room as everyone started to move toward the four square-shaped fight zones. There was more space in this section and judging by the additional marked off areas it looked like tonight was going to have a lot of fights.

Mattie started to bounce on her toes. “I can’t believe I’m here. This is not even remotely as grungy and gangland as I was expecting.”

A few faces turned our way at her loud exclamation, but a swift stare from Fallen Angel sent them right back to minding their own business.

“Fighters, make your way to the cordoned-off area,” the announcer continued. “We will announce the draw as soon as we have all of you checked in.”

“I’m going to keep an eye on Mattie,” Nolan said. “You all do me proud tonight, or I’m going to cancel our ugly Christmas sweater card this year. Winners get ugly sweaters, alright? Just winners.”

Jordan and Rafe punched their friend on the shoulder, and Mattie gave me a quick hug.

“Kick ass, bitch,” she said as she pulled away. “I’m gonna bet on you, and then we can use that money for booze and strippers.”

“Not a fucking chance,” Rafe growled before he and Jordan dragged me away toward the fighter’s special location.

CHAPTER 34

“*H*ow are you feeling?” Jordan asked as we stood a little to the side of the fighters. “Feeling in the zone? Not tired?”

I laughed at his cute worrying. “I feel great! I’m so ready for this fight... It’s exactly what I need after that stressful vote.”

“You’ll fight twice,” Rafe said. “The three of us all have two fights tonight, actually.”

Somehow Rafe always knew these things even though they were supposed to be secret.

“First round,” the announcer started. “Fallen Angel versus Cyclops in fight square one. The Bishop versus Viper in the fight square two. Sushi versus Anaconda in the third square. Sam versus Magic Hands in the fourth. Fighters, make your way to your assigned squares now.”

Rafe and Jordan were both fighting in the first round, and not near each other either, so I’d be running back and forth like a crazy person trying to see them both. “Be careful,” I whispered.

Jordan grabbed my right hand, Rafe the other, and both of them held on for a few seconds. When we were together like this, everything so perfect, it made me feel like we could do this. We could make our weird trio work. I was just a chick dating two dudes, and that was okay, right?

Modern independent woman. In love with two princes.

A much better fairy tale, if you asked me.

“See you in five minutes,” Rafe said, his confidence at peak as always. Jordan just laughed before they both headed to their fights. Once everyone was in their square, the announcer kicked off the first round.

I’d seen Rafe fight many times, and I had no doubt that Cyclops, with his one stupid, fucking “eye” cut out of his mask, was going to be nothing more than

blood and guts in less than the five minutes Rafe had predicted. With that in mind, I decided to watch Jordan's fight this round.

I'd never seen Sushi in action, so I pushed my way right to the front, needing to be as close as possible to the magic. Fuck, this was my aphrodisiac. Fighting, being around fighting, watching hot dudes fight. Sign me up for life.

For some reason I'd expected Jordan to be a sword man—maybe a samurai sword or even short blades—but he shocked me when he pulled out a set of nunchakus. That was not a discipline I'd ever really learned, outside of using them to increase my hand speed and coordination. It was not the easiest weapon to handle, and I was excited as fuck to see what Jordan could do with them.

His opponent, Anaconda, didn't have any weapons outside of studded brass knuckles, and he eyed the prince warily. Jordan held his weapon in both hands, and then in almost slow motion, let one side fall, the metal glinting off the low lights in here.

It looked like his sticks were custom made, a mixture of wood and metal with some lethal-looking spikes across the tips. The moment Jordan started to swing them around, getting faster and faster until his hands and the weapons were nothing but blurs, was the moment I knew his opponent was going to forfeit this match.

No one, unless you were skilled beyond fuck, would go up against Sushi. And Anaconda, who'd brought brass knuckles to a nunchaku fight, was definitely not skilled.

Jordan moved with startling speed, twisting his body as he struck. The stick in his right hand cracked Anaconda across the arm, eliciting a yelp from the fighter.

That was followed with a quick, "I yield!"

"Anaconda yields," the announcer shouted, "and is henceforth banished from fighting again tonight. Sushi is the winner in square three."

Not one minute later... "Fallen Angel is the winner with a knockout punch in square one. Cyclops is done for the night."

Jordan and Rafe both rejoined me on the other side of the fight squares; neither of them had even broken a sweat. "One minute," Jordan teased Rafe. "How long were you?"

Rafe just shook his head. "Let's see who is fastest in round two."

I leaned in closer to Jordan, my heart still pounding hard, even though I'd barely seen him fight. "You are so getting lucky tonight," I whispered, desperate to drag him out of here so he could put those magic hands to good fucking use.

His eyes darkened until they were near black, and I swallowed hard as he pressed me back into the wall we were near. "If we didn't have another fight,"

he murmured, leaning down so our faces were close, “I’d be hauling your ass to our room.”

The announcer's voice droned on in the background, but I totally missed it because blood was rushing in my ears—not to mention heat pooling in my center.

“Violence is up,” Rafe said, sounding amused as he broke us up. “Square three.”

Neither Jordan nor Rafe had been called this round, so they followed me over and stood on the east side while I climbed into the ring, shed my black robes, and handed them back to Rafe. My sword was in the special scabbard I had for it, so I pulled it free, removed the belt, and handed that back as well.

I had no idea who my opponent was, but that didn’t really matter since I had no prior knowledge of almost any fighter here. I’d only seen a few, and of those, none posed a threat to me.

A male stepped into the ring, or more accurately, was halfway through climbing into the square, when a huge shadow loomed over him and yanked him backward. A blade sliced across my opponent’s throat in a split second, and I blinked wondering what the fuck had just happened.

Before I could blink again, the murderous shadow leaped gracefully into the square with me, and I caught sight of his blade—a katana that was very similar to my wakizashi, except for the length of blade. As a larger and stronger fighter, Uriel preferred that length, whereas I was more comfortable with my weapon.

“Security!” Rafe shouted. “This man is a wanted terrorist! Arrest him.”

Uriel ignored the prince, smiling directly at me. His lips and eyes were the only things visible beneath his traditional fighting garb, and it was enough for me to see that he was not going anywhere. “Are you afraid to fight me, Rose?”

His words struck a chord deep inside me. I had been afraid my whole life of going up against my sensei, but while Uriel hadn’t seemed to move on from who I used to be two years ago, I was a very different person now.

Now I felt strong and supported. Now I would do whatever it took to keep my life safe, just as it was today.

A bunch of security were hurrying toward us, and I knew I could let them try and take Uriel out. But there was no one skilled enough here to do that, no one except me. “Wait! I want to fight him,” I shouted.

Rafe and Jordan started swearing from the side, already preparing to jump into the square and defend me.

“Stop!” I said to them, clutching my sword tight. “I need to do this. It’s been a long time coming, and there’s no one else here who could best him.”

Rafe scoffed, and I shook my head. “Not even you, Angel. I know Uriel. I

know exactly how he thinks and moves and reacts. I can do this.”

Uriel let out a low derisive laugh while shoving the dead fighter the rest of the way out of the ring and into the crowd. Blood slicked the floor at the side of our fight space, but luckily the worst of it had run into the spectator area and not made our ground slippery.

Rafe was furious, I could practically feel the anger and heat pouring off him, but he didn't move any closer. Our gazes locked. I wrenched mine free to look at Jordan, who appeared to be torn but also wasn't moving.

“Are you sure?” Jordan asked.

Before I could reply, Rafe bit out, “She can take him.”

Just like that, he accepted that I needed this, and he stepped back down, pulling Jordan with him. “The fight will go ahead,” Rafe added, and the security stopped their push forward.

Uriel grinned. He thought he had me.

He was a fool, and I was about to hand him his fucking ass on a platter.

“Bring it on, *old man*.”

My sensei's lip curled in a snarl, and he launched himself at me in a lightning-fast strike, one that immediately made me second-guess my decision to fight him.

What the hell had I been thinking? I'd never beaten Uriel, but I'd come damn close to a stalemate in the tunnels last week. Except now he had nothing to lose. Regardless of whether he won or lost, he wasn't getting out of these tunnels—not with so many security guards and trained fighters filling the room.

But if I didn't strike the killing blow, it'd forever haunt me. I'd never be free of the shadows, of the feeling that he was out there watching me somehow.

Nope. Uriel wasn't leaving this fight except in a body bag, and what beautiful poetry it'd be when the blade *he'd* given me took his life. The blade that I'd earned in blood, pain, broken bones, and lost innocence.

Drawing a deep breath, I spun out of his reach and found my center. The calm place devoid of emotions or fears. The place where I could block out the whole world and laser-focus on my opponent.

Tension dropped from my body like shedding a coat, and when my eyes came up to lock on Uriel, I knew I was ready.

Ready to kill my sensei. My mentor, my savior, and my first misguided love.

Uriel was going down.

The clang of steel on steel rang out through the cave, bouncing off the walls and echoing back in a way that drowned out the roar of the crowd. It was almost peaceful, the way Uriel and I danced around one another. Our blades met in a flurry of movements, but it was like fighting my own shadow.

Uriel had taught me everything I knew... until I met my princes. My few training sessions with Rafe had already modified my style the slightest bit, and I knew I was going to surprise Uriel soon. So soon. I just needed the right opportunity.

"You're weak," Uriel spat at me, his eyes bright with emotion. It was unlike him to show anything in a fight and a testament to how unhinged he'd become. He was the one who'd taught me to give nothing away. To give my opponent nothing to work with.

"You're weak, lazy, undisciplined, easily distracted." He rained blows down on me with every insult, but I parried hard and caught or dodged every single one of them. "You're worth nothing except a few minutes of pleasure between those tight thighs. You're a *whore*, Rose. After I kill you, I'll kill both your princes."

He was trying to get under my skin, and as badly as I wanted to block it all out, I hesitated.

Uriel could threaten me all he liked, and it wouldn't dent my armor. But threaten my guys? The two I'd so recently admitted I was head-over-heels in love with?

I faltered, and the tip of Uriel's blade sliced through the flesh of my upper arm.

Pain burned through me and I hissed in anger. I danced out of the way, giving myself a bit of space to get my head straight. He'd aimed to distract me, and it'd worked. But if that was the best he could manage when I was caught off guard, a little scratch to my arm? Then I doubted I was the only one off my game.

"It's been so long since my blade has been coated in your blood, Rose," Uriel murmured, licking his lips in a deeply disturbing way. "I forgot how much I enjoy piercing your flesh."

I swallowed back all the angry retorts building in my throat. I wouldn't let him suck me into that trap. No, I needed to focus, to block out all the noise, and to *end* him. Sooner rather than later.

This time it was me who attacked, taking the offensive with a series of strikes. My limbs flowed through the air like I was nothing more than a ribbon in the breeze, my wakizashi blade a mere extension of my body. But more than that, Rafe had taught me not to just rely on my weapon. When I saw my opportunity, I lashed out with a kick to Uriel's side. He exclaimed in pain, and a flash of satisfaction zapped through me.

I'd hurt him.

Memories of our last fight flickered across my mind, and I remembered the

cracking sound when I'd hit him in that same spot. I'd broken his ribs, I was almost sure of it.

And now? Now, I knew how to win this.

But damn, it was going to hurt.

A tight backflip took me across the ring, creating several paces of space between Uriel and me. It confused him because a move like that was in direct contrast to everything he'd taught me. When you identified a weakness, you exploited it, immediately and without hesitation.

But that was what he *expected* me to do, so I did the opposite.

Uriel frowned but crossed the gap between us and went back on the offensive. For every move he made, I did the opposite of what he'd taught me. It was the only way to beat him—be totally unpredictable. Right down to the moment I saw my opening.

My sensei struck out at me in a spinning motion that left his balance entirely weighted on one foot and his back exposed. There was no way he could guard against a strike from behind, not with broken ribs on his left side. So instead of dodging to the left—and escaping his strike—I moved right.

Right into his blade. But it gave me the reach I needed.

My wakizashi pierced the flesh of Uriel's back, and I let out a primal scream as I drove it home. The blade protruded through his chest in a spray of blood, coating the spectators who stood too close to the side of the fight ring, and for a moment, it seemed like time stood still.

Uriel's katana had stabbed me, but a stomach wound was nothing compared to being impaled through the heart. Blood bubbled from his lips, pouring down his chin. His katana clattered to the floor, cutting my wound deeper as he let go, but I didn't move. I didn't flinch. I'd blocked out the pain, along with all my emotions.

There would be time for all of that later, I hoped. But now? I needed to see that light fade from his fucking eyes.

Planting my boot in the center of Uriel's back, I shoved him off my blade. His dying body hit the ground in a splatter of blood, and I winced as I used my foot to roll him over. I wasn't taking any fucking chances, but time was limited. The dizzy, sweaty feeling rolling over me was my first clue that my wound was worse than I'd calculated.

Crouching down, I ripped Uriel's mask off and locked eyes with him as he died.

"I win," I whispered as the bubbling blood eased and my former mentor faded into the nothingness of death.

CHAPTER 35

The steady beep of a heart monitor woke me. My head was heavy and my eyelids seemed almost glued shut when I tried to open them.

"Ms. Spencer," an unfamiliar woman said from somewhere above me. "Take it easy. You've been unconscious for a while. Just move slowly and you'll be okay." Her voice was low and soothing, and the bubble of panic rising in me subsided.

Blinking several times to clear the grit, I frowned up at the stranger. "Where am I?" I asked in a hoarse, throaty whisper.

"Here, I'll get you some water," she offered, turning away for a second before handing me a plastic cup. "You're in the Royal Swiss Private Hospital. Do you remember why you're here?"

Her question was calm, but it brought back a flood of emotions. I gasped, bringing my free hand to my stomach.

I'd been stabbed. Uriel had stabbed me, but then I'd killed him.

"I've got a couple of very concerned princes waiting outside the room," the woman—nurse, I guessed—told me, continuing on in that calm, soothing tone, even though I hadn't answered her. "Do you think you're well enough to see them? I'm a bit worried they might put more holes in the wall out there if I tell them no again." Her eyes creased with laughter, but I could imagine she wasn't actually joking. If the hospital had been keeping my princes out of the room, they'd be losing it.

"Yeah," I replied with a nod. "Yes, you can send them in."

The nurse gave me a warm smile back and patted my hand. "Your doctor will want to talk to you about your surgery and recovery, so they'll have to keep it brief. It's best you speak to the doctor alone, okay?"

Confusion swept through me at that comment, but she was already hustling over to the door to let my guys in.

"She's awake," I heard her tell them, blocking the doorway with her hands on either side of the opening. "But you are *not* to stress her out. Are we clear? You have until the doctor gets here, and then you will leave without complaint or I won't let your asses back in for a full twenty-four hours. I won't tolerate you upsetting my patient."

I smirked at the stern voice she used on them, imagining my alpha male princes scowling back at her but unable to argue. Nurses were legit badass bitches. She was just casually taking on Fallen Angel and Sushi like they were naughty school boys.

She stepped aside, and Rafe and Jordan pushed each other to be the first through the door, making me laugh. Which in turn made me wince as it pulled at the injury on my stomach. I had no idea what surgery I'd needed, but there would be a fair few stitches at minimum.

Getting stabbed with a katana would do that.

They both dragged chairs over to the side of my bed, and Rafe smacked Jordan's hand out of the way as he reached for mine.

"Prick," Jordan muttered as Rafe claimed my hand and wove our fingers together against the soft blankets. Only the best in the Royal Swiss Hospital, I supposed.

For a moment, the three of us sat there, staring at each other. Well, I was looking between both of them while they had their eyes locked on my face. "What happened?" I asked, my voice still a little raspy.

"You almost fucking died and left me alone with this asshole!"

One would have thought that those words would've come from my prickly prince, but it was actually Jordan who'd choked that out.

Rafe leaned closer, his hand clutching mine almost to the point of pain, but I didn't care. There were so many drugs in my system at that moment he could have broken a finger and I would barely have felt it. "You fight like a fucking dream," he murmured, his lips brushing against my cheek as he breathed me in. "A torturous dance of speed and grace, I have never seen anyone move like you. Not even Uriel."

Jordan got closer too, the pair of them all but surrounding me. "Rafe knew what you were about to do, but we were too slow to stop it."

I swallowed hard, my throat tight. "The longer the fight had gone on, the harder it would have been to beat him. Uriel is trained to fight for hours without tiring. I wouldn't have had a chance in a long fight, being so out of practice. I saw my shot..."

“You were lucky,” Rafe rumbled. “We haven’t talked to the doctor yet, but the surgery didn’t take as long as they’d expected. So hopefully that means no lasting damage.”

A throat cleared in the doorway, and both princes scowled in that direction. The man in the white coat—the doctor presumably—held both hands up and chuckled. “My name is Dr. Ryan, and I come in peace. No harm befalls my patients in this hospital.”

He zeroed in on Rafe then, and gave a respectful half-bow. “Especially not a friend of the crown prince.”

“Girlfriend,” Rafe snapped back, his diplomacy all but gone.

The heart monitor made a few beeping sounds as my chest went all fluttery, and the doctor hurried forward to check it out before likely realizing it was just my reaction to being all loved up and shit.

“If you two could give me a moment alone with Miss Spencer, I’d like to go over her injuries and surgery,” he said formally, staring at the princes.

Neither of them moved an inch.

Dr. Ryan paled a touch, and considering he was already super fair with golden-blond hair and brown eyes, he looked almost ghostly. Especially against all the bronze goodness of my guys.

“It’s okay,” I said. “They’re my family, and I’m cool with them being here for whatever you need to say.”

He cleared his throat. “I really insist that we speak in private, at least for a few minutes. They can wait right outside the door.”

My head was starting to ache again, my stomach feeling tight and uncomfortable, and I just wanted to be alone with my princes. “Okay, fine.” I turned to look at Jordan first and then Rafe. “Just give me five minutes, guys. Then you can come back and sing me a lullaby.”

My joke fell flat, and I guessed that it had been tense around here while I was in surgery. Rafe grumbled, but he leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. “We’ll be right outside,” he said, loud enough for the doc to hear. “Just shout.”

Jordan kissed me as well, and then the pair, shooting dark glares at Dr. Ryan, turned and left the room. Meanwhile, I was trying not to feel embarrassed that neither of them had bothered to hide their affection for me in front of Dr. Ryan. Apparently we were just putting our relationship out into the world.

The doctor moved closer until he stood on the right side of my bed. “How are you feeling, Violet?” he asked, seemingly more confident now that he wasn’t being stared down by two tyrannical princes.

I cleared my throat. “Honestly, doc. I feel like shit. My body hurts, my throat is raspy, and everything below this hospital blanket feels like it’s not even

connected to me. But I'm alive, right?"

He chuckled uncomfortably. "That's all normal and to be expected. The stab wound to your lower abdomen was moderately severe; that particular blade appeared to be designed to inflict maximum damage with almost no effort."

I winced. "Yeah, the katana is a real bitch, but it's not the weapon's fault. Trust me, the wielder was definitely the problem in this situation."

He looked even more uncomfortable, and I wondered if anyone outside of my princes even knew who had stabbed me... or that he was dead. Something to ask them when they returned.

The doctor had continued talking, and I tuned back in to a bunch of medical jargon about the six-hour surgery and...

"Wait, what?" I blurted.

He blinked at me, seemingly stunned by the interruption.

"I can't have children?"

Dr. Ryan shot me a sympathetic stare. "I'm sorry, but the damage done to your uterus was too great, and I couldn't stop the bleeding. We had to remove it entirely, or you would have died."

I just stared at him. I had no uterus. I was eighteen years old, I didn't give a fuck about kids right now, but one day...

"I know this is a huge blow, and we have counselors here at the hospital you can speak with in more depth. I just want you aware, there was no other choice. If we hadn't done this, you wouldn't have survived." His tone was gentle, sympathetic, but he couldn't possibly comprehend the shock I was experiencing.

I just nodded, not really sure what else I could say. He finished the rest of his update in a calm, soothing voice but I wasn't listening. Not really. "This is your pain button." He pointed it out as I blinked away some of the haze of shock. "You can top up as needed, and we'll monitor you for a few days before releasing you into the care of"—he cleared his throat—"your friends." He clearly knew I had no family to care for me.

I was still staring at him, just blinking, my brain screaming as a feeling of loss washed through me. I'd never had a real family, always alone, and now I would never know what it felt like to create life. To create a family.

Doctor Ryan gave me a sympathetic nod and patted my arm before leaving the room. A second later familiar hands were on my face. Rafe and Jordan, both at my side, held me the best they could.

"Violet, talk to me," Rafe rasped out.

"Baby, what's wrong? What did he say?" That was from Jordan.

My eyes burned as I lifted my face to them. "I—the doctor—he said that... I can't have children." The words were broken, rasping out of my dry throat. All

the moisture in my body must have been in my tear ducts because I was crying, the pain leaking from me in a torrent of tears.

“What do you mean?” Jordan asked.

Rafe had gone scarily silent, eyes unmoving from my face.

“Uriel must have dragged his blade down in those final moments,” I choked out, sniffing, “and he ruptured or punctured or damaged my uterus in some way. I missed the finer details, but the doctor had to remove it or I was going to bleed out in surgery.”

Rafe made an almost inhuman sound of fury, and then in a flash, he pulled away and stormed out of the room. Jordan’s eyes followed that movement for a beat before he turned back to me, both hands on my cheeks now. “Violet, baby, I’m so sorry.”

A sob escaped.

“I don’t even know if I wanted kids,” I choked out with bitter laughter. “Fuck. It’s always one loss after another.” I lifted my face to see his red-rimmed eyes watching me while he held me close. “I’m broken. Damaged. I can never give you or Rafe an heir. There’s literally nothing I can offer you now.”

Jordan’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t want an heir. I want *you*.”

Another sob, followed by another. “You say that now, but you’re going to be the king of New America. It’s a hundred percent expected that you will have children. You need an heir.”

Jordan scoffed and shook his head. “Nope, my sister can take up that responsibility. Or we’ll adopt. Yep, we can adopt a commoner, and that will really make the world stand up and take notice.”

I stared at him, waiting for him to truly realize what he was saying. A king adopting someone not of royal blood...? It was unheard of. Jordan didn’t flinch though, steadily holding my gaze, and somehow, an iota of the pain tearing through my chest eased. He meant what he was saying. He didn’t care.

“I love you,” I whispered. “I want this to work, so if you’ll fight...”

“I will fight all the way,” he promised, leaning in to kiss me.

As he pulled away, my eyelids fluttered as exhaustion pressed harder on me. I fought against it, needing to see Rafe.

“Where did he go?” I asked, slurring my words as the pain medication tried to drag me into sleep again. “I’m too broken now...”

My shit was barely making sense, and I wasn’t going to be awake long enough to yell at Rafe.

“Don’t ever say that again,” a low voice snapped, and I jerked my eyelids open, having closed them unknowingly. Rafe was back at my side, staring down at me with his Fallen Angel expression. “You’re perfect and I hate kids.”

A sad chuckle escaped me. “Liar. You adore your siblings.”

I must have closed my eyes again, and I barely felt the kiss Rafe pressed to my lips. “I love you, princess. Sleep now; I’ll be here when you wake up.”

I was conscious long enough for Jordan to kiss me as well, and then they both settled in beside me, refusing to move an inch. Through my grief, I felt protected and secure, and some of the ache in my chest eased.

Jordan’s voice penetrated the encroaching darkness. “Where the fuck did you go, man?”

Rafe grumbled. “To rip that fucking doctor a new asshole. He should have told us first so we could break it to her gently. Violet is my family—*our* family—and I won’t stand for that shit.”

Jordan sighed. “That’s not really how it works, bro. But I hear you. We’re family, no matter what our blood says.”

Darkness stole me away then, but I would never forget the word they’d both said. *Family*.

Maybe losing the ability to have children wasn’t the end of my chance at a real family. Maybe this was only the beginning.

EPILOGUE

FOUR YEARS LATER

“Are you fucking serious?” Mattie stared me down as I emerged from the room dressed in jeans, flats, and a plain back shirt.

“What?” I said, looking down at my outfit. “It’s just dinner, right?”

Her hands went to her hips. “Bitch, I will murder your ass, hide the body in the trunk of my car, and then help the police search for you, I swear to god.”

A snort of laughter escaped me. “Come on, Mattie. I really don’t want to get all dressed up and make a big deal about it. Birthdays don’t mean shit to me.”

Her perfect nose wrinkled, and with that look in her eyes coming out to play, I was sort of wondering if she’d meant that thing about hiding my body. “Yeah, okay.” I threw my hands up. “I’m sure you’ll drag me off to a nightclub anyway.”

A satisfied smile lit up her face. “That’s more like it. Now get that sexy ass back in the room and change into something appropriate for your station in life.”

My station in life. I was a slave to the man, but I fucking loved it. Still, I had no idea what she was talking about.

I’d graduated six months earlier and joined Mattie in the hallowed ranks of the people’s representatives. My original dream might have been to be a sports therapist, but not too far into my schooling at Arbon, after surviving getting stabbed and all the rest, I’d decided that what I truly wanted was to make a difference.

And we were. Today had been amazing, wrapping up a new global initiative that would allow orphans a chance to better themselves through monarch-funded higher education. We were in New America for the signing today, and since Mattie and I only answered to Mr. Wainwright, it meant that we had more freedom and flexibility than most people who worked for the People’s Court.

“Wainwright said we have to head to Australasia next month,” Mattie shouted through the door while I changed into a tight-fitting, short black dress. “Alex has requested you stop in and have lunch with him.”

I snorted, zipping myself up, then pulling on sky-high black heels. “No can do. I’m going to be sick that day.”

My ex was a playboy of the worst kind, but he appeared to be running his country much better than his parents had. And better still, he was working closely with the Australasian People’s Court and giving in more than I’d expected.

Each monarchy had a permanent court attached to them now, plus there were the global liaisons like Mattie and me who traveled between them all and kept everything running smoothly. We’d been obvious choices because of our royal contacts and connections. They helped more than I’d expected.

“Ta-da,” I said, strutting out the door in my high heels like a pro. Thanks to Mattie forcing designer stilettos into my everyday work wardrobe, I could now do just about anything in shoes like these.

Mattie shook her head before wrapping her fingers, with their long red nails, around my forearm to drag me over to the mirror. We lived in hotel rooms now, with four suitcases between us, and it was my idea of a fucking amazing life. Mattie was the sister of my heart and soul, and almost everything in my world was perfect.

Except for one small detail.

“Have you heard from them?” she asked as I sat and she touched up my makeup, darkening my eyes and lips.

I swallowed hard. “Yeah, they’re both stuck in their castles, doing all the princely duties. But it’s okay. We have a modern relationship, and it just makes it all that sweeter when I do have them to myself.”

Rafe and Jordan had stayed at Arbon with me for two extra years, teaching in their spare time, and the three of us had lived in a relationship that had everyone talking. None of us had given a shit though. Everything had changed in my last year when Jordan’s father had had a heart attack and he’d had to go home to sort everything out and help until King Munroe got back on his feet.

Rafe had also had duties he could no longer ignore, and thus our modern relationship had morphed into something different. More time apart.

“I fucking miss them,” I sighed. “Why did no one tell me that love hurts?”

Mattie blinked at me, her reflection in the mirror stunned. “Dude, there has literally been a thousand songs written about how shit love is.”

My eyes narrowed. “Speaking of... How are things going with Zach, anyway?”

She scowled at me. “It’s complicated, and I don’t want to talk about that asshole tonight. He’ll only spoil my good mood.”

I grinned, but let it go. I’d thought my relationship with Rafe and Jordan had been complicated in those early days? We had nothing on the train wreck of Mattie and Zach. I was still pretty sure she would end up killing him and feeding the body to sharks.

Mattie finished my makeup off with some dramatic false lashes, then stood back to admire her work.

“Come on, my gorgeous friend. Let’s head out and drink until we vomit.” She beamed at me, all too excited by that idea.

I shuddered at the mere thought, but it would be nice to have a night out and relax. Mattie’s driver was waiting out front for us, and when he opened the door, I squealed at the familiar face inside. “Nolan!”

Leaping out, he wrapped his arms around me, hauling me off the ground as he twirled me. “I missed your gorgeous-as-fuck face,” he shouted loudly enough that every single person staying in the swanky Swiss Hotel would have heard us.

Nolan had gone on to play soccer for a New American team, sticking it to the royal traditions of crown heirs. Personally, I loved his life choice because my base was between New America and Switzerland, so we saw him all the time. “I didn’t know you were going to be here tonight,” I said as he dragged me into the car.

He scoffed. “You wound me. I would never miss one of my sister’s birthdays. Not for a fucking billion dollars.”

Mattie snorted out a dark laugh. “Remember when we were sixteen and you missed my birthday because you were off fucking around with that hot yoga instructor.”

Nolan blinked at her. “Look, I just forgot. It happens. And... he was really flexible.”

Mattie glared at him. “We were born on the same fucking day! How could you forget?”

I settled back, my joy at hearing them bicker suddenly the best thing to happen on my birthday. Only seeing my princes would make this day any better, but since that wasn’t happening, I’d just have to think of the video sex I’d had with both of them this morning—separately of course—when they’d each called to wish me happy birthday.

“We’re here,” Mattie squealed, interrupting my *thoughts*. When we emerged, cameras flashed as the media took photos of us. All of us ended up online way more than I enjoyed, but there was a certain notoriety that came with being best friends with royals and dating two of them, not that the world had quite figured it

out yet.

A lot of people knew, but nothing had been confirmed, and so far we'd skated under the radar—something I hoped continued for a long time.

The long line out the front of Fantasy, the hottest nightclub to grace New York, was bypassed by my best friend as she dragged me right up to the security at the front. We were waved inside without a second glance, and Nolan was already moving to the heavy beat that encased us as we entered.

"Drinks first," Mattie shouted, and we made our way to the VIP area. There was no point in staying in the main throng of people—we'd end up getting mobbed and the night would be no fun at all as the security around us dealt with them.

The life of a royal. A life I was growing used to.

Once we'd made it past the barrier, ascending to the platform above the main floor, I started to relax and look forward to my first drink. My heels weren't even hurting, and I took that as a good sign that I was going to enjoy my birthday dancing the night away.

Mattie led us to a private booth; nearby, waiters stood around with alcohol-filled trays ready for us. "Come on, Vi," my friend said, hurrying forward.

I laughed, but the sound was cut off as two figures stepped into view, side by side, decked out in suits.

Fuck.

My knees buckled, and if Nolan hadn't caught me, I'd have ended up on the floor.

"Don't you fucking cry," Mattie warned me as I scrambled up. "You'll ruin my makeup."

My feet were moving, and I pushed through the crowd until I could throw myself into their arms. Despite Mattie's warning, hot tears spilled over as they held me close, the familiar scents of my princes washing over me.

"I love a happy ending," Nolan trilled from behind us, and another sob escaped me.

When I pulled back, I examined their faces like I hadn't seen them—in the flesh, that was—for years, when in reality it had only been a month. Rafe was darker and harder than he'd been in school, maturity turning him into the sort of dangerous man that no one wanted to fuck with. So, actually, a lot like he'd been in school, only hotter.

Jordan, too, had grown up a lot. His father's near-death had forced him to step into a role of leadership, and he was already beloved by his people.

They were both loved by me as well, and even though on occasion I feared that one day they were going to tell me they had to move on and get married to a

nice royal that could give them heirs, neither of them had ever indicated that was the case.

They talked about forever with me. I wanted forever.

“How are you here?” I asked, my hands gripping both of their suit jackets as I held them close to me. Jordan’s hand was on my back, Rafe’s on my hips, and they held onto me with the same desperation.

“We will never miss your birthday,” Jordan rumbled, his lips dipping down to press against mine. I opened my mouth and accepted the kiss, drowning in his taste and in having him back in my arms once again. When we pulled apart, Rafe moved in for his turn.

“Mattie insisted that it would be fun to surprise you,” he rumbled, face close to mine. “She loves you almost as much as we do and wanted this night to be special.”

He captured my lips before I could say anything; the rough domination of his kiss had my knees weakening as my thong grew damp with need. His chest rumbled under my hand, and I pressed closer, Jordan right there on my other side so I would have been all but hidden from sight between the two of them.

“I want this for my birthday, too,” Nolan said from behind us. “Make it happen, sister.”

There was a smacking sound—Mattie hitting her twin no doubt. “You’ll be lucky if you get socks, asshole.”

Nolan laughed, and I pulled away to peer between my princes at them. “You reminded her that you missed her sixteenth birthday. You’re fucked now,” I said.

Nolan groaned dramatically. “It was years ago. Mattie has to move on.”

She *moved on* by stomping on his foot before flouncing off into the booth. We followed, Rafe and Jordan staying as close as they could on either side of me. When we were all seated, a drink was placed in my hand, but I was way more interested in Rafe’s possessive hand on my right thigh and Jordan’s on my left.

My breathing was embarrassingly heavy, but thankfully no one could hear it over the music. “I missed you,” Rafe said close to my ear, his fingers trailing a little higher. I really owed Mattie some thanks for forcing me into this dress. The jeans would not have worked.

“I can’t believe you’re both here,” I said, feeling emotional about it again. “Can we please not be apart for this long next time?”

Rafe’s lips brushed over my ear, and when Jordan moved in to press his to my neck, I about dissolved into a puddle on the floor. We’d never done the trio thing. It wasn’t for any of us. Instead we had an open, mature relationship where I dated both guys and we all considered ourselves family, and whatever it was

we had going worked.

I slept in the same bed as both of them when we were together, but if one started something, the other left the room. Neither of them were leaving now, and I understood the need to be together after so long apart.

This was not the time or place, though.

“We should dance,” I said, breathlessly, wondering if I was going to leave a fucking wet patch on this seat when I stood up. Another win for the black dress.

Rafe chuckled, brushing his fingers across my pussy, and I moaned like the desperate woman I was. “I have a better idea.”

Jesus. Fuck. I really didn’t want to see myself in the papers getting fucked by two princes, but as horny as I was, maybe it was time for the world to know...

Rafe stood then, pulling me with him so I was pressed against his body, my feet off the ground as he held me. “I have a surprise for you.”

“We have a surprise for you,” Jordan said. “But yeah, it was mainly Rafe’s idea.”

“It was mainly my money,” Rafe corrected, “which doesn’t even matter. All that matters is we need to get out of here so I can fuck you.”

I was already nodding. A tap on his shoulder had us turning to Mattie. “You said I could have a few drinks first,” she said, pouting.

Rafe’s chest rumbled as he laughed. “I have drinks on the plane, come on.”

Just like that, without even a sip of alcohol had, we left the club. “I mean, you could have just surprised me at the hotel,” I told Mattie as we walked out into the cool night air.

She pouted even harder. “I thought they’d let us have at least a few hours of drinks and dancing, but you were just too hot for them to ignore.”

Shouts rang out as the paparazzi noticed us emerge. Once they realized that Rafe and Jordan were with us this time—and that both of them were holding my hand, one on either side—they exploded toward us. Thankfully the car was already waiting, and we were inside before anyone could get too close.

“Shit,” I said, breathless. “They’re vultures.”

Looking out the window, I saw that the prince’s security followed in a second car, making sure no one else trailed us. “Will they be coming wherever we go?” I asked.

“Nope,” Rafe said. “This one is family only.”

They had me super intrigued now. In the car the five of us chatted, and it was such a warm comfort to be together with them again. It had been a long time since we could all hang out like this.

When we pulled up at the airfield, I grabbed onto Rafe. “Where are you taking us?”

He just grinned, that devastatingly handsome face of his giving nothing away. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life.”

He nodded. “Good.”

And that was all there was to it. As we boarded the plane, the drivers brought suitcases in after us. Mattie shot me a smirk. “I packed for you. Because I’m an awesome friend like that.”

Pulling free from my princes for a beat, I wrapped my arms around her. “You’re the best fucking friend a girl could hope for. I love you.”

She returned my hug with enough force to crack a few ribs. “I love you too.”

The captain’s voice interrupted our moment, telling everyone to take their seats. We all settled into the white captain’s chairs, and in only a few minutes, we were taxiing down the runway.

“One of you’d better spill about where we are going,” I said, crossing my arms.

None of them would say a word though. I was pretty sure Nolan didn’t even know, but as always, he went along with all the plans.

“It’s going to be a long flight,” Rafe told me. “You should get comfortable.”

At that moment I knew our destination wasn’t anywhere in New America, so we were no doubt heading back to the Switzerlands. It really didn’t matter anyway, as long as we were all together.

“Does Wainwright know we won’t be at work on Monday?” I asked Mattie.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “He’s been informed not to expect us back for at least a week. Or longer.”

Bubbles of excitement filled my stomach, and I wondered how someone could feel so much happiness from the simplest of things. “This is the best birthday ever,” I said softly. “Thank you all.”

Rafe replied by unbuckling me and hauling me across the aisle into his lap. “Get some sleep, baby,” he murmured, sliding his nose along my jaw. “You’re going to need it.”

Fuck. Yeah, I wasn’t getting any sleep now.

As my body ached for release, I squirmed on his lap, and he wrapped a strong arm around me. “Stop moving, princess, or you’re going to give everyone here a little show.”

“Two tickets to the show!” Nolan shouted from a few seats back.

I leaned out into the aisle to see him. “Two?”

He shrugged. “One ticket just sounds so lonely.”

I snorted as Rafe hauled me back into his lap. This time I settled down against him, sighing at how much I loved being in his arms. The only way this

would be better was if Jordan were with us, but I'd switch out soon enough.

At some point we all fell asleep, waking up to sunshine and the captain announcing we were landing. Getting off Rafe's lap, I stretched, and as hungry eyes captured my attention, I smirked at Jordan. "Going to tell me where we are yet?"

He returned that smirk with one of his own. "You're about to find out..."



WHITE SAND BEACHES, crystal clear, aqua waters, and the most perfect, white beach mansion that I'd ever seen. "I don't understand," I whispered, standing there in my black dress after having flown across the world and taken a car and then boat ride until we'd ended up here.

"We bought an island," Rafe said on my right side.

"A place for the three of us to meet and have complete privacy," Jordan added from my left.

"This is the absolute fucking bomb," Mattie exclaimed, already stripping off her clothing so she was clad only in her underwear before running into the ocean.

As the sun beat relentlessly down on us, I was starting to think she had the right idea. With a quick tug on my zipper, I stripped my dress off, leaving me in my bra and thong.

Nolan's hands wrapped around my waist as he hauled me over his shoulder, all but sprinting across the sand to throw us both into the water. We hadn't stepped inside the house yet—our bags were all still sitting in the sand—but none of us gave a shit.

"Come on," I shouted to the guys. "Get in here."

In sync, Rafe and Jordan, who had both changed into more casual clothing on the plane, reached up and gripped the backs of their shirts, slowly pulling them up over their heads. As their bronze abs and broad shoulders came into view, I was actually panting.

"Got a little drool there," Mattie said, wiping at my chin.

Splashing her would have required me taking my eyes off the show, and there was no way I was doing that.

Rafe's pants went next, and when he got down to his tight, black boxer shorts, I sort of hoped Mattie and Nolan would go away. Just for a few minutes. I needed to be alone with my guys.

"Uh, I think we should head into the house," Mattie said, reading my mind.

There was a reason she held the title of best friend in the world.

Despite her twin's protests, she dragged him out of the water, and when they disappeared from view, that was when the princes joined me. "We really missed you," Jordan said. He wrapped his arms around me, hands already trailing down to stroke me through my underwear.

Hard cocks pressed into me on both sides, and I was about to fucking combust. Panting, I let one of them haul me up a little as the other one's fingers slipped under the band of my underwear, rubbing circles on my clit as I moaned.

"Ours," Rafe said as he kissed me, our tongues clashing, almost fighting in a desperation to get closer. "And this is our home together."

"Yes," I cried, and as fingers slipped inside me. My pussy spasmed around them, and I came hard.

Whoever said that a girl needed marriage and babies to have her happily ever after was totally fucking deluded. All you really needed... was love.

THE END.

LETTERS FROM THE AUTHORS

Wow! I just... how can it be over? I hope you all loved the slightly unconventional storyline. The ending was exactly how I hoped and now I'm all emotional. I also want a love island just like theirs. LOL.

Violet, Rafe, and Jordan. It didn't start that way, but sometimes the best surprises in life happen spontaneously. Don't you think?

Thank you for trusting us to tell the story the way the characters needed it told. Thank you for embracing their flaws and quirks. And most importantly their love.

Thanks to my kickass, strong, funny, gorgeous co-author, Tate. Writing with you is an adventure I'd take any day, and I know we'll create many more stories in our future. (she hates sappy shit and is probably making a face as she reads this. Lucky IDGAF).

Thanks to my PA, Heather for putting up with my shit. Thanks for our editors and cover artists. You make our words and ideas shine and we appreciate your hard work so much.

Thank you to the readers who stay with us book after book, trusting the journey, and supporting our passion. We couldn't do this without you.

Huge hugs and love!
Jaymin



Gag, that was so freaking sappy I almost died pasting it into formatting. Kidding! I'm kidding. Sort of. I kinda think you're great too, dude. And you're really pretty so there's that. #feelingsgohere

So, hey! Another series bites the dust. That was a wild one, right? Bet you never thought this was how it'd all turn out when Violet first stepped foot into Arbon Academy. You know what? Neither did we. But sometimes authors just have to take a backseat and let their characters drive the damn car. Violet may not drive as fast as Riley, but she took a hell of an interesting route.

Don't despair that it's all over, though! Jaymin and I have already chatted about what we might do for these three love birds when we revisit Arbon to make a box set sometime next year. I for one, can't wait to see what they'll get up to while we're not looking.

Thank you to all the incredible humans who made this series what it is! Our editors, our crazy talented designer, our review teams, as well as my super awesome PA, Sara Dick Supreme and her PA Alyssa The Guru.

And thanks to you, reader! You fucking rock, you know that?

Stick with us, you haven't seen the last of this dynamic duo!

Sending you all social-distancing appropriate elbow bumps,
Tate

ALSO BY THE AUTHORS:

JAYMIN EVE

Supernatural Academy (Complete Urban Fantasy/PNR)

Year One

Year Two

Year Three

Arbon Academy (Complete Dark College Romance)

Book One: Princess Ballot

Book Two: Playboy Princes

Book Three: Poison Throne

Titan's Saga (Complete PNR-sexy and humor)

Book One: Releasing the Gods

Book Two: Wrath of the Gods

Book Three: Revenge of the Gods

Dark Legacy (Complete Dark Contemporary high school romance)

Book One: Broken Wings

Book Two: Broken Trust

Book Three: Broken Legacy

Secret Keepers Series (Complete PNR/Urban Fantasy)

Book One: House of Darken

Book Two: House of Imperial

Book Three: House of Leights

Book Four: House of Royale

Storm Princess Saga (Complete High Fantasy)

Book One: The Princess Must Die

Book Two: The Princess Must Strike

Book Three: The Princess Must Reign

Curse of the Gods Series (Complete Reverse Harem Fantasy)

Book One: Trickery

Book Two: Persuasion

Book Three: Seduction

Book Four: Strength

Novella: Neutral

Book Five: Pain

NYC Mecca Series (Complete - UF series)

Book One: Queen Heir

Book Two: Queen Alpha

Book Three: Queen Fae

Book Four: Queen Mecca

A Walker Saga (Complete - YA Fantasy)

Book One: First World

Book Two: Spurn

Book Three: Crais

Book Four: Regali

Book Five: Nephilius

Book Six: Dronish

Book Seven: Earth

Supernatural Prison Trilogy (Complete UF series)

Book One: Dragon Marked

Book Two: Dragon Mystics

Book Three: Dragon Mated

Book Four: Broken Compass

Book Five: Magical Compass

Book Six: Louis

Book Seven: Elemental Compass

Hive Trilogy (Complete UF/PNR series)

Book One: Ash

Book Two: Anarchy

Book Three: Annihilate

Sinclair Stories (Standalone Contemporary Romance)

Songbird

TATE JAMES

**Madison Kate Story
(Dark NA Contemporary Romance)**

#1 HATE

#2 LIAR

#3 FAKE (2020)

#4 KATE (2020)

**The Royal Trials
(Complete Fantasy series)**

#1 Imposter

#2 Seeker

#3 Heir

Box Set: The Royal Trials: Complete Series

**Kit Davenport
(Complete PNR series)**

#1 The Vixen's Lead

#2 The Dragon's Wing

#3 The Tiger's Ambush

#4 The Viper's Nest

#5 The Crow's Murder

#6 The Alpha's Pack

Novella: The Hellhound's Legion

Box Set: Kit Davenport: The Complete Series

**Dark Legacy
(Complete Dark Contemporary high school romance)**

#1 Broken Wings

#2 Broken Trust

#3 Broken Legacy

Box Set: Dark Legacy: The Complete Series

Royals of Arbon Academy

(Complete Dark contemporary/dystopian college romance)

#1 Princess Ballot

#2 Playboy Princes

#3 Poison Throne

Hijinx Harem

(Complete RomCom PNR series)

#1 Elements of Mischief

#2 Elements of Ruin

#3 Elements of Desire

The Wild Hunt Motorcycle Club

(Dark PNR/Fantasy series)

#1 Dark Glitter

#2 Cruel Glamour (2021)

Foxfire Burning

(UF/PNR series)

#1 The Nine

#2 The Tail Game (2021)

#3 TBC (2021)

Undercover Sinners

(Dark Contemporary Suspense Romance)

#1 Altered By Fire

#2 Altered by Lead

#3 Altered by Pain (2020)

Forgotten Gods

(Urban Fantasy series)

#1 Feral Magic

#2 TBC