

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is shown from the chest up, her eyes closed and head tilted back. She is being held from behind by a man whose arms are wrapped around her. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with a cloudy sky. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

CHLOE WALSH

Endgame

A NOVEL

Endgame

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Preface

Rourke

**And as I lay me down to sleep,
in god's arms my soul to keep,
and if I die before I wake,
in god's arms my soul to take.**

"Momma." Curling up in the smallest ball I can make, I snuggle into her skeletal frame. "Momma, I'm scared."

"Don't be scared, my darling," she soothes, stroking my hair with her hand. The hand with all the needles. "Momma loves you up to the sky and back again."

"Momma, don't leave me."

"I don't want to leave you," she whispers. "Momma wants to stay here with you, my baby boy, but God has bigger plans."

"I hate him," I cry.

I cry and I cry and I cry.

"He's gonna take my Momma."

Why won't someone stop this?

Why won't they stop that man in the sky from taking my momma?

I need her here with me.

She makes me happy.

I feel safe when I'm with her.

"Please, Momma. Don't let him take you."

"Daddy's going to take good care of you, Rourke."

Her voice is sad.

It makes me sad.

"I promise we'll see each other again one day." She touches my cheek and I sniff, breathing her in. I know this is a bad day. Even though I'm small, I know this day is important. I need to remember this day. I need to remember Momma.

"No!" With tears pouring down my cheeks, I cling to her. "Don't go, Momma. Please don't go. I don't want Daddy. I want you..."

"I wish I didn't have to, sweet boy," she sobs. Her breathing sounds funny. Crackly. "You're so small... I know this is hard for you to understand."

“I’ll be good,” I promise, blinking away my tears. “I’ll do everything you tell me... I won’t be bad, Momma. Just stay here. With me.”

“I want you to keep this with you,” Momma sobs. She hands me a shiny black book. “Keep this close, Rourke, and whenever you’re sad, read it.”

“I can’t read,” I wail, taking the book from her.

“Not now,” she soothes. “But one day, you will. When you’re grown, you’ll be able to do everything.”

“Come on, Rourke.” That’s my Dad. He’s nearby. He’s crying too. “It’s time to let Mommy have some rest.”

He picks me up and takes me away from her.

I hate him. I kick and lash and bite at him. I want him to be sick. Not Momma.

He can’t fix her. He should be able to fix her. Dads are supposed to fix things.

“Goodnight, my darling,” Momma whispers as I am carried out of the room kicking and screaming.

And even though I’m small, I know that this is the last time I will see my mother awake.

Chapter 1

Rourke

“ROURKE! ARE YOU LISTENING to me?” My father’s voice drilled through my ears, loud and piercing and so very fucking annoying.

Grabbing my pillow, I dragged it over my head and buried my face in the mattress. “Go the fuck away,” I mumbled drowsily.

“Get up, Rourke,” Dad continued, tone surprisingly persistent. “Cassidy and her daughter will be here soon.”

Oh joy.

“Again.” I released a growl, struggling to resist the urge to jump off my bed and kick his ass for being such a dumb fuck. “Go away.”

“Rourke,” Dad said with a weary sigh. “Please. I need you to make an effort today. This is – *she* is important to me.”

Like I gave a shit.

“Rourke?” Dad tried again.

Fine! “I’ll be down in a sec,” I grumbled, angry at myself for giving into this bullshit farce.

This wasn’t the first time my father had asked me to make an effort for a woman. He’d spurred that same sentence about wives four, three, and two before this one.

“Thank you,” Dad replied, tone laced with relief, before slipping out of my room.

When I heard the door click shut behind him, I rolled onto my back and looked up at the ceiling.

I remained perfectly still as I stared at nothing in particular and fought to get my heart rate under control. It was a difficult thing to do when I was two seconds away from losing my shit.

Reaching into the drawer of my nightstand, my fingers curled around the old, familiar, leather bound journal and just like that, my heartbeat

steadied. Clutching the journal to my chest, I closed my eyes and breathed slowly.

I hated my father.

It was a bold statement to make, and a cliché one, too, but I meant it. I fucking despised the man who was partially responsible for my existence.

My father was weak in nature, temporary in loving, lacking in loyalty, and displayed every characteristic I couldn't stand in a human.

Cassidy James.

Wife number five.

What a fucking joke.



WHEN I FINALLY hauled my ass out of bed and trudged downstairs, both Dad and Amelia were in the kitchen along with Fran, our semi-retired housekeeper. Dad was hovering over his iPad with a deep frown etched across his face. Amelia was standing near the stove, watching over Fran as she stirred a pot of her famous pea soup.

“Rorky-Porky,” Fran called out, noticing my arrival. “Come on over and taste this for me, boy. Your little sissy ain’t real good at telling an old lady the truth.”

Smiling fondly at the old woman who was solely responsible for raising me and my little sister when our father checked out on us, I walked over and took a sip from the wooden spoon Fran was holding out to me. “Millie ain’t lying, Fran,” I told her with a smile. “Your soup tastes better every time you make another batch.”

Fran beamed up at me, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening. “You’re a charmer, Rourke Owens.”

No, I wasn’t, but I loved that old woman like she was my blood. My affections for Fran somehow managed to cover my usual assholiness.

“Are you excited to meet your new mama?” Fran asked with a wink.

Only she had the ability to make a joke about Dad’s new wife without me losing my shit. Fran got it. She had known my mother. She’d been right here in this house when Camille Owens passed and every time my father brought home a new *mommy* for us. “Can’t wait,” I shot back sarcastically.

“I’m expecting you both to be on your best behavior,” Dad interrupted. “You too, Frannie. Cassidy is important to me and I want her and Mercedes

to feel welcome in Ocean Bay.”

“Of course, Daddy,” Amelia replied softly, not meeting my eyes.

“I meant you, Rourke,” Dad warned, eyes still locked on my face. “Don’t fuck this up for me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I shot back mockingly. My father had some fucking nerve asking me for anything. He didn’t deserve shit from me.

“Please,” Dad pressed, blue eyes locked on my face. “Promise me you’ll try and accept Cass and her daughter.”

“You know me, Dad,” I retorted dryly. “I’m not one to make promises I have no intention of keeping.”

Chapter 2

Mercedes

I ALWAYS KNEW MY mother wasn't a responsible person. The fact that I had attended no less than four schools in the last two years put proof to that particular pudding. Cassidy James was highly unconventional, and as reckless as a teenager jacked up on booze on prom night. She was thirty-three years old and I swear had never mentally passed the age of nineteen.

From a young age, I knew my mother wasn't like the other kids' moms. Having me when she was just a child herself, sixteen to be exact, had impacted her, and I think stunted her emotional growth rate. How I had managed to survive to the age of seventeen was a miracle in itself and a tribute to my sheer survival skills. I had pretty much brought myself – *and her* – up.

For years, we moved from town to town, city to city, and state to state; my mother chasing her latest dream, which usually came with a penis hanging between its legs.

Yeah, my mom loved men, and men loved my mom.

But as reckless and immature as she was, I never in my wildest dreams could have predicted my mother's latest fuck up.

She was pregnant.

Yep.

She'd gone and gotten herself knocked up.

Again.

Without being married.

Again.

I wasn't opposed to having children out of wedlock. I was, however, opposed to having children without a stable home or regular income.

My mother had neither.

Even I had heard about the sperm donor, Gabriel Owens, serial womanizer. The guy was richer than most and slicker, too. I'd only met him

a handful of times and I knew enough from those encounters that they were a perfect match. He was vain and my mom was a babe.

Unsurprisingly, Gabe had kids, too.

One of each.

A son my age, Rourke, and a daughter, Amelia, a couple of years younger.

Both by different women.

At least he was consistent...

Mom was deliriously happy of course. She'd finally snagged her dream man. One with a big, fat wallet. And as if getting pregnant at her age wasn't irresponsible enough, Mom had only gone and made herself Mrs. Owens *the fifth*.

I mean, I could understand remarrying once, hell even twice, but five times?

Call me cynical, but that shit didn't float with me.

I wasn't unfamiliar with stepfathers; I'd had plenty of them myself. But none of those had ever put a ring on mom's finger, or a baby in her stomach.

I shook my head as I thought about my mother, and seriously considered the probability of being switched at birth.

If it weren't for our uncanny resemblance, I would have sought legal representation.

Sigh. My grey eyes, almost an exact replica of my mother's, and my olive skin tone, not to mention the C-section scar she liked to hold over my head every year during bathing suit season, were proof enough to douse that tiny flicker of hope out.

One gigantic distinction between us was the fact that Mom was a natural blonde with platinum curls while I was born with the jet-black, poker straight hair I had since grown to the middle of my back. I was also a realist and my mother was a romantic. She loved living in the moment and I thrived on routine. She was a *spur of the moment* kind of gal, and I was a *plan it to the letter* type person.

As much as I wished it to be otherwise, instability was the norm for me, and moving house came as easy to me as packing up my seasonal closet.

It was the way I had been raised.

“Did you call Mr. Randle?” I asked her for what I knew was the fourth time. I had to keep on Mom’s ass about important things. Otherwise, we’d have been living on the streets a long time ago.

“Gabe has taken care of all of that for us,” Mom gushed as she thrummed her slender hands against her protruding stomach.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” I felt like I was a parrot; I’d been repeating the same thing over and over for weeks now. “I have friends in Kansas, Mom. And a job.” And a life. Huffing, I rested an arm on the car door and used the other to steer. “I really think you should reconsider this relocation business.”

“Mercedes, please,” my mother said in a whiney tone of voice. “Do we have to go over this again?”

“Uh, yeah,” I shot back. What was supposed to be my last six weeks of freedom before starting senior year had been ruined by the upheaval of my mother carting me halfway across the country with her so she could shack up with her ‘baby daddy’, and I used the term lightly. “You’re hauling me out of school right before my senior year starts and dragging me across the country with you. We most definitely have to go over this again.” *And again, and again until you start to see sense, woman!*

“It’s better to move now,” Mom shot back. “You’ll have time to settle in before starting at the Academy.”

“*The Academy.*” I scrunched my nose up at the thought. Who was she trying to convince? “I wonder if *The Academy* is as pretentious as it sounds?”

“Mercy.”

“Mom.”

“Gabe assured me that it’s a wonderful school.” She smiled excitedly. “And very exclusive.”

“How *fabulous!*” I rolled my eyes, unable to stop myself. “News flash, Mom. I don’t fit the private school bill.” Not even close. “I’ve been public schooled my entire life.” Where I belonged. Where it was familiar. “How am I supposed to get along with these people?” *Snobs.* I meant snobs. I wasn’t a superficial rich kid who rolled around in daddy’s money for two very important reasons. The first; we didn’t have any money. Second; I didn’t have a father. “This is going to suck.”

“Come on, Merc, where’s your spontaneity?” Mom asked, smiling. “Gabe’s a good man with a nice home and a successful business. This is a new adventure for us.”

“No,” I corrected. “This is *mooching*, Mom.” I shook my head and forced back the urge I had inside of me to rattle my pregnant mother. “Didn’t you learn anything from the Carolina incident?”

Mom cringed and I felt like a tool.

“Fine,” I huffed, throwing my hand up in the air. “I won’t mention the Carolina incident again.” It was hard to stay mad at a woman who reminded you of a child.

“You’re going to love Ocean Bay, Mercy,” Mom gushed. “Think of all that sun.”

“And all the alligators,” I chimed in.

“And shirtless boys.”

“And poisonous snakes,” I rolled out, not missing a beat.

“A whole six weeks of sunbathing and lazing around before school starts?” She smiled hopefully. “Come on. That has to sound more appealing than getting up at the crack of dawn to bus tables at Nancy Joe’s, and spending your nights washing dishes in The Pelican Hotel back home.”

Did she know me at all? “I like to work, Mom,” I shot back. “I like having my own money. You know, being *independent*?”

“Ugh. You’re impossible to please.”

“Not really.”

“At least you’ll have your car,” she offered with a scrunch of her perfectly positioned nose. “Can’t you be happy about that?”

“Damn straight I’ll have my car.” I tightened my hold on the steering wheel. I had thrown a fit when Gabe tried to insist on us flying.

There was no way in hell I was leaving my car behind. I cherished my 1963 Mercury Comet convertible. She was my baby and the one thing on earth I loved above everything else.

It had been left to me by my mother’s father in his will. It was the only gift I remembered getting from him and I inherited it on my sixteenth birthday. It was an off-white color with a red interior and she drove like a dream, too. Really solid and sweet on the road...

“I need you to try and make this work,” Mom said then, breaking through my daydream. “Mercy, you’ll be eighteen in a few months. This

time next year, you'll be heading off to college somewhere, and where will that leave me?"

"You're not supposed to ask me that," I muttered. "It's not my job to take care of you, Mom." *So stop making me feel so bad for wanting a better life than this.*

"I love Gabe."

I snorted. "You've known him for a grand total of four months." I remembered it like it was yesterday; Mom bringing that fancy suited man into our one bed apartment last May. I'd been trying to study for finals. Of course, my plans had gone to shit the minute they slipped into Mom's bedroom. I got my first ever C because of their unbearably loud sex noises. *Inconsiderate assholes.*

"Don't you think two people can fall in love in that time span?"

"I think you can fall in *lust*," I argued. "Love though?" I shook my head. "I hate to break it to you, Mom, but it doesn't exist."

"Always so cynical."

"Real," I corrected. "I'm sorry if I don't buy into the whole hearts and flowers bullshit we're all spoon-fed from birth, but I know damn well that if a knight in white armor's gonna ride in and change my life then that knight will be me."

"Mercedes," Mom sighed.

"You put too much faith in the male species, mother," I argued further. "You've got a brain in your head. Use it. Empower yourself."

"I like who I am," Mom countered. "I like being attended to."

Attended to?

Was she for freaking real?

"Ugh. Whatever, fine. Go chase after that true love bullshit you've been telling yourself is real all your life. Maybe you'll find it at the end of a rainbow with a pot of gold and fix all of our problems."

"I told you. Money's not an issue anymore."

"*For you*, mom," I glared. "It's not an issue for *you*."

"Gabe has offered to pay your education in whatever college you want to attend."

"How generous." My tone was laced with sarcasm. "Come on, Mom. You know better than that. A rich man doesn't give something for nothing."

"Gabe does."

“We’ll see,” I muttered.

How anyone had let this woman-child be responsible for a baby was beyond me, but she’d managed to keep me alive this long, I figured what was another nine months?

My future was almost secured. I had one more year of high school, and if my *Step-Daddy* wanted to foot the bill for my college education, then I sure as hell wasn’t going to say no.

They could consider it a severance pay, because once I got finished with high school, I would *not* be coming back to Florida.

That was for sure.



Rourke

“HEY MOMMA,” I muttered as I hunched down beside the marble headstone that marked the final resting place of my mother. I didn’t come here as much as I used to. It hurt too fucking much. When I was younger, I would ride my bike out here most days, but now? Now, I came when shit was hitting the fan at home. “It’s that time of the year again.”

The cemetery was quiet and I was glad. I needed to vent and I wasn’t in the mood to wait around. It sucked major ass that the only person I felt I could truly confide in consisted of bones and ash and was six feet beneath me, but that’s how life went sometimes. “I hate him so much, Momma. I’m fucking burning inside. I feel like busting every wall in that house just to stop myself from busting his face.”

Brushing aside some leaves and mulch, I exhaled a heavy sigh and sank down on the grass beside her. “He’s at home waiting on Cassidy to arrive.” I picked at several shoots of green grass as I spoke. “This one’s got a kid, too – *Mercedes*.” Feeling the anger rise inside of my body, I forced myself to breathe deep and slow before continuing. “Doesn’t matter. They won’t ever mean a damn thing to me.” That, I was absolutely sure of. “She’s just another number to me, Momma.” I scrunched my nose up in disgust. “Her kid, too.”

The sound of footsteps approaching caused me to clamp my mouth shut. Stiffening, I turned my head to one side and watched as a girl I had

grown up with wandered down the path towards me. I instantly recognized her, and with that recognition came a huge swell of pity.

“Rourke,” she acknowledged quietly.

I nodded. “Molly.”

“Haven’t seen you here in a while.”

“Haven’t been here in a while,” I replied honestly.

“It’s always hard when you’ve been away for a while.” Molly stopped four plots down from where I was sitting, eyes locked on the two headstones laying side by side. “The guilt is the worst.” I watched as she knelt down on the grass and clasped her hands together. “Hey, Momma. Hey, Bobby.” Molly turned to face me and smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ve been taking care of her grave” She gestured towards my mother’s plot. “I pick out weeds anytime they sprout up and lay some fresh flowers down every time I bring some.”

“Thank you.” My voice was thick and gruff. Molly was the one person in this town who, when my own life went to shit, I could look at and think *at least I don’t have it as bad as she does*. That was her mother and little brother down there. I’d lost my mother, but I still had Amelia. Molly was alone.

“I heard about your Daddy getting remarried again,” she added with a small frown. “I’m not sure whether I should congratulate you or offer you my condolences.”

“The latter, Molly.” I smirked and climbed to my feet. “Always the latter.”

“See you at school, I guess,” she called out when I turned to leave.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I’ll see you.”

Chapter 3

Mercedes

THE FIRST THING THAT hit me when I arrived in Ocean Bay was the heat. It was stifling and my ass cheeks had left their imprint on the leather interior of my car.

“Goddamn,” I muttered as I dragged my dehydrated carcass out of the car. Covering my eyes with my hand, I took in my surroundings in a state of semi-awe/semi-dismay. “This place is...intense.”

“It’s amazing, right?” Mom squealed as she got out and walked around to my side of the car. “This is it, Mercy,” she whispered in delight as she caught ahold of my hands and squeezed. “We’ve made it, baby.”

“God, Mom.” I shook my head in embarrassment. It was bad enough that I knew she thought of this place as her meal ticket, but hearing her say it out loud was too freaking much.

“There’s my girl!”

The sound of Gabe’s sickeningly smooth voice had my mother squealing like a little girl and dashing off in the direction of the huge mofo mansion/beach house in front of us.

Ugh.

“Gabe!” Wrapping her arms around her husband’s neck, Mom threw herself into his embrace.

Meanwhile, I attempted not to be sick.

This was beyond gross.

Placing my shades on my head, I’d needed them while driving in the goddamn sun, I reached into the backseat and retrieved my backpack.

Yeah, I wasn’t a purse kind of girl. Give me a backpack any day. Besides, I carried a lot of crap around with me. I had fair reason to. Most seventeen-year olds didn’t have a mother who could move them on a whim like I had.

Dragging my ass up the driveway, I slipped my backpack onto my shoulders and held onto the straps like they were a comfort blanket.

I didn't need this shit.

A new home.

A new town.

A new family.

Thoroughly revolted at the prospect of all three, I trailed after my mom and her new husband, with a *someone pissed in my cornflakes expression* molded to my face. I didn't care if Gabe held the crown jewels inside that mansion of his. I was *not* going to be happy about it.

"Don't touch me," I warned him when he held the front door open for me.

Immediately he withdrew the hand he had been about to place on my shoulder. "Right...uh, no problem, Mercedes." Good. We weren't there yet and, if I had my way, we never would be.

Rolling my eyes, I ignored the formal way he said my name. A name I loathed to be called. Another mark on the shit list for you, Gabo!

"This is beautiful," Mom squealed, clapping in delight when we stepped inside the ginormous foyer. Spinning around to face me, Mom beamed. "Isn't this place beautiful, Mercy?"

She was right.

It was beautiful.

Of course, I would rather die than compliment this man's house.

"Peachy," I replied in a bored drawl, flicking my glasses back down on my nose. I was a master at concealing my true thoughts and feelings. I knew I looked bored, but the truth was I was impressed with the interior of this house. Big time.

As I stood on the cool, black marble tiles and looked around, I was immediately transported to an Italian villa in Europe. That's what this place reminded me of. The cream painted walls were in stark contrast to the enormous circular, black, cast iron staircase leading up the second level of the house. And the oversized paintings and mirrors hung cleverly to absorb light? Yeah, they screamed pretentious – and filthy rich. Hell, the ceiling was at least twenty feet above us. I was in some deep shit, that was for sure.

With my fingers still curled around the straps of my backpack, I looked at my new *Daddy* and asked, "Where's my room?"

“Mercy!” Mom hissed, clearly embarrassed. “Don’t be rude.”

I opened my mouth to give my mother an explicit example on just how rude I could be when Gabe interjected.

“It’s fine, sweetheart.” Walking over to my mother, Gabe wrapped his arm around her shoulders and smiled down at her. “I’m sure you’re both exhausted from the drive down here.” He frowned then. “I’ve organized a family dinner in the dining room, but if you’d rather lie down first, we can postpone?”

I said “yes” at the same time my mom said “no.”

Seeing as Gabe had a higher probability of getting laid tonight if he agreed with my mother, he followed his dick and led her through the house and into the dining room.

Miserable, I followed after them.

“Mercedes, you met my son Rourke at the wedding, didn’t you?” Gabe announced when we walked into the overly jazzed up dining room.

Instinctively, my gaze honed in on Gabe’s son who was already seated at the table and my heart sank into my ass. Rourke sat at the far side of the huge oak table, glaring daggers at my face with hard, blue eyes.

The guy had some fierce eyes. The color was a deep ocean blue and they were pretty. His dark brown hair was sexily disheveled. He looked too good to be sitting across from me. Too built to be going into his senior year of high school. He looked more like a senior in *college*.

“Yeah,” I ground out through clenched teeth as I took the seat opposite him. “I remember.” He didn’t offer me a hello, so I didn’t bother to offer him one either.

Steeling myself, I folded my arms across my chest, and glared back at the beautiful bastard with a look my mother had labeled my ‘*resting bitch face*’.

Rourke was snarling at me, so I returned the gesture.

I had no intentions of entertaining his bullshit; I’d endured more than enough of it the last time we met...

This is the biggest croc of shit ever. Getting married in a church for the fifth time? Was that even allowed? Honestly, I had no idea. I wasn’t religious myself, had never chosen a particular man in the sky to pitch my flag to. I mean sure, my mom had been brought up in the Baptist faith, and I, in turn, had learned to pray to the man upstairs when shit hit the fan and

I was in need of some divine intervention. However, the fact that I was standing beside my mother as she pledged herself to Gabe, made it perfectly clear the big guy wasn't taking pagan pleas.

"If anyone objects to this marriage, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

Biting back the urge to scream I object, I decided to focus my attention on Gabe's son who was standing slightly behind his father and directly opposite me. He looked miserable...and hot. Tall and muscular, Rourke Owens filled that suit in all the right places. Maybe this marriage crap wouldn't be so bad; at least I got to drool over Rourke – in secrecy of course.

Rourke's blue eyes landed on mine then, startling me, and I smiled, offering him my best 'I know how you feel, this sucks' gesture. He didn't return the smile. He didn't even blink. He just stood a few feet away, staring at me like he was trying to solve a puzzle and the answer was in my eyes.

When the pastor pronounced them husband and wife, and their guests cheered and clapped, Mom and Gabe led the way out of the church, followed by his daughter and the other groomsman, and then finally me and Rourke; the reluctant best man and even more reluctant maid of honor.

We linked arms, but I had to take a moment to steady my nerves before I could walk. God, he was so tall and he smelled delicious; like soap and cologne and man.

"So, this sucks," I whispered, as we trailed after our parents.

"Does it?" he replied, his voice barely more than a whisper, as he stared straight ahead.

"Um...yeah?" Even in heels, I barely reached his shoulder in height, and had to crane my neck up to look at him. "Don't you agree?"

"Cut the shit. I know what you want," he said after a moment, voice still seductively soft. "You and her."

I stiffened. "And what's that?"

"Money," Rourke replied softly. "It's written all over her face – and yours."

"You're wrong about me," I bit out, voice shaking a little, as we reached the entrance and stepped into the sunshine. He didn't let go of me and I didn't move away from him. I knew I should but I...couldn't. I was determined to defend myself to this boy. "I don't want this."

Stopping several feet away from the bridal party, Rourke released my hand and took a step back from me. “My father might be stupid enough to fall for your mother’s shit, but I’m not him.” Folding his arms across his chest, he glared down at me. “Don’t think I’ll make the same mistake with you...”



I KNEW FULL WELL that Rourke Owens thought my mother was a gold-digger – he’d said as much on their wedding day. *So did I*, but I wasn’t about to voice that opinion to a guy who had obviously decided he hated my guts before getting to know me. He prejudged me and my intentions. He didn’t know shit.

Rourke’s eyes were filled with pure, unadulterated hatred for me as he leveled me with a look that said everything he was feeling in the moment.

Disgust, loathing, disappointment, mild boredom, and pure hatred.

He wasn’t going to accept me, I realized.

Well, fuck him.

People had tried to break me before.

He would fail, just like the others.

Bring it, asshole, I thought to myself. Let him hate me. Saved me the trouble of feigning any plausible amount of politeness around him. I wasn’t much of a talker anyway. I preferred to use my energy on other things, and if Rourke Owens expected me to swan in here and kiss his ass, then he had another thing coming. I was nobody’s bitch and he was about to learn that.

“And Amelia,” Gabe added, taking his seat at the head of the table. “My daughter?”

Reluctantly, I tore my gaze away from the horrible, beautiful bastard and focused on the meek blonde sitting beside him.

“Hello, Mercedes,” Amelia acknowledged with a warm smile. “It’s good to see you again.” She looked younger than fifteen, and fragile to boot.

And even though I *really* did not want to like these people, there was something about the sadness in this girl’s eyes that caused the ice around my heart to thaw just a little bit.

“Hey,” I replied, inclining my head in her direction. It was the best I could do under the circumstances. Surprisingly, it seemed to be enough for

Amelia because she beamed back at me.

Thankfully, the cook arrived then with our starters and, bringing with her, my excuse not to speak.

With my head down, I ignored the chattering coming from my mother and Gabe, choosing to focus on the snot-colored soup in my bowl. Christ, what the hell was that? Pea soup?

Braving the unknown, I dipped my spoon into the bowl and shoved it into my mouth, determined to get on with this damn dinner.

Not bad.

Feeling more at ease now that I knew the soup didn't taste like a certain body part, I allowed my thoughts to wander as I ate it up...

It felt like my life had been thrown into the fast lane. Four months ago, I was wrapping up junior year with a 4.0 GPA and a full college scholarship in close sight.

Now, I was a little more than a month away from starting my senior year of high school in a snobby private school on the east coast, hundreds of miles from home, all because my mother couldn't keep track of contraceptive jabs.

You would have thought having me in her sophomore year of high school would have made the woman more proactive and careful, but no, Cassidy James at thirty-three was as reckless and irresponsible as she had been at sixteen.

Even now, I wanted to reach forward and smack her silly. The only thing that stopped me from doing so was the tiny swell on her stomach she was proudly rubbing.

My mother was in love with all things love, but she wasn't exactly a nurturer. She'd been more like an older sister to me growing up. When I reached the age of nine or ten, the roles reversed and I became the older sister. I was seventeen years old and exhausted from parenting a reckless mother.

Mom, an only child, originally from a small seaport town call Friday Harbor, got herself into a string of bad relationships during high school and ended up nursing me through her junior year until giving up her chance at a high school diploma to go in search of the city life.

Mercedes James; because that's what you got when you let an immature sixteen-year-old name a baby after the place in which you were

conceived.

I guess it could have been worse. I could have been called Tequila, her beverage of pleasure that night.

It wasn't that I didn't love my mother, I did, *deeply*. But we weren't compatible, and I was *embarrassed*. Everything she seemed to do irritated me and grated on my nerves, and I knew full well that if I didn't get out of here soon, I would be the one left holding the baby.

I had nine more months in this house and then I could take off and never come back.

The university of Colorado had an impressive business program and generous scholarships, while, I had a 4.0 GPA and a will stronger than iron.

It was a perfect match.

CU was my first choice for college, but I was willing to learn anywhere in the world if it came to it.

Anywhere except Florida state.

Yeah, I needed out of this place and fast.

I needed the freedom I never had while shouldering my mother's troubles.

I needed a fresh start.

Unintentionally, my gaze wandered into enemy territory and I had to steel myself when I found Rourke was *still* glowering at me.

Of course, I narrowed my eyes and glared back.

Back off, Rich Prick. This cat has claws!

Boys like this one never usually bothered me. I had enough pride to say no when they asked me for something I wasn't willing to give, and enough confidence not to care about the backlash.

At the end of the day, when I left school, I left all of the shit behind me.

Unfortunately for me, I couldn't leave this particular piece of brown crumb behind.

I had to live with him.

"Before we have dessert, I'd like to set some ground rules," Gabe announced at the end of dinner, startling me from my reverie.

"Ground rules?" Rourke shot back flatly, staring at his father like he had grown three extra heads. "What. The. Actual. Fuck?"

So he speaks...

Dammit, I had been hoping my memory served me wrong and Rourke Owens sounded like a nasally adolescent.

Nope.

My memory of him had been perfectly accurate.

His voice was deep and gruff and he had that sexy southern drawl I secretly loved.

FML.

"Yes, some ground rules," Gabe repeated, casting his son a warning glare. "And watch your mouth, son. We have ladies in the house."

"We do? Where?" Rourke asked mockingly. "From where I'm sitting, we've got a life-size version of Barbie and her brat." Turning to his sister, he added, "No offense, Mills."

"None taken," she whispered, red-faced.

"As opposed to you?" I snarled, unable to hold my tongue.

Now he looked at me. Rourke's eyes were hard and cold as he stared me down. "Did you say something, *Six*?"

Six?

"Yeah." I sat forward. "You compared my mother to a Barbie doll and I said as opposed to you; a spoiled, entitled, little *prick*."

"Mercy," Mom hissed in an appalled tone. "That's enough!"

"Yeah, Six," he sneered. "Listen to your momma. That's enough."

"Would you like me to stick my foot up your ass?" I asked in a sickly-sweet voice, glaring daggers at the boy sitting across from me.

"Mercedes James," Mom growled. "That's quite enough!"

"I don't know. I've never tried it," Rourke shot back, ignoring my mother. He leaned forward and smirked at me. "Would you like to suck my dick?"

"Rourke!" Gabe roared, banging his fist against the hard surface of the table. "Don't you dare speak to your sister like that."

Reluctantly, Rourke tore his gaze off me and looked at his father. "She is *not* my sister."

"Apologize," his father gritted out. "*Now*."

"Fine." Rourke waved a hand in the air. "I apologize for offering to let you suck my dick."

"Your name is quite unusual, Mercedes," Amelia squeezed out, obviously trying to simmer down the tension in the room by changing the

subject. “And really pretty.”

“Thank you,” my mother exclaimed over enthusiastically. “Her father drove a Mercedes when we were in high school.”

“Mom.” I cringed in shame. Like she even *knew*. Mom was clutching at straws with that bold statement. “Please.” *Shut the hell up...*

“You’re named after the car?” Amelia chirped up excitedly. “That’s so cool.”

“That’s so fucking tacky,” Rourke sneered, observing me with a disapproving gaze. “What’s your middle name – the condom broke?”

“No, but I know yours,” I shot back heatedly. “Rourke – I should’ve been swallowed!”

“What’s the matter with you two?” Gabe snarled, slamming his fist down on the table. “We’re supposed to be having a nice family meal here.”

“Family meal?” Rourke sneered, still focused on me.

Our eyes were locked in a heated battle.

I would rather *die* than be the first one to look away.

“We’re not a fucking family, Dad,” he continued to say. “We’re collateral damage in an affair gone wrong.”

“Rourke, please don’t speak to your father like that,” Mom began to say, but she was quickly cut off when he tore his eyes off my face and unleashed his death gaze on her.

“Don’t even go there,” he warned, tone almost soft, eyes full of unrestrained anger. “You’re not my mother. In fact, you’re nothing to me. You’re just one more in a long line of poor fucking substitutes. So, you go right ahead and do what you want with him.” He cast a glance towards his father and sneered. “Fuck him. Repopulate the earth for all I care. But don’t *ever* think you’re gonna have a damn thing to do with me.”

“Jesus Christ, Rourke,” his father groaned, rubbing his face with his hand. “Can’t you control yourself for one night?”

“I don’t know, Dad,” Rourke shot back sarcastically. “I guess it runs in the family.” He cast a disgusted glance at my mother’s stomach and shook his head. “The whole *lack of control* thing.”

“One more word, Rourke,” Gabe shot back in a threatening tone. “And I swear to god, I’ll pull your ass from the team this year.”

I watched as Rourke’s face reddened to the point I thought it would burst. Then he exhaled a slow breath and nodded, offering a mumbled

“sorry” to my mother.

Ah, now I remembered. Football was a pretty huge deal around here. It was back home, too, but Mom had mentioned how Gabe’s son lived and breathed for the sport. Apparently, the Ocean Bay Falcons were two-time state champs and this year were going for their third in a row. Interesting.

“That’s alright,” Mom replied sweetly, making Rourke grimace further. “I know this is hard for you. It’s going to take some time to adjust.”

I knew how he felt then. Rourke thought Mom wasn’t being sincere. Her voice was sickly sweet and enough to drive her own daughter crazy. Rourke thought she was faking it. She wasn’t. Mom was a people pleaser and genuinely wanted this boy to like her. I, on the other hand, couldn’t care less.

The last course of dinner was eaten in palpable silence.

“That was delicious,” Gabe announced as he dropped his napkin on the table and rose from his chair. “But I’m exhausted.” Turning to my mother, he reached out a hand. “Come on, sweetheart. Let me show you to our room.”

Ugh.

“Your bedroom is on the second floor, right alongside Rourke’s,” Amelia explained as we walked back to the main foyer behind our parents. My eyes met hers and she smiled sympathetically. “It’s really bright and fresh and open. I think you’ll like it.”

“I’m sure,” I muttered, unwilling to be cruel to this timid girl.

“Sergio brought your bags in earlier,” she continued to say, nodding towards my duffel bag placed at the bottom of the staircase. “I can help you bring them up if you like?”

“Sergio?”

“Dad’s driver.”

“Oh. Well, no. Thanks. I can manage,” I replied, patting the lone duffel bag before hoisting it up. Turning to Mom and Gabe, I asked, “Is my room to the left or right of the bannister?”

“The right.” Gabe frowned at me like he couldn’t understand how a seventeen-year-old could have so little belongings.

Two words, Gabe; *food stamps*.

I preferred eating to wearing fancy clothes.

Splurging every cent we had was my mother’s forte.

One he would soon learn.

"Is that all you have?" he asked.

"I travel light," I shot back. Everything I owned was contained in the bag in my hands and the backpack on my back.

"Rourke," Gabe announced then, calling on his son who was sulking in the corner. "Show Mercy where her room is."

"Do I look like your bellboy?" Rourke snarled, glaring at his father with an almost murderous expression. "Do it yourself."

"It's fine," I interjected, moving for the staircase. "I'll find it myself."

"Now, Rourke!" Gabe hissed, displaying a little steel in his spine.

As much as I despised Rourke, I *hated* the way Gabe just spoke to him.

If he thought he was going to pull that parental bullshit on me then he had another thing coming. Mom and I had a different kind of a relationship. She had always taken a back seat to parenting. I was almost eighteen now, and I sure as hell didn't need her getting any notions.

"Fine, but she can carry her own shit," Rourke growled, shoving roughly past me as he stalked up the marble staircase.

I didn't think that comment rendered a necessary reply, so I kept quiet. I was sure Rourke Owens and I would have plenty to fight about in the coming months. I planned on conserving my energy for the ones that mattered. Besides, I didn't need his help.

Asshole.

When we reached the second floor, I followed him down a long hallway. He stopped at the second to last door on the left. Without saying a word, he turned the round doorknob and pushed the door inwards. My breath escaped my lungs in a heavy sigh when my eyes landed on the apartment sized bedroom that was to be mine.

"See this door here," he snarled, drawing my attention back to him as he pointed to the door next to mine, the one at the end. "You keep the fuck out of there. You get it, Six?"

"Six?"

He smiled cruelly. "Yeah. *Six*. You got a problem with that, *Six*?"

I hated him.

I knew that was a bold statement to make, having only met the guy, but I honest to god hated Rourke Owens with every fiber of my being.

“I’ve got it, *Prick*.” He was a prick. There was no other way to say it.

“This is my house,” he hissed, taking a step towards me, dwarfing me with his impressive frame. “Don’t get comfortable here. It’s temporary.”

“About as temporary as your perfectly shaped nose if you don’t back the hell off and leave me alone,” I shot back.

Rourke’s brows shot up in surprise. “You wanna take me on, Six?”

“I’d eat you up and spit you out for breakfast, little boy,” I countered in a bored tone. He unnerved me like no one else, but I would rather die than let him know it.

“I’m gonna break you, Six.” Backing away slowly, he cocked a brow and shot me a look that said he wasn’t one to make promises he couldn’t keep. “When I’m through with you, you’re gonna wish like hell you never came here.”

I’m already wishing I didn’t come here!

He smirked cruelly at me before stalking past me in the direction of the staircase, leaving me a bundle of nerves in the doorway.

The moment he was out of sight, I exhaled a trembling breath.

Yeah. I wasn’t too stubborn to admit that I was in serious trouble with Rourke Owens.



Rourke

“A WORD, ROURKE.” My father’s request came moments before he caught ahold of the back of my neck and shoved me through the foyer and out the front door. He was able to move me because I *chose* to go with him. If I hadn’t, then let’s just say, he wouldn’t have been successful.

“What can I do for you, Dad?” I asked when we were both standing outside with the front door pulled out.

“You couldn’t help yourself, could you?” Dad spat, his blue eyes full of unrestrained fury and focused solely on my face. “One dinner, Rourke. Would it have killed you to rein it in for *one* fucking dinner?”

“What do you want from me?” I shot back, losing my cool façade. I was done with this bullshit. “I showed up to your shitty fucking family dinner,” I snarled. “I suffered sitting across from the woman you impregnated and traipsed into our home.” Running a hand through my hair,

I bit back the urge to roar. “I’m trying more than you could ever comprehend.”

“Well try harder, dammit,” he spat. “And stop letting me down!”

“Stop letting *you* down?” I laughed humorlessly. “That’s ironic considering that’s all you’ve done my entire life.”

“Rourke,” Dad called out wearily, but I was done. I was so fucking over all of this bullshit. Ripping off my shirt, I broke into a run. I needed to get as far away from this house as I could.

Chapter 4

Mercedes

MY ROOM, I BEGRUDGINGLY had to admit, was fabulous. It was south facing and based at the rear of the house so I had a direct view of the water line. All I could see from the floor to ceiling window was blue skies, bluer water, and pale, golden sand.

A tiny part of me agreed with my mother as I laid my eyes on the magnificent scenery. This place was certainly better than the one-bedroom apartment we'd come from. The smell of salt in my lungs. The sounds of wildlife and waves crashing against the rocks. Everything was foreign to me. I'd lived in many places over the years, but none of them held a spark to the beauty that was Ocean Bay.

Unpacking my belongings in the walk-in closet at the far end of my room didn't take long. I hadn't been lying when I told Gabe I traveled light. Four pairs of jeans, a half dozen hoodies, a week's supply of bras and panties, a pair of cut off denim shorts, a plain navy bikini, and an armful of shirts and tanks took up a grand total of two drawers in the impressive closet.

After unpacking, I took a ridiculously long shower in the adjoining bathroom. Yeah, my own bathroom? Another thing I'd never had before. *Damn you, Gabe. Don't make me like living here!*

When I was finished showering and had dressed in jeans and a tee, I walked back to the queen-sized bed and sank down. What was I supposed to do now?

Slipping my hand into my faithful backpack, I retrieved my cell and swiped my thumb across the screen.

8:45pm

Great. I was a night owl. I struggled with sleeping. I usually had too much on my mind – not to mention too much work to get done – to find any sort of rest before 2am.

Deciding to take a walk around the house, I slipped on my Converse and tucked my backpack in the back of the closet before stepping out. I didn't know these people, and sure, I didn't have much in the line of capital value to steal, but my shit belonged to me.

There were five rooms on the second level of the house. One of which belonged to me, the other Rourke. Nosy, I peeked into the other rooms and found an enormous bathroom with the biggest egg shaped tub I'd ever laid eyes on. Another door led to what appeared to be a game room. There was a large L-shaped, black leather couch, a pool table, a dart board, and a big ass television mounted to the wall. Rourke's man cave, I decided. The fifth door was at the opposite end of the hallway to my bedroom and it was locked.

Opposite to that, there was narrow marble staircase leading up to another door. Of course, I had to check it out. Hurrying up to the top of the steps, I reached a hand out only to snatch it back when the sound of my mother moaning and panting filled my ears.

"Oh, Gabe, yes! You always know how I like it..."

Scarred for life, I retreated down the steps, nauseated and heaving. So, Mom and Gabe's room was on the third floor.

As I descended down the staircase to the ground floor, I made a mental note to *never* go up to the third floor and put myself through that mental anguish again. Ugh.

Downstairs, everything was quiet and I immersed myself in the sound of silence. It sure as hell beat the sound of Gabe giving it to my mother. Ugh. *Don't hurl, Merc. Block it out.*

Shuddering, I wandered around, opening every door I walked past. In my travels, I found a sitting room, the dining room we'd had our dinner in earlier tonight, two empty bedrooms, *three* more bathrooms, a gigantic kitchen, and Amelia's room. "I'm so sorry," I muttered when I opened the bedroom door and noticed her sitting on her bed. "I didn't know this was your room."

"It's okay," she replied with a serene smile. Placing the book she had in her hands down beside her, she waved me in.

I shook my head and smiled. I wasn't going in there. I wasn't ready for a friendship with her and I knew she would offer me one. "I really wasn't

trying to snoop,” I heard myself explain. “I’m just trying to find my feet. This house is ridiculously big.”

“It is,” she agreed, her voice a softer female version of her brother’s southern drawl. “I bet it’s daunting; coming here?”

“Understatement of the century,” I shot back with a smirk, remaining by the door. “This place is the polar opposite of where I came from.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” I nodded, looking around at her pink painted walls. “Our last apartment had one bedroom. I slept on the fold out couch in the kitchen slash living room.” I grinned when my eyes landed on the antique looking dressing table, lined with rows of perfumes and lotions. What I would have given to have a dressing table like that when I was fifteen. “We are worlds apart, really.”

“We are *family*,” Amelia corrected, tone gentle. Reaching out, she patted her mattress again. “This is your home now, Mercedes.”

No.

It wasn’t.

This place would never be my home.

Politely declining, I said goodnight to Amelia and closed her bedroom door behind me. I needed some time to digest everything.

Deciding to scope out the beach and get some fresh air, I slipped into the back yard and walked down the steep steps at the back of the house that led to a gate that separated the property from the beach, passing an impressive outdoor pool on my way.

The moment I was on the other side of the gate, I felt a thrum of excitement spark to life inside of me.

The beach was empty.

I had it all to myself.

Reaching down, I kicked off my Converse and socks before picking them up. The sand was grainy and warm and felt delicious against my feet. Wiggling my toes, I exhaled heavily and soaked up the sensations I was feeling.

The ocean was calling to me, seducing me with every wave and moonlit shimmer. Without thinking, I found myself moving towards the shore, drawn to the immerse beauty of freedom.

My hands moved to the hem of my shirt almost instinctively. Whipping it over my head, I tossed the flimsy fabric on the sand beneath me and moved my attention to my jeans. Shrugging them off, I kicked free, leaving them strewn beside my shirt on the sand. The night air nipped at my body, peppering my pale skin with a thin layer of goosebumps.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply and took a step forward. Foaming water crushed against my ankles, rising further up my body with every step I took. Soon, I was chest deep and grinning from ear to ear. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad here. I had the beach on my doorstep, the water, the sensations around me, and freedom in my cusp.

Exhaling loudly, I lay on my back and used my arms to tread the water as I allowed myself to float on the surface with my eyes clenched shut. Blocking out everything else in my life, I immersed myself in the tranquility of the moment.

Tomorrow, I was going to take a look around Ocean Bay. I still had a whole bunch of resumes tucked away in my backpack. Maybe I'd hand them out to the local restaurants and diners; see if anyone was hiring. I would need my own money. My pride refused to allow me to ask Gabe for handouts.

"Trying to kill yourself already?" A deep voice said from close by. "Damn. Figured it would take more than one conversation to break you down, Six. I'm kinda disappointed."

My eyes flew open at the sound of *that name. Bastard*. Couldn't give me an ounce of peace.

"Don't flatter yourself," I growled as I waded back to the shoreline to where Rourke was standing with my clothes in his hands. "Your childish bullshit doesn't bother me."

Dammit, Rourke was sickeningly good looking. He was all broad shoulders, ripped stomach muscles, and sexily disheveled brown hair as he stood a good five inches above me. It was disturbing. And those deep dimples in his cheeks? Yeah, I wasn't sure if I wanted to stab them with a knife or my tongue...

"Is that so?" he shot back with a cocky grin. "Guess I'm gonna have to up my game then, huh?" He watched my every move as I walked towards him. "Nice bathing suit, Six. Where'd you get the panties – in the geriatric section of K-mart?"

“They’re called underwear, asshole,” I hissed as I stared up at the handsome bastard who was dressed now only in a pair of black board shorts. I forced myself not to cover my body. I had nothing to be ashamed of. My black bra and panties were perfectly fine – albeit a little generic.

“They’re called granny panties,” he shot back mockingly.

“What are you even doing out here?” I sneered, changing the subject. “Are you one of those sick freaks that get off on creeping around beaches at night?” Dropping my hands on my hips, I forced myself to keep eye contact when I taunted, “Let me guess, this is how you pick up girls? By stalking them and stealing their clothes?”

Rourke threw his head back and laughed. “Not that it’s any of your damn business, but I was out for a run, and I don’t need to chase pussy, Six. It comes to me.” The loud gasp of breath that escaped my lips only seemed to encourage him. “And even if I did.” He cocked a brow as his gaze slowly moved down my body and then back up to my face. “Trust me, you’d be the last girl I’d fuck.”

“I didn’t mean *me*!” Ugh. “Whatever.” I huffed, holding my hand out, ignoring the way his words stung and prickled at my self-esteem. “Give me my clothes.”

“Say please,” Rourke taunted, smirking down at me with a dangerous glint in his eye. “*Six*.”

“I don’t beg,” I shot back, flustered and infuriated. “*Prick*.”

“Oh, you’ll beg me,” he replied cockily as he held my clothes hostage above his head. “Sooner or later.”

“What’s your problem?” I demanded, losing what little was left of my self-restraint.

Rourke didn’t even take a moment to think about my question before stating “you” in an angry tone. “I don’t like you,” he added unapologetically as he took a threatening step closer. “I don’t trust you.” He moved closer again and I had to crane my neck up to keep eye contact with him. “And I sure as hell don’t want you in my house. Or my town.”

“Your town?” Now I was the one to laugh, though it was forced. “Could you be any more self-absorbed?”

“My town, my rules,” Rourke shot back, smirking cruelly. “I say jump, you say how high.”

“You’re delusional,” I shot back, raging.

“And you’re a money hungry bitch,” he countered airily.

“Don’t put a label on me,” I warned him. “I am nothing like what you’re thinking.”

“And you know what I’m thinking?” He cocked a brow and stepped closer. “Six?”

“Six?” I felt like screaming at him. “Is that supposed to stand for something?”

“Yeah.” Smirking cruelly, Rourke trailed his finger across my collarbone. “It’s what I like to name my father’s latest *kids*. You’re the sixth, but not for long, *Six*.”

“Awh,” I sighed dramatically. “A cute pet name. I’m flattered.”

“Don’t think you’re anything special,” he shot back cruelly. “The next one will be seven. The one after that; eight.”

“And Amelia?” I mocked. “What’s she? *Two*?”

“She’s my sister.” His tone was flat and cold. “Something *you* will never be.”

“Half,” I muttered under my breath.

“She’s my *sister*,” he repeated, emphasizing the word *sister*. “No halves, quarters, or fucking tenths about it.”

“Whatever,” I muttered, feeling oddly offended as I desperately fought down the urge to shiver in pleasure, my traitorous body enjoying his touch far too much. “This is getting old.” I shivered as the cool night air nipped at my bare skin, the weight of his stare on me entirely too much to handle. “I’m cold and I want to go to bed.”

Rourke looked down at me and smirked cruelly, his blue eyes dark and full of anger. “You know what you have to do.”

I balked. “You’re not serious.”

His grin darkened. “Say it.”

“Drop dead.”

“Okay then.” He turned to leave.

“*Please*.” I almost choked on the word as it came out of my mouth. I didn’t want to ask this asshole for anything, but I was colder than my pride. “Please, Rourke, can I have my clothes back?”

“Well of course you can,” he shot back with a smile before reaching back and tossing them into the water. “Go fish.”

“Bastard!” I yelled as I dove into the water to retrieve my clothes, the sound of his laughter causing my skin to burn with rage. I only had one pair of Converse and that prick had tossed them in the ocean.

“You’re going to pay for this, asshole!” I called out from the water as I battled to capture my stuff.

“Looking forward to it.” Rourke laughed once more before turning around and walking back to the house.

Oh yeah, he was laughing now, but I would be the one that laughed last. I didn’t give a shit about his issues. Rourke Owens was going *down*.



I WAS SOAKED TO the skin and shaking all over by the time I reached the house. Dropping my bundle of wet clothes on the floor outside my bedroom door, I made a beeline for Rourke’s bedroom door and kicked it open.

Ignoring the pain in my foot from where I’d kicked his door, I quickly scoped out the layout of his room. Amongst the posters of football players and semi-naked women that usually ordained a teenage boy’s room, were pictures of random buildings. Weirdo.

Like a raging lunatic, I stalked towards his closet, still only in my bra and panties, before pulling open the door and grabbing a handful of clothes.

Furious, I walked into his ensuite bathroom and tossed them on the floor of his shower before switching on the water.

Unsatisfied with my vandalism, I returned to his room and looked around to find what I could use around here to hurt him. What would really piss him off? Dammit, what did teenage boys love most?

Sex.

Grinning evilly, I stomped over to his bed and yanked open the drawer of his nightstand before rummaging inside. A worn leather traveler’s notebook? Boring. Some gum? Nope. A stash of random keys? Not really. A porno magazine? Ugh, was he serious? Continuing to snoop, my eyes landed on the twelve pack of condoms laying open inside the drawer. Bingo. I quickly scooped them up. That would do. Rourke could consider it a little payback/delayed gratification for throwing my clothes in the ocean tonight.

On my way out of his room, I stopped in front of the huge shelving unit that looked like a makeshift shrine to his beloved game. Row upon row

of trophies ordained the shelves, several of which held the title MVP. Huh. So, Rourke Owens was valuable on a football field? I bet he was. Dick. Grabbing the biggest trophy I could find, I tucked it under my arm before knocking the rest onto the floor and retreating to my bedroom. Even though it was childish as hell, I went to bed that night with a shit eating grin on my face.

Chapter 5

Mercedes

I WOKE SEVERAL HOURS later to the feel of being dragged out of my bed. Startled, I kicked and flailed my arms out in a desperate attempt to free myself from the clutches of pure evil.

“Omigod, Rourke! What are you gonna do?” a female voice squealed out.

“I’m gonna teach her a lesson,” he shot back as he carried me over his shoulder, “not to touch my shit.” So this was payback for messing with his room?

“If you don’t put me down, I’ll scream,” I warned him as I banged my fists against his lower back in my feeble attempt to free myself.

“Oh, you’re gonna scream, Six,” he promised darkly. “I can guarantee you that.”

“Jesus Christ, Rourke!” I had to close my eyes then; the sensation of being carried down the stairs upside down was too much to handle. “Let me down!”

“What is he *doing*?” yet another female voice called out. This bitch was laughing though.

“Dude!” a male voice hollered out when we reached the bottom of the stairs. “What the fu—”

“Stay out of it, D,” Rourke snarled, still moving through the house with me tossed over his shoulder.

I felt the cool sting of the night air moments before I was thrown from Rourke’s arms and engulfed in a huge swell of water. Panic stricken, I pushed towards the surface.

“You bastard!” I spluttered when I broke the surface. “You could have drowned me!”

He was standing at the edge of the swimming pool in the back yard with his hands on his hips, glaring down at me with a murderous

expression. “You’re still breathing, aren’t you?” Rourke shot back. “Mores the fucking pity. You think that’s funny? Stealing my condoms? Fucking with my stuff?”

“Seeing as you’re all worked up, then I’d say yes!” I snarled as I swam over to where he was standing. From where I was standing, I could see no other way around this. If I didn’t push back, Rourke Owens would bury me, and I refused to go down like that. Springing up out of the water, I knotted my fist in his shirt and dragged him roughly into the water. “No sex for you tonight, Asshole.”

“Damn, Rourke!” the same guy as earlier laughed. He was huge, bigger than Rourke, and he was standing at the edge of the pool beside two stunningly beautiful blonde girls, and grinning like an idiot at the pair of us. “Sissy’s got spunk.”

“She’s *not* my sister,” Rourke snarled, treading the water, cold blue eyes locked on my eyes. “Ya hear that? You are *not* my fucking family.”

Here I was; being punished for my mother’s decisions *again*. Fuck this. “I don’t want to be your family,” I practically screamed, splashing him. “I can’t stand the sight of you!”

“Then leave!” he roared in my face. “Take your whore of a mom and get the fuck out of my town...”

Rourke didn’t finish his sentence; I don’t suppose he could when my fist was crunched into the side of his jaw. “Don’t,” I warned, breathing harshly as I lunged at the big bastard, “call my mom a whore again.”

He shook off my punch like I was a mildly annoying bumble bee buzzing around his face. “You’re a fucking lunatic,” he snarled, getting in my face.

“Yeah,” I shot back, pushing against his chest. “I’d have to be to move into a house with a deranged psychopath like you.”

“You think I’m a psychopath?”

“Oh, I *know* you’re a psychopath.”

My reaction to Rourke’s cruel words only caused the other guy to laugh harder. “This is priceless,” he chuckled, thoroughly enjoying himself at my expense. “Ash, Britt; you need to film this shit. The guys on the team are gonna piss themselves when they watch Rourke getting schooled by her.”

“Don’t fucking dare, Ashley,” Rourke spat. “Or you, Brittany.” He turned his attention to me once more and hissed, “Stay out of my room, Six. You don’t wanna make an enemy out of me.”

“Really?” Hauling myself out of the water, I glared down at him. “I thought we already were.”

“Allow me to introduce myself,” the other guy said with a chuckle as he sauntered towards me. “I’m Daryl King.” He held his hand out to me. “And I apologize for my friend’s manhandling.”

Good looking guy, I thought to myself seconds before I pushed his ass in the pool to join his *friend*. “The next time you see someone doing something you know is wrong, do something to stop it instead of apologizing after it’s done,” I hissed before stalking into the house.



Rourke

BLOOD WAS DRIPPING from my knuckles; the punching bag in my best friend’s garage the victim of my latest burst of aggression.

God fucking dammit.

He really did it.

Dad really brought another woman and her brat into our goddamn home.

“You got it out of your system yet?” Daryl asked, wiping the corner of his mouth, as he observed me from a safe distance. He was my best friend, had been since pre-k, and at 6’3” was as tall as me in height, but he knew better than anyone not to try and stop me when I was in this kind of mood. A homicidal mood.

“Not even close,” I growled, continuing to pound my bare fists into the bag.

With intelligent green eyes, Daryl studied me with a concerned frowned etched on his face. “Mind taking care of those hands, buddy?” he tossed out, folding his arms across his chest. “Kinda need you in one piece this season.”

He would say that. Daryl King – or King Daryl, as he was known by his teammates – was our team’s first string quarterback and Ocean Bay Academy’s answer to *Tom Brady*. We’d been playing together since Daryl

was old enough to throw a football and I was fast enough to go long and catch it, and he needed me. I was the number one ranked high school wide receiver in the state and a fucking bullet on the field. But the mood I was in right now, I didn't give two shits if I fucked my wrists or not. All I could think about was history repeating itself a-fucking-gain.

I guess you could say I'd been in denial since the wedding, hoping and praying this was some sick joke. But when my new *Mommy* and her spawn showed up on our doorstep yesterday, reality had hit me like a wrecking ball.

"Dude," Daryl hissed. "I need a wide receiver out there with hands that can actually catch my damn passes."

"Well, that's too fucking bad," I shot back, uncaring. You'd think all the damn double sessions we'd been doing in preparation for the new season would have helped me work my frustrations out, but nope. I was burning with furious energy.

"You're just all riled up because you've got a hard on for those thick hips." My frown deepened and Daryl's smile widened. "I'm right, aint I?" He threw his head back and laughed loudly. "Step sissy's got an ass you wanna tap."

"Don't," I warned "go there." I was having a hard-enough time trying to block the memory of Six's body from my mind. She had a figure that was built for cruel intentions. She looked like the sort of girl a guy lost his mind over. A dangerous fucking female with a beautiful face and even more beautiful body. Bad fucking combination...

"Hey, man. I ain't judging you." Daryl held his hands up in retreat. "I saw her too; almost naked in the swimming pool, remember? Lord have mercy on that ass!"

He was right about that.

Six had one hell of an ass. Fuck me, the memory of her tits spilling out of her bra, that tiny waist and thick hips, not to mention the long, glossy black hair, still haunted me.

"I don't need this shit, D!" I snarled, heart hammering against my ribcage. My rage was swallowing me up. "I'm so fucking done this time, man."

So what if the girl was good looking and so fucking what if she was curved like a dream? I still hated her and all she represented to my family.

“Fuck!” I roared, throwing my head back in pure anger. “He’s no kind of father,” I snarled, biting out the words. “If he gave a shit, he wouldn’t go there *again*.”

“You don’t really believe that, man,” Daryl shot back calmly. “Hell, I know all about parents being assholes and hating their children, but Gabe not caring about you and Amelia?” Daryl shook his head. “Nah, dude. That’s bull crap and you know it.”

Breathless, I shook my wrists out before walking over to the worn leather couch shoved against the far wall of the garage and sank down. “I’m so fucking done.” With all of it. Every little fucking aspect of my life. “It’s the same bullshit repeating itself over and fucking over.”

“It’s not the same this time,” Daryl offered as he came and sat beside me. “What happened before?” He turned and stared into my eyes. “It’s nothing like that. She’s just a girl, dude.”

“I don’t care,” I replied angrily, accepting the bottle of Gatorade he was offering me. I didn’t care if Six was just a girl. She didn’t need to be in my house. Her mother didn’t need to be there either. “I want them *gone*.”

Daryl laughed. “That’s gonna be hard now that your step momma’s pregnant.”

“That house is mine, D, *mine*,” I hissed through clenched teeth before taking another slug from my bottle. “After all the shit last year, Dad thinks he’s gonna pull this crap on me and Millie again?” I shook my head in disgust. “Nah, man. I don’t fucking think so.”

“Focus on the game, Rourke,” Daryl ordered, tone suddenly serious. “Concentrate on getting to state and ignore the girl.”

“Easy for you to say,” I shot back angrily. “You’re not the one that has to sleep in the goddamn room next to hers.”

“What got into you last night anyway?” Daryl asked, curious. “I’ve known you my whole life, man, and I ain’t never seen you lose it with a female like you lost it with her.”

“You know what got into me.” I took another sip of my Gatorade and blocked out the petrified feeling that had consumed me when I realized that Six had been in my room. *In my fucking drawer*. “Crazy bitch stole my condoms.”

“You sure that’s all it was?”

“Tell me how you’d have reacted if you had Brittany Beckitt buck ass naked on your bed waiting for your dick and some stupid girl stole your stash of rubbers?” I asked, lying through my teeth. I didn’t care about Brittany’s pussy. Not anymore. I cared about my privacy. I cared about my fucking journal. Exhaling a deep breath, I twisted my neck from side to side.

“I would have thanked Jesus and kissed the girl’s feet,” Daryl shot back with a crooked grin. “Britt’s a nasty bitch, man. You know it. I know it. Hell, the whole damn town knows it.”

“You don’t know anything about it, D.” Britt and I weren’t a couple like we’d been in the past, but that didn’t mean I was going to sit around and listen to Daryl talk shit about her. Hell, I was still in her pants most weekends. Way I saw it, I’d be a poor fucking excuse if I sat around bitching about the girl I was sleeping with.

“Girl done you wrong,” Daryl argued. “More than once. You need to cut her loose. For once and for all.”

Yeah, Daryl was probably right about that, but it was easier said than done. Britt was familiar and safe and I’d loved her once. It was hard to walk away from your first everything. That’s what Brittany Beckitt represented to me; my first fucking everything. There’d been a time when I’d genuinely believed she would be my only everything. Of course, that was before she crushed my heart, but still.

“Maybe you should just go on and get it over with.”

“Get what over with?”

“Banging your stepsister,” Daryl shot back with a snicker. “All that pent up sexual frustration ain’t good for a guy’s game, you know.”

“Don’t,” I warned, blocking out the image of that fucking girl’s body. Goddamn Six. She messed with my head. One damn dinner, and I couldn’t get her feisty little attitude out of my head.

“Fine.” Daryl threw his hands up. “If you’re not interested in tapping that ass, then step aside and let the master get to work.” Grinning, he waggled his brows. “I’ve got something between my legs that will help that stepsister of yours work out her anger.”

“Touch her and I’ll fucking kill you.” I didn’t mean to yell. Hell, I didn’t mean to care. I shouldn’t... but I did. “I mean it, D,” I snarled,

agitated at the thought of my best friend chasing after Six. “She’s off limits, man.”

“I knew it!” He threw his head back and laughed. “You like her.”

“No.” I shook my head, refutably denying the fucking notion. “I don’t.”

“Then what?” He looked at me in confusion. “You don’t want her, but you don’t want any of the rest of us having her either?”

“Exactly.”

“You’re an asshole, Rourke.”

I was. But no one was touching Six.

“Rourke.” Daryl’s tone was suddenly serious. “All jokes aside, man; I think you should give her a chance. Or at the very least, leave her alone.”

“You cannot be serious.” I gaped at the absolute bullshit that was coming from my best friend’s mouth. “You know what happened the last time I gave someone a chance.”

“History ain’t repeating itself here, Rourke,” he replied, voice pained, eyes full of sympathy. He could fuck his sympathy. I didn’t want it. “She’s just a girl, man, tryna make it in a new town. If you give Sissy a chance, I bet you’ll be surprised with what you find.”

“Quit calling her Sissy.”

“What, and call her *Six*?” Daryl cocked a brow. “No thanks. I’m not that cold.” Shaking his head, Daryl exhaled heavily. “Come on, man, she doesn’t need the wrath that comes with being on your bad side. You know how it works around here; if you hate her then the whole town’s gonna hate her.”

I knew what Daryl was trying to say. Fuck, I even wanted to listen, but every time I tried to comprehend the notion of accepting my new family, the image of my sister’s face penetrated my mind, shutting down any sort of welcoming thought. “I don’t care,” I hissed finally. “Let ‘em hate her.”

Chapter 6

Mercedes

I HATED MY STEPBROTHER.

Seriously, I hated him more than I hated anyone in my life – even more than the scumbag that knocked my mom up at fifteen and left her to raise me alone. *Whoever he was.*

I normally had a handle on my emotions, but since arriving in Ocean Bay, I felt like screaming at the top of my lungs. My nerves were in shreds and I was burning with anxiety and rage. Who the hell did Rourke Owens think he was? Talking down to me like I was trash? Making me feel like a bad person for breathing? And throwing me in his stupid swimming pool in front of his stupid friends? Rage coursed through me. He wasn't going to get away with it.

The alarm on my phone cut through my thoughts and I quickly snaked a hand out from under my warm duvet to turn it off, wondering why I ever bothered setting an alarm when I always woke before it went off.

It was 7am on a Saturday morning in mid-July. Most teenagers I knew would be sleeping the morning away. But if I had been back in Kansas, I would have been getting up for work right about now. *I guess old habits die hard.*

Throwing the covers off myself, I climbed out of my warm bed and straight into a fancy-pants shower that had more water jets than I had skin to wash.

Drying off, I dressed in a black tank and my denim cut offs before ambling downstairs to the kitchen to fix some breakfast.

Grateful for my early bird nature, I tackled the empty kitchen, making myself familiar with every cupboard door and expensive looking appliance.

When I had fixed myself a plate of bacon and eggs, I sat down on one the stools at the huge granite marble counter and dived in.

As I munched on the crispy bacon, I gazed out the gigantic floor to ceiling window in dismay, taking in the sight of that damn swimming pool Rourke had tried to drown me in last night. *Jerk.*

“Fond memories?” a familiar deep voice asked. I bit back the urge to growl when Rourke sauntered into the kitchen, wearing nothing but a pair of grey sweatpants hung low on his hips. The white shirt I presumed he had been wearing was wrapped around his left fist.

“What the hell happened to you?” I blurted out, eyes locked on the blood smeared shirt in his hand.

“What the hell has it got to do with you?” Rourke shot back coolly, tossing the shirt down on the counter in front of me.

“Nothing,” I replied, flicking it away from my plate. “Bleed to death for all I care.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Reaching into the fridge, Rourke grabbed a bottle of water and cracked the cap open. “To get me out of the way so you and your momma can clean up?”

Was he for real?

Did he actually believe that crap?

I opened my mouth to respond to his ridiculous accusations, but he was already walking out of the kitchen. “Save it, Six,” he tossed over his shoulder as he walked out. “I wouldn’t believe a word that came out of your mouth anyway.”

Oh yeah, I really did hate him.



Rourke

BRITT STOPPED BY last night. Part of me wanted to throw her out on her ass when she walked into my bedroom like she had the right to everything inside of it. She didn’t. Not anymore. I should have sent her on her way. I didn’t. I was a fucking idiot for it, but there was something screwed up in my head when it came to that girl. And it was my mother’s birthday.

Mom would have been forty-four years old yesterday – had she lived – and Britt remembered that. No one else had. My father certainly hadn’t. The sound of him giving it to his new wife on the third floor had been so loud that I would have been surprised if he remembered his own damn name.

Asshole.

When I woke this morning, I felt dirty. Like I'd done something really fucking stupid by accepting Britt's body and offer of comfort last night. I tried to ease my conscience by telling myself there was nothing wrong with hooking up with her. I forced myself to believe that it was okay to need someone's touch every once and a while. That it was okay to need someone, period.

I knew Britt was the wrong fucking girl for me to attach myself to, especially since all that had happened last summer, but she was all I'd known for such a long time that it was hard to walk away. As fucked up as it sounded, Britt was the only permanent thing I'd had in a lifetime of temporary everything.

Then I thought of Six and anger coursed through me.

Goddamn that girl.

I couldn't get her out of my head. She was driving me batshit crazy. Her quirky remarks and quick comebacks entertained me far more than I wanted them to. When she looked at me, it felt as though she was looking straight *through* me. It was as if she was seeing past the material bullshit and straight into my black heart. Nobody looked at me like she did. It unnerved the hell out of me.

I wanted to hate her so damn much. She and her momma represented everything I despised in life. They represented yet another bad decision by my father. Another wife. Another stepsibling. Another fucking mouth to support.

I didn't care if Six was a girl. I didn't care if history wasn't repeating itself. I was still fucking angry that Dad had gone and done this again without thinking of the consequences. Without thinking about *us*.

Forcing my mind free from all thoughts of Six and her mother, I showered and then slipped on a pair of shorts and my Nikes before heading downstairs. The moment I was outside the front door, I broke into a run, needing to work off some of this pent-up frustration festering inside of me.

Like a cruel twist of fate, Six was climbing out of her car when I jogged back up the driveway. The moment I laid eyes on her, I realized that the last ninety minutes of running had done jack shit to curb the energy bristling inside of me, and every time I put my eyes on that girl, it ignited even further.

Her grey eyes landed on my face and that energy bristling inside of me erupted into something I could only describe as molten fucking lava in my veins.

“What the hell are you looking at?” I snarled, because it was the only thing I could say. Her eyes on my face affected me more than I cared to acknowledge.

“You,” she replied evenly. Slamming her car door, Six stalked towards me. I slowed to a walk, waiting to receive her “I’m looking at you, asshole.”

Goddammit, Six needed to cut it with the catty remarks. I was quickly learning that smart mouth of hers was a major turn on for me – which only aggravated me more.

“Got a problem?”

“Yes, I do,” she snapped, not stopping until our shoes were touching. “You’re my problem. You and your sex noises.”

I grinned. “Sex noises?” Was she for real?

“I could hear you last night,” she hissed, red faced. “Having sex with that girl.”

“Really?” I cocked a brow and smirked. “I didn’t know you were listening. I would’ve put on a show.”

“Ugh. Spare me.” She made a gagging noise. “Next time, keep it down.”

“Are you asking me or telling me?” I asked, amused.

“Take it whatever way you want,” she shot back, not giving me an inch. “I don’t give a shit so long as I don’t have to listen to some stupid girl screaming the house down like a freaking hyena.”

“Sounds like you’re jealous, Six,” I shot back, grinning, when she made a heaving sound.

“And it sounds like you’re delusional, Rourke,” she retorted before swinging around and storming off in the direction of the house.



Mercedes

I WOULD NOT LET him get to me. I refused to allow Rourke Owens to hold any sort of power over my emotions.

“Sounds like you’re jealous, Six,” Rourke taunted, towering above me with a shit eating grin etched on his face.

Like hell... “And it sounds like you’re delusional, Rourke,” I shot back before turning my back on him and rushing towards the house. I needed to get away from this boy. When I was around him, I didn’t feel in control of my emotions. And I wasn’t jealous. He could screw whoever the hell he wanted. It didn’t matter to me who he brought into his room at night, just as long as he didn’t keep me awake while he was *entertaining* them. Asshole.

Shoving the front door open, I marched into the foyer, holding onto my temper by the skin of my teeth.

Breathe, Mercy, breathe. Don’t let that jackass get to you.

“You’re pissy today,” Rourke taunted as he followed close behind me “What’s wrong with you, Six?”

You! You’re what’s wrong with me... “Leave me alone, Rourke,” I shot back, jaw clenched, moving for the staircase. “I’m tired and hungry and in no mood for your bullshit.”

I heard Rourke laughing, but thankfully, he didn’t follow me upstairs.

When I reached my bedroom, I slipped inside and slammed the door shut before leaning against it. Exhaling a loud sigh, I closed my eyes and forced myself to calm the hell down. I needed to get a grip on myself. I couldn’t let this guy continue to get to me like this.

I wouldn’t.

Chapter 7

Mercedes

CHECKING MY REFLECTION in the bathroom mirror, I nodded in approval.

The job I had managed to snag at a coffee house on the pier required the female staff wear a black, tight-fitted skirt and fitted white shirt.

Thankfully, they supplied the uniform, and although I didn't own a decent pair of black shoes, the manager had assured me my black Converse were fine.

When I popped in last week and handed my resume to the insanely hot manager, he'd hired me on the spot. He told me to be in bright and early the following Monday.

Grabbing my backpack off my bed, I headed out, feeling both nervous and excited about my first day at a new job.

When I reached the bottom of the staircase, I headed straight for the kitchen, ready to go for what had to be round thirty with my darling stepbrother.

I'd been living here two weeks now and it was becoming glaringly obvious that Rourke Owens and I would *never* be able to stomach being in the same room together for longer than five minutes at a time, much less hold down a civilized conversation.

He hated my guts which was perfectly fine by me since I despised the ground the big dick walked on. In the days that had passed since our altercation at the beach, we had clashed on several more issues.

Rourke played music ridiculously loud at night. Our parents didn't care. They never once told him to stop or rein in the debauchery. Once I learned that Amelia's bedroom was on the ground floor, and our parent's room took up the entire third floor, I realized these late-night shenanigans were for my benefit.

Of course, I drowned out his shitty rock music by blaring my favorite television show on Netflix at the very maximum my flat screen was capable of projecting. To which I was rewarded with some sort of ball being banged against my wall for a solid thirty minutes so hard that it caused the TV to fall off the wall stand it was mounted to and crash to the floor.

I returned the gesture by picking up said television and stalking into the enemy's territory and casually dropping it on his head. Lucky for him, it was a flimsy flat screen, because the way he made me feel it could have just as well been a cement block.

Asshole.

To my absolute delight, the kitchen was void of all traces of Rourke Owens when I walked inside. Immediately, my mood brightened to the point I was borderline smiling when I poured myself a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Mercedes," Gabe's voice filled the room. "You look... dare I say, happy?"

Damn...

"I was," I muttered under my breath before slugging back a mouthful of coffee.

"Hmm?" Gabe asked as he poured himself a coffee. "Did you say something?"

"Nope." I watched my stepfather as he prepared his drink. Gabe was extremely handsome for a man in his mid-forties, with a strong physical physique and a full head of dark hair that only bore the slightest slither of silver. His looks alone made me suspicious.

From what I'd seen growing up, men that looked like Gabriel Owens were rarely monogamous. Mom had moved from man to man my whole life.

My earliest childhood memory consisted of me sitting in the back of my mother's space wagon, with everything we owned loaded inside, waving goodbye to the man I'd later come to learn wasn't my father, but had been a good fit at the time.

My mother may be impulsive and drawn to his lifestyle, but her heart was in *this guy*. I didn't want to see it get broken. Not now there was a baby involved.

"Rourke left for football practice a few minutes ago," he offered. "He was dropping Amelia to the King's place on his way. You just missed

them.”

Thank god! “That’s a shame.”

“Your mom’s staying in bed for a little while longer.” Gabe smiled knowingly as he disposed of his spoon in the sink. “Morning sickness.”

“Oh joy.” Placing my mug in the sink, I wiped the corner of my mouth with my finger and flashed a false smile. “So. Will I do, *Daddy?*”

Gabe flushed bright red. “Let’s not.”

“What?” I feigned innocence, while enjoying making the man squirm.

“Just stick to Gabe, okay?” he muttered before taking a sip from his mug. “And you look perfectly fine.” He frowned as I sauntered out of the kitchen, blue eyes raking over me once more in obvious disapproval. “Perhaps a longer skirt?”

“It’s the uniform,” I called out as I headed outside to my car, thankful to have scored myself a job so quickly.



Rourke

“WE COULD TAKE THE boat out at the end of the month. I’m tied up with work until the last week of August, but after that, I’m all yours. We could make a honeymoon out of it. What do you think?”

“Oh, Gabe! That sounds wonderful.”

“Anything for you, sweetheart, and besides; we haven’t had a proper honeymoon yet.”

“But the children?”

“Sweetheart, Rourke and Mercedes are both seventeen. Amelia’s fifteen. I would hardly call them children...”

Slamming the front door loud enough so they would hear me coming, I stalked into the kitchen, ignoring my father and his latest squeeze as I went.

“Hello, Rourke,” Blondie chirped out with a fake as fuck smile.

I grunted in acknowledgment. It was the best I could do. I didn’t like Cassidy James, and her trying to be nice to me only irritated me further. Besides, she was sitting on my father’s lap; that alone was enough to make me hurl.

“Where were you, Rourke?” Dad demanded then, wrapping an arm around his tiny wife. “It’s almost midnight.”

“Running,” I shot back as I scoured the fridge for something to eat. My gaze landed on a cellophane wrapped plate of chicken legs. I smirked to myself as I retrieved the plate and quickly disposed of the wrapping. Our housekeeper, Fran, was good like that; she always tucked away protein crammed meals for me during training season.

Tearing into one of the legs, I ignored my Dad when he said, “Running? At this time of night?” choosing to answer the calling of my stomach instead. It was only when he said, “I was worried about you,” that I deemed it appropriate to respond. And only then it was with a snort. Fuckers wasn’t worried about me.

Shaking my head, I walked over to the sink and picked up the last remaining chicken leg before tossing the grease stained plate inside. “Where’s Millie?”

“Your sister’s in bed,” Dad replied. “Which is where you should be.”

Turning to face him, I leaned against the counter and cocked a brow. “Where I *should* be?” Did he think I was ten years old again? The sound of a car engine outside distracted me and I glowered when I realized who said car belonged to.

“Mercy’s home from work,” Cassidy chirped with a glimmer of relief in her eyes. “Thank god.” She turned to my dad and smiled. “I was so worried about her being out this late.”

My brows shot up in surprise. I thought *Step Mommy* didn’t care about anything except my father’s money, but nope. Looked like she had a soft spot for Six.

“I told you she’d be fine, sweetheart,” Dad said, soothing his little doll. “Although, there really is no need for Mercedes to be working. School is right around the corner. She should be spending her last few weeks of freedom enjoying herself.”

“Try telling *her* that,” Cassidy shot back in a weary tone. “My daughter is ferociously stubborn, Gabe.”

“Yeah.” Dad smirked at me. “I have a son with that same problem.”

The door of the kitchen opened inwards then and in walked my living nightmare looking like my walking dream.

Goddammit.

“What’s going on?” Narrowed grey eyes landed on my face for the briefest of moments before returning to our parents. “Mom?” Dropping her

backpack on a chair, Six sauntered past me, not giving me the time of day, and headed straight for the fridge. “What are you doing up so late?”

The white t-shirt with Madame Jory’s logo and tight, black mini skirt did nothing to hide that fucking fabulous figure I knew was underneath her clothes and immediately I was burning mad at her. For being here. For being so fucking sexy. For representing a bad fucking memory...

“I was waiting for you to get in before I went to bed,” Cassidy replied, smiling. “How did your first day go?”

Retrieving a can of coke from the fridge, Six slammed the door shut with her hip and leaned against the fridge. “It was fine.” Snapping open the can, she took a long swig before sighing. “We were doing inventory and stock take after closing tonight so I’m a little tired.”

Dad frowned. “Mercedes, you know you don’t have to –”

“I want to work, Gabe,” Six shot back, casting a warning glare at my father.

I smirked at the sight of this tiny, five feet nothing girl giving my father hell. Dad loved being in charge. His controlling nature and attention to detail were what made him such a success in the business world. A property developer, my father had made a steady fortune – on top of my mother’s already established business – throughout the United States by buying up derelict homes and apartment buildings before turning them around and selling them at a major profit. Watching Six shut him down over something as lame as a part time job in a coffee house made me ridiculously happy and, if I didn’t hate her so much, I’d be sort of proud. But then I remembered that I *did* hate her, and my smirk transformed into a grimace.

“Maybe you should roll out a pay-your-own-way rule with your kids,” Six added, casting a glare in my direction. “A part-time job never killed anyone.”

I smirked at her obvious dig.

I had a job; getting our team to state this year. That was my fucking job, and I had a lot of guys’ futures counting on me. I might not need a scholarship, my momma had left me well provided, but Bear did, and Mason, too. Fuck, I had enough in the bank and in trust funds to sit on my ass for the rest of my life if I felt inclined. Of course, I wasn’t going to do that; I had plans on following in my momma’s steps and going for a career in architecture, but Six had a fucking nerve.

This house was mine. That fridge she was leaning against? Mine. The bed she slept in every night? Also mine. She and her momma were in this house right now because I was under the legal age to live alone and my Dad couldn't exactly abandon me. Not that he had much choice in the matter. Dad wouldn't have shit without my mother and he knew it. The cars, the houses, the boat he talked about bringing Cass on? They were all funded from the property empire *my mother* built, not him. Dad's fortune was tied up in me. *I* was the heir to her fortune; Dad just happened to be the one controlling the purse strings – *my fucking* purse strings.

Yeah, I was my father's meal ticket and he was theirs, which meant I was unintentionally funding this fucking marriage – and every one that had come before it.

"Now that they're both here, Gabe, we could discuss the boat trip?" Cassidy interjected, drawing me back to the present, as she looked up at my father like he hung the fucking moon.

"Yes!" Dad turned to us and smiled. "As you both know, Cass and I haven't had much time together since the wedding."

I snorted.

So did Six.

We both glared at each other.

"I've cleared my schedule so we can take a boat trip."

"Boat?" Six frowned. "What boat? I'm not going on any boat trip."

"Who said anything about you being invited?" I countered, unable to stop myself from snipping at her. "They don't want you on their honeymoon, Six."

"Rourke!"

"When I want your input, I'll ask, *Prick*," she shot back, grey eyes flashing with anger.

"Mercy!"

"Blow me."

"Rourke!"

Turning her attention back to our parents, Six crossed her arms and asked, "When are you leaving?"

"The end of the month," Cassidy replied.

Six's eyes widened. "But that's right before school starts."

“Don’t worry. I’ve already ordered your uniform, books, and supplies. They’ll be here later this week. Everything is organized.”

“But, Mom, I really wanted you to be here.”

“Why? It’s not like you’re too young to go to school on your own?”

“Because!” Six bit down on her lip and glared. “Nothing. Forget it. It’s fine.”

“Thank you, baby,” Cass cooed. “Gabe and I really need some alone time.”

“And for how long?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a couple of weeks.”

“A couple of *weeks*?” Six cocked one of those finely shaped brows.

I watched in confusion. Why was this bothering her? It wasn’t like Cass or Dad spent any time at home with us. Why did she care if they left or not?

“Have you thought about your upcoming doctor’s appointments?” Six continued. “Or your morning sickness? You do realize that it could get ten times worse out on the water? Two weeks on a boat is *not* a good idea, Mom.”

“There’s no need to speak to me like I’m a child,” her mother shot back, turning red. “I’m the parent here, Mercedes.”

“Oh, you are?” Six shot back, feigning surprise. “Wow. Could have fooled me, Mom.”

“Mercedes! Show some respect,” Dad snapped. “Don’t speak to your mother like that.”

“Dad.” Something erupted inside of me then, something fucking strange, because I felt a burning urge to defend Six. I didn’t want to feel it, but it stung like a bitch. “Leave her alone.”

“Stay out of this, Rourke. I don’t need your help,” Six hissed at me before turning her attention to my father. “This has nothing to do with you, Gabe.”

“Your mother has *everything* to do with me and I won’t tolerate you speaking down to her under my roof, or telling her what to do a minute longer.”

“Telling her what to do?” Six threw her head back and laughed harshly. “Oh my god. You have no clue, do you?”

“Mercedes, please,” her mother began to interject, but Six wasn’t having it.

Eyes locked on my father, Six growled, “You might want to advertise for the position of a nanny because when that kid comes, you’re going to need one.” She laughed harshly once more. “Because your darling *wife* sure as hell needs some pointers and I’m not sticking around to help. I already raised myself.” Having said that, Six shoved past me and stalked out of the kitchen.

“She’s right, Gabe,” Cassidy sobbed. “I let her down. Mercedes had to grow up faster than any child should have to.” Hiccupping, she added, “No wonder she hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you, darling,” he soothed, wrapping his arms around his wife.

Shaking my head, I left the room, choosing to go check on the one person in this house that deserved my time and attention. When I reached her door, I knocked twice before slipping inside. “You okay?”

Amelia was sitting cross-legged on her bed, reading some old dog-eared paperback. “I’m fine, Rourke.” Placing the book face down on the bed, she looked up at me and smiled. “Are you?”

Immediately, I was consumed with my guilt, and every time I looked at my sister, that guilt grew. “I’m good, Mills.” I wasn’t. Not even close. But she didn’t need to worry about my bullshit. Walking over to her bed, I sank down on the edge and exhaled heavily. “Dad’s planning a trip with Barbie. Apparently they’re leaving at the end of the month on a last-minute *honeymoon*.” Christ, even the word made me sick. “It’s not permanent, Mills.” I dropped my head and studied my hands. “Barbie and Six being here? I’ll fix this. I promise.”

“Her name is Cassidy, Rourke, and I like her.” Amelia corrected, before crawling over to sit beside me. “And I like Mercy, too.”

I stiffened. “Tell me you’re joking.” I turned and looked at my sister. Her small, heart shaped face and blue eyes, surrounded by a halo of golden hair, burned through me, making me feel worse than normal. “You don’t mean that.” How could she? How could she sit here and offer second chances? Goddamn, my baby sister was a better person than me.

“Cass is okay, Rourke. And I really think she loves Dad,” Amelia insisted. “And Mercy? She’s about as happy to be here as you are to have

her here.”

“Good,” I snapped, jaw clenched. “Maybe she’ll take the hint and fuck off.”

“Oh, really? And where is she supposed to go, Rourke?”

“Anywhere that’s not here.”

“Cassidy is the only family she has.”

“Not my problem.”

“It’s not their fault, Rourke,” my sister whispered. “And it’s not your fault either.” Leaning her head against my shoulder, she sighed sadly. “You need to stop blaming them and yourself for what he did. Hating them won’t change the past. It just makes life harder for you. I don’t want you to be bitter, Rourke.”

“I *can’t*, Mills,” I squeezed out. It was my fault. I didn’t protect her. I took my eye off the ball and my sister paid for it in the worst kind of way. Trust had gotten me nowhere and fast. I would *not* make that mistake again.

Chapter 8

Mercedes

I WORKED THE next four days straight at the coffee shop, learning the ropes and the million different beverages they offered. I was grateful for the extra shifts Alec had offered me. I needed a distraction from the house and everyone in it. Working at Madame Jory's gave me a much-needed break.

I had the day off work on Friday and I planned to spend it in my room, locked away from the bullshit family I'd been dragged into. Mom and Gabe had left early this morning with Amelia in tow. Mom had popped her head in my door first thing to let me know they were going shopping and I zoned out. I wasn't interested in shopping and didn't care enough to pretend to listen.

I couldn't seem to look at my mother these days without feeling acutely annoyed. And hanging around the house just to end up being on the receiving end of Rourke's angry glares wasn't exactly appealing either. I always gave as good as I got when it came to Rourke Owens, but I'd be a liar if I said he didn't make me feel nervous. He looked at me like I was a threat; like my mere presence was causing him tremendous distress.

It didn't make sense and I resented my mother for bringing me into his house. It was her fault I was the sole focus of this angry, fucked up, beautiful man-child.

Rourke wasn't eighteen yet, but calling him a boy sounded absurd, especially considering I'd seen him shirtless and there was *nothing* boyish about his ripped stomach and bulging biceps.

By lunchtime, I reluctantly gave into my stomach's noisy protests and fell out of my bed. Trudging downstairs, I headed straight for the kitchen, ignoring the sound of the television blaring coming from the living room.

Of course, since it was my one day off this week, Rourke would have to be hanging around the house.

Biting down on my lip in frustration, I walked over to the fridge and pulled out a carton of milk and then grabbed the container of cereal on the counter. Fetching a bowl and spoon from the dishwasher, I sank down on a stool at the breakfast bar and fixed myself a huge ass bowl of cereal. I wasn't familiar with this particular brand, but I wasn't fussy either. The honey glazed, bean-shaped cereal tasted delicious and I scarfed them down.

"Christ, you eat like a pig," Rourke commented dryly, walking into the kitchen.

Not bothering to answer his snarky jibe, I merely flipped him the bird and continued to 'eat like a pig' as he had so kindly phrased it. I didn't give two shits what Rourke Owens thought about me or my eating habits.

Unlike him, I hadn't been raised with a silver spoon in my mouth and caviar on my side plate. He was probably one of those people that cut their burger into bite sized pieces before eating it. Me? I was a blue-collar kind of girl with the basic knowledge of a fork, knife, and spoon and not a lot else. *Stuck up prick.*

"I was joking," Rourke shot back in an amused tone.

"Don't care," I muttered between bites, eyes focused on the half-eaten bowl of cereal in front of me. "Did you want something?"

"Not from you," he shot back cruelly.

"Then what do you want?" I slammed my spoon down on the counter and glared at him. Rourke's brows rose in surprise. I didn't care if I had shocked or surprised him. I didn't care if I was being rude, either. "This is my only day off all week. Forgive me if I don't want to spend it swapping shitty comments back and forth with you."

Rourke narrowed his eyes. "What the fuck's gotten into you?"

You, I wanted to scream.

I didn't.

"Nothing," I snapped, refocusing on my late breakfast. "Nothing at all."

"Then what's with the tone?"

Tone? Was he serious? I inhaled several deep breaths before attempting to answer him. "You don't like me," I finally said. "You've made that perfectly clear over the past two and half weeks. But news flash, Rourke. I don't particularly like you either." Glaring, I added, "My *tone*

obviously mirrors my feelings of disgust and possible hatred, though that I'm still undetermined of."

Rourke smiled at me.

Why the hell was he smiling at me?

"You don't hate me," he replied with a grin.

"Are you asking me if I hate you, or are you just adding to the already laden down list of reasons why I should?"

His smile widened. The deep dimples in his cheeks that appeared when he smiled were beautiful. I was instantly angry with him because of it. Why did he have to be so nice to look at? Ugh.

"You're a strange one, Six," he finally said. "I'll give you that."

"I'm a *strange* one?" I shot back, but Rourke didn't answer me. He was already half way out of the room.



Rourke

I DEDICATED THE whole weekend to football. Working out with Daryl, going through drills and plays with the guys; basically running myself into the ground.

When I finally walked my stinking ass into the house late Sunday evening, I was met with the sound of my sister crying in her bedroom.

"Amelia?" Immediately my hackles rose, and I was on the war path. Storming down the hallway to her bedroom, I shoved the door inwards and stalked inside, ready to kill the motherfucker that had made her cry. "Mills? You okay?"

When I walked into her bedroom and my eyes landed on her empty bed, confusion swept through me. I could have sworn I heard crying. Stilling my body, I listened carefully, straining to hear the sound again.

And I did.

I fucking heard it again.

Except it wasn't coming from Amelia's room like I had thought.

Confused and feeling edgy, I trailed back down the hallway to the main foyer.

More crying filled my ears.

Louder this time.

Goddammit.

Swinging around, I barreled towards the living room door and pushed it open. Immediately, my gaze locked on Six who was sprawled out on the couch and crying like a freaking baby.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded, feeling oddly worried.

She looked away from the television screen she’d been glued to. Big grey eyes full of tears met mine. “Oh m-my g-god,” she cried, wailing uncontrollably. Tears were pouring down her cheeks as she heaved uncontrollably.

“What?” I looked around frantically. “What the fuck happened?”

“They killed him,” she screamed, pointing back to the TV. “They fucking *killed* him, Rourke!”

I tore my attention from her face and looked at the television screen. Immediately I recognized the program Six was watching as an episode from that fantasy TV show everyone seemed to love so much – myself included. Instantly, the penny dropped.

“Are you fucking serious?” I demanded, shaken up. “You’re crying over a goddamn TV show?”

“You don’t understand,” Six wailed, still crying. “I’ve invested all this time into...and they...they just...omigod, I *can’t*! I can’t cope with this.”

“I thought you were hurt in here!” I growled. “Goddammit.”

“Turn it off,” she squeezed out, tone pleading. “Please, Rourke. My heart can’t take it.”

I gaped at her. “Are you serious?”

She nodded frantically, still crying.

Shaking my head, I muttered a curse and walked over to the TV set before switching it off. “Happy now?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be happy again,” she whispered, wiping her nose with the sleeve of her sweater. “If this is what mourning someone’s death feels like, I don’t want to form another relationship for the rest of my life.”

“Christ,” I muttered dryly. She was such a drama queen. “You do realize that it’s just a TV show, right?”

Six leapt off the couch, still clutching her chest. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that,” she half growled, half sobbed as she hurried out of the room.

What the fuck was I living with?
And why the hell was she making me smile?

Chapter 9

Mercedes

WHY THE HELL WAS he making me so nervous?

Over the weeks, I had grown accustomed to feeling disgust and loathing whenever I was in Rourke's' presence, but this nervous anxiety I had pumping through my veins tonight? Not so much.

Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he was dressed only in a pair of tight black boxer shorts and I had the best possible view of his tight as hell butt.

Or maybe it was him standing half naked in my bedroom that was causing me so many issues?

Either way, I was a nervous freaking wreck.

"Are you deaf?" Rourke demanded, snapping me out of my daydream. "Or did you really not hear a damn thing I've just said?"

I hadn't been listening to him; I'd been too busy *staring* at him. Clearing my throat, I looked up at him and said, "Actually no. I wasn't listening to you. I was too busy trying to work out what the hell you're doing in my room."

"You wanna get pissy with me?" He was staring at me, his blue eyes boring into mine with so much heat I could hardly stand the intensity. "Seriously?"

"What do you want, Rourke?" I was in no mood to fight with him tonight, especially when he was almost naked. It felt like he had some twisted advantage over me. Those cut muscles wielded a sick power over me and I was disgusted with myself for it. Goddamn, every part of that boy's body was chiseled and *hard*.

"Dad called," he reeled off impatiently. "He and your mother are spending the night in Tampa." Shrugging, he added, "Wanted me to let you know."

Tampa. I shifted onto my knees. "Why?"

Rourke glared at me. "How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

"Okay," I bit out, choking down the sarcastic remark on the tip of my tongue. *Asshole*. "Why didn't Mom call me herself?"

"Again," he shot back flatly. "How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

"Fine." I threw my hands up in defeat. "Whatever. You've told me, so you can leave now, Rourke."

He didn't leave.

Instead, he continued to stand in the doorway of my room, looking too freaking good to be true.

"What?" I snapped, feeling the blood rush to my face from his weighted stare.

Rourke tipped his head to one side, studying me. "What are you doing?"

I looked down at the scissors and newspaper clippings on my bed and shrugged. "I'm couponing."

"Couponing?" Rourke raised a brow. "What the hell is couponing?"

I fought back the urge to roll my eyes. Rich prick. "It's something us normal folk do," I replied sweetly. "You know, in order to keep the wolves from the door." When he continued to stand there, I grew impatient. "You can go now."

Of course, he didn't do that. Walking over to my bed, Rourke sank down on the edge and grabbed my folder of neatly organized clippings. "So, how does this work?"

"Why do you care?" I replied, confused.

He looked at me and offered me a rueful smile. "Just show me."

Shaking my head, I exhaled an impatient sigh and swiped the folder out of his hands. "So, I usually dedicate one evening a week to clipping out coupons and organizing them in here." My ears burned as I opened the folder and swiped through page after page of discounted offers. "I move the ones with the nearest expiration date to the front and then, when I've listed all the items Mom and I need or might need in the coming weeks, I compare the list to my coupons and work out the cheapest way I can get everything."

"Why?" he repeated and it pissed me off.

"Because we're not all born with a silver spoon in our mouths, Rourke," I snapped.

“No,” he said gruffly. “Why do you do this?” He stared at me as he spoke, like I was a big puzzle he had to solve. “Why not leave it to your mother?”

I threw my head back and laughed harshly. “Trust me, if I left this to my Mom, we would have starved years ago.”

Rourke didn’t laugh.

He didn’t even crack a smile.

“How long have you been doing this?” he asked, looking down at my folder with a frown. “Couponing?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged, uncomfortable. “Since I was eleven or twelve. Why?”

Rourke didn’t reply, but from the look of incredulity on his face, it was pretty obvious that he didn’t approve. He sat on my bed for another minute or so, staring down at my coupon folder before abruptly jerking to his feet and stalking out of my room.

“Goodnight to you, too,” I muttered under my breath. “Ass.”



Rourke

“HEY, DARYL? HAVE you ever heard of couponing?” I felt like a fucking tool asking my best friend that question, but ever since I walked in on Six the other day and saw her messing around with her coupon folder thingy, I’d been curious as hell.

“Don’t you have enough money?” Daryl shot back with a smirk, as we ran side by side down the sandy beach at the back of my house. “Like the TV show?” he added, noticing my serious expression.

I shook my head, maintaining the brisk pace. “Nah, man, like real life, living from a folder, couponing?”

He turned to face me and said, “Sissy?”

I nodded.

“Damn.” Daryl let out a whistle. “That’s rough.”

Tell me about it. “She said she’s been doing it since she was a kid, man.”

“She’s still doing it?” he asked, slowing to a jog.

I nodded.

“Maybe it’s a habit or something?” he offered.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“What about it? What does it matter to you if she’s fucking around with coupons anyway?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.” At least it *shouldn’t*...

Daryl grinned. “Sissy’s getting under your skin, aint she?”

“Nope.”

“You like her,” he pressed, chuckling. “Admit it, Dude.”

“Got nothing to admit,” I shot back coolly.

“You’re a terrible liar, man. Always have been.”

“She’s just another number to me.” I meant it. Soon enough, my father would move on to the next woman and Six would be a distant memory to me. “It’s temporary.”

“Sure, Rourke,” Daryl replied with a wink. “Whatever you say, man.”

Chapter 10

Mercedes

TWO WEEKS INTO my new job at Madame Jory's and I was grinning all the way to the bank – well, to the spot under my mattress.

I'd made almost ninety dollars in tips during Thursday and Friday's shifts alone and another fifty bucks earlier in the week.

Feeling like a splurge, I stopped off at the convenience store on the way home from work and bought my weight in candy bars.

Was it bad for me?

Without a doubt.

Was it worth it?

Every damn piece.

When Amelia walked into the living room late Saturday night and found me sprawled out on the huge sectional couch, I was one candy bar away from a sugar coma.

"Hey, Mercy," she said sweetly. "Mind if I join you?"

"Oh hey, Amelia. Sure." I waved her over, though she'd have to sit on the other couch. There was no way I could move. Goddamn, why had I done this to myself? "Want one?" I offered, holding up my paper bag towards her.

There wasn't much of a selection left to choose from, but still, it would have been rude not to offer. She shook her head, politely declining, before curling up on the couch opposite me. "So, how's the job going?"

"Good, though I've just eaten my entire salary."

Amelia giggled. "I like having you here."

She did? I cocked a brow. "Why?"

Sitting cross-legged, she rested her elbows on her legs and smiled. "You're so...different to who we were expecting."

Oh? "And who were you expecting?" *And who's we?*

“Well...” Nervously, she tugged on one of her long golden curls. “You’re funny, for one. And you don’t take Rourke’s crap. That’s surprising. The others, they... I don’t know, they didn’t take him on like you do. It’s weirdly refreshing. You know, you’re the sixth step sibling we’ve had?”

“Yeah.” I scrunched my nose up. “Rourke filled me in on that little gible of information.” Grabbing another candy bar, I ripped off the wrapper and took a bite. I was so full. “He christened me *Six*, remember?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled, red-faced. “It’s nothing personal. Truly.” She re-tucked the hair she had just tucked behind her ears again – an obvious nervous trait. “He does that to all of them.”

I cocked a brow. “All of them?”

“All of our father’s wives’ children.” She blushed bright red again. “There’s been a Five, a Four, and a Three before you. The two previous to that were twins belonging to wife number two; Ellery and Edward.” Amelia sighed heavily. “Rourke just referred to them as Thing one and Thing two.”

“Aw,” I muttered sarcastically. “And here I was thinking I was all special.”

The door of the living room flew open then and I heard Rourke call out, “Hey, Mills, you hungry?” in a weirdly *soft* voice. “I’ve made your favorite. Mac and Cheese.”

The moment Rourke’s eyes landed on my face, the shutters closed down and that tiny fleck of gentleness he’d revealed while speaking to his sister was gone.

“Yeah, I’m starving,” Amelia chirped as she looked at me and smiled, “You hungry, Mercy?”

I opened my mouth to tell her no, I had almost killed myself with candy bars, but Rourke got there first. “There’s only enough for two.”

“Rourke,” Amelia scolded, red-faced. “Be nice.”

“It’s fine,” I replied, flipping him the bird. “I’m sure your Mac and Cheese sucks ass anyway.”

“I’ll plate up,” Rourke bit out before leaving the room.

Amelia waited until Rourke had closed the door behind him before saying, “I know my brother hasn’t exactly been welcoming to you, but I promise it’s nothing personal.”

Nothing personal? I scoffed. “It sure feels personal, Amelia.”

“He hates what you *represent*,” she whispered, tone low and hushed. “Not who you are as a person.”

“Why?” Pulling myself into a sitting position, I leveled her with an even stare. “What’s his problem?” I didn’t want to be here either. I wasn’t happy about our parents shacking up. But I wasn’t going around threatening to make his life a living hell.

Amelia exhaled a heavy sigh. “It’s complicated.”

I cocked a brow. “Complicated?” *Pathetic*.

“In Rourke’s eyes, you’re a threat to our lives,” she whispered again. “A problem. He needs control, it’s how he copes with the screwed-up way Dad has raised us.” She looked at me with the bluest eyes I’d ever seen. “You and your mom arriving was out of the blue. Your mom getting pregnant was unexpected. Rourke hates this. He feels like his world is being intruded on so he reacts in the only way he knows how.” She shrugged helplessly. “He attacks.”

“But I’m not the enemy here!” I threw my hands up in frustration, forcing myself to lower my tone when I noticed her grimace. “And my mom’s not either. Yeah, she’s a flake and likes shiny things, but she’s harmless.”

“I know that,” Amelia replied softly. “But Rourke?” She shook her head. “Not so much. He’s on a permanent witch hunt. He has some really bad trust issues and sees everyone new as a threat to his family.”

“Why?”

“He has his reasons,” was all she replied. “And... issues. Many of which stem from losing his mother so young.”

“What happened to his mom?” I asked then. “I know your mother lives in the south of France.” Gabe had mentioned how Amelia visited her mother during the holidays every year, but he never mentioned Rourke’s mother.

“Camille?”

“Yeah.” I nodded in affirmation. “Is she —”

“Dead?” Amelia offered before nodding. “She passed when Rourke was a little under three.”

“God,” I whispered.

“He’s never been the same since,” Amelia added. “At least that’s what our father says. Of course, I’ve never known him to be any other way than

he is now, but I guess that sort of trauma affects a child.”

“I bet.”

“Rourke blames himself for so many things; especially his mom’s passing.”

“*Why?*”

“Shortly after Camille got pregnant with Rourke, she was diagnosed with an extremely aggressive form of cervical cancer,” Amelia explained. “The doctors treating her were confident if she started treatment right away they could save her. But starting treatment meant...”

“Getting rid of the baby,” I whispered.

Amelia nodded. “She continued with her pregnancy, choosing to keep her baby. By the time Rourke was born, the only thing the doctors could do was give Camille time and keep her comfortable.”

“That’s horrendous.” Pain speared through me. “Surely he has to know that he’s not to blame for any of that?”

“I was born three weeks before Camille passed,” Amelia added with a grimace. “A product of an affair our father had while struggling to cope with the impending death of the love of his life.” Shrugging, she smiled. “At least that’s what my mother told me.”

“So, your mom and Gabe weren’t—”

“Married?” Amelia shook her head. “God no. Mom was just a shoulder for Dad to cry on.” She scrunched her nose up at the thought. “My mother is a retired dancer. Back then, she was doing a tour of the East coast with the dance company she worked for and met Dad. It was a fling that had been fueled by alcohol and grief, lasted some three weeks, and resulted in her getting pregnant.”

“Damn,” I muttered, unsure of what else to say.

Amelia nodded. “When I was born, Mom came back here, to Ocean Bay, and looked my father up. By then, Camille’s fight was coming to an end. She’d fought the cancer as best as she could but she was weak and hooked up on a morphine pump right here in this house.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “My mother wasn’t in the position to care for me, the life of a dancer no place for a baby, so she gave me to my father.”

WTF? “She just *handed* you off to him?”

“Uh-huh.” Amelia half sniffled, half laughed. “At first, Rourke hated me. He struggled a lot after his mom passed and took it out on me. He even

tried to blind me with a flashlight once, and another day he took me out of my basinet and put me on the neighbor's doorstep." She grinned. "Of course, they brought me home – much to his dismay."

"What changed?" I whispered. Something had to. They were close now. Rourke loved his sister. He adored her. It was as obvious as the nose on his face.

"He was seven and I was five. I came home from a birthday party crying. One of the kids had pushed me down in the dirt and I cut my knee," she explained, smiling fondly. "I don't think the kid did it on purpose, but Rourke flipped out all the same. I'd never seen him so angry before. He put me on the back of his bicycle and took me back to the party; told me to point out who had made me cry. I did, and it just so happened to be one of his best friends, Daryl King."

"What did he do?"

"Rourke? He kicked his butt," Amelia giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. "He beat Daryl up real bad and then made him kneel in front of me and beg my forgiveness."

"Oh my god!"

"I know," she chuckled. "After that day, we were as thick as thieves. He's had my back ever since."

"Amelia? Grub's up."

Rourke's voice filled the room and Amelia sprang up from the couch she'd been sitting on. "Rourke is the only sibling I have," Amelia explained softly as she hurried to the door. "He means a lot to me. I know he's a jerk to you, and all you can see is his bad sides, but there's more to him than meets the eye. He truly is a great brother." With that she slipped out of the room and closed the door.

I was reeling.

No, I wasn't reeling.

I was floored.

My heart, hard as it was, broke when I thought of the three-year-old version of Rourke having to say goodbye to his mother. My own mother was a pain in my ass, but I couldn't imagine not having her in my life. This bothered me. It bothered me so much that I moved on flight mode when I climbed off the couch and headed for the kitchen.

“Six, if you’re here for a fight then you need to walk away now,” Rourke warned when he looked up from the stove and noticed me walking towards him. “I’ve had a really long ass day...whoa –”

His words broke off the moment I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged him.

He remained still as a statue, all his muscles bunched and tense, but he didn’t shrug me off, so I considered that a victory.

“What was that for?” he asked, tone a little huskier than normal, when I stepped away.

“I thought you could use a hug,” I replied.

“From you?” He cocked a brow. “Why would I want *you* to touch me?”

“I told her about Camille,” Amelia offered from her perch at the counter.

“Why would you do that?” Rourke growled, stiffening, his heated gaze still on my face.

“Because, like it or not, Rourke, this one is here to stay,” his little sister replied. “And I wanted her to know the facts before you try and chase her away.”

“It’s not your business,” he snapped then, glaring down at me. “My mother has nothing to do with any of this.”

“I know,” I agreed as I retreated from the kitchen. “But I’m still sorry.”



IT WAS AFTER MIDNIGHT when Rourke walked into my bedroom and threw himself down on my bed next to me. I had been sitting up playing a crummy game of Snake on my phone, but the moment he laid down beside me, I completely forgot about the game.

“Rourke?”

Folding his arms behind his head, Rourke settled on his back, our bodies aligned. “She was beautiful.”

Dropping my phone on the floor, I laid down beside him. “Your mom?”

He moved his head.

“I’m sorry, Rourke,” I whispered, knowing there was nothing else I could say.

“She deserved better,” he grunted, eyes locked on the ceiling. “It was no way to go.”

“No. It wasn’t.”

“I’m still mad.” He let out a harsh laugh. “You’d think that after fifteen years the anger would have simmered down, but nope.” He exhaled heavily. “I’m fucking burning with it most days.”

“It’s understandable.”

“Is it?” He turned to face me then, his blue eyes burning holes into mine. “Maybe I’m broken inside.”

“I haven’t lost a parent like you have,” I replied, eyes locked on his. I only had one. “So, I won’t tell you I know how you feel. But I understand the feeling of being powerless. I can imagine what that does to you.”

“Why are being like this?” he asked after a pause.

“Like what?”

“Understanding,” he muttered. “Kind?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I’m a little broken, too.”

“Maybe,” he whispered, blue eyes piercing me. “Are you?”

“Am I what – broken?”

He nodded.

Facing the ceiling again, I exhaled a heavy sigh. “Probably.”

Rourke was quiet for the longest moment before asking, “What broke you, Six?”

You... “A long list of things,” I replied instead.

“Care to share?”

“And give you more ammunition to use against me?” I laughed harshly. “No thanks.”

“I deserve that,” Rourke replied with a sigh.

He did.

Another minute passed before he said, “My father thinks I need therapy.”

“What do you think?”

He looked back to the ceiling and exhaled heavily. “I think...” He sprang up without finishing his sentence and climbed off my bed. He looked down at me then and that cruel smirk was back. “I think he needs to stop bringing home new wives and their fucking strays.”

Ouch.

Turning back to face the ceiling, I closed my eyes and swallowed deeply.

The sound of my bedroom door clicking shut did little to ease my racing heart. I wouldn't sleep a wink tonight.



Rourke

SHE WAS FUCKING WITH my head real bad. Goddamn, I couldn't concentrate worth a shit on anything but Six.

Christ, we started back at school soon. I would have to look at her every damn day. I wouldn't be able to avoid her there like I had been managing to do at home. She would be a senior like me, and I knew full fucking well my father would pull some shit and have her put in my classes. It was a given.

Goddamn, why'd she have to go and be all nice to me tonight?

It was so much easier to hate her when she was a bitch.

And why the hell did Millie tell her about my mother?

I didn't want Six knowing about my momma.

She was *sacred* to me.

My memories were all I had left of her and I didn't want anyone fucking with those.

Laying in complete darkness, I reached into my nightstand drawer and pulled out the old journal. Remaining perfectly still, I held it to my chest and exhaled a heavy sigh. This damn traveler's notebook had given me more comfort than any blanket or pacifier ever had. It still did.

The notes and letters it contained, I had read thousands of times. I knew each page by heart, but the ink on the pages was her marking. Her words. Her touch. I cherished it.

Looking up at the ceiling, I pictured my momma's face in my mind. I invented a voice I wasn't sure had ever existed to go with the face.

When I had the picture just right, and when I'd pretended to hear her whisper she loved me, I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter 11

Mercedes

AFTER OUR TALK, it didn't take Rourke long to return to his normal asshole self.

That flicker of vulnerability I had seen for the briefest of moments the other night was well and truly gone now – replaced with an impenetrable wall of sarcasm and wit.

He clashed happily with me on absolutely everything and was never more content than when he was making me feel unwelcome. Dick.

It was my day off from work the following Tuesday and I planned on spending it going over a bundle of notebooks and old test papers that Amelia had managed to snag from Rourke's room.

It was inevitable that Rourke and I would be in at least some of the same classes when school started and I wanted to compare the lesson plans from his teachers to my old ones.

Laying on my stomach on the rug in the living room, I splayed several books, sheets, and papers out on the floor and concentrated.

Rourke's notes and test papers irritated me much more than they should. Because he was smart. Like seriously, high IQ level intelligent.

In the dozen or more papers I had in front of me, the lowest my stepbrother had received was a 92. It pissed me off. And he could draw. The doodles and random sketches of buildings on the inside of his textbooks and copies were *insane*. So he was beautiful, rich, good at sports, smart, and he could draw? Ugh. The best I could do was a match stick man.

Glum, I forced myself to ignore that pesky inferior feeling trying to swallow me up and focused on Rourke's English Lit notes. It wasn't easy though, not when my eyes kept returning to those damn doodles.

Admitting defeat, I gave up on Shakespeare and grabbed the A4 sized note pad. As I flicked through page after page of building sketches, my jaw fell more and more open. He was good. He was really good. I turned

another page then and froze when my eyes lands on a graphically detailed sketch of a naked woman. The woman he'd sketched sort of reminded me of a cartoon version of Jessica Rabbit.

She had long locks with sultry eyes and big pouty lips. She was sitting down against a blank backdrop with her legs spread open in an extremely provocative pose.

Of course, she had the standard over inflated breasts teenage boys seemed to be obsessed with.

What really caught my eye though, was his accuracy in her...lower area.

Oh, my freaking god.

As I gaped at the sketch, I had a burning urge to run upstairs to my room, ditch my clothes, and grab a mirror. The boy had drawn the most realistic vagina I had ever freaking seen. If it wasn't for Rourke's impressive attention to detail, I would have hurled. Actually, I still might.

"Having fun?" Gabe's voice came from behind me and I slammed the book closed, feeling like I'd just been caught watching porn or something.

"Just reading up on some of Rourke's...uh... notes for school," I replied, red-faced and mortified. Scrambling onto my knees, I quickly piled all of the notes and books on top of one another.

If Gabe knew what I'd been looking at then he hid it well. "Really?" His brows rose in surprise. "I'm surprised Rourke shared those with you. He's usually so..." His voice trailed out and he shook his head and smiled at me before saying, "Never mind."

Okay! Climbing to my feet, I grabbed the stack of books and held them to my chest. "I better get these back to him." *Or back to his room before he realizes they're gone...*

"Before you go, I wanted to talk to you about something." Gabe called after me.

Reluctantly, I paused in the doorway and turned back to him. "Oh yeah?"

"I wanted to organize a family meal in the next week or so, before your mother and I leave."

Another family meal? "Why?"

Gabe smiled. "Because we're family now, Mercedes. And your mother and I want to lay down the house rules while we're gone on our trip."

“Fine.” Ugh. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Well...” Gabe said, trailing off. “I was hoping you could talk to Rourke – try and convince him to attend.”

“Me?” I squeaked. Was he blind or something? “Gabe, your son *hates* me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

I raised a brow. Who was he kidding?

“Fine,” Gabe sighed, admitting defeat. “I’ll level with you. My son’s behavior has left your mother feeling a little...unwelcome.”

Made *her* feel unwelcome? I rolled my eyes. My Mom was such a drama queen. “And you’re telling me this because?”

“Amelia has tried speaking to him about it, but it went straight over his head,” Gabe explained in a weary tone. “And Rourke hasn’t listened to a thing I’ve said since he was a boy.” He smiled at me with a hopeful expression. “So... I was thinking maybe if you had a word with him and explained how his behavior is making your mother feel uncomfortable, he might listen?”

“No,” I choked out. Was he for real? “No way. I’m not getting involved.” Especially when *I* was the one who spent most of the time on the receiving end of Rourke’s anger.

“Oh well. You can’t blame a guy for trying,” Gabe muttered sullenly.

I didn’t bother answering, choosing to take the staircase two steps at a time in my rush to get Rourke’s books back in his room before he found out I’d had them.



Rourke

SIX WAS SITTING on the edge of my bed when I got home from football practice. She was wearing a plain gray tee-shirt and jeans, and didn’t have a smidgen of makeup on her face. She didn’t need it. She was beautiful just as she was.

Anger coursed through me then; my brain finally catching up to the realization that she was in *my* room.

What the fuck was she doing in my room?

She didn't even look up at me when I walked into my room; she was too engrossed in the book in her hands. For a moment, my heart stopped dead in my chest.

It quickly kick-started again when I recognized the old sketch book and I felt myself sag in relief.

For a moment there, I had thought Six was reading my mother's book to me. If she had have been, I wasn't sure how I would have reacted. I had a feeling the answer would be *not well*.

Dropping my gym bag by the door, I walked over to where she was sitting and folded my arms across my chest. I owed her for being a dick the other night. The shitty way I spoke to her when she tried to console me over my mom was the reason I wasn't tossing her ass out.

Of course, the moment Six noticed me standing over her, she screamed and dropped the book on the floor. "Omigod," she panted, breathless. "Rourke, you almost gave me a heart attack."

"Hey." Holding my hands up, I teased, "It aint my fault you were too busy snooping around in my shit to realize I was here."

"I wasn't *snooping*," she shot back, red-faced, spring up from the mattress. "I was...admiring."

"Are you a lesbian?" I asked with a smirk when I noticed what page of my drawings had gotten Six's attention.

"Oh, shut up. You know what I mean. And *no*, I'm not a lesbian," she added with a pout, glaring. "I was just..." Her voice trailed off and she look down at her feet before back up at my face. "Those drawings are good, Rourke."

"I know," I shot back with a wink.

She folded her arms across her chest and huffed out a breath. "Cocky much?"

"Just stating facts, Six." Bending over, I grabbed the book off the floor and returned it to my desk. "But apparently, your memory isn't worth shit."

She looked at me in confusion.

I smirked. "I told you to stay out of my room?"

Awareness dawned on Six's features. She blushed, but she didn't offer up an explanation, and weirdly, I liked it. She wasn't afraid of me, not really, and she was more than willing to go head to head with me. I

reluctantly had to admit that her take no bullshit attitude was really fucking attractive to me.

“Did you...” Pausing, she clasped her hands together. “Um, the girl in the drawing.” She sat back down on my bed. “Did you draw her...I mean, was she...ugh!” Groaning, Six shook her head.

“Did I what, Six?” I asked, thoroughly enjoying how uncomfortable she clearly was.

“Is she a real person?” Six blurted out, looking angry at herself. “The girl in the drawing. The one with the ugh...piercing on her...”

“Clit?” I offered, smothering a laugh.

“Yeah. Um, her.” Six cringed. “Did you draw her in real life?” She puffed her cheeks and shifted uncomfortably. “If not, you have one hell of an accurate imagination.”

I almost choked on my laughter. Of course I didn’t draw her in real life. It was Jessica Rabbit for fuck’s sake. “It’s just a sketch I did one night when I was bored and horny.”

Six looked up at me with a pained expression. “Dear god,” she muttered with a shake of her head. “Why are we even having this conversation?”

Walking over to my bed, I sank down beside her and grinned. “Why are you blushing?”

“I’m not blushing, asshole,” she growled.

“Yeah, you fucking are.” Unable to stop myself, I reached over and tipped her chin upwards. Big grey eyes greeted me. “See.” I stroked my thumb over her burning cheek. “Blush.”

I expected Six to hit me for touching her, she was unpredictable as fuck, but she didn’t. She didn’t move away either. She surprised the hell out of me by leaving into my touch, so much so that I ended up cupping her cheek.

“Why are you touching me?” she whispered, eyes locked on mine.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged, unable to respond to a question I wasn’t too entirely sure of the answer to. “Why aren’t you pushing me away?”

She shrugged, but didn’t pull away from me. “I don’t know.”

What the hell was this?

What was happening here?

“Mercy! There you are?” Cassidy’s voice came from my doorway, breaking the weird tension between us, and causing Six to jerk away from me.

“Mom.” Flushed, Six turned her attention to her mother. Biting back the urge to growl, I turned and glared at my father’s wife. “What’s up?”

“I was planning on heading into town to do some shopping,” Cassidy announced, looking from Six’s face to mine with curious eyes. “Wanna come?” Her eyes landed on mine again. “Hello, Rourke.”

Jaw clenched, I forced a nod. That was all she was getting from me and she was lucky to get that.

“No,” Six replied with a sigh. She glanced nervously at me before standing up. “I’m broke until Thursday.”

Cassidy sighed impatiently. “I told you,” she began, pouting. “Money is not an issue.”

No. It wasn’t an issue, because it was my fucking money.

Goddammit.

“Mom!” Six looked back at me, clearly embarrassed, but I was too pissed to care.

“Mind discussing your shopping trip somewhere else?” I sneered, thoroughly fucking disgusted.

“Rourke –”

“In the future, stay the fuck out of my room, Six,” I shot back, my voice laced with disgust. I was disgusted with myself. For a minute there, I’d almost forgotten about what that girl was all about. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Chapter 12

Mercedes

“SO, YOU’RE GABRIEL OWENS’ new step daughter?” a tiny blonde with a pixie hair cut asked me as I served her at Madame Jory’s just before closing on Saturday. It was hot as hell out all day and the girl had a long-sleeved sweater and jeans on. I wasn’t a fashionista, but damn! This was shorts and t-shirt weather. “Mercedes James?” she asked with a small smile.

I had only been working at Madame Jory’s a little over three weeks, and already, I had lost count of the number of times I’d been asked that question. Ocean Bay was a tight knitted town and people were curious.

“Yep,” I replied, handing over her tall mocha latte.

“Wow,” the girl replied with a heavy sigh. “That must suck.”

“Suck is an understatement,” I replied, taking the twenty-dollar bill she was holding before quickly depositing it in the cash register and returning her change.

Wiping down the countertop, I took a quick peek at my phone and mentally sighed.

7:02. Home time.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go home. Scratch that; I knew I absolutely did *not* want to go home. Going home meant seeing Rourke, and seeing Rourke gave me anxiety.

I lifted my gaze from the counter and noticed the girl was still standing there.

“Can I get you anything else?” I offered, feeling awkward. What was she doing? Why was she just standing around? “We’re about to close.”

“Oh!” Shaking her head, she smiled bashfully. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be weird; it comes naturally.” Chuckling, she stretched her hand out. “I’m Molly Peterson. I live about a mile from Rourke’s house – well, your house now, too, I guess.”

“For now,” I corrected as I removed my apron.

Alec appeared then and smiled down at me. “Good work today, Mercy.”

“Thanks,” I shot back with a smile. “I’ll head off now if that’s okay?” I grinned like a dope up at him. “Are you okay to lock up on your own?”

“Of course.” He smiled again, brighter this time. “See you after school on Monday.”

Hot damn.

“Hey – do you want to walk home with me?” Molly offered then, surprising the heck out of me. I hadn’t realized she was still there. “I have to go past your place to get to mine, so it wouldn’t be completely stalkerish of me.”

“I have a car.” *Don’t do it, Mercy. Don’t do it...* “But...” Shit, I was going to do it. Those damn puppy eyes had my conscience screaming. “I can give you a ride if you like?”

Molly’s face lit up. “That would be awesome. Thank you!”

“No problem.”



“YOU PROBABLY THINK I’m a complete weirdo for just coming up and introducing myself like I just did,” Molly rambled as she fastened her seatbelt. “But I figured since you’re new here, you might not know many people and could use a friend. And while I’m not technically new here, I too could use a friend. You’re starting the Academy when school starts back up, right? Me too. Well, I’m not starting there, I’m just continuing. We’re going to be in the same grade. You’re going to be a senior, right? I’m not overly popular with the *it crowd*, and since Rourke’s in the *it crowd* and you’re his step sis –”

“Molly?”

“Yeah?” She bit down on her lip almost nervously and flashed me with those huge, puppy dog brown eyes.

“It’s cool.” Cranking the engine, I turned and smiled at her. “I could use a friend, too.”

“Really?” She beamed at me. “You’re sure?”

I cocked a brow before pulling out of my parking space. “Um, yeah? Why not?”

“Oh, no reason.” Blushing, she tucked tiny pieces of hair behind her ears. It was only then, when the long sleeve of her shirt slipped up, that I noticed the welts on her wrists. “I’m just not...I’m not the coolest person in the world to hang around with. I probably should have mentioned that before accepting the ride home, huh?”

“Says who?” I replied, pretending I hadn’t seen the marks on her wrists.

“Everyone that matters,” she told me with a heavy sigh. “I grew up in Ocean Bay. We, um, moved away when I was nine. When my family finally moved back, I was fifteen, and by then everyone at school had formed their own cliques and groups.” She worried on her lip again. “It’s not easy being the newbie.”

“No.” Frowning at her words, I concentrated on taking the right turns back to our road. “But that’s okay.” I turned and smiled at her. “Who cares if you don’t fit in here?” Shrugging, I added, “That just means you’re bigger than their small minds.”

“Sounds like you know what you’re talking about,” Molly offered quietly.

“I’ve moved around – a lot.”

We were quiet then until Molly said, “So this car is insane, huh? Is it a classic?”

I felt myself smile sincerely for the first time since I arrived. “Yeah. It’s a 1963 Mercury Comet convertible.”

“I wish I had a car.” She sighed wistfully. “My father is completely against the idea.”

“Why?”

“Wow, you really don’t know who I am, do you?” she whispered in a tone that resembled awe.

I frowned. “Should I?” Who was this girl? Should I know about her?

“I figured Rourke would have filled you in on who’s who in the town by now,” was all she replied.

“Rourke and I don’t exactly get along,” I bit out. *Understatement of the century.*

She smiled knowingly. “You mean he’s an ass.”

I laughed. “You could say that.” And more. *A lot more...*

“He’s not a bad guy, Mercy,” she offered then. “Rourke? I mean, sure, he has a really bad temper and has been in some trouble...but he’s not the worst of them. He’s actually a pretty decent guy.”

“The worst of them?” I asked. “Who’s them?”

“The cool kids,” she replied with a hint of annoyance. “Ocean Bay’s ‘it’ crowd.”

Oh my god!

Shaking my head, I bit back a groan. “Molly, tell me you’re not one of those girls who wants to be friends with the *cool kids*?” Casting a glance sideways, I winked, “Because if you are, you may need to rethink hanging around with me. I’m not exactly Rourke’s favorite person.”

“As if!” She laughed loudly. “No way. I’m just saying; Rourke’s one of the better ones. If you think he’s bad, wait until school starts back up and you meet the girls.” Molly shuddered at the thought. “They can be really... cruel, Mercy, and really territorial – especially Brittany Beckitt. Her and Ashley Thomas are the worst. Brittany’s the captain of the cheerleading squad and a real bitch. Her family are huge investors in Ocean Bay Academy – almost as big as Rourke’s family. Anyways, with the exception of Rourke, Daryl King, Bear Martinez, Reebo Rose, and Mason Starr – those guys are Rourke’s best friends and practically run the school – Brittany’s word is law. She and Rourke have been dating since middle school. Honestly, they’re more off than they are on, but she’s incredibly territorial of him.”

My heart sank into my ass. There was that Britt girl again. “What’s so great about this *Britt* girl?” I tossed out, hating the jealousy in my own voice.

“You mean, apart from being physically perfect?” Molly shot back with a sigh. “She’s gorgeous, she’s rich, she’s from a well do-to family, and she’s captain of the cheerleading team.”

“Is that all?” I drawled sarcastically, feeling inferior for a brief moment before slapping the feeling away. What the hell did I have to feel inferior about? I didn’t even like Rourke.

“Oh, she also models.”

“Wonderful.”

Molly smiled and nodded. “But on the other side; she’s rude, obnoxious, bossy, extremely controlling, and a huge man-eater – not to

mention loose, if you know what I mean. And she has a horrible temper.” Leaning closer, Molly said, “Last year, when she and Rourke were going through one of their off periods, he invited Tammy Guest to the homecoming dance with him. Britt *flipped* and attacked Tammy right there on the dancefloor. Ended up breaking her nose. For a skinny bitch, she’s freakishly strong. It was horrendous.” Molly’s eyes widened as she spoke and I had a hard time concentrating on the road when I was fully committed to this conversation. “The poor girl had to switch schools in the middle of junior year because she was getting so much hell from Britt and her squad of bitches.”

“What’s her problem?” I tightened my hands on the wheel. “They were *off* at the time, weren’t they?”

“Brittany’s problem is that she thinks she owns Rourke.” Molly scrunched her nose up in distaste. “Like *own-owns* him. She picks him up when she wants him and tosses him aside when she’s done. Why Rourke puts up with her shit, I will *never* understand because the boy is beyond *beautiful* and could quite easily have any girl in school he wanted.” She huffed out a breath then and I got the sense she meant he could have her, too.

I smirked to myself.

I liked Molly – even if she was a little gossipy. I wasn’t about to flip out and grow jealous bitch claws on the first potential friend I had made since I got here because she happened to like the same guy I did– *didn’t*! I didn’t like him. Dammit... “She sounds like a bitch.”

“She is.” Molly looked me up and down and grinned. “And I have a feeling that she’s really not going to like you, Mercy James.”

I mewed over Molly’s words for a moment before saying, “First day of school should be a barrel of laughs then.”

“I’d say! Have you met Amelia?”

I nodded. “She’s...nice.” There was no other word to describe Rourke’s younger sister. “It’s hard to believe they’re related.”

She nodded. “Rourke’s super protective of her, huh?”

“Yeah, I gathered that,” I muttered, driving past my house. “How far to your place?”

“Keep going straight. Another couple hundred yards,” Molly confirmed before adding, “That’s because she was abused.”

I almost crashed the car. “Come again?”

“Didn’t you know?”

“No.” I gaped. “When?” I shook my head. “Who?”

“Their stepbrother,” Molly replied quietly. “I’m the next house on the right.”

“Oh, my fucking god,” I whispered as I flicked on my blinker and slowed right down. “I can’t believe this.” I was reeling. Amelia had been abused? And by their stepbrother? God, no wonder Rourke didn’t want me in his home. “Poor Amelia.”

“It all came out last year,” Molly filled in as I pulled into her driveway. Another beach house mansion. “Although, word is it had been going on for a lot longer than that – if you know what I mean.”

I did. I knew exactly what she meant and it made me want to puke. “What happened?” I managed to squeeze out.

“Rourke flipped. He tore up their house and then went and trashed the school. Beat the shit out of his stepbrother. He was almost expelled, but Coach pulled some strings – couldn’t do without their star wide receiver, after all.” Molly shook her head and sighed. “Yeah, Rourke was in a really bad way for a while.”

Jacking the handbrake, I sat back in my seat and stared blindly ahead, barely able to comprehend what I had just learned. “I can’t believe I didn’t know this.”

“Me too,” she told me. “It’s common knowledge around here.”

“Was he arrested?” I turned and looked her in the eye. “The stepbrother?”

“Yeah, but the D.A never took it further.” Molly scrunched her nose up in disgust. “Not enough evidence apparently – and Josh stuck to the same story; they were in a secret relationship and Amelia was too afraid of her violent older brother to admit the truth. Josh was fifteen at the time, and Rourke has a record of losing his temper, so the D.A bought it.”

“That’s bullshit.” My voice rose like my temper. “That’s *exactly* why women don’t come forward; because of assholes like that.” I leaned my head back and sighed. “I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“About Rourke?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “No wonder he was so allergic to Mom and me moving in with them.” He’d been burned before. Worse than burned; his

little sister had been sexually exploited. “Ugh. Okay, now I’m kind of wishing you never told me.”

“Why?”

“Because now, I’m starting to see the man behind the monster and it was much easier when it was just monster.”

“He’s some man though, right?” Molly teased. “Have you seen him without a shirt on?”

“Don’t remind me.” The image of Rourke’s sculpted abs and sexy treasure trail were imprinted in my memory for life. “He has the V, Molly. You know; that really hot V some guys have beneath their navel?” I swallowed deeply. “Rourke’s is the best I’ve ever seen.”

“I know.” Molly sighed. “It’s so defined, I want to lick it.”

“But he’s a prick,” I added dejectedly. *A prick who hates you*, a voice in my head hissed.

“He is,” she agreed solemnly. “So, do you think you’d like to hang out some time before school starts?” Molly unfastened her seatbelt and climbed out. “If you want to, that is.” She hovered at the passenger door. “Obviously, you don’t have to, but if you wanted to –”

“Molly, slow down.” I smirked at her bashfulness. “I would love to.”

Her eyes lit up. “You would?”

I nodded. “Have you got a cell?”

“Yes.” Digging her hand into her jeans pocket, she retrieved a shiny iPhone and passed it to me.

“I’m gonna call my number,” I explained as I dialed my own cell and waited for it to vibrate in my pocket before ending the call and handing it back to her. “I’ll text you the next day I’m off work and come pick you up.”

“That sounds awesome!” She bounced excitedly from foot to foot. “And good luck with the whole stepbrother hating on you situation.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, even though I had a feeling I would need a lot more than luck to deal with Rourke Owens. “See you soon.”

Chapter 13

Mercedes

WHEN I RETURNED TO Gabe's house after dropping Molly at home, it was with a fresh perspective and an open mind. Rourke wasn't the bastard I had thought.

Sure, he was still a bastard, but he had *reasons*.

Valid reasons.

Reasons I could relate to.

Reasons I knew could warp a person's mind.

Reasons that could ruin lives.

No wonder he despised me and mom. I got it.

Truly, I did.

And the attitude Rourke had with his father?

Yep. Got that, too.

Instead of the usual pent up frustration and burning anger I felt when I pulled into the driveway and saw Rourke's shiny black Chevrolet Silverado, I was filled with...understanding and hope?

Of course, that empathy was watered down with a huge dash of disgust the moment I stepped foot through the door to the sound of T Spoon's version of Janis Joplin's *Mercedes Benz* filling the house.

The music was playing at an obscenely loud volume and it instantly pissed me off. I knew who was responsible for it.

Of course, the clever bastard had screwed around with the song and switched the words 'Oh Lord' to 'Oh Gabe.'

It hurt, but not nearly as much as it pissed me off.

"Rourke!" Slamming the front door closed behind me, I stalked towards the staircase, not stopping until I had climbed the entire flight and was standing outside his bedroom. "Rourke!" Slamming the palm of my hand against the door, I fought down the urge to rip the damn thing off its hinges, stomp in there and kick his stupid, beautiful ass.

Why the hell did Gabe let him get away with this crap?

“Rourke!” I repeated, pounding on his door.

He yanked the door open so quickly that I almost fell forward.
“What?”

“Are you playing that on purpose?” I demanded, feeling irrationally furious. “That damn song?”

His grin widened. “Thought you’d appreciate it.”

He didn’t even try to deny it. He was playing that song to get a reaction out of me. Mission accomplished. “Well, I don’t,” I snapped. “So turn the damn thing off.”

“What?” he chuckled, leaning against the doorframe. “I like the song.”

He didn’t like the song. I had lived with Rourke long enough to know his musical preferences.

He liked rock.

He did this to hurt me, to let me know what he thought of me.

A gold digger.

All of the empathy I had felt for him earlier evaporated into a haze of rage.

“Turn it off,” I hissed, jaw clenched, as I stared up at his frosty blue eyes. “Now.”

Lowering his face to within inches of mine, he smirked and said, “Make me.”

I would not cry.

I would not cry.

“You are the biggest jackass I’ve ever had the misfortune of knowing,” I snarled, cheeks burning.

“Meeting? Probably. But knowing?” Rourke shook his head and smirked. “You don’t know me, Six.”

I hated him.

I really did.

Turning away before I exposed myself to this cruel boy, I strode down the hallway and into my room.

I knew why he was doing this. It was because of my mom and her stupid shopping spree.

Goddammit, I wasn’t my mother and I was sick to death of being punished for being her daughter.



Rourke

I TOOK IT TOO FAR.

Messing around with my computer this afternoon, I had stumbled over that fucking song and decided to screw around with the sound by changing up the words. What had possessed me to do that to her; I had no answer. Six didn't deserve that.

In my defense, I thought Six would laugh it off. She didn't. She looked like she was about two seconds away from crying when she ran into her bedroom.

Feeling like a dick, I stood outside her door, with one hand on my head and the other on the handle. Even though the word was foreign to me, I wasn't that big of a bastard that I didn't know what I needed to do.

Apologize.

"Six?" Turning the handle, I pushed the door inwards and walked inside. I didn't bother knocking because I knew there was a huge chance she wouldn't let me in if I did. Playing that song was a dick move and I knew it. When I stepped into her room, her bed was empty and still made. The sound of the shower running alerted me to the fact that she was in her bathroom.

Walking over to Six's bed, I sank down on the purple comforter and waited for her to come out of the bathroom. When she finally did, she greeted me with a high-pitched scream.

"Rourke!" Six hissed, clutching the towel she had wrapped around her very wet – very naked – body. "What the hell are you doing in here?"

"What I did with that song?" Jerking off the bed, I turned my back to her, averting my eyes from her almost naked body. "I shouldn't have done that to you." *No shit, Sherlock!* "I won't do it again."

"Are you *apologizing* to me?" her voice was laced with surprise.

"Yeah, and you might wanna record it." I shrugged, looking down at the floor. "Because it doesn't happen often."

"Wow." Her voice was soft. "Okay."

"Okay?" I frowned. What the fuck was okay supposed to mean?

“Yeah,” Six replied. “Okay.” I listened intently to the ruffling noises and sound of drawers opening and closing behind me. “I forgive you,” she finally said, coming to stand in front of me, dressed in a tank and pajama shorts. “Just don’t... do that to me again, okay?”

I nodded. “I won’t.”

“I’m not my mother, Rourke,” Six added, voice thick with emotion, as she looked up at me with those big, grey eyes. “I’m here because I don’t have a choice.” She folded her arms across her chest as she spoke, never taking her eyes off my face. “I don’t want your father to take care of me. And I don’t want his money either. All I want is to finish high school and get the hell out of here.”

I knew that. Fuck, deep down inside I think I always *knew* it. One look in her eyes and a blind man could see the sincerity pouring out of her. So why couldn’t I just *accept* it and be nice to the girl?

Because you’re afraid of the way she makes you feel a voice in my head screamed. It was the same voice I’d been trying to block out since she walked into my house.

Chapter 14

Mercedes

I WAS WALKING around the counter with two mugs of black coffee in my hands when Rourke walked into Madame Jory's on Friday afternoon with that big guy I'd thrown in the pool a few weeks back – Daryl King.

The moment my eyes landed on Rourke, my step faltered, but I quickly righted myself, managing to deliver the order without scalding myself in the process.

What the hell was he doing here?

He hadn't come in here before.

Why now?

And why the heck had Alec decided to take his break *now*?

Things had been weird between me and Rourke. Weirder than before. Something had changed in his eyes that day he caught me in his bedroom. For a brief moment back in his room, I had thought he might kiss me. Of course, my mom had ruined that by bursting in and bringing up a shopping trip. The shutters Rourke had opened slightly to me that day had slammed tightly shut when Mom had mentioned money.

And then there was the whole escapade with that stupid song. Rourke had purposefully taunted me with it before doing a one-eighty and apologizing to me. I didn't understand him or the way he made me feel. Most of the time, I wanted to scratch his eyes out, but there were brief moments when I wanted to wrap my arms around him and hold him close. Yeah, I hated those moments. They made me weak.

In the days that passed since our weird run in, I had been expecting Rourke to be extra cruel.

He wasn't.

Like last night for instance; Amelia and I had ordered take out and were watching a movie in her room. When Rourke popped his head around

the door to say goodnight to his sister, I had expected him to retreat the moment he noticed me.

He didn't.

He accepted Amelia's offer of joining us. Rourke didn't say word to me during the movie, but he was *there*. He confused me and if I was being honest, fascinated me...

Forcing my features to remain impassive, I fought down the swell of anxiety in my stomach and walked back around the counter to serve him.

"What can I get you?"

"Sissy." Daryl grinned. "How the hell are ya?"

"It's Mercy," I corrected him in a tight voice, forcing myself to remain professional.

"Mercy," Daryl repeated slowly with a huge smile before winking. This boy was beautiful and I had a feeling he knew it. He had that enormous, sexy football player thing going for him, with a sun kissed tan, deep green eyes and dark brown hair similar in color to Rourke's. He and Rourke were the same height, both giants, but where Rourke was lean and muscular, Daryl was broader and *bigger*. "I'll have an iced tea," he told me, again with the flirty wink.

Nodding, I reluctantly looked at Rourke. "You?"

Rourke looked down at me with a curious expression, his blue eyes locked on my face. Immediately, I felt my face heat under his stare.

He smirked, revealing both dimples in his cheeks and I bit back the urge to sigh. He affected me and what's worse, I had a feeling he knew it. "I'll have the same, Six."

Six. The way Rourke said it now? It was more of a habit than a cutting remark and I had a feeling if he ever did call me by my real name I wouldn't like it.

Rourke handed me a twenty and I quickly tolled up what he owed in the cash register before returning his change. He didn't tip me or tell me to keep the change and I was glad. It would have been insulting.

My face was burning and I was furious with myself for displaying any sort of emotion around him. Shaking my head, I ordered myself to calm the heck down. "Take a seat and I'll bring your drinks down to you," I told the boys before turning my back on them and quickly getting to work on their orders.

“All good out here, Mercy?” Alec’s voice filled my ears then and I sagged in relief. He was back from his break.

Since starting at Madame Jory’s, between serving customers and wiping down tables, I’d spent a lot of time ogling Alec. He was insanely hot with a deep tan, blonde surfer hair, and amazing brown eyes. He was also twenty-one-years-old. *Too old for me*. But he was a great distraction from my asshole stepbrother.

I finished pouring two glasses of iced tea and placed them on a round tray before swinging around and handing it to Alec. “Can you drop these down to table...” I scanned the room and found the table Rourke and Daryl had taken up occupancy before saying, “Table four please?”

Alec smiled warmly and took the tray from my shaking hands. “No problem.”

“Thanks,” I squeezed out, relieved. Alec disappeared with their order. The place was dead this morning so I quickly busied myself with returning the jug of iced tea to the under counter fridge before wiping down the three small shelves.

“Mind explaining why that jock over there asked me why my waitress named *Six* didn’t drop off his drinks?” Alec asked when he returned, grinning down at me.

“It’s a long story,” I muttered, embarrassed.

Alec cocked a brow. “A long ex-boyfriend kind of story?” he asked, leaning his hip against the counter.

“Try a long, angry, stepbrother story.” I stood up and exhaled a heavy sigh. “My mom married his father earlier this year.” I shrugged. “He’s still pissed.”

“Ah.” Awareness dawned in Alec’s eyes – amazing brown eyes. “Bad blood?”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“Sounds like you need an ally in this town,” he replied after a moment. “Taking on the Falcon’s star player?” Alec leaned closer. “Can’t be easy.”

Was Alec flirting with me? “I can handle him,” I shot back, feeling a little flutter in my tummy.

“Even so, I think I should take you out sometime.” He grinned down at me. “Give you a few tips on taking on a guy like him.”

“And you’d know about taking on a guy like him?”

“I grew up in this town, too, Mercy,” Alec replied gruffly. “I know all about those rich pricks from the Academy.”

My lips tipped upwards. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Warm brown eyes shone down at me. “And why is that?”

“Because I’m too young for you.”

“I can assure you that I am a perfect gentleman,” he teased.

I laughed “I bet you are.”

“At least think about it?”

“Okay.” I shook my head and smiled, knowing I wouldn’t change my mind, but feeling flattered by his interest. “I’ll think about it.”



Rourke

“LOOKS LIKE SISSY has an admirer.” Daryl’s comment caused my head to snap up. My gaze honed in on Alec Larkin who was sidling up to Six behind the counter.

Immediately, my blood pressure began to rise.

Daryl and I knew all about that piece of shit Larkin. He’d been a few grades above us in school, and had graduated from the Academy three years ago when Daryl and I were up and comers on the football team.

When Daryl and I made the team freshman year, Alec had been the receding senior captain/quarterback. Playing college ball hadn’t worked out for Larkin and he had returned to Ocean Bay eighteen months ago to work in his Aunt’s café with his tail between his legs.

Personally, I’d never had a problem with the guy, Daryl was the one Larkin had beef with, but I had a feeling that was about to change. The way he was looking at Six assured me of this.

“What do you think his game is?” I asked, eyes still locked on him and Six.

Daryl snorted. “From the looks of it, I’d say his game is getting into your stepsister’s pants.” I bit back a growl. Yeah. That was not fucking happening. “Ignore him,” Daryl announced, drawing my attention back to him. “You know what that prick’s like,” he added. He finished off his drink and stood up. “If Larkin thinks he’s getting to you, he’ll never let up.”

“He’s not getting to me,” I bit out as I stood up stiffly and followed him to the door. “I couldn’t care less.”

“Uh-huh,” Daryl shot back with a grin. “You keep telling yourself that, Romeo.”



Mercedes

“ARE YOU GOING OUT WITH HIM?” were the first words that came out of Rourke’s mouth when I got home from work Friday night.

“Excuse me?” I asked, startled by his question and the aggression in his tone.

“Alec fucking Larkin,” Rourke growled. “Are you dating him?”

I raised a brow and met his stare head on. “What do you care?”

“Just answer the question, Six.”

Forcing myself to swallow my anger, I kicked off my shoes in the foyer and headed straight for the kitchen, feeling both hungry and irritated.

“Well?” Rourke demanded, following after me. “Are you?”

“That’s none of your business,” I shot back, irritated. I wasn’t dating Alec, nor had I any plans to, but that didn’t have a damn thing to do with Rourke freaking Owens.

“Yes, Rourke. We’re dating,” I shot back sarcastically. “In fact, Alec just asked me to have his babies. Isn’t that exciting?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do you think you’re funny?”

“Not especially, but I think you’re asking questions that are none of your business.” Opening the refrigerator door, I pulled out a half-eaten plate of lasagna and carried it over to the microwave. “What do you care if I date Alec?” I added, sliding the plate into the microwave and switching it on. “You hate me, remember?”

“How I feel about you has nothing to do with this,” Rourke shot back angrily. “He’s too old for you, Six. You need to steer clear.”

The microwave pinged and I retrieved my plate and grabbed a fork before walking over to the island. “Well, I’m sorry, but I can’t afford to be picky when it comes to friends.” Sinking down on a stool, I stabbed at my meal. “In case you didn’t notice, I’m not exactly the bell of the ball around

here.” *No thanks to you.* “And Alec is about the only damn person in this shitty town who has been somewhat friendly to me since I arrived.”

“Yeah,” Rourke sneered, coming to stand at the opposite side of the island to me. “He’s being friendly because he wants to get you in the back of his truck,” he spat, glowering at me. “With your legs spread.”

“I don’t spread my legs easily, Rourke,” I quickly retorted. *Not at all, actually...*

He cocked a brow. “Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“Because you’re an asshole.”

“Fine.” Rourke threw his hands up. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you when he comes on hot and heavy.”

“I won’t,” I replied sweetly before popping a forkful of lasagna in my mouth and smiling.

Rourke turned to leave, but quickly spun back around to face me. “Are you that fucking lonely?” he demanded. “The guy is twenty-one. You’re seventeen, Six. Seven-fucking-teen.”

“Again,” I shot back. “What do you care?”

Rourke turned red. “I *don’t* care.” His words were laced with venom as he spoke. “I offered you some friendly advice. If you’re too fucking stupid and starved for attention to take it, then that’s on you, Six.”

That was it. I’d had enough.

“I might be lonely, Rourke,” I hissed, slamming my fork down on my plate. “But it’s temporary. It won’t last.” Climbing off the stool, I stalked towards him. “You’re the one who is going to end up completely alone,” I sneered before stalking out of the kitchen, appetite long gone.

Damn Rourke Owens.

Damn him to hell.

Chapter 15

Mercedes

SHORTLY BEFORE OUR parents were due to leave for their trip, I found myself being led to a table by a waiter who looked more suitable to dine at this establishment than I did.

“Your family have yet to arrive, Miss,” he told me as he pulled out a chair for me to sit. “Can I get you something to drink while you wait?”

“Thanks.” I sat down and smiled politely. “I’ll have a Coke if that’s okay?”

“I’ll be right back with that, Miss,” the waiter announced with a flourish before hurrying off.

My short black skirt, converse, ponytail, and coffee stained tee didn’t exactly say sophisticated – which was just what Chez Barelles screamed. I had just clocked off work and hadn’t time to go home and change. I had woken up late this morning to a flat tire on the front passenger side of my Comet.

I couldn’t be late to work, so I snagged a ride to the Coffee Shop with Gabe’s driver, Sergio, and had run three blocks across town to get here.

Exhaling a heavy sigh, I leaned back in my seat and took in my surroundings. The crisp white tablecloth laid over the round table looked ridiculously plush and expensive. I could never understand why restaurant owners did that. Why would they put white table cloths down? It was inevitable the fabric would get ruined. Sure, it was fancy, but it wasn’t practical.

The waiter returned with my Coke and I thanked him before taking a deep drink. The table was set for six people, myself included, and I wondered who our extra guest would be. Gabe had obviously talked Rourke into this family dinner bullshit. I checked the screen of my phone. 7:46

They were over fifteen minutes late. It pissed me off that Gabe had made such a big deal about all of us meeting on time and yet I was the only

one here.

Another ten minutes slipped by and the waiter returned, looking down at me with a slightly impatient frown. He looked at the five empty chairs and made a low tutting sound as he tapped his pencil against the pad he was holding.

Embarrassed and equally annoyed, I threw my hands up. What could I say? I was here; I wasn't responsible for the rest of my estranged family. Inconsiderate assholes.

Concentrating hard on my glass, I tipped it from side to side, watching as the two melting ice cubes clanked and slid around in the bottom of the empty glass. *This sucked ass.*

I waited another twenty minutes before admitting defeat and pushing back my chair. I apologized to the annoyed waiter and paid for my coke, tipping him my last ten bucks before hurrying out of the restaurant with my face blazing red.

When I reached the front of the restaurant, I inhaled a deep breath, taking in the smell of the ocean close by. I liked it. I hated that I did, but I liked being close to the water. It made me feel...free, even if that was silly. Wrapping my arms around myself, I mentally prepared for the twenty-minute walk back to Gabe's place, and stepped out onto the street. My step faltered when I noticed the familiar black Chevrolet Silverado parked a few cars down the street.

Rourke was standing in front of the hood of his truck with his back to me.

Was he...?

Oh yeah, the extra pair of slender legs I noticed between his assured me Rourke was pressing some girl up against his fucking car. I was disturbed and oddly jealous. Ugh. Smacking down that notion, I glowered at the big bastard and stalked towards him.

"Where the hell *were* you?" Furious, I marched straight up to him. "I've been waiting in there for almost an hour and not one of you showed up!"

My accusatory tone didn't go unnoticed and Rourke stiffened before slowly turning around to face me. He took a slow appraisal of my body before looking at me with a bored expression. "They cancelled."

"They canceled?" I repeated, furious. "Are you fucking serious?"

Rourke glared at me. “Hey,” he snarled. “Don’t fucking shoot the messenger. I just found out myself.”

Message? “What goddamn message?” Huffing, I snagged my phone out of my pocket and glanced at the screen. “I didn’t get any message.”

Rourke growled and ran an impatient hand through his dark hair. “Your mother wasn’t feeling well today, so my Dad took her to the emergency room –”

“My Mom’s sick?” I interrupted, voice cracking. A shooting blast of paralyzing fear shot through me. “Omigod.”

“She’s fine,” he was quick to say. “Baby’s fine, too.” Rourke exhaled an impatient sigh, like giving me the news that my mother was fine pained him. “Some shit about cramping and spotting.”

“But she’s okay?”

Rourke nodded once. “All good now.”

“Okay,” I squeezed out, forcing myself to hold back the emotions bubbling up inside. “Good.”

I stood there on the street looking at my stepbrother for an abnormally long time before exhaling a huge sigh of relief.

Mom was okay.

This was good.

“What’s her problem?” the girl Rourke had been leaning against asked with a pout. “Why’s she looking at you like that?”

“I’m right here, precious,” I snapped, glaring at the blonde. “You talk about me then talk *to* me.”

“Fine,” the blonde hissed. “What’s *your* problem?”

“My problem?” I repeated, mulling over the word like I had to think about it. I didn’t. My problem was this fucked up family I had been roped into. My problem was the fact that my mother was pregnant and I was scared to death of what happened next. My problem was the fact that she had her fingers hooked in the loopholes of Rourke’s jeans. And my biggest fucking problem was the fact that I cared so damn much.

Refusing to embarrass myself further, I knew I would if I opened my mouth, I walked around them and continued down the sidewalk in the direction of Gabe’s house.

This sucked.

My life sucked.

Ocean Bay sucked.

I wanted to go home... if only I knew where that was.

I had passed my fourteenth street lamp and the last on the street when the sound of an engine revving behind me filled my ears. I didn't have to look behind me to know who the owner was. Rourke.

I had no plans on stopping. Knowing Rourke, he would offer me a ride and then drive off the moment I accepted. And besides, I didn't want to have to share a car with the blonde he'd been heavily petting.

"Where's your car?" Rourke called out, lowering the car window.

I didn't answer.

"Six?"

Nope. I wasn't answering him.

"Do you need a ride?"

For some inconceivable reason, my chest had constricted and I could feel the burning sensation in my eyes. Why the hell was I about to cry? What the fuck was wrong with me? Rourke was offering me a ride home and I was two seconds away from crying?

"Get in, Six."

I shook my head and concentrated on the long stretch of road ahead of me.

"Get the fuck in my truck, Six."

"Why the hell are you offering me a ride?" I snarled, unsure of why I was so suddenly and furiously upset with him. "You don't even like me."

"Maybe so, but that doesn't mean I want to see you get raped," he shot back flatly. "Young, female, and walking all alone at night? Not fucking smart, Six."

He was right. I reluctantly had to acknowledge the bastard was right. "Fine."

I stopped in my tracks and turned to stare at him, expecting to see a smug looking blonde in the passenger seat, but that's not what greeted me.

He was alone.



Rourke

SIX CLIMBED INTO THE passenger seat of my truck and fastened her seatbelt. I didn't say a word to her. She looked about two seconds away from crying and I had a feeling that whatever came out of my mouth would set her off.

I'd seen the expression on her face when I told her about her mom. Her whole world crumbled in the two seconds it took me to give her the news and tell her everything was okay.

Why couldn't they have sent her a damn message?

Why the fuck was I the one taking care of her now?

Why did I care?

And where the fuck was her car?

Goddammit.

Silent, I threw the truck into gear and tore off in the direction of the house.

"You're sure my mom's okay?" Six finally broke the silence by asking and I nodded.

"She's fine, Six."

"Was that your girlfriend?"

I turned and looked at her.

"The blonde," she clarified. Claspig her hands in front of her, she exhaled heavily. "With the legs."

I smirked and turned my attention back to the road ahead of us. Six was talking about Meredith Sanders. "No," I replied after a pause. "She's just a girl from school. Not my girlfriend." Although, she apparently wanted to be.

I had just pulled up at the restaurant earlier when I got the message from my Dad, calling a rain check on dinner. The dinner they had obviously forgotten to mention was canceled to Six. Assholes.

I'd been reading the text from Dad when a very drunk Meredith had opened the passenger door of my truck and climbed in.

Having managed to sweet-talk her out of my truck, I'd been trying and failing to coax the girl to go home when Six arrived.

To be honest, I'd been sort of relieved to see her. Saved me a huge fucking swell of regret later.

"Huh," Six muttered with a grimace. "Could've fooled me; the way she was all over you."

“Mere is... *friendly*.” I frowned, wondering what kinder way there was to call a girl loose. “She uh, likes footballers.” That was putting it mildly.

In junior year alone, Mere had fucked Reebo, Mase, Bear, Clayton, Reeves, and Lewis. Daryl took her v-card in sophomore year so that was him scratched off the list.

“She wants me,” I explained with a frown. It sounded vain as hell when I said it like that, but it was the truth. Meredith wanted to add my name to the list of Ocean Bay Falcon’s she’d bagged.

“I find that hard to believe,” Six shot back.

“What? That she’d want to fuck me?”

Six blushed. “No.” She scrunched her nose up. “Yes... Ugh, I don’t know. It just sounds like something a guy would do.”

“Wow. Sexist much?”

“I’m not being sexist,” she shot back.

“Yeah, you are.”

“How’d you figure that one?”

“Because you think only a guy would go out with the intention of banging?”

“Well, yeah.”

“That’s *sexist*.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Yeah, it is,” I argued, amused. “What about girls? Do you think they don’t enjoy sex?”

“Well *obviously* girls enjoy sex, too, Rourke,” Six snapped.

“Then why’s it hard for you to believe Meredith wants to fuck as many guys from the team as possible?”

“Because it’s *cheap*!” she retorted angrily.

“Double standards, Six.” I laughed as I pulled into our driveway. “And here I was thinking you were a twenty-first century girl.”

“A girl wouldn’t think like that.”

“That one does,” I shot back.

“Whatever,” she huffed. “You shouldn’t have led her on anyway.”

“Did you see me kiss her?” Pulling up outside the house, I killed the engine. “Well. Did you?”

“Well...no,” she replied. “But you didn’t push her away.”

“Christ.” I unfastened my belt and turned in my seat to look at her. “What’s your problem? Are you *jealous* or something?”

“What?” she squeaked, face snapping towards me. “No. Of course I’m not jealous. Why would I be jealous?” Glaring up at my face, she added, “I don’t give a damn what you do or who you do it with, Rourke.”

I shrugged. “You’re asking an awful lot of question for someone who doesn’t give a damn.”

Her jaw fell open and I grinned.

“You know, sometimes I really hate you,” Six muttered as she shoved open the passenger door and shimmied out. “You’re a real jackass, Rourke Owens.”

Yeah, she was probably right about me being a jackass. For some reason, when I was around that girl, the asshole in me came out in full force.

Six slammed the door in my face, and I watched with a shit eating grin on my face as she walked that fine ass of hers into my house.

Chapter 16

Mercedes

“EAT BREAKFAST WITH ME,” were the first four words that came out of Rourke’s mouth when I entered the kitchen the following morning. I, of course, was instantly suspicious.

“Why?” I walked over to the breakfast bar and pulled out the stool opposite his before taking a seat, eyes locked on Rourke in suspicion. “Have you pissed in my cornflakes, Rourke?”

“Funny.” He smirked and shoved a plate towards me. “Actually, I made bacon.”

“Oh.” My brows rose in surprise. Actually, it was more than surprise. It was intense shock why was he being nice to me this morning? Rourke was never nice to me. “Why?”

“Do you want some or not?” he shot back, irritated, blue eyes narrowed on my face.

“Okay.” Never one to refuse free food, I snatched a piece of bacon off the plate and bit down. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Rourke was quiet as he picked at a piece of bacon between his fingers. I was stumped. I didn’t get it. I had no freaking clue why he had just offered me breakfast. My confusion and suspicion slipped away the moment I trailed my gaze over Rourke’s bare chest.

Hot damn.

Rourke needed to cover that body of his up. He might be an asshole, but he had a body that could make even the most conservative of girls bend her morals.

“What time are you working today?” he surprised me by asking.

“Um...” I swallowed down a piece of greasy bacon before saying, “I start at ten this morning.”

Rourke nodded once and returned to his bacon.

I would like to say that we ate in comfortable silence after that, but it would be a huge lie. There was nothing comfortable about being in Rourke's presence.

He made me feel uneasy and weirdly exposed. The silence between us was palpable, and when he finally stood up and brought his plate to the sink, I mentally sagged in relief.

It was exhausting being around him, never knowing when to have my guard up.

"Do you need a ride?" he surprised me further by asking.

"A ride?" I strangled out.

"To work," he clarified with a small twitch of his lips. "I assume the reason you were walking last night is because your car's out of commission?"

"My car?"

"Yeah, Six." Rourke full on grinned at me, exposing those deep dimples in his cheeks. He needed to smile more; they were really beautiful. "You know, it's the thing with four wheels and an engine. Gets you from a to b."

"I know what a car is," I shot back, flustered. "And no. It's just a flat. I can change it before I leave."

"Suit yourself," Rourke said before walking out of the kitchen, leaving me staring after him.

What the hell was *that*?



Rourke

I know there will be days
when you feel like crying.
Days when you feel like giving up.
That's life, baby boy.
Just try and remember;
the bad days will always
lead to better days.
Happier days.
And remember you are loved.
I love you more than
I thought humanly possible.
The day the nurses placed you
in my arms was the day I fell in love...

I WAS SLOWLY coming to the conclusion that I was a masochist. Sitting in my room, rereading my mother's journal over and over and making myself feel sad so I wouldn't forget her wasn't normal.

Fuck, everything was so screwed up and blurry now. I wanted so bad to morph back to my early childhood. Things were so much easier when I was a kid and had my parents to make the hard decisions and do the worrying for me.

Having breakfast with Six this morning had screwed with my head. It was the reason I was sitting here torturing myself with my mother's memory.

Something inside of me was drawn to her and it disgusted me.

In a sick way, I felt like I was betraying my mother by liking the daughter of Dad's new wife.

It had been so easy to hate all the others.

I couldn't understand why it was different now.

Why *she* was different.

But I knew she was, and that only made me more determined to force her out of my world.

Chapter 17

Mercedes

I CALLED MOLLY after work on Tuesday and asked if she wanted to hang out. I hadn't expected her to drop all her plans and invite me over there and then, but that's exactly what she did.

Molly's house was impressive. Like Rourke's, it was huge and had that pungent smell of money, though it wasn't nearly as impressive as his place.

I had picked up some junk food on my way over, to which she thanked me at least a dozen times. It wasn't necessary. I was grateful for the friendship she was offering me. I wasn't the easiest person in the world to be around.

Growing up, I tended to stick to myself anyway. There wasn't much point in laying down roots and making deep connections with people when I could be moved on at any moment in time.

It wasn't like I was completely antisocial; I *had* friends in my old schools, but I had just learned from an early age to depend on myself. But that didn't mean I didn't appreciate having Molly as my ally in this town.

I was also pretty certain she was a little nutty, but I liked her crazy. It complimented *my* crazy, and I had a feeling I would be sticking to this strange girl like glue.

We'd been sprawled out in her living room for the past couple of hours, talking shit and watching back to back episodes of Teen Wolf.

Turned out, Molly and I had a lot in common. We were both single, both seventeen, both social outcasts, and liked pretty much all the same movies and TV shows. We were also both brought up by single parents, although, Molly's mother had passed away when she was a child, while my father was a John Doe.

"Do you want another coke?" Molly asked, eyeing the empty can on the floor next to the couch I was lazing on.

“Sure, thanks.” Lazily, I raised my thumb, eyes glued to the screen. “Hot damn, that boy is beyond beautiful?”

Molly giggled. “Who; Jackson or Scott?”

I scrunched my nose up in disapproval. Was she blind? “Stiles!”

She disappeared from the room, returning a few minutes later with two cans of Coke and a bag of potato chips.

When Molly handed me the can, my eyes landed on the marred skin covering her wrist, but this time I couldn’t pretend I hadn’t seen it. “What happened there?” I asked, eyes locked on her hand. If this girl was to be my friend, I couldn’t ignore the evidence that she might be cutting.

Molly smiled sadly. “I was wondering how long it would be before you asked.”

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” I added awkwardly. “But I’d be a shitty friend if I didn’t tell you that there are other ways to deal with stress. You don’t need to hurt yourself, Molly. And I know we barely know each other, but if you ever need someone to talk to...” I shrugged. “I’m here.”

“Thank you?” Molly offered with a rueful smile. “But I don’t self-harm. Those scars have been there since childhood,” she continued to say. “I was pulled from a house fire when I was nine.” Molly pulled up both sleeves of her long-sleeved shirt, revealing charred, crinkly, reddish, purple skin. “My legs look the same.” She pushed her sleeves back down again.

“Oh.” Mortified, I began to apologize profusely. “I’m such a dope. God. I’m sorry. I thought... I don’t know what I thought—”

“Mercy, it’s okay,” Molly replied with a gentle smile. “Actually, it’s really sweet of you to care.” Grinning she added, “I can assure you I have more than enough burns and scars on my body already. I have no plans on adding to them.”

Jesus. “I’m so embarrassed,” I muttered, red-faced.

“Want to change the subject?” she offered kindly.

I nodded in relief. “Please.”

“Great. Let’s talk boys,” Molly suggested happily before sinking down on the couch beside me.

“Boys?” Pulling myself up, I repositioned myself so that I was sitting cross-legged and facing her. “What boys?”

“Rourke,” Molly offered with a knowing smile, mirroring my actions. “You like him, don’t you?”

“What? Are you crazy? Of course not,” I quickly protested, cheeks burning.

That only caused Molly to laugh. “Oh, you so do. The second I mentioned his name, your eyes flashed with something.”

“Yeah,” I shot back. “They flashed with *horror*.”

“Maybe,” she teased. “But I think there was something else there, too. Attraction?”

I pulled a face at her, unsure of what to say in response. I couldn’t exactly say Rourke wasn’t attractive. It was damn obvious the guy was beautiful in every way. “He drives me crazy,” I finally settled on staying.

“Yeah?”

“And he’s an asshole,” I offered lamely, clutching at straws.

Molly nodded knowingly. “He can be.”

“All of the time,” I grumbled. “He can’t stand me, Molls. Like for reals can’t stand me. Rourke spends most of his days glaring at me.” I shook my head and exhaled a weary sigh. “It’s like he’s judged me based on every bad decision his father has ever made.”

“And that bothers you?” she offered in a gentle tone.

“Well, yeah,” I muttered. “Of course it *bothers* me.”

“Why?” Molly smiled. “What does it matter to you what Rourke Owens thinks?”

“Because I want him to like me ba –” I slapped my hand over my mouth before I finished the sentence. “Oh my god, you’re good,” I breathed, looking at Molly with reluctant admiration.

“I know,” she chuckled. “It’s a gift of mine; exposing other people’s true feelings.”

“I don’t want to like him, Molly,” I whispered, feeling a huge chunk of shame and resentment land on my shoulders. “He’s a real dick to me.”

“But?”

I had no idea why I was opening up to this girl. I wasn’t the type of person who confided in... well anyone. It wasn’t me. Never had been. But Molly? She obviously had one hell of a gift, because I found myself pouring my heart out to her.

“But when he’s not being a complete dick ninety-nine percent of the time, I see something in him.” I sighed heavily before forcing myself to say the words I dreaded to acknowledge, “Something I think I like.”

Chapter 18

Mercedes

I TOOK BACK EVERYTHING I had said to Molly the other day. There was *nothing* about Rourke Owens that I liked. Nothing at all. In fact, the boy was driving me freaking crazy.

Our parents had gone out for the night and Rourke had filled the house with people. I dreaded to think of what was to come when they actually left for their trip. If this was anything to go by, I was in for some sleepless nights.

A small part of me knew I should go down there and try and socialize. Very soon the horde of drunk teenagers' downstairs would become my peers at school.

But then I thought better of it. I'd never cared about fitting in with people and it would be a cold day in hell before I tried to fit in with *his* crowd.

And besides, I wasn't a fan of parties. I'd had a bad experience in my early teens that had put an abrupt end to any potential carefree teenage years.

Damn him, I was trying to get some much-needed sleep. I'd worked a late shift last night and an early one this morning. I was bone tired, but it was obvious from the sound of the music blaring down stairs that I wasn't going to get any sleep in this place tonight.

Tired and cranky, I threw off my bed covers and stomped to my door.

Dressed in a tight, white tank and pajama shorts, I flung it open with every intention of going downstairs and giving that son of a bitch a piece of my mind, but I staggered to a halt when he walked out of his bedroom with nothing but a towel wrapped around his narrow waist.

Well shit...

It was times like this, I wished so hard my stepbrother had been interested in table tennis or chess. A sport or hobby that wouldn't require

him to have a body like *that*.

“Looking for something, Six?” Rourke asked, tone mildly amused, as he smirked down at me.

“Yes,” I shot back, forcing myself to look at his face and not his smoking hot body. “Some peace and quiet, but apparently, that’s too much to ask for around here.”

“If you don’t like it, you know where the door is.”

Unsurprised by his snarky response, I placed my hands on my hips and glared up at him. “I’m tired, Rourke. I’ve been working all week and your friends’ downstairs are keeping me up with their music.”

“Again; you know where the door is.”

“You’re such a big dick,” I muttered, unable to stop my gaze from landing on his stomach again. *Don’t look down, Mercy. Don’t look down at it...*

“I have such a big dick? Why yes, I do, Six. Thanks for noticing.”

What! “You know I didn’t say that.” *But I had noticed.*

Many times...

“It’s what you were thinking though?” Rourke dropped his towel and sauntered towards me.

“What are you doing?” I choked out, eyes locked on his penis. His very *large*, very *erect* penis.

With every step he took towards me, I found myself retreating, until there was no room left and my back hit my bedroom door. “Well, you’ve been staring so damn hard at that towel, I figured I’d put you out of your misery.”

“Wh-what are you doing?” I whispered when he stepped right up to me and placed his hand on the door handle beside my hip.

“What does it look like?” he replied, tone husky, seductive blue eyes locked on my face. “I’m getting a condom.” With that, he opened my bedroom door and prowled inside as naked as the day he was born. “In the future, don’t steal my shit,” he added when he returned a moment later, sauntering past me with a box of condoms in one hand and his trophy in the other. “It’s not nice.”

I watched, wide eyed, as Rourke walked back to his room and slammed the door shut. Seconds later, the sound a female giggling filled my ears and suddenly that was worse than all the crappy music in the world.

Ugh.

Unable to cope with the thought – and knowledge – of what was about to happen in the bedroom next to mine, I hurried down the staircase; choosing mingling with the drunk teenagers over listening to my stepbrother having sex.

“Sissy!” The sound of Daryl King’s voice penetrated my ears and I bit back a groan. Great, I thought to myself as I watched him walk over to me. Another big dick out for my blood. I shouldn’t have pushed him in the pool. It wasn’t his fault his best friend was a total asshole. I opened my mouth to tell him that when he reached me, but he surprised me by smiling down at me. “How the hell are you, Mercy James?”

“Um...fine?” Was this a trick? Was he going to pick me up and throw me in the pool, too?

“That you are, girl,” he shot back with a smile. “That you fucking are.”

Craning my neck, I stared up at him and frowned. “Why are you speaking to me?”

His brows rose in surprise. “Is there a reason I shouldn’t speak to you?”

“Rourke hates me,” I shot back. “You’re his best friend.” I shrugged, leaving him to fill in the blanks.

“True,” he countered, smiling down at me with perfect, white teeth. “Rourke is my best friend, but that doesn’t mean we share the same brain.”

“Is that so?”

“Absolutely,” he replied with a flirty wink. “Come on.” He reached forward and grabbed my hand. “Let me introduce you to the guys.” Daryl didn’t wait to give me a chance to agree; he simply dragged me through the crowd of people, stopping when we reached the kitchen and were met by three enormous guys. “Reebo, Bear, Mase; this is Mercedes James.” Grinning, Daryl gestured toward me with both hands. “Rourke’s new *stepsister*. She’s gonna be joining us at school next week.”

Three pairs of curious eyes landed on my face.

“Well...shit,” the tall blonde one said with a grin that matched Daryl’s. Pretty brown eyes stared down at me. “No wonder Rourke’s pissed.”

“Excuse me?” I folded my arms across my chest and glared up at who had to be the third most beautiful man I’d ever seen in real life. First place,

I regretfully had to give to Rourke. Second went to Daryl the huge, mofo quarterback. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Ignore Mason, sweetheart,” another guy offered. This one was seriously tanned, with jet black hair curling around the nape of his neck, sparkling greenish/brown eyes, and seriously *built*. “Mase has no manners,” he added in a thick Southern drawl. Taking ahold of my hand, he raised it to his mouth and pressed a kiss to the back of it. “The name’s Reebo. Reebo Rose.”

“Good to know,” I replied as I pulled my hand out of his.

“This is Bear,” Daryl announced, inclining his head to the other guy; the quiet one who seemed to be observing the whole situation.

“Hey,” he acknowledged, tipping his beer towards me.

I was sure this one was of Hispanic origin with a sexy tan and that dark smoldering look going on. What the hell did they feed the boys around here, because it sure as hell wasn’t the same shit as where I’d come from.

Goddamn.

“So you’re the famous Six?” The blonde asked, Mason I think they said his name was. “Damn,” he muttered before taking a swig from his beer bottle. “Bad hand of cards.

Six? *Seriously?* I wasn’t having this. “I resent that name,” I shot back with a hard bite to my voice.

Mason’s brows rose in surprise. “Sorry. It’s just...

“Yeah, I got it,” I interrupted, knowing full well who was to blame for the ridiculous nickname. “I still don’t like it. So, if you’re speaking to me, call me by my real name. Got it? Thanks.”

“You’ve got spunk, girl,” he shot back with a look of admiration in his eyes.

“She’s not for you, Mase,” Daryl was quick to point out. “Don’t even think about it, Bro.”

“And why’s that?” Mase shot back with a smirk. “Thinking of tryna steal her away for yourself, King?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” Daryl replied with a knowing smile. “I’m not that fucking stupid.”

“Beer?” Reebo offered then, thrusting a bottle into my hands. “Drink up, gorgeous,” he added, cracking the cap off for me.

“Uh...thanks.” I was actually sort of glad. I was out of my depth with these boys. Placing the bottle to my lips, I drink deeply, enjoying the buzz I felt every time I swallowed another mouthful. The moment I was finished, I was handed another by Reebo. “Thanks,” I said with a genuine smile. I had a feeling I was going to like this one. He was big and strong and fed me alcohol. He also reminded me of a gigantic teddy bear – a really sexy one. What could be better?

“So where is your stepbrother?” Mason asked with a teasing hint in his tone.

“In his room,” I muttered before taking another sip. “Or so I *heard*.” I forced back a shudder at the memory.

“He’s banging someone?” Mason looked surprised. “Damn. Didn’t know Britt was invited.”

“Yeah,” Bear added, speaking for the first time, brows furrowed. “Saw her come in earlier. Didn’t release he was messing around with her again.”

“Bad fucking move,” Mase muttered solemnly. “Bad fucking pussy.”

I will not ask. I will not ask. I will not... “Who’s Britt?” *Dammit!* I already knew the answer to this – Britt was a bitch – but I wanted to know more. No, I *needed* to.

Reebo was the one to answer my question. “She’s bad news, baby girl, and real bad fucking news for your stepbrother.”

I opened my mouth to ask *why*, but the sound of Rourke’s voice behind me caused me to quickly close it again.

“What’s *she* doing here?” He was close to me – so close I could feel him brush against my back. “Daryl?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Forcing myself not to shiver at the contact, I turned around. “I’m talking to your friends.” My grin widened. “*Lovely* guys.”

Rourke narrowed his eyes. “What game are you playing, Six?”

None. “One you won’t win,” I shot back, eyes locked on his. “Finished with your condom already?” I cocked a brow. “I’m disappointed, Rourke.” Shrugging, I added, “I thought you’d last longer than ten minutes.”

“Do you think you’re cute?” He prowled towards me, his expression hard, eyes dark and heated. Instinctively, I took a step away from Rourke and the anger emanating from him.

“Rourke...” Daryl started as he moved to step between us.

“Stay the hell out of this, D,” Rourke hissed, swatting his hand away, his attention locked on me. He didn’t stop walking until he was flush against me. “Standing around here with your tits on full display and flirting with my goddamn teammates?”

Steeling my spine, I looked up at the broody prick who had been making my life a living hell and hissed, “I wasn’t flirting with anyone and my tits are not on display, asshole.”

“I can see your nipples,” he shot back angrily, caging me in with his huge frame. “Poking out from under that piece of cloth you call a shirt.”

“Fuck you, Rourke,” I spat about two seconds before my back hit the wall behind me.

“Damn fucking straight,” he snarled, stepping into my personal space.

“*What?*”

“Don’t even think about fucking my teammates, Six.” He pinned me to the wall, surrounding me with his huge frame. “I aint messing around here, girl.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Rourke,” I breathed, heart hammering in my chest, as I stared into his furious, beautiful face.

“You’re not for them, Six.” His breath fanned my skin and he lowered his face to mine so that we were eye to eye. “So, say goodnight to the boys and walk your pussy back up that staircase – where it’s safe.” He stared hard at me for a long moment before abruptly turning around and walking back to his friends.

If Rourke expected me to react like every other girl in Ocean Bay who obviously fell over him and did as he asked then he was going to be disappointed.

Bastard.

Throwing back what was left of my beer, I walked straight over to where he was standing with his friends. Grabbing the guy closest to me, which just so happened to be Mason, I bunched his shirt in my fist and dragged his face down to mine.

The moment our lips met, Mason’s arms came around me, his lips controlling the kiss with his obvious experience. Ignoring the sound of cheering and wolf whistling around me, I allowed Mason to kiss me deeply and I did it with my eyes locked on Rourke’s furious expression the entire time.

“No one tells me what to do,” I said, panting, when I broke the kiss, eyes still locked on my stepbrother. “You got that?” I wasn’t sure what I was expecting him to do, but clapping certainly wasn’t one of them.

“Thank you,” Rourke hissed. “For proving to me you are every inch your mother’s daughter.” Lifting a hand, he gestured towards Mason. “You wanna fuck him, Six? Go for it. In fact, fuck the whole damn team while you’re at it. I’m *out*.”

“You’re out?” I gaped at him. When was he in? “You’re crazy, Rourke.”

Rourke didn’t answer me.

He just turned and walked off.

“Ignore him,” Daryl said, coming to stand beside me as we watched Rourke stalk out. “Boy’s got issues.”

“Yeah,” I choked out. I was beginning to gather that.

Chapter 19

Rourke

SIX KISSED MASON.

She mother fucking kissed him. Right in front of my goddamn face. Anger? I'd never fucking registered the emotion before this moment. But right now, it was all I could feel. I was seeing red and it was taking every ounce of my self-control not to lose it and kick the shit out of one of my oldest friends.

Dammit, I felt like setting the damn house on fire and burning every fucking room to the ground. I wanted to eliminate every slither of evidence that held the memory of my stepsister kissing my friend. I knew I wasn't being rational. Hell, Daryl had told me as much, but I didn't fucking care. He didn't get to do that; he didn't get to touch her. She was... She wasn't for him.

Furious, I stalked out back and paced the patio.

"You need to calm down," Daryl instructed, following me outside.

"I'm gonna kill him," I snarled, making a move to go back inside.

Daryl stopped me with one beefy hand to the shoulder. "And do what?" he demanded, tone hushed. "Beat the shit out of him? Over a girl who's not yours?"

"He shouldn't have touched her," I roared, shoving him off.

"She kissed *him*, asshole," Daryl hissed, grabbing me with both hands now.

"I didn't see that fucker pulling back," I argued, furious.

"Are you serious right now?" Daryl countered, forcing me to look at him. "Dude, you were upstairs with Britt twenty fucking minutes ago."

"And what of it?" I shot back angrily, knowing I sounded like a hypocritical shit. I hadn't been with Britt, not in the way I'd let Six think, but I wasn't about to say that now. I was too fucking prideful. She'd

stopped by, looking for what she always wanted and I'd been more than willing to oblige – until I ran into Six.

What was she doing to me? What the hell was I becoming? I didn't care about this shit. What did I care if a girl kissed Mason?

Because she's your fucking girl, my brain roared and I quickly shot that shit down.

Six wasn't mine. I had no claim over her and I didn't want one either. She was just a girl I had the unfortunate luck of being thrown into living with.

"What *of it?*" Daryl ran a hand through his hair and muttered a string of curses. "You need to get your head out of your ass," he told me. "If you want Sissy then stop being an asshole and –"

"I don't," I snapped, interrupting him.

I didn't want her.

I didn't.

But I sure as shit didn't want anyone else having her either. I didn't give a damn how demented that made me sound, it was how I felt. If she even looked at Mason fucking Starr again tonight, I had a feeling that I wouldn't be able to control myself.



Mercedes

I DEBATED GOING back upstairs and burying myself under my duvet, but then I thought of what Rourke had said, and I shut that notion down.

I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

Screw him. I would not let him win. He would not beat me in whatever sick and twisted game we were playing.

Remaining downstairs, I propped myself on a stool at the breakfast bar and proceeded to drink half my weight in beer.

By the time the crowd started to clear out, I could no longer feel my lips. Or my ass. Hunched over the counter, I nursed what had to be my twentieth bottle of beer, and watched Rourke and his friends. They were all standing around Rourke and giving him what looked like a serious talk.

What fucking ever.

I didn't care.

I was wasted. I shouldn't be thinking about the jerk. No. He was much worse than a jerk. Rourke was a bastard. And big. And pretty. A pretty big bastard. I snorted to myself before groaning loudly.

God, why was I even thinking about him?

He was screwing with my mind. Jesus, even thinking his name made me ridiculously angry. It was stupid – no; *he* was stupid.

He couldn't even leave my drunk brain alone.

"You here with anyone?" someone asked, drawing my attention away from Rourke.

"Huh?" Turning my head to the side, I locked eyes on a tallish, browned haired guy. He was leaning against the counter beside me and stunk more of alcohol than I did.

"I asked you if you were here with anyone tonight?" He reached forward then and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear before smiling. "Sexy thing like you shouldn't be drinking all by her lonesome."

"Time to call it a night, pretty girl." Reebo's familiar-ish voice filled my ears. "Anderson, fuck off. She's not on the market."

The guy who had been talking to me quickly disappeared from sight and I frowned. "Where'd he go?"

"Don't give two shits as long as it's far away from you," Reebo replied with an easy smile. "Think you've had enough for tonight, don't you?"

"I'm fine," I slurred, holding my hand up in protest. "I'm not r...ready to go yet." Reaching out, I trailed my finger down his chest and giggled. "Teddy bear. Big and *strong*."

"Okaaaay..." Reebo took a safe step back from me. "You're drunk, baby girl. And while you're hot as fuck? I wanna keep my head on my shoulders."

Seconds later, my beer was yanked out of my hand and I was greeted by two very angry blue eyes.

"Bed," Rourke ordered.

"Nope," I snickered, trying and failing to recapture my beer.

"Bed. Now," he repeated, holding the bottle away from me.

"Why?"

"Because you're embarrassing yourself." Flustered, Rourke ran a hand through his hair. "You're acting like a goddam..." He stopped and clamped his lips together. "Bed. Six. Now."

“Slut?” I offered with a harsh laugh.

“Don’t,” Rourke shot back angrily, and if I wasn’t so drunk, I could have sworn I saw him flinch.

“But I am a slut,” I shot back innocently as I grabbed the bottle out of his hand and guzzled another large mouthful. “Isn’t that what you’ve been hinting at since I got here?”

“Shut your goddamn mouth, Six.”

“I mean, come on, Rourke, you’ve called me a worthless piece of trash on enough occasions.” Slapping the bottle back down on the counter, I shook my hair out and sighed. “I’m just finally caving and agreeing with you.”

“Goddammit, Six,” Rourke warned, yanking the bottle off the counter and tossing it somewhere behind him. It clanged on the ground and shattered. “Don’t fucking talk like that.”

“Why?” I half slurred, half snickered. “It’s okay for you to degrade me, but I can’t?”

“Is that what you think?” he asked, clearly irritated, as he ran a hand through his hair. “You think I’m *degrading* you?”

I threw my hands in the air and made a “Sheeesh” sound. “Feels like that to me.”

“Mercedes.”

“Oh, so I’m Mercedes now, am I?” Tears were burning my eyes but I refused to let them fall. I would not cry in front of this cruel bastard. “How *kind* of you.” Drunk or not, I was a stubborn bitch and that stubbornness couldn’t be swayed no matter how much alcohol I consumed.

“You’re drunk,” Rourke said in a low tone, taking a step towards me. Everyone in the kitchen was watching me lose it, but I didn’t care. In fact, I didn’t give a damn. “Get up and I’ll help you to bed.”

“So, you can what, Rourke?” I demanded, roughly shrugging off his hand when he placed it on my shoulder. “Pat yourself on the back and give yourself brownie points for being kind to me?” I shook my head and sneered. “Save it.... Argh!”

My words got stuck in my throat the moment Rourke picked me up like a freaking baby and carried me out of the room. “If you think I’m leaving you here to make a fucking fool of yourself, then you’re wrong,” he

told me as he carried me out of the kitchen and up the staircase towards my bedroom.

If I had been able to feel my ass, I might have fought back, but I couldn't, so I didn't struggle. He carried me into my room and sat me down on the end of the bed before reaching forward and pulling back the covers.

"Why do you hate me?" I asked when Rourke picked me up and tossed me onto the mattress.

"Believe me, Six," he growled as he tucked my duvet up to my chin. "If I hated you, I wouldn't have brought you up here."

"Then why did you bring me up here?" I slurred, looking up at him.

"Because," he muttered, but didn't say anything else.

I closed my eyes. "Because?"

I heard him sigh heavily. "Sleep it off, Six."



I WOKE SEVERAL hours later to the feel of my mattress dipping and someone climbing into bed with me.

"I know I shouldn't be in here," Rourke whispered in the darkness as he curled his body around mine.

"Then why are you in here?" I managed to squeeze out as my body burned beneath his touch.

"Because..." he slurred, nuzzling his body against mine.

"Because?" My voice was barely more than a whisper and I could hardly hear it over the pounding of my heart. Rourke's hard, warm body so close to mine felt familiar and insanely right.

"I'm drunk as fuck, Six," he whispered.

"I know. I can smell it."

"You're one to talk," he snorted.

"You were an asshole tonight," I whispered in the darkness. "Sometimes I really hate you, Rourke."

"I know you do," he slurred, tightening his hold on my waist. "But if you could pretend to love me, just for tonight, I'd be really fucking grateful."

Those words.

That plea.

It *killed* me.

I turned to face him and whispered, “Why do you need me to pretend I love you?” My eyes were locked on his face. It was dark, but I hadn’t drawn my curtains so the moon illuminated his face. “Rourke?”

“Because.” He was breathing hard and fast now, his breath fanning my face, bathing me in the heavy stench of alcohol.

My heart slammed against my ribcage. “Because?”

“Fifteen years today,” he finally choked out, clenching his eyes shut. “Still...hurts.”

“Since your mom passed?”

He nodded.

Trembling, I reached up. I cupped the back of his neck with one hand, and bunched the front of his shirt with the other. I pressed my forehead to his chest and whispered, “I love you, Rourke.”

He shuddered violently before slumping forward, resting his chin on my head.

Several minutes passed by and Rourke’s breathing turned deep and slow. He had passed out, I realized. In my bed, with his body curled around mine.

I shouldn’t have said it.

I shouldn’t have told Rourke I loved him.

Not when I didn’t mean it.

And I was almost certain I didn’t.

Chapter 20

Rourke

“OWENS, WHAT THE HELL is wrong with you today?” Coach Joe roared from the sideline on Thursday night. We were on our second double session of the day and running through formations. “You got pussy juice on those fingers or something, boy?”

“No, sir,” I replied, running back to the line out.

“Then catch the damn ball.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pussy juice.” Daryl bit back a snicker. “He wishes.”

“Shut your fucking mouth and throw me a good one,” I snarled.

“Lord have *Mercy!*” my best friend taunted, using *her* name to piss me off further. “You’ve got a mouth on you today.”

“And you’ve got a death wish,” I called back as I took position on the field.

The play resumed and I ran like a fucking bullet towards the thirty-five, avoiding the defense, eyes locked on the pig skin floating through the air towards me. Seconds before the ball was safely in my hands, I was taken to the ground.

“Fuck,” I wheezed, not bothering to get up. I couldn’t. I wasn’t hurt, but I was done.

“Goddammit, Owens!” I heard Coach roar from nearby. “Get your head out of the clouds.”

“Yes, sir,” I muttered, still sprawled out on my ass. My head wasn’t in the clouds like Coach thought; it was back in my kitchen watching Mason Starr stick his tongue down Six’s throat. Worse, I’d woken up in Six’s bed this morning. Thankfully, she wasn’t in it with me, but still. I shouldn’t have been in her fucking bed, and I definitely shouldn’t be feeling happy that I was. *Goddamn.*

“You good, Rourke?” Reebo asked as he came and stood over me. “Here.” Holding a hand out, he helped me to my feet. “Damn, man. You took some hit.”

“Yeah,” I grunted, shaking it off. I wasn’t physically hurt. My pride on the other hand? Fuck, that was wounded. Jogging back to the sideline, I grabbed a bottle of water out of one of the training bags and gulped it down.

“Get your ass in the showers, Owens,” Coach ordered. Nodding, I continued to drink. “And don’t come back here ‘til you’re ready to play football.”

That suited me just fine. My head wasn’t in the game today and I sure as shit didn’t fancy taking another beating out there.



SIX WAS IN THE pool when I got home. I thought about just ignoring her and walking straight into the house, but my fucking dick had other ideas.

Hard at the sight of her, and with my Ray bans on, I walked over to one of the sun loungers and threw myself down.

I was aching in places I never knew I had muscles and all I wanted to do right now was kick back and perv on my stepsister in peace and quiet.

Thankfully, Six didn’t notice me coming in; she was too busy swimming lengths of the pool. Folding my arms behind my head, I sprawled out and enjoyed the view.

Her sexy ass bouncing as she kicked her legs was better than any fucking porno, and when she moved onto her back and gave me a full view of her breasts, barely held in by the tiny scrap of a bikini she had on, goddamn, I had to bite back a growl.

I managed to get a whole fifteen minutes of a floor show before she realized I was there.

“What are you doing?” she asked, finally noticing me.

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“Watching me?”

Accurate. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

I watched from behind the safety of my sunglasses as she climbed out of the pool and walked towards me. “Actually, I’m glad you’re here.” *She was?* “I wanted to speak to you about something.”

"I'm all ears," I drawled lazily, watching as she took a seat on the lounge next to mine.

"I took it too far," she finally said, eyes locking on my face. "Kissing Mason?" She tucked her long hair behind her ears. "I did it because you told me I couldn't, not because I wanted to...ugh. Look, either way, I shouldn't have done that."

No, she shouldn't have kissed him, but for an entirely different reason to the one she was mentioning. "Why did I wake up in your bed?"

My question seemed to surprise Six. "You don't remember?" she asked, brows raised.

Aw fuck. "No. What did I do?"

"Nothing," she quickly replied. "You were drunk and came into my room by mistake and...um, passed out on my bed."

"Is that it?"

She nodded, red-faced.

I sagged in relief. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"Wow," Six mused. "I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say you're sorry and mean it."

"It happens," I shot back with a smirk.

"I don't want to be your enemy, Rourke," she said with a heavy sigh.

"Then what do you want to be, Six?"

She opened her mouth and quickly shut it. Looking up at me with intense grey eyes, she whispered, "I..."

"What do you want to be, Six?" I repeated huskily.

She paused.

"I'm waiting."

"For us to be friends, I guess."

Well that's too bad because I can't just be your friend...

"There you both are!" Cassidy's voice filled my ears and I balked. She shimmied out to the pool area with a huge smile on her face and my father's hand in hers. "Hello Rourke," she said with a smile. "Mercy. We have something really exciting to tell you both."

"God no," Six muttered under her breath. "Not more news."

Stiffening, I took my glasses off. "What?"

"It's twins!" Cassidy squealed, clapping like a damn seal. "We've just come back from the doctor's office and he confirmed we're having twins."

“No!” Six and I both hissed at the same time before gaping at each other in horror.

I shook my head. “What the...”

“Actual fuck,” Six finished for me. “Mom, are you sure?”

“Yes! Look. *Look.*” Springing towards us, Cassidy handed her daughter a long strip of sonogram pictures. “See, there’s one. And there, see that little marking right there, that’s the other.”

I looked up at my father.

“Don’t say a word,” he warned, glaring back at me. “Not a single word, Rourke. I mean it.”

“The doctor says that’s why I was having those cramps,” Cassidy added with a dreamy sigh. “Two babies.”

“Congratulations,” Six strangled out, handing back the pictures to her mother. “You guys are going to have your hands full.”

Frowning, I watched as Six stood up and hurried into the house. I waited for Cassidy to go and check on her. She didn’t. “I’m so excited,” she gushed, claiming the lounge Six had vacated. “Oh Gabe, two beautiful babies.”

Biting my tongue, I stood up and walked into the house before I said something that got me kicked off the team permanently. Yeah, I might have the money, but until I came of age, my father held the power. Dick.

Chapter 21

Mercedes

MY HANGOVER FROM HELL had been made fifty million times worse by my mother's announcement.

All day, I had felt like death warmed up; the memories of embarrassing myself in front of Rourke and his friends eating away at me – not to mention the horrifyingly embarrassing memory of me telling him I love him that Rourke thankfully hadn't remembered. But when Mom dropped the twin bomb earlier? Yeah, that news had made my heart fall into my butt.

Twins.

Feeling angry and sorely disappointed, I hurried to the sanctity of my bedroom, grateful for the first time that I was in Gabe's house because that meant I actually had a room to run to.

I threw myself down on my bed and curled into the smallest ball I could.

Breathe, Mercy. Just breathe...

I didn't want to cry over this.

I should be happy for her.

Goddamn, I really wanted to be happy for her, but it had been hard enough for me to accept one baby. Now there would be two?

This wasn't about me. I knew that. It was about Mom and Gabe. But it infuriated me that she could be so reckless. I didn't want any child to grow up like I did, to see what I had seen, or to endure what I had endured.

I loved my mother, but this stung. She had made a lot of mistakes when I was growing up. Some bad ones, and some downright unforgivable ones. Knowing that soon there would be two more children thrown into the mix made me feel physically repulsed.

My bedroom door opened and my eyes locked on Rourke. He was walking towards me with a troubled expression on his face.

My heart pounded in my chest at the sight of him.

What was he doing here?
Had he come to check on me?
I didn't believe that, but my body still warmed at the sight of him.
He was here, and right now, that meant a lot to me.
More than he would ever know.



Rourke

SIX WAS CRYING WHEN I walked into her room without knocking. Surprisingly, she didn't scream at me and tell me to get out. No, she was too busy trying to mask her emotions from me.

I looked at her, sitting on her bed, hugging her knees, and something propelled me forward. She was upset and it wasn't my fucking problem, and *still* I walked over to her bed and sat down beside her.

Dammit.

"It's not worth crying about," I finally muttered, unsure of what to say. I knew she was hurting, I knew *why*, but there was nothing I could do to fix it. I didn't want her to think I cared. No, scratch that; *I* didn't want to think I cared. *Fuck!*

"It's like you said," I grumbled. "In another few months, you'll have graduated from school and be long gone from here." It was all she talked about with Amelia. I'd overheard them many times since she'd arrived. Six had big plans. She was getting the hell out of this town as soon as she got her cap and gown next June.

"She's so stupid, Rourke," she choked out bitterly. "So fucking *stupid*. She thinks the whole damn world is all sunshine and flowers." She shook her head. "She has *no* clue."

"Accidents happen," I offered lamely. I was just as fucking allergic to having new siblings as Six was, but I also knew what it felt like to make a mistake with a girl.

"Always to *her*," Six shot back, voice laced with anger. "Always to the people around *her*."

"Are we still talking about the pregnancy?" It didn't sound like it. It sounded like it was about something entirely different.

“I’m just sick of it, Rourke,” Six shot back, looking down at her knees.
“I’m done taking care of her.”

I knew the feeling well.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I stood up then because I had to. Sitting next to a crying girl wasn’t something I felt comfortable with. Especially when I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hold her or wring her damn neck. “We could go for a drive or something.” I needed to move... Put some space between us. Get out of this bedroom.

She looked up at me in shock. “Together?”

What the fuck was I doing?

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “Together.”

Chapter 22

Rourke

I HAD NO OTHER explanation or valid reason for putting Six in my truck, only that I wanted to stop her from crying.

I didn't like what her tears did to me or the helpless feeling that had come over me when I realized there was nothing I could do to fix it for her.

I had no fucking clue of where I was taking her. I just knew that the both of us needed some time out from that house.

She was quiet while I drove, deep in her thoughts. Again, I didn't like it. I wanted to know what was running through that mind of hers.

"Tell me about Britt," she finally said when we were parked after grabbing food from the McDonald's drive thru.

"Tell you about Britt?" Well, I hadn't been expecting that question to come out of her mouth. I mulled over how to answer that particular shitbomb as I unwrapped my double cheeseburger.

If Coach found out I was eating this stuff, he'd throw a fit, but Six had perked up the moment the yellow M had come into sight.

"Britt is a girl," I finally said.

That was all I was willing to say. Britt and I had a very complicated past. She was a touchy subject for me and I didn't want to expose myself any further to the girl sitting beside me. It felt like Six already knew too much. I felt exposed around her and it fucked with my head.

"Well duh!" She took a bite of a chicken nugget and smirked. "Elaborate, please."

"Okay. Britt is a girl I occasionally fuck." I turned to her and smiled. "Better?"

"Not really," she whispered, dropping her half-eaten nugget back in its box. "Yuck."

"Yuck." I snickered and took a bite of my burger.

“The way the guys were talking, they seemed to think there was more between you and her?”

The guys needed to mind their fucking business. Shaking my head, I muttered, “It’s just sex, Six. No biggie.”

“So, you use her?” she asked flatly. “For sex? Ugh. That’s disgusting.”

“What do you want me to say?” I shot back heatedly, unwilling to go there with her. Besides, she had no fucking clue. “You want me to make up some bullshit story and romanticize the situation? Tell you I fuck her because I love her?” I shook my head and sighed, annoyed at myself for losing my temper *again*.

“That would be nice,” she shot back. “It would make you sound like less of a jerk.”

I rolled my eyes. “I fuck her because she gives me what I need, when I need it.”

“Do you love her?”

It was a very good question. One I’d been asking myself for a long time now. “That’s none of your business.”

“Come on, Rourke,” Six argued, probing further into shit that had nothing to do with her. “It’s a simple question. You either love her or you don’t.”

I loved her, and she broke me, and because of her, I doubt I’ll ever trust another female again for as long as I live. “I love her pussy,” I said instead.

“You’re sick, Rourke, you know that?”

“What fucking ever, Six.” I finished my burger and rolled the paper up in a ball before tossing it into the back seat. “And trust me, it works both ways. Britt uses me, too.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore,” she muttered in a tone of disgust. “Hanging out with you was a mistake, Rourke. Just take me home.”

A mistake?

“Fine.” Cranking the engine, I tore out of the parking spot. “Fucking suit yourself.”

It was the last time I’d make an effort with her.

She could wipe her own damn tears next time.

I was done.



Mercedes

BRITT IS A GIRL I FUCK.

I willed the words Rourke had spoken not to be true even though I knew they very much were.

It hurt me, knowing he slept with other girls. It shouldn't; it wasn't my place to feel anything for Rourke Owens, but when it came to him, my brain seemed to click off.

Deep down inside, I had a feeling Rourke was a much better man than the one he pretended to be. But he just kept proving me wrong.

Rourke didn't speak a word to me the entire drive back to the house. Instead, he blasted some god-awful, heavy rock music and drove like a raging lunatic.

He was mad at me. For asking questions and for being mad at him when he answered me honestly.

I was mad right back at him.

I was mad at Rourke for having this unwanted and infuriating power over my emotions.

And I was mad at him for making me *care*.



Rourke

"HAVE YOU THOUGHT THIS through, Dad? How are you going to time manage your work and home life once the twins are born?" My fifteen-year-old sister was in the kitchen when me and Six walked back into the house.

Amelia was giving our father a lecture on responsibility. If the situation wasn't so sickening, I would have thought it comical.

"I'm going to bed," Six muttered before hurrying to the staircase.

"Whatever," I shot back, not looking at her. I was still feeling angry about the way she had dismissed me earlier. I'd been trying to cheer her up. It was the first and last fucking time I would go out of my way to help that girl.

“Amelia,” Dad sighed, rubbing his jaw with his hand. “I raised you and Rourke on my own just fine. I’m sure I can manage another two.”

I snorted.

He didn’t raise us.

Our housekeeper fucking raised us.

Our father simply *funded* us.

Asshole.

“Have you got something you’d like to say, Rourke?” Dad snapped, clearly hearing my reaction.

“Nope,” I replied as I walked into the kitchen and grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter. “Not a thing.” I wasn’t getting involved in this. Dad knew what I thought of the situation; it was a fucking mess. I wasn’t giving him an excuse to blow up on me. I didn’t need the hassle.

“I know money isn’t an issue,” Amelia continued to say, “But babies? They take up time, Dad. A lot of time.” Shrugging she added, “Have you thought about hiring someone to help you and Cass when they’re born? I presume you’ll take a couple of weeks’ paternity leave, but what happens when you go back to work? How is she supposed to cope on her own with two babies? Especially since she’ll have to have an elective C-section. Mercedes was born by emergency section, you know. That kind of surgery takes weeks to heal from.”

“Wait, what?” Dad held his hand up. “How do you even *know* this stuff?”

Amelia gaped at him in bewilderment. “Maybe because I *ask* questions and actually *listen* to the answers people give me.” She frowned and crossed her arms. “Come on, Dad, this is information you’re supposed to know.”

Dad looked affronted, and a little nauseous, as he stared at my sister. “Look,” he finally said. “Cass and I leave in the morning for a couple of weeks. I promise you I’ll read up on all the baby stuff then, okay?”

Seemingly mollified, Amelia nodded. “Okay. Night, Dad. I love you. Have a safe trip.”

“I love you too, sweetheart,” he called out after my sister as she retreated to her room.

“What? No *I love you, Rourke*?” Folding my arms across my chest, I cocked a brow and smirked. “Talk about favoritism.”

Dad smirked. "Like you would believe me if I told you."

It would still be nice to fucking hear it,

"So, you guys are leaving tomorrow?"

Dad nodded. "First thing in the morning, and I'm counting on you to take care of your sisters while I'm gone."

I stiffened. "She's *not* my sister." How many goddamn times...

"Fine. My wife's daughter." Dad waved a hand wearily. "Better?"

I nodded. It was better. Slightly.

"Fran will be popping in and out to check in on you guys while we're away –and Sergio, too. And look, I know Mercedes has a *prickly* personality and you two butt heads," Dad added slowly, obviously choosing his words carefully. "But she's not as tough as she makes out to be."

"She's not?" I laughed. "Could've fooled me."

"Please, Rourke." Sighing, Dad ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "Just... just look after her, okay? Make her feel welcome at school on Monday and try and keep her out of trouble? At least until me and her momma get back."

Dad must have smoked some strong shit if he thought Six needed *my* protection.

Girl had steel in her veins.

"I'm not making any promises," I finally replied. I couldn't.

Six was uncontrollable and I lost control around her.

Together, we were a bad fucking combination.

Chapter 23

Rourke

AFTER MY TALK WITH my father, I was still feeling riled up over the incident with Six and in no mood for sleep.

Deciding I needed to cool myself down, I stripped off and went for a swim. Forty lengths of the pool usually helped ebb the tension in my body. But not tonight. Not with the image of Six's face weighing heavily on my conscience.

Fuck, why did I even care?

She wasn't my problem and I sure as shit didn't need another girl to take care of. Especially since I'd done such a piss poor job protecting Millie from the monster in our home. Josh Trident's face entered my mind and I balked.

"Fuck!"

Refusing to drive myself crazy by thinking about that piece of shit, I shook my head and climbed out of the pool, deciding to hunt down the other girl in my life right now as a distraction.

A weird feeling came over me when I reached her bedroom door, one I wasn't familiar with, and I quickly shook it off before knocking on her door.

Nothing.

She must have had her television on because I could hear the low hum coming from behind her door.

I knocked again; harder this time.

Again, nothing.

Feeling unreasonably annoyed at the prospect of being ignored, I tried the handle.

It was locked.

"Six?" Banging the palm of my hand against the door once more, I pressed my ear to the door. "Open up."

A minute or so later, the door jerked inwards.

Holding onto the front of the towel she had wrapped around her otherwise naked body, Six angled herself so her lower half was hidden behind the doorframe.

“What?” she asked, cheeks flushed, as she looked up at me with a hardened expression.

“You never thanked me for dinner.” It was possibly the lamest thing I could have said, but my words weren’t coming to me. I’d been struck fucking dumb by the sight of my stepsister in a towel. Clenching my eyes shut, I shook my head and tried again. “The chicken nuggets?” *Oh, much better, dipshit...* “Did you enjoy them?”

“Are you on *medication*?” Her grey eyes bugged in her head as she gaped up at me. “We just had a fight earlier and now you’re asking if I *enjoyed* dinner?”

Yeah, I had no answer for her.

She was right; I probably needed some medication, but I wasn’t about to tell her that.

Instead, I folded my arms across my chest and met her indignant glare with one of my own. “It’s customary to thank someone when they buy you dinner, Six.”

She cocked a brow. “Fine. Thank you for buying me dinner, Rourke.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Uh-huh. Okay By-bye now.”

“Wait,” I called out, blocking her from closing the door.

Why the fuck did I block her from closing the door?

She looked up at me impatiently. “Yes?”

“Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“That’s *right*, Rourke. *Yes.*”

“What time?”

“Omigod, will you just go away!”

“Why?”

“Because I’m busy, okay?”

“What exactly are you doing in there?”

Six flushed bright red. “Nothing.”

“Then why are you blushing?”

“I’m not blushing!” she denied quickly – too quickly. Her voice was an octave higher, too, and her pulse? It was fluttering in her neck.

“Liar,” I taunted, leaning a hip against the door frame. “Tell me.”

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” Six shot back, growing more flustered by the second. “We hate each other, remember? We don’t do civilized conversation.”

I grinned. I’d seen that expression before. It was the one girls usually wore when I was balls deep inside them. “You’re fucking yourself.”

“What?” she half-screamed, half choked out. “I am not!”

My grin widened.

She so was.

Unable to stop myself, I slipped through the crack in the door and walked straight over to her bed; ignoring her protests along the way.

“No, Rourke! Get out of here... Please. Get the hell out...”

My eyes locked on her purple pal still vibrating around on her unmade bed and I threw my head back and laughed. “I *knew* it!”

Reaching down, I grabbed the vibrator off the mattress and clicked the button. Immediately, the rubber dick starting spazzing out of control, the head jolting back and forth rampantly.

“Fuck me, Six. I heard a humming sound, but I thought you were watching TV or drying your hair–”

“Give me *that*,” Six hissed. Grabbing the vibrator out of my hand, she switched it off and stomped over to her nightstand before shoving it inside the top drawer.

“Is this what you stole my condoms for?” I teased, laughing my ass off. “Because I think you’re safe.”

“Get out of my room,” she screamed, red faced, as she stalked towards me, still clutching that tiny fucking towel. “Now, Rourke.”

“Or what? You’ll set your dick on me? I need to know, Six; who do you visualize when you’re plunging that thing inside your pussy?”

“It’s not funny,” she screamed, punching my chest with her tiny fist. “Stop laughing at me, you bastard.”

Maybe it wasn’t, but I couldn’t stop laughing. “Come on, Six, you can tell me.”

She opened her mouth to say something and then quickly closed it.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m gonna presume it’s me,” I teased.

Her face turned purple.

“Is it me, Six?” I purred. “Do you fuck yourself with the rubber dick and pretend it’s me?”

“I hate you, Rourke Owens,” she choked out, hiccupping. “You’re a piece of shit.”

My laughter faded fast the moment I saw tears appear in her eyes.

Shit.

“What is this?” I gaped at her. “Are you seriously *crying* over this?”

Was she cracking already?

Over a rubber dick?

Hell...

“There’s no need to be so damn sensitive.” I scratched my head, feeling at a loss. “I think it’s hot.” I didn’t just think it; it *was* hot. The thought of Six working herself over with that vibrating dick made my own spring to life in my shorts. “I fuck myself too. Daily. It’s natural. No need to cry about it. Hell, if they sold vibrating hands, I’m pretty sure I’d use that, too –”

“I’m crying because I’m *frustrated*, Rourke,” she shot back angrily, interrupting my attempt to console her. “Because you are driving me *crazy*.” Her towel slipped then, revealing one of her overly generous sized breasts. “And I don’t know how to deal with you!”

Fuck me.

“You blow hot and cold,” she continued to rant. “One minute, you’re treating me like I’m the shit beneath your shoes and the next, you’re making me breakfast! I don’t know where I stand with you at any given time and it’s driving me insane.”

Fucking hell.

Nipple. I could see her nipple. It was calling out to me.

Immediately, I was hard as a fucking rock.

“So, yes, Rourke,” she hissed out. “You frustrate me. Okay?”

“Christ, Six,” I groaned when she didn’t move to cover herself up. “Are you trying to kill me?”

She gaped at me. “What are you *talking* about?”

Unable to stop myself, I reached out and cupped her breast. “If you don’t cover it up, I’m gonna assume you want me to put it in my mouth,” I

growled, voice thick and gruff. Her breast was full and heavy and felt fucking perfect in my hand. “Which in my frame of mind, knowing you’ve just been fucking a rubber dick, I’m about two seconds away from doing.”

This was a bad fucking idea.

My heart was hammering in my chest.

My brain was telling me this was fucking wrong, and my body was roaring *don’t fucking stop*.

I wanted her.

There, I finally admitted it to myself.

I wanted Mercedes Owens more than I’d wanted my next breath and it wasn’t a spur of the moment thing either. I wanted my stepsister from the moment I walked into that church and laid eyes on her. It was wrong and all fucked up, but there it was. I didn’t *want* to want her. I didn’t fucking want to like her, period. But she got under my skin.

From the moment I saw her, standing next to her mother in that pretty red dress and sulky as fuck expression, I knew she was going to cause me problems...

“Rourke,” she whispered, swaying a little, as I circled her nipple with my thumb. Immediately, her nipple hardened in my hand.

Fuck.

She actually wanted this.

Eyes rolling back, Six moaned loudly and took a shaky step closer.

To me.

The towel had slipped to her waist now, giving me a perfect view of her full breasts. Christ, I’d never seen real ones this big. The girls I’d been with in the past that had tits as big as Six’s had all been enhanced with a shit ton of silicone.

Losing my fucking mind, I hunched forward and pulled one erect nipple into my mouth as I continued to probe the other with my hand.

“I...omigod!” Six cried out, clutching my shoulders to steady herself.

Unsure of what to do, and knowing I couldn’t stop myself either way, I clamped my hands around that tiny fucking waist of hers and lifted her up, mouth still wrapped around her nipple.

She came willingly, pliantly, wrapping her legs around my waist.

Fucking perfect.

“Get rid of it,” I instructed, voice gruff, still suckling on her nipple. Immediately, Six dragged the towel away from her body and tossed it on the floor.

“Fuck me.” Pulling back, I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip as my eyes roamed over her naked body.

She was perfect.

Her body.

Her breasts.

Goddammit, she was curved to perfection.

“What do you want, Six?” She needed to make a decision. She needed to initiate this. I wasn’t taking her without her full consent. She needed to prove to me this was what she wanted. This wouldn’t happen until I got that guarantee.

“You,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around my neck. The only thing separating her naked body from mine were my shorts. “I want you, Rourke.”

Goddamn...

“Are you sure?” I pressed a kiss to her collarbone, moving my hand lower to feel that fucking peachy ass of hers. “One hundred percent?”

“Uh-huh. I want you to finish what I started,” she whispered, grinding her body against mine. “Make me come, Rourke.”

Fuck me...

Lowering my mouth to hers, I kissed her hungrily, fucking frantically, as I walked us blindly in the direction of her bed. She tasted amazing, felt like fucking heaven wrapped around me.

My shins hit the bed first, causing me to fall heavily down on her. Six didn’t seem to care though. In fact, she moaned loudly, and pulled me down harder on her, fingers knotted in my t-shirt. She whimpered into my mouth, grinding her pussy against me, making me fucking weak with need.

That was it.

I was going to have this girl.

There was no other way around it.

I needed to fuck Six right out of my system.

I slipped my hand between her legs and moaned into her mouth when I felt how wet she was.

Sliding one finger inside her tight pussy, I rubbed her slowly.

Christ, she was seriously tight –tighter than any girl I’d been with before.

She cried out in pleasure when I stroked her, thrashing herself against me.

I brushed my lips against hers and whispered, “More?”

Her hands were wrapped around my shoulders, her nails digging into my back, as she writhed beneath me. “More,” she breathed, nodding. “Definitely more.”

Reclaiming her lips with mine, I slid another finger inside her, exhaling a ragged breath when her pussy clamped down hard. I was painfully hard now; my dick straining to replace my fingers.

Moving faster now, I plunged my fingers into her tight little pussy and reveled in the way she bucked wildly beneath me.

Unable to hold back a second more, I pulled out of her and dropped my hands to the waistband of my shorts, allowing my erection to spring free.

It was at that exact moment she decided to freeze up on me. “Wait.”

Wait? I bit back a groan. “What’s wrong?” The crown of my cock was pressed to the entrance of her pussy and it was taking every ounce of self-control I had not to bury myself inside her. I knew she’d feel fucking amazing. The preview my fingers had received just now guaranteed it.

“Tell me you love me.”

I froze.

What.

The.

Fuck.

“You don’t have to mean it,” she added, voice soft and barely more than a whisper. “In fact, I know you don’t. That’s okay. I just want to hear it.”

“Are you serious?” I ran a hand through my hair and bit back the urge to roar. I never told anyone I loved them. Fucking no one. I’d spoken those words to a grand total of two women in my lifetime. The first one, my mother, shortly before she died. The second, Britt, shortly before she fucked me over. I shook my head. “No.”

“Please,” she whispered, looking up at my face with those smoky, grey eyes. “Just lie, Rourke. Just lie to me.” Her hands were on my waist, pulling

me down on her fucking amazing body. “I won’t mind. I promise.”

“I *can’t*,” I squeezed out, voice strained from the sheer amount of concentration it was taking to not plunge my dick inside this girl and fuck her brains out.

I wouldn’t lie about something like that. I couldn’t. I didn’t love Six and I wasn’t taking her under false pretenses. I wasn’t a fucking *predator*. If she wanted me for the night, I was hers, but that was it.

“If you want my dick, it’s yours,” I told her. “But it will be sex, not love.”

Shaking her head, she scrambled out from underneath me. “You hypocritical asshole!”

No.

No.

No.

Fucking *no*...

Tucking her hair behind her ears, Six pulled her duvet across her body, hiding herself from me. “God, I’m so fucking stupid.” She laughed harshly. “You don’t even like me.”

“Don’t *like* you?” Standing up, I put my dick back in my pants and readjusted my erection. “Does this look like I don’t *like* you?” I was harder than I’d ever been in my goddamn life.

“Your dick likes me, Rourke,” she shot back flatly. “But you’ve made it pretty clear that the rest of you hates me.” She touched her cheeks with her hands and groaned loudly. “I’m such a fool.”

“Is this because I won’t tell you I love you?” I shot back, confused as hell. “Because I won’t lie about shit like that, Six. I *don’t* love you.”

“Good,” she shot back quickly. “Because I don’t love you either. Do you hear me? I don’t love you either, dammit!”

“Good,” I growled. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

“Me too.”

I stood staring at her for the longest moment before throwing my hands up in the air in frustration. “You know what? Fuck this.”

“See!” she hissed. “You can’t even be nice to me for one minute.”

“Because I don’t know how to *handle* you,” I roared. “Because I don’t know how to deal with the way you make me *feel*!”

“Mad, Rourke. I make you feel mad,” Six replied, tone shaken. “And you make me feel crazy. So I think it’s best if you leave and we both forget this ever happened.”

“That’s what you want?” I stared hard at her. “You want me to walk out of here and pretend this...” I gestured between us. “Never happened?”

Wide eyed, Six stared at me for the longest moment before whispering, “yes.”

Chapter 24

Mercedes

I HAD COME *THIS* close to losing my virginity to a boy who hated me almost as much as I hated him.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Something really bad, obviously, from the way I'd given myself up to my stepbrother like that.

If Rourke had been on the fence about me being loose before, he certainly wasn't after last night.

Taking out that vibrator my best friend from Kansas, Bianca, had bought me had been a terrible idea.

My first time attempting to give myself an orgasm and I'd been caught red-handed, not that it have even fit inside of me. It hadn't, because *I* hadn't been broken in.

Tell me you love me, Rourke.

Ugh, I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

How pathetic.

Shame crept through me when I thought of how easily I had almost given myself to him.

Was I completely insane?

What the hell had come over me?

I'd dated boys in the past and never had I lost my head like that. My last boyfriend, Peter, had put in four hard months of wooing before I allowed him to put his hands on me. And even then, it was in the back of a movie theatre, in complete darkness, and it was bra over boob contact.

Rourke, I had allowed to spread me open on my bed. His penis had been *this* close to the entrance of my vagina. *This* freaking close.

He was mad at me for stopping... for being so mentally unhinged.

I didn't blame him.

I mean, who *did* that?

What girl in her right frame of mind begged a guy to tell her he loved her right before sex?

This girl, apparently.

No, fuck him.

He was the one who asked me first!

I shouldn't have to feel ashamed for asking him to tell me I needed to hear what I'd told him when he needed to hear it.



Rourke

"WE NEED TO TALK," I announced on Friday morning when I got back from dropping our parents off at the boat. Six was sitting on her usual stool at the kitchen island, nursing a mug of coffee between her small hands.

Of course, the moment she saw me, she dropped her gaze, choosing to stare down at her coffee with keen interest. "No," she whispered, face cast downwards. "We really don't."

"Six," I growled, irritated by her dismissal. "We need to talk about it."

"I don't want to."

"Well, tough shit, because I do." Walking over to where she was sitting, I sank down on the stool beside hers and swung her around to face me. "Last night, I –"

"I can't talk about it, Rourke," Six snapped, covering her cheeks with her hands. "I can't, okay? Jesus!"

I wasn't sure what I wanted to do more; throttle her or kiss the shit out of her. "Listen to me," I growled. Cupping her face, I forced her to look at me. "I was a complete tool last night." Understatement of the century. "Getting pissed with you for not wanting more?" I shook my head and exhaled a ragged breath. "I was thinking with my dick, not my conscience."

"Forget about last night," she squeaked out before pulling her face away from my touch. "I have."

"You really mean that?" I asked, watching as Six got to her feet and put some space between us. "You really want me to pretend nothing happened between us?"

"Yes, Rourke!" she hissed. "I really want you to forget about the most embarrassing, regrettable night of my life."

Most regrettable night of her life?

Fuck me.

She couldn't have hit me harder if she stabbed me in the chest.

"Fine," I said flatly, feeling wounded. "You weren't worth remembering anyway."



Rourke

SIX TOLD ME TO forget about her. She wanted me to forget about what had happened between us the other night. She'd been avoiding me ever since.

I had too much pride in me to complain or tell her I thought otherwise.

Besides, I didn't need the complications that came with messing around with my stepsister.

Tell me you love me.

Those words had haunted me every minute since I left her room on Thursday night.

Six had thrown me.

Fuck thrown me; she'd knocked me on my ass with that request. Had she not asked that of me, I was certain I would have fucked her in a dozen different positions that night and every night since.

I wanted her so damn badly I could hardly focus on much else. But her immediate regret had burned and was the founding reason I dialed Britt's number tonight.

I needed familiar.

I needed no strings.

I needed anyone but Six.

Chapter 25

Mercedes

I SPENT ALL DAY FRIDAY avoiding Rourke. Thankfully, I had to work a double shift which got me out of the house for most of the day. However, Alec was in a horrible mood for most of it which sucked big, fat donkey balls. I was so used to happy-go-lucky Alec that I wasn't prepared for the cranky asshole Alec I was greeted with. Yeah, that version of my boss was a douche.

All day, my thoughts were seized by the beautiful bastard who slept in the bedroom next to mine. The moment I had laid eyes on Rourke Owens, I *knew* he was going to be trouble for me. I should have listened to my gut when it screamed warning after warning at me; instead I had listened to my heart and my stupid teenage hormones.

And now?

Now I was in over my head, drowning in feelings I had no idea how to deal with.

Rourke wasn't for me. He was wrong. All fucking wrong. My brain knew it; I just needed the rest of me to get with the program.

He was my stepbrother, dammit. His father was married to my mother. Getting myself involved with him would be all kinds of crazy, and I didn't need the trouble that came with a guy like him.

Besides, he was back to being mad at me again.

The way Rourke was treating me now only assured me that I did the right thing by stopping it from going any further the other night. He was back to being cold and indifferent, ignoring me when I walked into the same room as him.

Knowing Rourke wasn't affected by what happened between us Thursday night, and was quite content to party it up with his buddies, well that upset me more than I cared to think about.

I decided that I should feel glad that he was avoiding me. After all, he was only doing what I asked him to do. *Forget it ever happened.*

I didn't care anyway.

I hated Rourke Owens.

I hated him almost as much as I hated myself for pushing him away.

I wanted him the other night, more than I dared to admit. The feel of him touching me, of being in his arms; it was *haunting* me. He turned me on like no one ever had before. And that kiss? Rourke had kissed me like he was starving for me.

Thinking about his lips on mine still made my toes tingle. I needed to shut it down and fast. Lusting after a boy who hated me was a very bad idea and a sure-fire way of getting my heart broken. I was catching feelings for him. That was bad because he wasn't even nice to me. He was cruel and mocking and cold and I still *wanted* him...

Molly called me when I got off work Friday night, asking if I wanted to come over to watch a movie. Glad to have an excuse to avoid going home and facing Rourke, I had happily agreed. It was 2am when we finished a Twilight marathon so I ended up staying the night at her place.

When I walked back into the Owens' residence just before eight the following morning, it was to a frosty reception and a trashed house. "Mind telling me where you were all night?" Rourke demanded, barreling into my bedroom after me.

"Mind telling me why I should?" I shot back, not bothering to look back at him. "Another thing; the house looks like a dump." Shrugging, I added, "I hope you're not expecting me to clean up after you."

"I had a few friends over last night," he muttered impatiently. "What about it?"

"Nothing. Just don't expect me to clean up your mess."

"Fine. I'll do it myself when you tell me where you were all night?"

"I was out."

"Six!"

"Rourke." Slinging my backpack down on my bed, I flopped down beside it and yawned. Dammit, I shouldn't have stayed up half the freaking night with Molly. I had an eight hour shift ahead of me and I was beyond exhausted.

“Where the hell were you?” Rourke repeated, blue eyes blazing and locked on mine. “You didn’t come home last night.” Slamming my bedroom door, he prowled towards me, looking both furious and relieved. “You *always* come home.”

“So, I changed my pattern for once,” I replied wearily, folding my arms behind my head. “I stayed at Molly’s.”

“Molly.” Rourke frowned. “You stayed at Molly Peterson’s place?”

“Yes, *Rourke*, I stayed at Molly’s place,” I shot back sarcastically. “Sorry I didn’t tell you, but I wasn’t aware I had to fill you in on my whereabouts.”

“My father left me in charge,” he countered, towering over my bed, his heated gaze focused entirely on me.

“Of Amelia,” I corrected. “Not me.” Speaking of... “Where is Amelia?”

“At the Kings’ house,” he replied, still looking at me with a furious expression. “She’s staying over there again tonight.”

“Did you give her this much shit for staying out all night?”

“She *called*,” he hissed.

“You’re overreacting here,” I shot back. “Making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Well, sue me for actually giving a crap about you,” Rourke shot back angrily, running a hand through his already sexily disheveled dark hair. “For fuck’s sake, Six, you could’ve called and let me know you weren’t coming home.”

My heart skyrocketed at his words.

Sue me for actually giving a crap about you

He gave a crap about me?

He cared?

No, my brain hissed. *No, he doesn’t!*

“I didn’t think it mattered,” I mumbled meekly.

Rourke released a heavy sigh and sank down on the edge of my bed. “What if something had happened to you?”

“Nothing happened to me,” I heard myself placate, pulling myself into a sitting position. “Rourke, I’m –”

“Don’t...” Pausing, he pinched the bridge of his nose, obviously trying to calm himself down, though why he was getting so worked up over this

was a mystery to me. “Call,” he finally said, turning his blue eyes on me. “Next time you plan on not coming home, call one of us and let us know.”

“You mean call you?” I offered, body heating from his intense stare.

Rourke didn’t argue.

“Okay,” I conceded. “Next time, I’ll call.”

“Good.” Rourke visibly sagged in relief. Then he flew off my bed like the covers had scalded him and stalked out of my room.

The moment he slammed my bedroom door shut, I threw myself down on my back and let out a huge sigh.

When had my life become so freaking complicated?

Chapter 26

Mercedes

WHEN I PULLED UP outside the house after work that night, I was greeted by a dozen or more shiny cars sprawled all around the driveway, and music blaring from the house.

Rourke was having a party.

Again.

FML.

Overcome with a sudden burst of anger, I leapt out of my car and stalked up the driveway, stepping over scattered trash and Dixie cups along the way.

He was cleaning this shit up.

I was not being held responsible for this one.

Goddammit. It was bad enough walking into house to the stench of stale alcohol and vomit this morning. I was not waking up to it.

I let myself inside and immediately had to clamp my hands over my ears; the sound of the music so loud I feared it would burst my eardrums.

Slowly, I accustomed myself to the obscene volume of noise, and dropped my hands from my ears before shoving past several random, near naked teenagers; my thirst for answers focused on one in particular.

I found Rourke, several moments later, in the corner of our dimly lit kitchen where he seemed to be thoroughly investigating some blonde girl's tonsils – with his tongue.

Pain.

Pain like I'd never known existed pierced through my chest, winding me.

God, this hurt.

This hurt so bad.

"Rourke!" I snapped, thoroughly shredded at the sight of the leggy blonde in a pink, sparkly bikini sitting on our countertop with her legs

wrapped around Rourke who was pressed up against her. I'd cleaned this whole house up and buttered toast on that surface less than twelve hours earlier. Bastard. "Goddammit, Rourke!" I screamed when he didn't answer me.

With all my might, I shoved him in the shoulder. He barely moved, but I did manage to get his attention.

Breaking the kiss, Rourke turned his face sideways and looked down at me. His features were flushed, his lips red and swollen, his hair all mussed up from where she'd been yanking on it, his eyes almost black with desire. His hands were still clamped on the blonde's bony hips as he narrowed me with an impatient expression. "What?"

I knew I wouldn't get an apology from him. *I wasn't anything to him.* He'd made that perfectly clear to me, but the boredom and indifference in his tone took me by surprise.

"What?" I shook my head and gaped at the overgrown bastard. "Are you serious?"

"I'm seriously forgetting everything you told me to forget," he slurred before winking. Drunk. The idiot was drunk. "I'm doing what you asked me to do. Now run along and annoy some other poor bastard."

"No. I think I'll stay and annoy you," I shot back before gesturing around wildly. "I cleaned this damn place up after your last escapade and you decide to throw another party tonight? *Really?*"

"Walk away, Six," he growled. "I'm in no mood for your shit tonight."

"No!" I snarled. "I won't. You're not the only person who lives in this house."

"I'm the only one *I* care about who lives in this house," he shot back coolly. "Amelia's at her friend's house for the night. You don't matter."

His cruel remark drew a giggle from the blonde wrapped around him and I averted my eyes from his face to hers.

Instantly, I knew who she was.

Britt.

I'd seen her before. I vaguely remembered seeing her smug face that night when Rourke threw me in the pool. This was the girl. The fuck buddy. The queen bitch. The one I lost sleep over.

As I took in her appearance, I knew I would lose many more night's worth of sleep.

Britt was beautiful. Tall, blonde, blue eyed, and extremely thin with legs that went on for days; basically, everything I *wasn't*.

Anger burned in my veins. At least I told myself it was anger. I would not consider it to be jealousy. I couldn't afford to.

"What is your *problem with me?*" I screamed then, focusing my unstable emotions on my stepbrother. I couldn't control myself around him. Rourke brought out a really ugly side in me. A side of me I had no control over.

"Get out of my face, Six," Rourke warned, glowering down at me. The glazed over look in his eyes, and the smell of alcohol wafting from him, assured me he was, indeed, wasted.

"No." Folding my arms across my chest, I glared up at him. I was stupid to fight with a drunk Rourke, but I couldn't help myself. This boy set me on fire. "I'm not going anywhere until you send these people home and clean your damn mess up..."

He kissed her.

Right in front of me, with his eyes open and locked on my face, Rourke resumed his kissing expedition with Britt.

"I'm not done talking to you," I hissed, shoving his arm once more, and forcing down the abnormal swell of pain in my chest. If I thought I felt pain before, it paled in comparison to the knife Rourke just stabbed in my chest.

Breaking the kiss, Rourke ran a hand through his hair in sheer exasperation. "Why won't you just *leave!*"

"Yeah! Why don't you climb back in the hole you came out of and get the hell out of my boyfriend's house," Britt hissed. "No one wants you here. Or your whore of a mother."

Oh, hell no she did not!

"Don't," I whispered shakily, "talk about my mother."

"Why?" she shot back with a cackle. "It's the truth and everyone around here knows it."

"Britt —" That was Rourke. He was trying to interject. I wanted to scratch his eyes out. This was *his* fault. Everything was *his* fucking fault.

"Why don't you jump off your boyfriend's dick and say that to my face, bitch," I snarled, feeling the sting of tears in the back of my eyes. I would not cry. I would not give these people the satisfaction.

“Is she for real?” Britt snarled, hopping down from the countertop. “Oh, honey, I’m going to ruin you.” She walked straight up to me, dwarfing me with her impressive height.

She had to be at least five eight or nine. I was barely clocking in at five feet, but I’d be damned if I let that intimidate me. “Not if I ruin you first.”

“Goddamn, Britt,” Rourke’s voice came from close by. “Leave it alone.”

We were causing a scene, people were watching, and I didn’t give a shit. He wasn’t going to treat me like this and she wasn’t going to talk about my mother. Over my dead freaking body.

“Your momma saw a meal ticket in Rourke’s father and trapped him with a baby,” Britt hissed, smirking down at me. “That makes her a whore, and you a whore’s bastard.”

“Fuck you.” Closing my fist, I reared back and socked her in the mouth.

“You little bitch!” Seconds later, I was sprawled out on the kitchen floor with this Britt bitch straddling me. “You’re dead,” she roared as she pulled on my hair and scratched at my face. “Dead!”

“Go for it,” I screamed, giving back as good as I got. She was kicking my ass. It was obvious and I could feel blood trickling down my face, but I refused to back down. I would rather die with this skinny bitch’s hands around my throat than give in.

“Goddammit, Brittany. Stop this!” Moving quickly, Rourke stepped between us. “Get away from her!”

Blocking Britt’s view of me, Rourke grabbed my hands and pulled me to my feet – and out of harm’s way.

“Let her go, Rourke,” Britt ordered as several girls arrived to flank her. “That little bitch *punched* me.”

“Yeah, let me go, Rourke,” I hissed as I shoved against him, desperately trying to break free from his hold and get my hands on her neck. “So I can rearrange that stuck up nose of hers.”

“Don’t even think about it, Six,” Rourke hissed in my ear. Wrapping his arms around my body, he pulled me roughly against him; my back pressed tightly to his chest. “Back the fuck up, Britt.”

“What are you *doing*?” Britt hissed, glaring at the boy who was holding onto me. “Taking up for that fat bitch? You’re *mine*, Rourke. You’re

supposed to be on *my* side!”

“Fat bitch?” I screamed in outrage.

“Quit acting like a crazy bitch then, Britt,” Rourke shot back, struggling to keep ahold of me. “You know I got no time for this shit. We’ve been here before, remember? Told you last time, I ain’t putting up with it again.” I could feel Rourke’s heart hammering in his chest. He was pressed so close to me, it was hard to ignore. “She’s off limits,” he snarled, pulling me close. “You got that? You don’t fucking touch her.”

“But you hate her!” She actually stomped her foot. “You’ve said it yourself.”

Suddenly, four familiar faces appeared in front of me.

“Back the fuck up, Britt,” Daryl ordered, taking stance between us.

Bear stood beside him, a silent force to be reckoned with “Now.”

“Yeah,” Mase added, coming to stand in front of me. “Take your skanky ass back to the Jefferson boys. We ain’t biting here, baby.”

The Jefferson boys? Who the fuck were the Jefferson boys?

“Damn, baby girl,” Reebo whistled, appearing in front of me. Scooting down, he looked at my face and grimaced. “She got you good.”

Reebo reached a hand towards my face and Rourke quickly slapped it away. “Don’t touch her,” he snarled, tightening his hold on me harder than ever.

Reebo glared at him. “Might wanna tell your crazy fucking ex that, asshole. Have you looked at her face?”

“Just get her out of here,” Rourke muttered under his breath before forcefully walking me from the room. Releasing me at the bottom of the staircase, he glared down at me and ordered, “Go up to your room and wait there.” He was shaking all over as he stared down at me. “I’ll fix this.”

“I will,” I hissed through clenched teeth before slipping around his huge frame and making a run for the kitchen. “After I kill that bitch.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I heard Rourke growl just as his arms came around my body. Seconds later, I was thrown over his shoulder and on the move. “You’re crazy, girl,” he hissed as he climbed the staircase with one arm wrapped around the back of my thighs. “Fucking nuts.”

“Let. Me. Down,” I snarled as I forced myself to look anywhere but his denim clad ass – that I had the perfect view of. “Now.”

He didn’t let me down.

And he didn't stop walking until we were outside my bedroom door.

Using one foot, Rourke kicked my door open and stalked inside, with me still over his shoulder. He walked over to my bed and slung me down roughly. "Stay here and calm your ass down."

"No!" Scrambling to my feet, I moved to slip past him, but he intercepted my move and used his huge frame to cut me off. "Move, Rourke."

"No."

"Dammit!" Releasing a scream of pure frustration, I slapped his chest with my hands and yelled, "Move."

"No."

"You're such an asshole!" I screamed, my temper getting the best of me. "Dammit!"

"Why am I even bothering?" Running a hand through his hair, Rourke shook his head and laughed humorlessly. "I should let you go back down there and get your ass handed to you."

"Suits me," I shot back.

"Sit the fuck down, Six."

"Why?"

"Because you're bleeding, dammit!" he roared. "And I need to clean you up."

"I don't need you to do shit for me," I shot back, my hands immediately moving to my face. Damn that bitch. I *was* bleeding. "I can take care of myself."

"Yeah," he sneered sarcastically. He turned and walked over to my door before releasing an annoyed growl. "Sure looked that way downstairs."

"Hey, maybe one of your friends can help take care of me," I called out mockingly. Wait – why was I doing this? Why was I *taunting* him? "Maybe Reebo or Mason?"

"Like hell!" Rourke snarled. Seconds later, I was airborne again and being carried from my bedroom to his.

Rourke walked over and tossed me down on his bed before walking back to his door.

"Why did you bring me in here?" I demanded, sprawled out on my back.

“Because I’ve got a lock with a fucking key in here, and your room doesn’t,” he growled. I watched him lock his bedroom door and slide the key into his jeans pocket. “And apparently, I’m on suicide watch with your crazy ass.”

He was right. I had a lock on my door, but it was one of those locks built into the door handle – easily accessible. Smart Fucker.

He disappeared into his bathroom then, returning a few moments later with a wet wash cloth. “Come here,” he ordered, sinking down on the edge of the bed.

“Don’t do me any favors,” I was quick to shoot back, scrambling away from him.

“Get your ass over here now, Six,” he growled, eyes locked on mine. “Or I’ll fucking put you over here.”

Sulking, I gave in and scooted over. I’d had enough rough and tumble for the night. I was prideful, but even I knew I was no match for this guy.

With my heart hammering against my ribcage, I crawled over Rourke’s ruffled bedsheets, and knelt beside him. He had one foot resting on the floor, the other tucked up on the bed. The white shirt he had on was dotted with blood.

My blood, I realized.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” he asked me.

Yes, but not in places I wanted him to touch me. Or maybe I did want him to touch me in those places and that was the problem...

“I’ll live,” I whispered, remaining completely still as he gently probed my face with his surprisingly gentle fingers. His breath fanned my face and I could smell the alcohol on it. He was drunk. He had to be. Hell, I was getting buzzed alone off the fumes of what he’d consumed tonight.

“Fucking Britt,” Rourke muttered under his breath. He was holding my chin with one hand and using the other to wipe my face and he had a deep frown on his face. “This one’s bad.” He pressed his thumb against my bottom lip. “Dammit.”

“I’m... ine...ourke,” I tried to say, but it was difficult with his thumb pressing down on my lip.

“No,” he growled. “You’re not.” He leaned closer then, hands cupping my cheeks, inspecting what I assumed was a claw mark and his breath washed over my neck. The sensation caused a tremor to roll through me.

Nervous anxiety, I put it down to, but my body knew the truth.

It was lust.

Every nerve inside of me was on high alert as my stepbrother touched me in ways that were perfectly innocent, but to me, the girl who'd been futilely denying my feelings since arriving here, it was entirely too much.

I wanted him. He was cruel and mean and slept around. He was the worst person for me to feel an attraction towards, but it didn't change the fact that I did. I *wanted* Rourke. Badly. I shouldn't have stopped him last night. I *wouldn't* stop him tonight. If he only wanted me...

Knowing I needed to say something – do something – to snap myself out of this lust driven trance, I asked, "Why aren't you going down there and fixing things with your *girlfriend*?" When he didn't respond, I added, "She sounded pretty pissed at you." Understatement of the century. "Sounded like she was two seconds away from dumping your ass."

Rourke dropped the washcloth on the floor and looked straight into my eyes. "Look at my face and tell me how many fucks you see me giving?" he ordered and I did. There was no way I could look away from him. "None," he replied, tone gruff. "Because I don't care, Six."

"About your girlfriend?" I whispered, heart racing.

"About anything," he replied before resuming the face touching. He seemed almost obsessed with checking me over. I didn't understand why.

"Why not?" The question was out of my mouth before I had a chance to take it back.

"Probably because that part of me is broken," he surprised me by answering. "I don't work right, Six. I don't care about people. Haven't for a long fucking time now." For once, there was no hint of sarcasm in his voice. Just sadness.

"Why?" My voice was softer, my heart thawing to his confession. "What broke you?"

Rourke took a long time answering my question. In fact, he took so long that I wasn't sure he *would* answer. Finally, he whispered, "Trusting people."

"Oh."

"And Britt's not my girlfriend anymore."

"But she was?"

He nodded. "She was."

My heart sank.

Why did that hurt so badly?

It shouldn't hurt so badly.

It was something I already knew.

"I'm hurt that you were kissing her tonight," I admitted then, voice torn. It wasn't something I was proud to say out loud, but I had to get it off my chest. "Seeing you with her?" I sighed heavily. "Was hard."

Rourke stared hard at me for the longest moment before muttering a string of curses. He rubbed his stubble covered jaw with his hand and exhaled a ragged breath. "Goddammit, Six."

"What?"

"What?" He glared at me with a heated expression. "You shouldn't have said that."

"It's the truth," I admitted. "I hated seeing you with her."

He leaned closer to me before quickly pulling back. "I don't need this shit, Six." His voice was strained, jaw clenched. "Shit."

"Don't need what?" I breathed, watching his every move. I was moving closer to his body. I couldn't stop myself. It was an automatic reaction. Right now, he felt like a magnet, pulling me closer.

"You," he groaned, still cupping my face. "I don't need you; coming up in here and fucking everything up." He sounded almost pained as he gestured between us and moved closer, resting his forehead against mine. "I don't need *this*."

"Why?" There was that question again. It seemed to be all I could say. I knew I should be mad at him, but I couldn't muster it up. I was drowning in the feel of having his hands on my face and his brow pressed to mine.

"Because," Rourke whispered, but didn't offer anything further. His mouth was less than an inch from mine.

"Because?" My breathing hitched; awareness of how close I was to what I had been denying myself hit me hard.

"You were right to push me away that night," he whispered, his confession a drunken slur. "Me and you? It's a bad idea..."

"I regret pushing you away," I interrupted. "I wish I hadn't."

"Don't say that," he groaned.

My heart hammered violently in my chest. "It's the truth."

"I've already told you," he whispered, leaning closer to me. "I don't love you."

"I know." I swallowed deeply and knotted my fingers in his shirt. "I don't love you, either."

"And I *won't* love you," he added, tone gruff. "You need to get that."

"I get it," I breathed, sliding my hand beneath his shirt to feel his ripped stomach. "I just don't think I care anymore." Crazy as it was, I was completely and utterly overtaken by this boy and all of the danger he represented to me. "I still want you." With my free hand, I reached up and cupped his stubbly jaw with my trembling hand. "Even if you hate me," I whispered before pulling his face down to mine.

The moment my lips touched his, Rourke froze.

His eyes were still open and locked on mine.

I could see the questions blazing in those blue depths, his hesitance and his burning hunger.

I didn't have the answers to the questions I saw in his eyes. I didn't know them myself. I was confused and unsure and terrified of rejection.

I wasn't sure what he saw in me then, and I didn't care, because whatever it was caused him to close his eyes and kiss me back.

He kissed me back.

He was *still* kissing me back.

Opening my mouth to his gentle probing, I allowed my tongue to duel with his, moaning weakly when he pulled back to tug on my bottom lip before reclaiming my lips with a soul searing kiss.

Nothing had ever felt this good.

Nothing had ever felt like *Rourke*.

Taking control of the situation, Rourke moved forwards, never breaking the kiss, and rolled me onto my back. Seconds later, his body came down on mine, hard, warm, and entirely welcome.

Shimmying beneath his body to shift my skirt up, I opened my legs to Rourke and whimpered into his mouth when his erection pressed hard against my panties.

He clamped a strong hand around one of my thighs and hitched it over his waist as he thrust himself against me, lips never leaving mine.

I didn't care that he had been kissing another girl less than an hour ago. I didn't care that I was a virgin and about to give myself up to a boy

who had the potential to crush me. I didn't care if he didn't love me. I didn't care about anything other than having his lips on mine and his weight pressing me down. His hand moved to the hem of my shirt, pushing it upwards. Then he was touching my stomach, moving higher...

I moaned loudly when Rourke reached for the cup of my bra and yanked it downwards. My breast fell heavily into his hand. The moment he pinched my nipple, something erupted inside of me, a deep heat of some sorts, and I bucked wildly beneath him.

Grinding against me, I could feel his pulse hammering in his chest. He was hard and his erection strained against the fabric of his jeans, pressing between my legs. The feel of his hands on my skin caused my clit to pulse hard. I needed him. I needed friction. God, I needed this. More of him.

Rourke continued to kiss me, his tongue stroking mine in fluent, confident strokes as I trembled beneath him. His hands were on my hips, pulling me against him, coveting my body.

As soon as it had started it was over and I wanted to scream 'no' when Rourke jerked off me and leapt off the bed.

"Wh-what are you doing?" I panted, breathless, as I gaped up at his beautiful face.

"I...Fuck!" Rourke hissed as he ran a hand through his ruffled hair and stared down at me with a heated expression. "God fucking dammit."

My gaze dropped to the large bulge in his jeans. Why was he stopping this? He was hard and turned on. I know he was. I felt it. "Why'd you stop?"

"Don't!" He held up his hand and clenched his eyes shut. "Please. Fuck. Don't say another word. You were right the other night. We can't do this."

"What?" I shook my head and stared at him in frustration. Two seconds ago, he'd been between my legs with my breast in his hand. "Why the hell not?"

He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose in what looked like *pain*.

Was he in pain?

What the hell was wrong with him?

"I told you," I breathed. "I *want* to do this with you."

"Well *I* can't do this with *you*," Rourke choked out.

“With me?” Rejection coursed through me. What was I – a piece of shit? “Fuck you, Rourke.”

“Fuck me,” he agreed grimly. “Exactly, Six. Fuck me and you’ll regret it.” He shook his head and exhaled heavily. “You deserve...not me.” Turning around, Rourke walked over to his bedroom door and reached for the key in his pocket.

I didn’t want him to go back downstairs to her.

I wanted him to stay right here with *me*.

“Is this because of what happened to your sister?” I blurted out, desperate, just as Rourke was about to walk out. Was it? Was he leaving me here because he thought I didn’t want this?

He froze in the doorway of his room, back stiffened.

“I know she was abused,” I quickly continued to say, desperate to keep him here with me. “By a family member... who said it was consensual,” I added, feeling flustered. “This? You and me? I *want* this, Rourke.” I swallowed deeply. “I just wanted you to know that...if that’s why you’re walking away from me.”

Moving like lightening, Rourke turned and stalked towards me, not stopping until he was leaning over me.

“Let me be very clear about something,” he whispered, his hands on either side of my body, blue eyes locked on mine. “I stopped Britt from beating on you tonight because I don’t need the hassle.” He leaned closer. “Football starts back on Monday and I don’t need my father interfering with my team because of *you*. You’re a complication for me, Six. A fucking nuisance.” His eyes were blood shot and full of rage as he spoke. “And I stopped *this* from happening because I don’t want you. Because fucking you would be a horrible *mistake*.”

“I *hate* you,” I squeezed out, forcing myself not to cry.

Rolling off his bed, I barreled past him and ran to my room. I refused to let this boy see me bleed.

The pain inside of me his cruel words had provoked had turned pensive and poisoned but I would burn in hell before letting him see just how badly he had hurt me.

Chapter 27

Rourke

I FUCKED UP. I screwed up real bad, and managed to catch feelings in the process.

Six's face?

Those silver eyes of hers, all full of pain and unshed tears?

I couldn't stop seeing them.

I'd never been a hero with words, but my panic last night had led me to say some pretty fucking unforgivable things to her.

I had *feelings* for her.

I felt *emotions* for Six.

Last night, I realized that.

I think deep down, I'd known it for a while, but the other night when she asked me to tell her I loved her? Shit, that did something to me. *Six* did something to me. And then when I saw her all cut up and bruised... hell, if that hadn't pulled at something in my chest.

Don't fucking ask me what feelings I was experiencing, because I had no idea of how to explain it, but there was no way I could take her now.

If I did, if I jumped in with Six, I had a feeling I wouldn't be coming back out.

That scared me.

I didn't want this.

I wasn't ready.

Goddamn...

I spent the best part of Sunday morning cleaning up after the party. I took out the half dozen bags of trash before vacuuming the whole way through the ground floor. I felt fucking ridiculous the entire time. Never in my life had I used a mop or vacuum, but I did it anyway, and I did it with the image of Six's face weighing heavily on my conscience.

By one o'clock, Six still hadn't come out of her room, but the house finally resembled a home and not the zoo it had been when I got up this morning.

With still no sign of her, I retreated to the living room where I spent the rest of the afternoon watching NFL reruns, feeling agitated and hungover to shit, only getting off the couch to answer the delivery guy when he dropped off a pizza.

Amelia text me at some stage during the evening to let me know she would be spending another night at Jenny King's house and going to school from there. Jenny was Daryl's younger sister and Amelia's best friend. I had no problem with her staying over so I let her know in a text, and warned her not to be late to school tomorrow. I knew she wouldn't be, but it was the kind of thing I felt was my duty to say.

I made three attempts to check on Six before I went to bed. I stood outside her bedroom door three goddamn times and couldn't make myself knock. Whatever it was she had over me, whatever feeling this was, it wasn't good. I wasn't ready to commit to another girl, not after Britt, and it wasn't fucking fair for me to lead Six on. I wanted her. More than life. But I wouldn't use her like that. There were more than enough girls at school willing to sate that particular need of mine.

Shit...

What the hell was I going to do at school tomorrow?

Britt was going to be there, and she was going to be out for Six's blood.

I couldn't let that happen.

I wouldn't.

Chapter 28

Mercedes

WHEN I WOKE UP MONDAY morning, my face looked a lot like my heart felt; cut to shit.

Correction; *my pride*, not my heart.

I refused to believe it was my heart that was hurting so bad in my chest.

I made a huge mistake by offering myself to Rourke on Saturday night, and he had showed me exactly how pointless that was; how broken his humanity was.

His words still haunted me.

I stopped this from happening because I don't want you. Because fucking you would be a horrible mistake

Stupidly, I allowed myself to grow feelings for a guy I knew was trouble. I knew he was a bad idea, I had warned myself, prepared myself for his bullshit, and still I let myself *feel* something for him. I refused point blank to acknowledge in any way, shape, or form that the emotions I was harboring for my stepbrother were anything resembling love. I couldn't love him. I *wouldn't*.

For me, this was so much worse than the usual traumatic bullshit that came with a break up in a small town, because I had to continue *living* with him. Rourke had seen me in intimate positions, touched parts of my body, put his fingers *inside* of me. But I refused to go down like this. I refused to drown in these feelings. I would keep swimming. I would fight this until my heart stopped beating.

I don't love you...I won't love you

Numbly, I threw my covers off and walked straight into my bathroom for a shower. I needed to do something with myself, make myself somewhat respectable for my first day at the Academy. Yeah, the day I had been dreading was here. I should have felt nervous. Instead, I just felt...shredded.

When I was finished, I quickly dried off and threw on a clean pair of bra and panties. Never in my life had I worn a uniform for school. The ones I had attended were low budget, lower middle class, American public schools. That was all about to change.

A grey V-neck sweater with the signatory *Ocean Bay Academy* crest, white shirt, navy tie, and fitted grey skirt were laid out on a chair when I walked back into my room. Immediately, I shuddered at the sight. This was not who I was. I wasn't a preppy, private school snob. I was a working girl who bussed tables to make it through school and keep a roof over my head. This shit was alien to me.

I blow dried my long hair, in a state of semi denial, before forcing myself to suck it up and get dressed. Slipping on a swanky new pair of three inch *Mary Janes* – courtesy of step daddy Gabe – I adjusted my grey stockings before checking my appearance in the full-length mirror in my bathroom.

Well... shit.

I almost didn't recognize the girl staring back at me. Running my hands over the front of my sweater, I adjusted my skirt once more and sighed. Maybe this whole uniform jazz wouldn't be so bad. I had one of those hourglass figures everyone talked about. You know; big ass, thick hips, tiny waist, overly generous breasts. In theory it sounded great, but unless you had the bank account of a Kardashian, trying to buy clothes to suit my shape on a budget was close to impossible – and cellulite was a bitch. However, I was *bossing* this uniform look.

The scratches Britt left on my face were healing, but still blatantly obvious, so I applied a full face of makeup to cover those up. I might not own much in the world in monetary terms, but I had some mad skills with a set of make-up brushes – the perks of being raised by a glamorous teenage mother.

Twirling around to get a one final look at my ass before venturing downstairs, I raised a brow in scrutiny. God, there was no hiding *that* thing.

No wonder my skirt was clinging to my body; I was housing half my weight in my ass cheeks.

I wasn't overweight, not in the slightest, hell, I was only a size six, but it was just *all there*.

Whatever.

Refusing to be one of those girls who dwelled on their size when they were perfectly healthy, I grabbed my bag off the bed and my car keys from my night stand before making a run for the front door, dreading the drive I was about to embark on to the fortress of eternal doom – aka high school. Yeah, avoiding Rourke was high on my agenda today and every day for the foreseeable future.



Rourke

EARLY MORNING FOOTBALL practice sucked ass. Getting up at the crack ass of dawn, having barely slept a wink, was not helping my already foul mood. Running drills in the heat of the early morning sun until I felt like puking didn't help much either.

Goddamn, Six!

She fucked me up. Six weeks of her living in my house and I was a wreck. My game was off, my mind unfocused, and my attention elsewhere. I had no doubt if I didn't pull it together by the game of the season Friday night, I would be getting my ass handed to me by Pattendale's defense.

"Someone get this man a pussy before he combusts right here on the field," Mason snickered, jogging towards me, when I turned the ball over for the third fucking time this morning. "Or some lube for *palm* and her five friends."

"You better run, Mase," Daryl ordered in an exasperated tone, intercepting me and ruining my plans on kicking the living shit out of Mason. "Calm your ass down," he added, looking at me. "Now."

Inhaling a deep breath, I shook Daryl's hands off and turned around. It was a lot easier to stem my homicidal tendencies when I wasn't in direct view of the douche who drew them out of me. Images of him kissing Six flooded my mind then and I balked.

"God fucking dammit," I roared. Dragging my helmet off, I stalked off the field. I couldn't do this. I couldn't fucking concentrate. In less than an hour, Six was going to be here, in my school, and I would have to watch these fuckers ogle her. I knew they would; they weren't blind and she was beyond beautiful.

Fuck.

My.
Life.

Chapter 29

Mercedes

IT TOOK ME ALL of five minutes at my new high school to learn that Rourke Owens wasn't just a bastard; he was an influential bastard with a throwing arm that rivaled a professional athlete.

Apparently, my stepbrother was a pretty huge deal at this school, playing first string wide receiver for Ocean Bay Academy's all state winning varsity football team.

Fuck my life...

Determined to seem unaffected by it all, by *him*, I kept my head held high as I walked through the hallway towards my locker with at least hundred pairs of eyes on me. It was pretty clear that since their star wide receiver hated my guts, his minions did, too.

Molly and I had compared schedules this morning when I collected mine from the office and it turned out we shared all the same classes with the exception of three. I was relieved

"Wow," Molly chuckled as we walked out of second period World Politics and headed down yet another identical hallway. "You're either a total badass and don't care that everyone is looking at you, or you have an awesome poker face."

Poker face, I thought to myself. I had a great poker face that I'd primed to perfection over the years. I'd had to; this wasn't my first time as a newbie in school. Unlike my dating history, when it came to the number of times I'd been the new girl at school, I was a complete slut.

"My locker's here." She stopped beside a row of blue lockers and smiled. "Want help finding yours again?"

"No. I'm good," I replied, waving Molly off. "I'll see you in class." I was determined to figure this school stuff out on my own. I was happy to have a friend, but I didn't depend on anyone for anything.

Rounding the corner, I felt an immense sense of relief and victory when I realized I had found my locker without getting lost in the maze of Ocean Bay Academy hallways. The school was bigger than I had anticipated; with three upper level floors and an underground pool and weight room.

According to Molly, sports were a pretty huge deal around here and everything about the Academy was directed towards their athletes, with their stars getting extra attention. I scoffed at the thought. It was like I had fallen asleep and had woken up in a goddamn movie.

Ignoring the stares and whispers around me, I walked right up to the locker I had been assigned and began to unload my bag.

"You shouldn't be here." Rourke's familiar voice came from somewhere close behind me and I inwardly groaned. He was back to the *you shouldn't be here* shit? Really?

Frozen in my spot, I closed my eyes and inhaled a deep, calming breath before answering him. "We've been through this. I have no choice."

"No." He appeared beside me then, towering above me, looking entirely too good in his uniform. "You shouldn't be *here*. In this section." He opened the locker directly next to mine. "Your surname starts with J, not O." He turned to face me then, his blue eyes heated and locked on mine. "Your locker should be down the hallway."

"Well, take it up with your father when he gets back from his trip, Rourke," I whispered, forcing the words out, as I stuffed the books I didn't need until later on in the day inside, ignoring the fluttering sensation in my stomach and the extreme pounding of my heart in my chest. "He's the one who filled out all the school paperwork."

"Dammit, Six!" He slammed his locker door shut, but didn't move. His jaw was working as he stared down at me with an expression I didn't recognize. "I need you to *not* be here."

"That's not your choice, Rourke," I shot back, feeling every inch of my body tremble beneath his heated stare. "So, you're just going to have to get used to it."

"Get used to it?" he shot back flatly, hands balled into fists at his sides.

I opened my mouth to say something, but quickly snapped it shut when Rourke punched the door of his locker before promptly stalking off, leaving me staring after him.

Jesus, what was his problem?
Why did he hate me so much?
And why did I have to care?
Dammit.

Chapter 30

Rourke

SIX IN A SCHOOL UNIFORM?

Fuuuuck.

How the hell was I supposed to handle this? Handle *her*?

For most of my life, school had been my sanctuary and when I was there, I was king. I knew what it sounded like and I didn't care. It was the honest truth.

From the moment my friends and I stepped foot through the doors of Ocean Bay Academy, the other kids had sort of bowed down to us. Maybe it had something to do with football, or maybe it was money. I wasn't sure, and I didn't care. Up until now I had enjoyed coming to school. I had enjoyed the distraction it gave me. But now *she* was here and everything was all screwed up again.

When I saw Six standing next to my locker this morning, the urge I had to walk over there and lay claim on her was extreme.

But I couldn't.

Dammit, it wouldn't be fair. I wanted her body. I wanted to fuck her. Sex was all I was willing to give her and Six deserved more.

She deserved *better*.

Tell me you love me...Please...Lie, Rourke. Just lie to me...I won't mind. I promise

Those words right there were the reason I wasn't going to go there with Six. The vulnerability she revealed to me that night? That was something I wasn't going to take advantage of. There was something needy about her I hadn't noticed before... Something lonely. I couldn't capitalize on that. I fucking *couldn't*.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts of my stepsister, I looked around the classroom and bit back the urge to growl. Mason, the turncoat bastard, had honed in on Six the moment she walked into fourth period Bio.

I watched him like a hawk as he leaned across their desk and whispered something in her ear. Every now and again, she covered her mouth and giggled at whatever he'd said. It made me want to fucking explode.

"Quit starting at her. You're gonna give yourself an eye injury."

Jaw clenched, I forced my eyes off Six and onto my lab partner. "The fuck you talking about, D?"

"Don't give me that shit," Daryl shot back. "Not only are you being obvious as hell about her," he grinned at me, "but you're fucking reeking of jealousy."

I opened my mouth to deny but nothing came out. Not one fucking word. Exhaling heavily, I leaned forward on my stool and shrugged. "Shit."

"Dang, Rourke," Daryl muttered, no longer laughing. "Sissy's got you tied up in knots."

"I almost fucked her," I croaked out, dropping my head in my hands. "Twice."

"For real?"

"Real." *Very real. Too fucking real.*

"What happened?" Leaning forward, Daryl whispered, "When you say *almost*?"

"First time, she stopped it because I wouldn't give her something she wanted," I admitted gruffly. "Second time, she offered herself to me anyways and I walked away."

"The fuck you do something stupid like that for?" His tone was indignant. "What did she want from you?"

"Something I don't have to give her, D," I bit out. "Something I ain't ready for."

"Fuck," Daryl muttered and I knew he got it then. He understood. He'd been my best friend my whole life. Mason, Reebo, and Bear were my friends, but Daryl? Daryl was my family.

We'd been through everything together; broken hearts, broken families, dead momma's, and cheating fucking exes. We'd done it all together, supported one another. The truth was, Daryl King was the only person I would ever consider talking about my feelings with.

"She love you?" he asked then.

I shook my head.

“You love her?”

“You know the answer to that.”

“But you like her?”

“Never thought I would.” I sighed heavily. “Never fucking expected to.”

“But you do?”

“Yeah, man.” I pressed my head into my hands and fought back the urge to groan. “I think I really fucking do. Her eyes, man.” I threw my head back and sighed. “They’re like fucking silver diamonds. I’ve never seen anything like ‘em. Fucking beautiful.”

“Then I’m gonna give you some real good advice, man, and I want you to take it.” Mirroring my slouched position on the desk, Daryl turned his face and looked me square in the eye. “If you want her, you better snatch her up fast or someone else will. She’s gorgeous, Rourke. *Fucking beautiful*,” he said with a smirk, mirroring my words. “The guys won’t stay away from her forever, no matter how much you warn them off. So I suggest you go and find it. Whatever Sissy asked you to give her? Find it, man.”

“Easier said than done, D.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Rourke,” he corrected, tone low. “You’ve been a mess since she walked into your house six weeks ago and we both know why. You want her. I see it. The guys see it. Hell, even coach knows something’s up with you.” He frowned as he spoke. “I know you’re all fucked up in the head when it comes to shit like this, but Mercedes?” He shook his head. “She ain’t nothing like Britt, man – most girls aren’t,” he added. “And deep down, I think you know it.”

Britt.

Fucking Britt.

“I don’t want to go there again,” I confessed, biting down hard on my bottom lip. “I won’t.”

“I get it, man,” Daryl sympathized. “It was bad enough the bitch was stepping out on you with half the damn football team from Jefferson High, but to fuck with your head about being pregnant?” He shook his head. “And during state? That was cold, Rourke. Fucking cold, man.”

Britt missed a period last year right around the time of playoffs. I’d been fucking terrified over it and had worried unnecessarily for weeks

about her potential pregnancy, only to find out that her period had arrived a couple of days later and she had never thought to tell me. “Scariest three weeks of my life,” I muttered, shuddering at the memory.

“And you can be damn sure she enjoyed every minute of it,” Daryl added grimly. “Hell, even if she had been, the odds of you being her baby daddy were slim fucking pickings, dude.”

I flinched.

I couldn’t help it.

It *still* fucking hurt.

“You need to cut her loose,” Daryl continued to say. “Once and for all. Be done with the bitch.”

Again, I knew Daryl was right. But knowing it was right didn’t make it easy. I’d been with Britt since I was twelve years old. She was my first crush, first kiss, first love, first fucking everything. Even though Britt had done me wrong, and I’d been with other girls since, I still harbored some serious feelings for the girl. Of course, that love wasn’t there between us anymore, at least not like it used to be, but there was still *something* there. Something that kept me coming back to her.

I never thought about it much before Six walked into my life. I didn’t have to. I ate, drank, and slept football. Britt had broken my heart but she was still there to fuck when I needed it. I thought I was happy with it like that. I thought it was easier. Now I had no fucking clue...

“You might want to make a decision sooner rather than later,” Daryl muttered, poking me in the ribs with his elbow before gesturing to the other side of the classroom.

“Fucking Mase,” I snarled when I locked eyes on their desk. He was touching Six. Fucker brushed her hair back. Tucked one of her silky tendrils behind her ear. She smiled at him and he leaned closer.

“Mr. Owens, are you alright?” Ms. Black called out sharply, drawing my attention to the front of the class.

I stared back at her. “Huh?”

“Going somewhere?” she asked with a confused expression on her face. It was then I realized I was out of my seat.

Fuck.

“Uh...yeah.” *Out of this fucking classroom before I lose my damn mind.*

Grabbing my bag off the floor, I stalked out of the classroom, offering Mason a *touch her again and I'll fucking kill you* glare when I passed their desk.

I was going to have to keep an eye on that fucker.

He needed to keep his eyes off of Six.

And his hands.

Chapter 31

Mercedes

“WHAT DID YOU DO to your stepbrother?” Molly demanded excitedly at lunch. We were in the corner of a crowded lunch room and she was looking at me like I held the answers to all her questions. I didn’t.

“What?” I shook my head and sat down at the empty round table I’d found close to the exit. “Nothing.” Well, that wasn’t technically true. I had tried to screw Rourke once or twice, but he wouldn’t let me. “Why?”

Sitting down opposite me, Molly placed her tray on the table and leaned forward on her elbows. “Word is, you were sidling up to Mason Starr during fourth period. Rourke saw you guys and flipped the hell out.” Molly’s eyes widened. “He is staring at you, Mercy. Like right now.” She pointed to something behind me – presumably Rourke. I didn’t dare look.

“Would you stop pointing?” I hissed, embarrassed.

Thankfully, she did.

“I don’t know what got into him during Biology.” That was the honest truth. One minute, we were taking down notes and the next Rourke was charging out of class like a raging bull. Why Molly thought that had something to do with me, I had no clue. Rourke didn’t care about me. He didn’t want me around. He’d told me it enough times. I was just hoping that one of these days, I would start to feel the same way about him. That day couldn’t come soon enough. “Whatever problem Rourke was having in class has *nothing* to do with me,” I assured Molly.

She didn’t look convinced. “I don’t know.” Chewing on her lip, she looked from me to something behind me and then back at me again. “Something is off with him.”

“Do you have a thing for Rourke or something?” Okay, I didn’t mean to be so blunt, but I wanted to know.

“What?” Molly’s cheeks turned red. “Why would you ask that?” Molly asked me.

I would give her nothing but honesty. “Because every time we talk, you bring him up in conversation.”

“No,” she choked out. “I don’t have a *thing* for Rourke.”

I cocked a brow, silently calling bullshit on that answer.

She turned redder.

I remained silent and waiting.

“Okay, fine,” Molly blurted. “I have a thing for someone, but it’s not Rourke.”

I frowned. “Then who?”

“Daryl,” she whispered, blushing wildly.

“Aw. Look at you all blushing and cute!” I couldn’t stop my smile from widening. “Daryl King.” I waggled my brows. “Well, I’ll be damned. You’ve got a thing for Mister Football himself.”

“It’s not funny, Merc.” Molly dropped her head in her hands. “I’m invisible to those guys. I always have been. Daryl King has never once looked in my direction since I moved back to Ocean Bay. Not one single time in two years.” She blew out a frustrated breath. “You’ve spent a half a day at this school and you are the *only* thing those boys are looking at.”

I folded my arms across my chest as I thought about what she’d just told me. “Are you using me?” I finally asked with a snort. It probably wasn’t something I should be laughing at, but I couldn’t help it. The thought of little Molly befriending me to get close to Rourke’s best friend had me close to convulsions. One look at her guilt-ridden expression and I knew I hit the nail on the head. “I feel so...violated,” I laughed. “Omigod, this is hilarious.”

“Wait, you’re not mad at me?”

“No, I’m not mad.” I waved my hand dismissively and bit back another laugh. “I’m using you too. I need a friend in this place. You’re giving me that.” Shrugging, I added, “Feel free to use me all you want – though, I should warn you now, I threw Daryl in our swimming pool when I first moved here, so I may not be very useful to you.”

Molly’s brown eyes widened. “You didn’t!”

I nodded. “Rourke threw me in to make a point. Daryl laughed at him doing it, so I after I dragged Rourke in, I tossed Daryl’s ass in to keep him company.”

“Holy shit,” Molly squeezed out then.

“What?”

“He’s coming over!”

“Who?”

“Omigod, they’re *both* coming over.” She began to fan herself.

I gaped. What. The. Actual. Hell... “Molly, are you okay?”

“I can’t,” she squeaked. “I can’t...Omigod...Hey, Rourke!”

The seat scraped beside me. Moments later, he was in my peripheral vision, sitting less than two feet from me.

Why?

“Hey, Molly,” Rourke replied with a smile. I gave him a mental brownie point for knowing Molly’s name. It meant nothing to Rourke of course, but it did to her. He looked at me then and nodded. “Six.”

“Rourke,” I acknowledged, because I had no idea of what else to say. What was he doing? Why was he here? What the fuck did he want? Was he here to humiliate me or something? He’d done enough of that the other night to last me a lifetime.

“Mercy James,” Daryl greeted me with a smirk as he spilled himself into the seat beside Molly. He turned and took a good long look at my friend and smiled. “And Blondie.” He looked harder at her. “How the hell are you, Blondie?”

“Hey, Daryl,” I snickered, unable to keep a serious face. It was hard when Molly looked like she had a bomb under her chair. “And her name is Molly.”

“*Molly*,” Daryl repeated, with a flirty wink. “Cute name for a cute girl.”

“Thank you,” Molly choked out, looking like she was about to faint.

Reaching over, Daryl snagged a fry from my tray and bit the end of it. “So, what’s happening, girls?”

“Nothing much,” I replied, feeling incredibly unnerved. Rourke was sitting beside me, and while he wasn’t saying anything to me, he *was* looking. He was staring so hard at me I was finding it a struggle not to pant. “Just...uh, eating.” *Lame, Mercy. Lame as hell.*

“Mercy and I were discussing our plans for the weekend,” Molly added, lying.

I frowned at her.

What the hell was she talking about?

She begged me with her eyes to go with it.

I sighed. "Yeah, we were. I was telling Molly here, I'm really looking forward to her party."

Daryl's brows rose in surprise. "Party?"

"Uh-huh," Molly replied in an uncertain tone.

"When?"

"After the game on Friday night," I offered with a nod. "It's going to be sick."

"The game?" Daryl asked, brows furrowed. "Our game?"

"Uh-huh."

"We're playing on Thursday night this week," Daryl explained.

Well shit...

"Mercy meant Thursday," Molly offered lamely. "Um, yeah. Big party plans for tomorrow night."

"On a school night?" I asked, gaping at my friend.

"Yes," she hissed, telling me with her eyes to shut the hell up and go with it.

"On a school night!" I repeated in an enthusiastic voice. "Molly here's a little rebel."

"Will there be beer?" Daryl asked, giving Molly his full attention.

"Three kegs and a DJ," I couldn't stop myself from saying. I was such a lying bitch. "Not to mention her father's top shelf collection."

"I guess we could swing by your place for a bit?" Daryl mused, rewarding Molly with a huge, beaming smile.

"That would be great," she breathed.

"Who said you were invited?" I shot back.

"He is," Molly squeaked, kicking my foot under the table. "Invited that is." She chuckled nervously and played with her hair. "If you want to come, that is." She looked across at us and smiled. "You're invited, too, Rourke. And Reebo and Mason. In fact, invite the whole team if you want. Anyone you like actually. There's plenty of room."

"Are you going?" Rourke asked then.

I wasn't expecting him to speak and I jumped slightly in my seat. Goddamn, his voice did something to my insides. "Me?" I asked, not daring to look at him. I couldn't.

"No. The man in the fucking moon." He sounded irritated. "Yes, you."

I shrugged. "Probably."

"Then I'll come," Rourke replied, tone gruff.

I swung around and glared at him.

What was he doing?

"On second thought, I won't be able to go," I bit out. "I have a prior engagement." Prior engagement? What the hell was wrong with me?

Rourke cocked a brow. "What?"

"A date," I lied. "I have a date on Thursday night."

"No, you don't," Molly snorted.

Gah. *Get with the program, Molls!*

"Yes," I shot back, cheeks flushed. "I do."

"With who?" Rourke asked, smirking at me. "Rourke Junior?"

Molly laughed. "Rourke Junior?"

"Six has a dick in her drawer."

I wanted to kill him.

I wanted to inflict harm on his sculpted body almost as much as I wanted to jump on it.

Rourke turned and smiled innocently at them both. "She gets off with it at night and screams my name while using it."

"Bastard," I hissed, elbowing him in the ribs. "He's lying!"

"No," Rourke laughed, holding me back from my attempt to pummel him. "I'm not. She sleeps in the room next to mine and keeps me up all night moaning my name."

"Dude!" Daryl threw his head back and roared laughing.

"I'm sorry, Mercy," Molly covered her mouth with her hands, trying to hide the sound of her obvious laughter.

Ugh. *Screw this.* Shoving my chair back, I climbed to my feet and made to storm off, only to think better of it. Turning around, I walked back to where Rourke was still sitting, laughing his ass off at my expense.

Cupping the side of his neck with my hand, I leaned down to his ear and whispered, "Laugh all you want, but Rourke Jr.? Yeah, he makes me scream in ways you *never* could."

Rourke's eyes narrowed and I gleamed in silent victory.

Take that fucker.



Rourke

“ROURKE JR.? YEAH, he makes me scream in ways you never could.”

I watched with my jaw hanging open as Six sauntered out of the lunch room, flipping me the bird on her way.

Was my stepsister trying to ruin me?

If she was, then it was working.

I was, without doubt, a fucking mess.

My eyes followed her until she was out of sight and even then, I stared at the door she had walked through like an idiot.

She was fucking beautiful.

I shouldn't have made the rubber dick joke in front of the others, but her reaction? The way Six fucked me over just there? I was impressed and painfully turned on. God, I needed in her so damn bad.

“And that, little Molly, is how you sink Rourke Owens!” Daryl snickered, thoroughly enjoying the floorshow Six and I had just given him.

Turning my attention back to him, I narrowed my eyes in warning. “Don't go there, D.”

Daryl threw his head back and laughed. “You're so fucking screwed, Rourke.”

No, I *wasn't*. “Shut the hell up,” I muttered through clenched teeth.

“Wait – do you *like* Mercedes?” Molly squeaked excitedly.

“No,” I replied at the same time Daryl said, “Yes!”

“Dude,” I snapped, feeling flustered. “Shut the fuck up.”

Daryl raised his hands in defense. “The sooner you accept it, the sooner you'll be back to your old self on the field.”

He was right about that.

If I didn't get inside Six soon, I was going to explode.

Britt walked over to us then, causing the smile on Daryl's face to transform into a snarl. “Put your tongue away, Daryl,” she sneered, leaning against the table so I had a full view of her barely covered tits. “You look desperate.”

“No, Britt, that title will always go to you,” Daryl shot back coolly. “Run along now.”

“Screw you, Daryl.”

“No thanks, Britt,” Daryl shot back without hesitation. “I wouldn’t touch you with Mason’s dick.”

Molly sniggered and I bit back a smirk.

“Are we hanging out after practice tonight?” Britt asked then, tone huffy as she turned her attention to me.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?” She looked at me with an incredulous expression. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means he’s done with your ass,” Daryl chimed in happily.

“I am not talking to you, Daryl King,” Britt shot back.

“Tough shit, because I’m talking to you,” he countered. “Rourke here? He’s done messing around with your trashy ass.”

“Daryl,” I growled in warning. “Leave it alone.”

“Rip the band aid off, Rourke,” Daryl shot back heatedly. “Quick and painless, man, and be done with the bitch.”

“Rourke,” Britt snapped, clearly furious. “Can we talk outside for a minute? *In private.*”

“Don’t do it, man,” Daryl warned. “You don’t owe her shit.”

I knew I didn’t owe Britt anything. She’d done me wrong on more occasions than I cared to remember. But she was looking down at me with those blue eyes and I felt my resolve waver. Reluctantly, I shoved my seat back and stood up.

“You dumbass,” Daryl muttered.

Britt smiled victoriously and walked ahead of me as we left the lunch room.

I didn’t look back at Daryl. I knew he thought I was a fucking idiot for hearing her out. He didn’t get it though. Deep down, I hoped he never would. I wouldn’t wish the pain of what I’d been through with Britt on anyone.

“I can’t believe you let Daryl King speak to me like that,” Britt hissed the moment we were in the hallway outside of the lunch room.

I shrugged. “He’s my best friend, Britt.” I wasn’t making excuses when I said that. I was simply explaining. “You know what you did. So does Daryl.”

“Really?” Britt cocked a brow. “Five years of being your girlfriend says you should have defended me to him.”

I bit back the urge to growl. “Pity you didn’t remember you were my girlfriend several times during those five years.”

“Is that what this is about?” She pouted. “Payback for cheating?” She took a step towards me and placed her hand on my chest. “Because I’ve said I’m sorry, Rourke.”

“I know.”

“Rourke.” Curling her fingers around the fabric of my shirt, she tugged me closer. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“But you did.” Holding my hands up, I took a step back, putting space between us. “I loved you, B, and you screwed me over.” That was the truth and it hurt. “You made a fool out of me,” I added, tone gruff. “Out of my feelings.”

“But...” She blinked rapidly, trying to figure out what I needed to hear to get over her betrayal. There was nothing she could say, but she tried anyway. “You forgave me,” she pressed. “We’ve been together many times since.”

We had and it was only now that I was beginning to see how fucking bad that was for me – how toxic she was to me. “That’s done with,” I told her, refusing not to look away when her eyes flared in anger.

“Is this because of *her*?”

“Who?”

“The bitch responsible for bruising my face,” Britt snarled. “Is it serious? Do you love her?”

I folded my arms across my chest. “That’s none of your business, Britt.”

“Then why can’t we just go back to the way we were?”

“Like when you were sneaking around behind my back and I didn’t know anything? Is that what you’re talking about?”

“But...”

“I think it’s too late.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Sorry, Britt, but I’m moving on.”

“With her?”

I didn’t answer.

“I’ll ruin her.”

“You’ll stay away from her,” I warned in a deathly cold tone of voice.
“I mean it. I’m not fucking around here. You mess with her and I’ll come down on you like nothing you’ve ever seen before.”

Chapter 32

Mercedes

THE COFFEE SHOP WAS hectic when I arrived for my shift after school. Apparently, the kids that went to The Academy liked to cram into the tiny, ten table establishment after school for coffee and a gossip. I'd lost count of the number of stares I'd received from kids from school when I served them. I shook my head every time. Entitled little brats.

One upside to the bustle was that time went quickly. Between taking and filling out orders, I didn't notice my four-hour shift passing. Before I knew, it was nine and Alec was turning the open sign on the door to closed.

"That was insane." I sighed and leaned against the counter. "I must have made at least seventy coffees tonight."

"The first week school reopens is always manic," Alec explained with a knowing smile. "It will settle down. I promise."

"I don't mind," I assured him, ripping off my apron and hanging it back up. "The busier we are, the faster the time goes."

"Should I be insulted by that statement?" he teased, warm brown eyes twinkling, as he walked towards me. "Am I that horrible to work with?"

"Are you fishing for compliments?" I cocked a brow and smirked. Having worked together for over a month, I was used to Alec's banter. In fact, I looked forward to it most days. "Wow, Alec. I thought you were smoother than that."

"So it's smooth she wants?" He grinned. "Alright. How about I take you out some night and wine and dine you?" He winked. "Smooth enough?"

"You know the answer to that." Grabbing my backpack, I slipped it on and headed for the door. "Sorry."

Alec had been asking me out for a few weeks now. And while he was insanely hot and fun, I continued to decline. I told myself it was because of

the age gap. I told Alec that, too. Thing was, I had a feeling it had less to do with age and more to do with my unwanted feelings for Rourke.

“You’re wounding my pride here, Mercy,” Alec called out good-naturedly – like I knew he would.

“I’m sure you’ll manage to survive somehow,” I chuckled, pushing to door open. “See you tomorrow.”



SOMETHING WAS DIFFERENT. I felt it the moment I stepped foot inside the house after work. What it was, I had no idea because everything looked exactly the same as this morning, but there was a different atmosphere in the place. That sounded verbose but I honestly felt it.

Kicking off my shoes in the hallway, I trudged into the kitchen only to pause in the doorway when my eyes landed on Rourke.

He was leaning against counter with his back to me. He was laughing. Genuinely laughing.

It wasn’t a sound I had heard too often and I soaked it in. The woman standing in front of the stove wasn’t Britt, or any other boney ass blonde from school – I presumed Rourke went for the anorexic blonde look.

No, this woman was old and grey and wrinkled. She was low in height and slightly hunched over the stove. She was using one hand to stir a pot with a wooden spoon. The other, she was using to pinch what I presumed was Rourke’s cheek.

I cleared my throat, not wanting to startle the old lady, and was immediately met with a pair of piercing blue eyes.

“Hey,” Rourke acknowledged in an actual civilized tone. “You’re home.”

Home? I almost laughed at the way he worded that sentence. The curious pair of grey eyes were what halted me in my tracks. “Hey,” I replied lamely instead.

“Oh,” he muttered when he noticed me eyeing up the old lady. “You two haven’t met yet. Frannie, this is Six, Cassidy’s daughter.” He smiled fondly down at the old lady. “Six, this is Fran. Our...” He paused for a moment, obviously thinking about her title. “Fran brought us up,” he finally settled on.

“Hello, Fran.” For some strange reason, I was incredibly nervous meeting this lady. I had no idea why, but I had a very strong feeling that I needed to make a good impression. “It’s nice to meet you.” Gabe had mentioned a lady named Fran would pop in and check on us once a week while he and Mom were away, but he had described a housekeeper. It was obvious to me that Rourke held this little old lady in much higher prestige.

“Now, boy, I know you ain’t gone and christened this pretty young thing a dang number like the others,” Fran said. Rourke shrugged sheepishly and she slapped his hand. “Dang it, Rourke,” she muttered when he didn’t deny it. “What’d I tell you ‘bout name calling?”

“It’s fine,” I heard myself say. “It’s more of a running joke between us.”

“See?” Rourke looked oddly relieved as he looked over at me and winked. “It’s my pet name for her.”

Fran walked slowly towards me and took my hand in both of hers, smiling the entire time. “Good to finally meet you...”

“Mercedes James,” I filled in awkwardly.

“Mercedes James.” Fran beamed at me, her frail hands shaking as she held onto my hand. “What a fine name that is.” She looked back at Rourke and winked. “What a fine young lady she is.” Immediately, I turned scarlet. “You got a young man calling on you, Mercedes James?”

“Ugh...no,” I spluttered, mortified. “Not at all.”

“Ya hear that, Rourke?” Fran said, not one bit conspicuous. “Mercedes’ here’s a free agent. Same as you.”

Rourke looked uncomfortable as he spoke. “Six is Cassidy’s daughter, Fran. You remember Dad’s wife Cassidy?”

“I ain’t lost my mind yet, boy,” Fran shot back. “Course I remember Cass.”

“Mercedes is my stepsister, Fran,” Rourke clarified with a frown.

“Pssh. Step-whepp.” Fran batted the air. “Ain’t no mixed bloodlines here.”

“Christ,” Rourke muttered under his breath before running a hand through his hair. “Are you staying for dinner, Fran?” He was desperate to change the subject. It was obvious.

“And miss my program?” Fran replied incredulously. I watched as she snatched a large brown purse from the counter and tossed it over her

shoulder. "Hell no."

I laughed out loud. I probably shouldn't have, but there was something warming about hearing an old lady cuss.

"You take good care of yourself, Mercedes James," Fran ordered with a smile before pottering over to Rourke and placing a loud kiss on his cheek. "Rourky Porky, you make sure you eat your dinner now, ya hear?" He turned bright pink. I snickered at the endearment. He loved this old lady. It was obvious.

"You sure you're okay driving home, Fran?" Rourke called after her.

"Boy, I was driving long before you were a twinkle in your daddy's eye," she called back. "Nighty-night." The sound of the front door closing filled my ears and I snickered loudly.

"Omigod," I laughed, unable to smother my grin.

"Don't say a word," Rourke warned me with a reluctant smirk on his face.

"Come here, Rorky-Porky," I teased as I prowled towards him with my hand out, fingers positioned like pincers. "Gimme a squeeze."

"Six, I'm warning you." He laughed and jerked backwards, unintentionally backing himself up against the counter. "Don't you dare."

"Oh, wassss wonnng?" I cooed. Stretching up on my tiptoes, I pinched his cheek. "Poor baby need a kiss?"

Reaching forward, he caught ahold of my hands, stopping me from pinching him further. "You think that's funny?"

"You think it's funny telling half the school about Rourke Jr.?" I shot back with a raised brow.

He frowned and said, "Okay, fair point," before his frown disappeared and was replaced with a shit eating grin. "You called your dick Rourke Jr.."

"Only because you did," I shot back, blushing. My hands fell to my sides, but he was still holding them.

"Are you embarrassed?" he asked, tone low and gruff.

"I'm *confused*," I corrected. I was embarrassed, but my confusion was trumping all other emotions. "The other night you were..." My words trailed off. Rourke knew what he was the other night. *A huge asshole*. "And then today at school, you come and sit with me at lunch?" I shook my head, at a complete loss. I knew what I should be feeling for him; anger and resentment. I wanted to feel that way. I willed those emotions to come. But

they didn't because I couldn't feel anything but want for this boy. It made me pathetic and sad and I couldn't change it. In the back of my mind, I knew what I felt for Rourke was more than lustful longing, but right now, I wasn't ready to acknowledge anything *more*.

"You're...different to what I expected," he offered.

"Yeah, well, I usually am."

"I think I like you, Six." He looked disappointed in himself as he said it.

"Wow. Thanks?"

"And I've been thinking about some stuff," Rourke added.

"Did it hurt?"

"Funny." He shot back, entwining his fingers with mine. "No. I've made a decision."

My heart leapt in my chest. "About what?"

"Us." He pulled me closer so that our bodies were completely aligned and flush against the other.

Breathe, Mercy. Breathe. "Oh?"

"Yeah." Rourke looked deep into my eyes. "I think we should fuck."

"I beg your pardon," I strangled out. I had to have misheard him because there was no way Rourke just said...

"I think we should fuck," he repeated.

Nope, I'd heard exactly right. "No!"

"No?" Rourke frowned like he'd never heard the word in his life. "Six, I just told you I'm willing to fuck you."

"You're *willing* to fuck me?" Snatching my hands back, I quickly retreated from him. "Wow." Was he serious?

"What?" Rourke shook his head. "No. Six, not willing." He took a step towards me. "I'm offering to fuck you."

Offering to fuck me?

Was he serious?

"You complete *asshole*," I hissed, hurt and furious. He couldn't have hurt me more if he slapped me across the face.

"What?" Rourke threw his hands up in the air. "I thought that's what you wanted the other night?"

I did. I wanted him the other night. But I also wanted... oh god, I didn't know what I wanted, but I knew it was more than a fuck.

“Six,” he tried again. “I’m not trying to be romantic here. I’m trying to be honest.”

“Well, you’re certainly that.”

“Stop it,” he growled. “What I mean...Fuck!” He rubbed his face with his hand and sighed. “I want you. Okay?” He looked me square in the eye as he spoke. “I want to be inside you so fucking bad. You have no fucking idea how much I regret walking away the other night.”

“Then why did you?” I whispered, asking the question that had been haunting me.

“Because all it will ever be is sex to me!” Rourke shot back heatedly. “And you?” He shook his head. “You’re the kind of girl that needs more – deserves more. I don’t have *more* to give!”

“Then why are you offering now?” I screamed.

“Because I’d rather it was me fucking you!” he roared. “I’m not blind, Six. You’re gorgeous. Christ, you should have seen the look on half the guys’ faces when you walked your ass into school this morning. They *all* want you,” he snarled. “And I can’t fucking stand the thought of you with anyone else.”

“So, you don’t want me,” I said shakily. “But you don’t want anyone else to have me?”

“No, Six. I *do*.” Rourke growled and threw his hands up in the air in obvious exasperation. “I do want you.”

“For sex?”

Rourke shrugged almost helplessly, but had the good sense not to respond.

“Well, thanks for the offer,” I said shakily as I retreated to the door and forced down the bile rising in my throat. “But I’m afraid I am going to have to regretfully decline your *offer* to fuck, Rourke.”



Rourke

WELL, THAT COULD not have gone fucking worse. I watched Six stalk out of the kitchen and I wanted to kick my own ass.

What the hell was wrong with me?

What was I supposed to do now?

Chase after her and beg? Hell no.

I was too damn prideful for that.

But I wanted her and I was done denying it.

I'm offering to fuck you? Smooth, Rourke. Real fucking smooth.

Feeling irritated, I paced the kitchen and plotted my next move. She wanted me the other night; I was sure of it. I wasn't willing to give her the words or make promises I wouldn't keep, but I was more than willing to give her my body. She'd turned me down.

That made me think about things. What else was I willing to give? How far was I willing to go to have her?

Six was funny and sweet and sarcastic as hell. I knew it wasn't just her body I was attracted to either. She intrigued me and challenged me daily and I felt an abnormal swell of jealousy whenever I caught any of the guys looking at her. I didn't like it. In fact, I couldn't fucking stand it. Usually girls bored me, but not this one. This one, I was drawn to.

Fuck.

Amelia strolled into the kitchen and studied me with a curious expression. Unperturbed by my sister's smirking, I continued to pace and plot. I would have to up my game if I wanted to get somewhere with Six. I *would* get there with her. My brain and my dick had decided it was a matter of time.

I'd have to woo the girl.

Fuck, I wasn't good at wooing.

The girls in Ocean Bay didn't exactly play hard to get.

I had a feeling Six wasn't playing either. She was hard to get.

"I heard a rumor today," Amelia announced. She slid onto one of the bar stools at our kitchen island. I didn't care about rumors so I didn't respond. "Word around school is you finally finished things with Brittany." Word traveled fast around the halls of the Academy. Again, I didn't care enough to stop and answer. "Is it true?"

"It is," I replied after a pause. "It's over. For good, this time."

"Good." Amelia sighed heavily. "I'm glad."

I nodded, still pacing.

"Is it because of Mercedes?"

I stopped and swung around to face her. "What?"

“People are talking, Rourke,” my sister said in a suddenly serious tone. “The girls on my soccer team are saying you ended things with Britt because you’re secretly seeing Mercedes.”

“Bullshit,” I growled, unwilling to tell my sister anything. “Ignore them.”

“They’re saying you and Mercedes have been hooking up all summer,” she added with a concerned frown. “Is it true?” She swallowed deeply and blushed. “Have you two been hooking up?”

Yes. “No,” I lied.

“You’re a horrible liar.” My sister looked at me with a dubious expression etched on her face. “Do you think I’m blind? Rourke, I’ve seen the way you both look at each other.”

“*Nothing* is going on.”

“Is Britt the one who cut up Mercy’s face?”

I flinched, but didn’t reply.

“Rourke,” Amelia said wearily. “Come on.”

“What do you want me to say?” I demanded then, feeling a sudden pang of anger. I didn’t need to explain myself to my little sister. “For fuck’s sake, Mills.”

“Don’t break her, Rourke,” Amelia said then, tone soft. “I have a feeling there’s more to Mercedes than she lets on. I get the distinct impression that she’s *fragile*.”

“Six, fragile?” I laughed at the notion.

“I’m serious,” Amelia urged. Hopping down from the bar stool, she walked over to where I was standing. “Mercedes isn’t some random girl you can walk away from when it goes to hell.” Amelia placed her hands on her hips and glared up at me. “Cass is having Dad’s babies; you can’t chase this one off, Rourke. You guys messing around with each other could cause a lot of problems.”

“You’re wasting your breath on this conversation,” I shot back. “I’ve already told you there’s nothing going on.”

“And I’ve already told you that you’re a horrible liar,” my sister replied before walking out of the kitchen.

Amelia’s warning fell on deaf ears though. I wanted Six and I wasn’t about to change my mind. And if I was being honest, I didn’t think anything could.

Chapter 33

Rourke

“HEY GUYS, IF YOU listen real careful, I think ya’ll will just about be able to hear it!” Mason announced in a serious tone to the team after football practice on Tuesday afternoon.

Reebo, who was slouched on the bench next to me, threw his towel across the room at Mason. “The fuck you talking about, Mase?”

Mason caught the towel midair and grinned. “The sound of Rourke’s balls dropping.”

“Stupid shit,” Daryl, who was on my other side, muttered. “Ignore him, Rourke. The fool’s clueless.”

Waggling his brows, Mason added, “Sissy’s got the poor fucker all frazzled.” Encouraged by the sniggers of our teammates, Mason continued to fuck with me.

He stood up on the bench and cupped his hand to his chest. “Lord have *Mercy*,” he chuckled as he rolled his hips and pretended to be slapping something in front of him. It didn’t take a fucking genius to figure out what. “Girl’s got an ass like a fucking porn star.”

The room erupted in laughter and Bear, who was getting changed beside Mason, shook his head and sighed wearily. “You ain’t real smart, are you, Mase?”

“Aw, Rourke knows I’m only messing around.” Laughing, Mason jumped down from the bench and smirked. “It’s all good.”

I did know he was joking around, but that wouldn’t prevent him from getting his ass kicked.

I stood up, unsmiling, and walked across the room.

The moment Mason’s gaze landed on mine, all humor in his eyes faded fast.

“It was a joke, dude,” he offered, holding his hands up in retreat. “I was just screwing around.”

I didn't say a word as I approached. I just smiled, knowing I was about to bust this fucker's nose.

"Rourke," Mase warned, taking a step back. He knew the drill by now. Mason and I had a lifelong friendship where any issues that came up were always resolved in a fight. "Chill out. It was a joke." When he realized I wasn't about to *chill out*, Mase groaned. "Aw fuck," he choked before taking a swing at me.

I ducked, easily dodging Mason's fist, before rearing my head back and lunging forward. The moment my forehead connected with his nose, a loud crunching sound filled my ears.

"God fucking dammit, Rourke," Mason howled, staggering backwards. "That's the third fucking time you've broken my nose, fucker." Covering his face with his hands to stem the loss of blood, he mumbled. "Always the fucking nose."

"Make one more fucking comment about her and I'll break your goddamn legs," I warned him, tone low, eyes locked on my friend. "Mercy James isn't a topic of humor or conversation for you or anyone else. You keep her name off your lips and her face out of your perverted fucking minds." I looked around my teammates in warning. "Ya'll got that?"

No one said a word, making it clear to me that these fuckers got it.

I grabbed my bag and stormed out of the changing rooms, not wanting to wait around and explain to coach why his first string tight end had a broken nose two days before game night.

I walked through the quad towards the student parking lot with my fists clenched tightly.

Listening to Mason talk about Six back there had been the straw that broke the camel's back for me.

My proposition last night had gone down like a lead balloon and Six had been avoiding me like the plague ever since.

School sucked ass today, mostly because Six wasn't talking to me. She just walked through the hallways with her nose cocked up in the air, ignoring the hell out of me.

I'd been watching her from a distance at school all day and it was driving me bat shit crazy. What was pushing me closer to the edge was having to watch the guys at school ogle her and watch her every move

when she walked past. I personally wanted to kick the shit out of every guy that looked in her direction.

Nothing was calming me.

Absolutely nothing.

No amount of running or training helped. I was burning inside. Bristling with this unyielding thrum of energy buzzing inside of me.

Everywhere I went today, I either saw her or heard someone talking about her.

Yeah, Six was big news around the school – I'd known she would be. You didn't look like her and go under the radar. Not that she seemed to give a damn about any of the attention. I liked that about her. She was completely unfazed by how she affected the guys around her. It was as if she didn't care.

Maybe she didn't.

Maybe she was used to it.

Had to be.

I thought about Mason and Daryl and how easy it was for them. They could promise a girl whatever she wanted to hear and not give a damn about the consequences or the aftermath.

Why couldn't I be like that?

Because I read too much into shit.

No, I read too damn much into my mother's fucking letters.

***Promise me, Rourke, that you'll never intentionally hurt a girl.
Always tell the truth, my boy, it's much easier to remember.
Following your heart's desire is a beautiful thing,
but don't leave a trail of broken hearts in your wake.
You're better than that. I'm writing this down because
I'm not going to be around to tell you this when you come of age...***

Stupid fucking words on a stupid fucking journal.

Words I followed.

Yeah, I was a prick and probably a million other things, but I didn't lie to girls. I told the truth to my fucking detriment. But it was times like these that it would be so much easier to lie.

It wasn't like I was short on offers.

If I wanted sex, I could have it.

But I didn't just want sex. I wanted it with Six. I wanted a lot with her.

Dammit.

She had some fucked up hold over me. I didn't like it, feeling out of control, but I was also sort of hooked on the fantastic fucking way she made me feel. That buzzing feeling I got when I was around her was addictive as fuck. One look from her and I was undone. I honest to god felt like I had been sucker punched in the chest whenever she looked up at me with those big silver eyes.

And when she gave me shit?

It was so fucking hot.

I didn't understand any of this, either. I couldn't make one bit of sense of my feelings or actions. I only knew that I had to have her...

"You staking claim on her now?" I heard Mason calling out in the parking lot. Seconds later, he was by my side. "Mercedes," he confirmed with an impish grin. "She yours now?"

"She sure as shit ain't yours," I shot back with a growl as I stalked to my truck. I needed to get out of here. I felt agitated and unpredictable. Bad fucking combination.

"You serious about her?" he asked, holding a bunch of blood soaked tissues to his nose.

"Not your business, Mase." Unlocking my truck, I tossed my bag in the back seat before rounding the truck. "You should go ice that," I added before opening the driver's side door.

"Thought so," Mase replied with a knowing smile. "Knew you wouldn't put that mess with Britt to bed if you weren't hung up on another girl."

"I'm *not* hung up on anyone," I shot back, lying through my fucking teeth. "I'm..."

"You're what?" Mase asked, grinning when I didn't finish my sentence.

Ruined. I'm fucking ruined. "I'm leaving," I muttered before slamming my door shut and cranking the engine.



Mercedes

“HOW WAS SCHOOL TODAY, Mercy?” Amelia asked me the moment I got home from work on Tuesday night. She was sitting at the breakfast bar, looking intently at me. Her blonde hair framed her face like a halo of gold, making her look much younger than what she was.

“It was fine,” I told her. “I didn’t see *you* anywhere though.” I thought that was pretty weird. Amelia was a sophomore. In any of my old schools, I would bump into kids from different grades all day long. But then again, Ocean Bay Academy was the first private school I had ever stepped foot inside. Maybe it was different here.

“Our lunch schedule is different to the seniors,” she informed me with an easy smile. “And most of my classes take place in the west wing of the school.”

“The west wing?” I raised a brow. “How many wings are there?”

“A lot,” she chuckled. “The Academy is pretty big.” Understatement of the century. “You know, if you joined the girls soccer team, we would see more of each other.”

“Pass.” I fought back a shudder. “I’m not into sports.”

She looked at me in surprise. “Any sports?”

Does eating count as a sport? “Not a one.”

“Oh.” Amelia looked at me with a thoughtful expression.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she was quick to reply, a little red faced. “I was just thinking about something.”

“Care to share?”

“It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Now I really want to know.”

“I was just remembering something I heard at soccer practice today,” she told me with a sheepish expression. “Something a few of the girls were saying about you and um... Rourke.”

Now I was the one to blush.

“What about me and Rourke?”

Amelia stared at me, her expression unreadable. “Some of the girls at school seem to be under the impression that you and Rourke are...a thing.”

“A *thing*?” I paled and quickly shook my head. “Why would anyone think that?”

“Because Rourke finally ended things with Brittany Beckitt yesterday,” Amelia supplied, intelligent blue eyes scanning my face. “For good, this time. And according to Sami Davidson – a senior on the cheerleading team – Britt went ballistic.”

He did?

Rourke really ended his screwed-up relationship with Britt – *the girl he liked to fuck?*

Ugh.

“What does any of that have to do with me?” I asked with a shaky voice. My palms were sweating, my heart racing erratically in my chest.

Why was I nervous? I didn’t need to feel nervous.

In fact, I shouldn’t be feeling anything at all.

Not about Rourke freaking Owens.

You see, I had a new resolve; *do not succumb to my stepbrother’s charms.*

Rourke could prance around the house half naked all he wanted. He could wink and flirt with me, and brush against my body with his to his heart’s content.

It wouldn’t affect me.

I wouldn’t allow it to.

Not since the words “*I’m offering to fuck you,*” came out of his mouth last night.

Whatever lunacy that had possessed me these last six weeks had taken a back seat to common sense. The desires and urges I felt towards Rourke were now repressed and safely locked away in my brain somewhere, in a big box with the words *don’t touch, he’ll fuck you up* scrawled over it.

Amelia raised her brows and gave me a ‘*don’t treat me like I’m stupid*’ expression. “I’m not blind, Mercy,” she said with a small frown. “I don’t know what it is, but there is definitely *something* happening between you and my brother.”

“There really isn’t,” I lied, feeling the burn all the way down to my toes. “Anything between us, I mean.”

“I know how Rourke presents himself to the world,” Amelia continued like I hadn’t spoken. “A foulmouthed asshole who doesn’t give a damn about anyone, but it’s not true. Don’t believe the act. Look beyond it.

There's a broken boy screaming out to be loved underneath that hard exterior. You just have to scratch at the surface."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I see something between you two," she replied honestly. "A connection."

Thankfully, I didn't have to respond to her statement because Rourke chose this exact moment to saunter into the kitchen in nothing but a pair of navy sweatpants.

Immediately, my traitorous heart decided to jackhammer in my chest; the sight of my stepbrother the cause of my body's violent reaction.

"Mills," Rourke acknowledged with a nod before turning to wink at me. "Six."

"Rourke," Amelia replied evenly.

"Did Fran leave anything for dinner?" he asked as he padded over to the oven and peeked inside. "I'm fucking starving."

"What the hell happened to you?" Amelia demanded before I could. Both of us were gaping at the bruising on the left side of Rourke's body.

Rourke looked from her to me before shrugging. "Got my ass kicked at practice this morning."

"You got your ass kicked?" Amelia asked incredulously.

"It happens." Closing the oven door, he moved towards the fridge, obviously unaffected by the look of horror on both of our faces. "Fuck yeah," he muttered happily. "Quiche."

"Not to you, Rourke," she was quick to point out. "You never take hits like *that*."

I remained silent, watching Rourke as he grabbed a fork from the drawer and quickly shoveled mouthfuls of quiche into his mouth.

God, he was so freaking sexy even when he was wounded.

Actually, the bruises only added to his sex appeal.

There was something primal about this boy...

"You want a piece of the quiche or a piece of me, Six?" Rourke asked with a double dimpled grin. "You're staring real hard, girl."

The dimples, I decided, must have come from Rourke's mother. Neither Gabe nor Amelia sported a single one.

Mortified, I cleared my thoughts and flashed Rourke a glare. "Neither."

“You sure you don’t wanna try a bite?” he shot back with a wolfish grin, holding out his fork towards me. “You never know; you might like it. You might even think it’s the best you’ve ever had.”

“Ugh.” Amelia cleared her throat loudly. “You’re so gross, Rourke.”

“I know I won’t,” I shot back firmly, forcing my features to remain impassive, while inside I was burning up. “I’m very selective in the quiches I taste.” Smiling sweetly, I added, “I’m sure yours tastes just the same as every other quiche in the world.”

Rourke smiled darkly in challenge. “Why don’t you come over here and check for yourself?”

“I...uh...have a lot of homework to do,” I blurted out, retreating from the kitchen, my face a deep burgundy color. I needed to get away from this guy. His mood swings were too much for me to handle. And he was too damn tempting!

Rourke threw his head back and laughed. “Rourke Jr. waiting for you upstairs?” *Asshole*. “Well, you know where I am if you get hungry.”

That bastard!

“Thanks,” I sneered. “But I’d rather starve.”



Rourke

“WHAT THE HELL ARE you playing at?” Six demanded, storming into my bedroom an hour later. Normally, I would have been mad as hell at anyone walking into my bedroom without knocking, but weirdly, I didn’t have a problem with this girl busting in on me.

“Taste your *quiche*?” she demanded in an infuriated tone, not giving me a chance to respond to her first question. “You’re a big dick, Rourke Owens.”

Smothering a laugh, I tried to keep a straight face as Six ranted at me. It wasn’t easy though, not when she looked so fucking sexy all flustered and outraged.

Standing in the middle of my bedroom dressed in tank top and tight cotton shorts, Six looked like she had just walked out of one of my dreams. She had her hands planted firmly on those fucking fantastic hips of her, and

was glaring at me with fierce silver eyes. Her dark hair was free and flowing down her body.

Christ, she was beyond beautiful.

“Are you listening to me?” she hissed, narrowing her eyes.

No, I wasn’t listening to her; I was too busy fucking looking at her. “What’s up?” I managed to muster up, tone thick and gruff, eyes locked on her curves. I knew what was under those scraps of clothes Six had on and I was dying to see for myself again. *Over and over again.*

“You are what’s up,” Six growled, stalking towards me like a wild animal would its prey. “You and your stupid comments.” Seconds later, she flung herself onto my bed, tackling me. “You think you’re funny?” she hissed, shoving against my chest. “Teasing me about *Rourke Jr.* in front of *Amelia* of all people?”

“What’s the problem?” I taunted, enjoying every minute of her outburst. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. And besides, we both know it’s me you were thinking about that night.”

Her voice rose and her eyes flashed with fury. “I’ll give you Rourke fucking Jr.!” Straddling my lap, Six pushed me down on my back. “I’m going to kick your ass,” she grumbled before pulling my hair.

I grinned, happily letting her shove me down. “You’re the one still calling your rubber dick Rourke Jr.” Reaching around, I patted her ass with my hand. “Is this your version of kicking my ass? If so, feel free to kick my ass daily.”

“Like that, do you?” she huffed, yanking hard. Yeah, the girl actually pulled my fucking hair. “How about this?” she added, digging her nails into my upper arms. “Still think you’re funny?”

If she expected me to fight her off, she was going to be disappointed. I’d never been so turned on in my life.

“Christ, you’re so fucking hot right now, Six,” I groaned in pure delight. “Never thought I would, but I’m loving this dominatrix thing you’ve got going on, babe.”

“Dominatrix? *Babe*? Are you serious?” Six screeched. “Oh my god! Leave me alone, you jackass!”

“You’re the one pinning me to my bed,” I shot back, chuckling.

She looked down at me then, eyes wide and full of awareness. “Omigod,” she muttered, face flushed. “What the hell am I doing?”

“You’re kicking my ass?” I offered with a rueful smile. “And I’m enjoying every fucking minute of it.”

“What are you doing to me?” she whispered, her grey eyes trained on mine. “You’re making me *crazy*, Rourke.”

“Good,” I shot back gruffly. “Because you’ve been doing the same to me since you walked your ass through my door.” My hands moved to their hips of their own accord, her body on mine too much of a temptation to even try and resist.

How I had managed to resist Six for as long as I had was a miracle in itself. I’d been fighting and losing battle, I realized. Thinking I could resist that girl was fucking insanity on my behalf. There was no resisting Six. There was no denying how attracted I was to her either.

She looked fucking beautiful tonight. Every sexy curve was on full display and, for once, I didn’t have to pretend I was unaffected.

“You’re lying,” she challenged, her lustful gaze locked on my face.

“I’m not a liar.”

She raised a brow in challenge. “No?”

“No,” I confirmed, tightening my hold on her. “I only deal with honesty, Six. It’s who I am.”

She stared at me for a long moment before whispering, “Me too.”

Without thinking twice about it, I slipped my arms around her waist and rolled her onto her back.

Six rewarded me with a small scream that I erased with my mouth. I kissed her hard and fast before pulling back to gauge her reaction. I wanted her with a desire that bordered obsession, but I wasn’t about to take from her anything she wasn’t one hundred percent willing to give me.

“Why did you do that?” Six whispered, panting, her fingers knotting in the front of my wife beater. She was looking up at me, cheeks flushed, silver eyes dark with desire. “Rourke?”

“Because,” I shot back gruffly.

“Because?”

Settling between her legs, I lowered my face and brushed my nose against hers, exhaling a shaky breath when she shifted beneath me.

I adjusted my weight onto one elbow then and the friction of our bodies caused me to growl and Six to whimper. The soft moan that came from her throat was almost too much for me.

I hadn't realized I'd been waiting for this. Looking forward to this. *To her.*

Unable to stop myself, I leaned into her neck and kissed the skin covering her fluttering pulse, inhaling a deep breath through my nose in the process. Fuck, even her scent was perfect. She smelled like coconut lotion and the ocean, and...Six. *Jesus.*

Clenching my eyes shut, I fought back a shiver and swiped my tongue across the bare skin of her neck. Tasted perfect, too.

"Rourke," she moaned, wrapping her legs around my body. "Mmmm, god...Rourke," she repeated, her words a breathy moan.

"What, Six?" I whispered, latching onto her neck with my lips. Suckling on her skin, I rocked against her and used my free hand to hitch one of her thighs up. "What do you need, baby?"

"More," she pleaded, thrusting her tiny little body against mine. "Please." Her voice was laced with aching longing. "I need...*more.*"

I knew exactly what she needed and I sure as hell planned on giving it to her many times over. I wondered if she was a screamer? How she'd sound when I finally buried myself inside her? How she would *feel...*

My thoughts caused my hunger for Six to grow and soon enough, I was frantic with my lips on hers and my hands under her shirt.

Her lips were soft and plump and melded perfectly to mine. She held me tightly against, her, small arms caged around my neck, pulling my face down to hers.

Six was clinging to me like she was afraid I would pull away at any moment. She didn't need to worry tonight; I had no intentions of leaving her again.

"Rourke, Dad's on the phone. He wants to talk to... I knew it!" The sound of my sister's voice caused Six to freeze beneath me and me to groan in pure fucking frustration.

"Oh my god," Six hissed, shoving against my chest. Reluctantly, I rolled off her and watched as she jumped off my bed and ran from my room, passing a grinning Amelia on her way.

"*Nothing's going on?*" Amelia said in a mocking tone as she held her cell to her chest. "Sure thing, big brother."

Flinging myself onto my stomach, feeling tortured, I grabbed a pillow and shoved my face into the fabric before groaning loudly.

God fucking dammit.

Mother fucking cock block...

“Um, Dad’s still on the line?” Amelia giggled and I reached behind me to flip her the bird.

“Sorry, Dad,” I heard her say, still giggling. Her voice grew softer, a clean sign she was retreating from my room. “Rourke’s having some...um, personal issues.”

Personal issues?

Oh, I was having personal issues alright; my balls had turned blue and were growing intimately acquainted with my stomach right about now.

I waited a few minutes, allowing my body time to simmer the hell down, before chasing after Six.

I knew the moment I knocked on her bedroom door that I was stepping over a line I wasn’t supposed to cross. But there was no going back for me. I was on fire for this girl and if she didn’t put me out of my misery soon, I had no doubt I would go up in flames.

Chapter 34

Mercedes

I WAS LIVING PROOF that shame didn't actually kill a person. If it did, I would have died on the spot last night. Amelia walking in on me and Rourke making out on his bed had to be the most embarrassing moment of my life.

Never mind had to be; it *was* the most embarrassing moment of my life.

There was something very wrong with me.

Had I left all of my scruples and morals back in Kansas?

I must have.

Having come very close to falling into bed with Rourke last night, I was seriously beginning to question my sanity.

Was I one of those masochistic girls who loved a bad boy that treated her like shit?

I never would have thought so, but since coming to this godawful town, I wasn't so sure.

He was wrong for me, so incredibly wrong.

Boys like Rourke Owens were dangerous. I wasn't a fool. I'd grown up around a different jackass every month. I knew a player when I saw one – *kissed* one...

Whatever sick and twisted game Rourke and I had been playing with each other, I was ending it now. Before I got hurt, or worse, fell so deep I couldn't back out.

Locking my bedroom door and not answering his soft knocking last night was the first sensible thing I had done since I got here.

I needed to cut him off. Break away from this twisted connection that seemed to be growing between us. Rourke had a hold on me I was determined to break.

I vowed to give all of my attention to school and cling to Molly like the pathetic, friendless person I was. Monday and Tuesday had passed in a new-kid-at-school-trying-to-find-her-feet sort of way. It wasn't an unfamiliar feeling to me.

By lunchtime on Wednesday, I was feeling settled. I knew it probably took other new students a hell of a lot longer to feel that way, but three days was long enough for me.

Taking a bite of my pasta salad, I listened to Molly as she rambled on and on about the Falcon's first game of the season tomorrow night – and the fact that *she* was hosting the after party.

"You don't have to throw the stupid party, you know," I informed her when she began to hyperventilate for the third time during lunch. "It was just a joke."

"A joke?" Molly squeezed out, wide eyed. "Daryl agreed to come over!"

"So?" I shrugged. "If it's making you feel this uncomfortable then cancel."

"I can't just *cancel*," she spluttered, like the thought alone was lunacy. "Daryl King agreed to come to *my* party."

"Your *imaginary* party," I chimed in between bites of my lunch. "And so what? I thought you said you didn't care about those guys?" I specifically remembered Molly telling me she didn't give a shit about the prestigious *it crowd*. I scoffed at the thought. "They're a bunch of jackasses."

"Cute jackasses," she countered with a grin. "You're going to come, right?"

"Yeah." I nodded and speared a pasta noodle with my fork. "I'll come by for an hour."

"And the game?" she added. "You're coming with me, right? It's the Falcon's first game of the season."

Swallowing a mouthful of pasta, I dropped my fork on my plate and leaned back in my seat. "I don't think so, Molls. I'm not big on football." I was trying to avoid Rourke as much as humanly possible. I hadn't told Molly anything about our encounter last night, and I had no plans to, but going to a football game he was playing in didn't sound like a good idea. "And anyways, don't high school football games usually take place on

Friday nights?” I asked. At least that’s what I remembered from my previous school.

“They do,” Molly confirmed. “But every so often the game has to be switched to a Thursday or a Saturday. Oh come on, Mercy!” Molly begged. “Please say you’ll come? I need you to come with me.”

I frowned. “Why?”

“You don’t get it, Merc,” she explained in a pained voice. “For two years, I’ve been invisible to Daryl King and his friends. Two years! Now, he’s interested in coming to my party? At my house?” Molly sighed heavily. “I’m not dumb enough to believe Daryl’s sudden interest has anything to do with me.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying, you’re the common denominator here, Mercy. The boys want to go to my party because of you.”

“And I told you, I’ll come to the party –”

“It’s not enough,” she blurted out, cutting me off. “What if, when they don’t see me with you after the game, they decide to go somewhere else?”

On a Thursday night? “Do you even care?”

“I shouldn’t,” she muttered. “But I do.”

“Fine,” I replied in defeat. I didn’t understand Molly’s need to feel accepted by these rich pricks, but I liked her. “If you really feel that way, then I’ll come with you to the stupid game.”

“Thank you! Oh, you’re going to have such a great time,” Molly said enthusiastically. “Our boys are so good to watch, Mercy. The Ocean Bay Falcon’s kick ass almost every game.”

“I doubt it, considering I don’t even like football,” I made the mistake of saying.

“Are you serious?” Molly squeezed out, wide eyed. “You don’t like football!”

I shrugged. “Not really.” I didn’t understand the game and I didn’t care to learn. Life was short and I didn’t plan on wasting a second of it learning useless facets of information I would never need. “Football. Soccer. Basketball. Lacrosse?” I gestured with my hand. “They’re all the same to me.”

“Omigod,” she spluttered. “What planet did you come from?”

“The real world,” I chimed in between bites of my lunch. “You know, the one where being on the football team won’t pay your bills and being a cheerleader doesn’t put food on the table.”

Molly flinched. “That sounds...terrible.”

I bit back a chuckle. “Not really. I actually sort of miss it.”

She looked at me like I had spoken a foreign language. “Why?”

I sighed, but didn’t bother replying. I loved Molly. She was sweet, good-natured, and my only friend in this town, but she was rich. Just like every other kid at this school, Molly had been born into wealth. She would never understand my feelings, so I didn’t bother voicing them.

“Did you understand a word of what Mr. Trimble said in Trig this morning?” I asked, deftly changing the subject.

“I don’t think Mr. Trimble knows what he’s saying half the time,” Molly shot back, happy to move on to a new subject. “That man is the worst. If I pass Trig this semester, it will be a miracle.”

Content, I listened to Molly as she rambled on and on about the different subjects she was taking for the duration of lunch.

When the bell rang, signaling the end of break, we were deep in conversation, discussing whether or not Miss Black, my biology teacher, was having an affair with Coach Joe.

I didn’t really care if they were banging or not, but I was glad to have something to think about. It helped me to ignore the pair of blue eyes boring into the side of my face.

Yeah, it hadn’t passed my attention that Rourke had never once taken his eyes off me during lunch.

Chapter 35

Mercedes

THE COFFEE SHOP WAS, once again, insanely busy after school on Wednesday. Hurrying out back, I dropped off my backpack before pulling my overly long hair into a loose ponytail and slinging my apron on over my uniform.

The after-school rush was in full swing when I took to the floor, taking orders and clearing off dirty tables for awaiting customers.

I had served fifty-six coffees and nineteen iced teas when Rourke walked through the door just before closing that night.

Donning our school's regulatory grey V-necked sweater and navy slacks, Rourke walked into Madame Jory's like he owned the place.

The sleeves of his sweater were rolled up, revealing the best pair of forearms I'd ever seen. Like seriously, the corded veins and muscles made me ache. Talk about forearm porn.

Knowing the hands attached to those forearms had touched me in places no one else has, made me feel a little lightheaded.

The moment his eyes landed on my face, my heart slammed against my ribcage and the air thinned around me, making it hard to breathe.

Goddammit...

"Evening, Six," he acknowledged with an incline of his head. The smile he was wearing did little to calm my frazzled nerves.

"We're closing," I blurted out. I was having a hard time trying to get past the last conversation we'd had; the words *'I'm willing to fuck you'* still haunting my every waking hour.

"I'm not here for coffee," Rourke replied with a wink.

"Then what are you here for?"

"You." He grinned, revealing those deep dimples.

Goddamn...

"Me?"

“Yes, you,” he replied, still grinning. “We need to talk.”

“But I’m working.”

He raised a brow. “I thought you said you were just closing?”

I flushed bright red. “I still have clean-up to do.”

“Then I’ll wait.”

My jaw fell open and I watched as Rourke walked over to a table and lowered himself onto a chair. He began to drum his fingers impatiently against the table, a clear sign he was restless.

“Does he want something?” Alec asked, appearing at my side. His face was set in a deep frown as he glowered at Rourke. “He knows we’re closing, right?”

“Me,” I whispered, cheeks burning. “He’s waiting on me.”

“Why?”

“Because...” When I didn’t finish, Alec looked over to where Rourke was sitting and then back at me.

“So, Owens is the reason you’ve been turning me down?” He didn’t sound mad, but he didn’t sound thrilled either. “Bad idea, Mercedes,” he added quietly. “That guy has serious issues.”

Yeah. I had gathered that.

“You done here, Six?” Rourke asked then, coming to stand by the counter, eyes focused on Alec.

Embarrassed and desperate not to draw attention to an already screwed up situation, I nodded and rushed out back to grab my bag.

When I walked back into the café, Rourke and Alec were eyeballing each other and both were wearing murderous expressions.

“I’ll see you later, Alec,” I called out as I slipped around the counter to follow Rourke.

“After you,” he said, holding the door for me.

“Um, thanks.”

We walked side by side, not saying a word, all the way to where I had parked my car. When I reached the driver’s door, I paused and swung my gaze up to meet his. “What was that about?”

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he replied, not missing a beat. “What did you expect me to do?”

“Accept it?” I offered, pulling open the driver’s side door and getting in.

Rourke smirked and reached for the passenger door. “You don’t know me well, Six.” He sat into the passenger seat and smiled. “What?” he offered, smirking devilishly, as he fastened his seatbelt. “I need a ride.”

“Don’t make jokes.”

“I’m not.”

“I’m serious, Rourke.”

“I’m just smiling at how cute you are.”

“Cute?” I shook my head and gaped at him. “I’m on the verge of throwing you out of my car and you’re commenting on my cuteness?”

“You’re not going to throw me out,” he replied confidently.

Choosing to ignore his cocky remark, I turned my attention back to my car. I cranked the engine and dutifully ignored the asshole sitting beside me before pulling out of my parking spot and into the street.

“Are we not talking now or something?” Rourke had the nerve to ask and I almost caved and gave that son of a bitch a piece of my mind. But then I remembered the best way to piss a person off was ignorance so I remained stoically silent.

“Six,” he repeated in his deep, raspy voice. “Talk to me.”

I tightened my hands on the steering wheel. “No.”

He chuckled. “Why not?”

“Because I’m pissed at you.”

“Because I asked you to fuck me?”

“No, Rourke. Because you *offered* to fuck me.”

“I didn’t mean it the way it came out.”

“I don’t care.” *It hurt all the same...*

“I’m not perfect, Six.”

“Oh, I’m fully aware of that, Rourke.”

“You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?” he chuckled.

I fought back a smile. “Nope.”

“Good,” he teased. “I like it when I have to work for what I want.”

“I’m not an object, Rourke,” I shot back, disguising my hurt with bitterness. “I’m not a trophy you’re working towards either. You can’t *win* me.” I released a weary sigh. “You don’t even like me.”

“I do like you, Six,” Rourke countered in a gruff tone. “I like you a lot.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” I muttered, tightening my hands on the wheel.

Rourke had the good sense not to respond.

Several minutes of silence passed between us before he spoke again. "I'm guessing Molly is the one who told you about Amelia?" he finally offered, tone void of humor now.

"Um, yeah." I cleared my throat, surprised as hell he was talking about this with me. "She mentioned it the other night."

"Josh was the son of wife number four," he informed me.

"What does that make him in stepsiblings; Five?" I cringed the moment the words slipped from my lips. This was no time for joking.

"It makes him a rapist bastard that needs locking up," Rourke snarled. Whoa.

"He...raped her?"

Rourke nodded stiffly.

My heart sank. "I'm so sorry, Rourke."

"He should have been locked up for what he did to my sister." He clenched his jaw, nostrils flaring. "Bastard manipulated Amelia. Fucked with her head and screwed her up real bad."

I was having a hard time concentrating on the road; Rourke opening up to me was causing me all sorts of problems. "How long did it go on for?"

"I don't know," Rourke confessed in a torn voice. "She wouldn't tell me, but I'm guessing a hell of a lot longer than the two months she reported to the cops."

"That's so horrible," I choked out. "Molly mentioned the DA didn't take it further because he was close in age to Amelia."

My words sparked outrage in Rourke and he turned to glare at me.

"Are you saying it's not abuse because he was fifteen?" His words were menacing and cold. "Do you think his age is an excuse to take advantage of someone?"

"No, not at all," I squeezed out, as I pulled into our driveway. "A predator is a predator." It didn't matter if they came in the shape of a teenage boy or an alcoholic, middle aged creep dating your mother.

"I'll never forgive my father for it," Rourke muttered after a pause. "Fucking never."

His dad? I pulled into my usual spot and killed the engine. "Why your dad?"

“He brought that bastard into our lives,” Rourke said grimly, staring up at the house. “All our lives, he’s been traipsing women and their kids in and out of our fucking house. Never gave two shits about how it made us feel. My baby sister is the one who ended up paying for his mistakes.”

“I’m sure your father never thought that would happen to your sister,” I heard myself say in defense. I wasn’t a fan of Gabe, but I didn’t believe the blame for Amelia’s abuse lay entirely at his door either, just like I didn’t believe the blame for my own personal hell solely belonged to my mom.

“I’m sure he never thought about her, period,” Rourke countered. “Especially since he was so quick to bring another fucking woman and her spawn through our doors.”

Meaning my mom and me.

“I’m not listening to this again.” Stiffening, I unfastened my seatbelt and reached for the door handle. “I get why you’re upset, Rourke. Really, I do. But do not compare me to that creep.”

“I wasn’t,” he muttered. “Hell, I didn’t mean to.”

“Whatever, Rourke.” I didn’t care. I was tired and fighting with Rourke was something I didn’t have the energy for.

“Six, wait!”

I didn’t wait.

Climbing out, I stalked away, leaving him sitting in the passenger seat of my car to deal with the issues that were obviously crippling him.



Rourke

MY SISTER WAS ABUSED.

It wasn’t an easy thing for me to speak about, partially because I felt so guilt ridden. It happened under my nose. Over and fucking over again.

I wasn’t sure why I told Six all of that tonight. I only knew that I needed to. She had something in her, something I was drawn to, and I wanted her to *know* me.

I wanted her to understand why I was the way I was.

She needed to know that I wasn’t inherently born a bastard; it was something I had turned into over the years.

Somewhere deep down inside, I knew the fascination I developed over Six was about a hell of a lot more than sex, but I wasn't ready to acknowledge it.

It scared the hell out of me, and if I had stronger willpower, I would have tried stay away from her. But whatever self-control I had was shot to shit every time I locked eyes on that girl.

My gaze followed Six as she hurried around the side of our house in the direction of the shoreline.

"Wait!" I demanded, springing to life. Throwing my car door open, I jerked out and stalked after her. "Wait a minute, will you?"

She didn't wait. In fact, she broke into a small run, stumbling, obviously trying to get as far away from me as possible.

"I didn't mean *you*," I shouted, closing in on her, taking the steps two at a time.

"Yes, you did," she shot back angrily. When she reached the gated entrance that separated our property from the beach, she swung the tall gate open. "You always mean *me*, Rourke. Always."

"*Listen!*" Reaching out, I managed to snag her arm and pull her back to me. "Just listen to me for a second," I repeated, breathing hard and fast, eyes locked on hers. She was fucking beautiful. Goddamn. "I don't think of you like that anymore," I told her, and surprisingly, I meant it. I was well aware she wasn't the girl I had once thought her to be.

She was different.

She was *more*.

"I don't care who your Momma is," I added gruffly.

Six shivered and I slid my hands up and down her arms, trying to warm her.

"I'm not used to *this*," I admitted, never taking my eyes off her. "You, Six? You have me tied up in knots." Another truth. "I'm trying not to be an asshole here, but it's hard as fuck when being an asshole's all I know." Reaching up, I cupped her cheek with my hand, forcing her to look up and meet my eyes.

Six trembled in my arms. "I've already told you." She bit down hard on her bottom lip, grey eyes dark and heated. "I'm not sleeping with you."

"What can I do to change your mind?"

She opened her mouth to say something, but then quickly snapped it shut.

“What do you need from me?” I pressed, exhaling a ragged breath. It was so fucking hard to stand here with her and *not* put my mouth on her. “List your demands, Six. Tell me your terms, whatever the fuck you need from me to make us happen, and I’ll meet them.”

“Oh my god!” She jerked away from me, red-faced. “I’m not a fucking contract, Rourke.”

I frowned. “I know that.”

“I’m a human being with feelings,” she continued to say, silver eyes glaring up at me. “Not some challenge for you, or notch on your bedpost.” Swinging around, she wrapped her arms around herself and walked towards the shoreline.

“I never said you were,” I shot back, trailing after her.

“You cast me with the same brush as my mother right from the get-go.” She kicked off her shoes and walked into the water, shivering violently when water splayed over her feet. “When the truth is, I’m about as opposite to my mother as you can get.”

I followed her into the water, not caring when my sneakers filled up with sea water. “I was wrong.” Reaching out, I clamped my hands on her hips and pulled her against my chest. “I see that now.”

She released a loud sigh, but kept her back to me. “You do?”

I nodded, wrapping my hands around her tiny waist. “I see something in you,” I admitted gruffly, leaning close to her ear. *And it scares the hell out of me.* “I can’t stay away anymore.”

I felt her small hands reach up and clasp my arms and it felt fucking amazing. “I need...” She paused and tried again. “I just need...”

“You need?” I urged, tightening my hold on her. My heart was hammering in my chest. She needed to tell me. I had a feeling I would do whatever it took to have her regardless of the consequences. Dropping my head, I pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “Tell me and I’ll do it.” I wanted this girl so fucking much. “Come on, Six.”

“I don’t do this,” she finally said. “With guys.” She hesitated before adding, “I’m not the girl you think I am.” Bitter disappointment filled my gut when Six pushed out of my arms and stepped around me. “You should

stay away from me, Rourke,” Six added before hurrying back towards the house.

This time I didn’t follow her.

It wasn’t an easy thing for me – stepping back and not going for what I wanted. I was usually selfish.

Six walked back to the house and my eyes followed her every step of the way. It was like I couldn’t get enough of her. She fucking mesmerized me. It was unsettling. I didn’t want to feel like this. I didn’t want Six to have this control over me, but she did.

Maybe she was my punishment for being a shitty son. I’d spent my life tormenting my father’s new *families*, and now Six was here, torturing me by just existing.

Chapter 36

Mercedes

“YOU LOOK UNREAL in this,” Rourke whispered for the third time during double period Biology on Thursday. He tugged on the hem of my skirt under the desk and leaned closer. “Fucking beautiful.”

“It’s the same thing every other girl at school is wearing, Rourke.” My voice was low and steady, but inside I was shaking. His fingers trailed over the bare skin of my thigh and I clamped my legs shut, keeping my eyes locked on the textbook in front of us, not daring to look sideways and see his face. Why was he doing this to me? And why the hell was my body enjoying it so much?

“Trust me, Six,” Rourke whispered in my ear, leaning entirely too close to me. “You look *nothing* like the other girls at this school.”

“I’m not sleeping with you,” I hissed, edging away from him. That’s what this was about. He wanted to get me into bed. It was as if screwing me had become his life’s mission. I hadn’t been one bit surprised when I walked into class this morning and saw Rourke sitting where Mason should be. All week I’d been avoiding Rourke, and all week, he’d been deliberately seeking me out. Stopping by my table during lunch, sitting next to me in any classes we shared, and brushing up against me when we were at our lockers were only some of the stunts Rourke had been pulling since putting his offer of *being willing to fuck me* on the table last Monday night.

At home, it was much worse. He sauntered into my bedroom on a regular basis and flirted heavily with me. It was as if the guy was purposefully trying to get a rise out of me, trying to make me blush and tremble.

Well, I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. It was all about the chase for Rourke. I had turned him down. He wasn’t used to being told no. I was fully aware that once he had me, this... *fascination* with me would get old.

“But you want to,” Rourke chuckled, reclaiming the space I’d put between us. He reached up then and twisted my ponytail with his hand, tugging ever so slightly, making my eyelids flutter.

“I don’t think you’re funny,” I whispered when I felt his hand drop to the back of my stool. “In fact, I think you’re an annoying asshole.”

Rourke chuckled and his breath fanned my neck. “I love that dirty mouth of yours,” he whispered. “Such a fucking turn on.”

“Why are you even taking biology?” I snapped, feeling flustered and at a complete loss. “It’s not as if you need it.”

Rourke smirked at me in challenge. “What makes you think I don’t need it?”

“You want to be an architect,” I shot back, flushed that I was so deeply aware of this boy I knew his college preferences. “Why would you need biology to design buildings?”

His brows rose in surprise. “You think I want to be an architect?” His voice was deceptively soft, his blue eyes burning with something I didn’t recognize.

“Well yeah,” I mumbled, embarrassed. I had seen Rourke’s drawings and sketches. I knew all the classes he took at school. I knew a lot about him actually. *Too much*. “Like your mom, right?” I swallowed deeply. “She was an architect, right?” A really fricking awesome one from what I had learned. According to Amelia, Rourke’s mom had been a total badass in the design world. A young woman in her early twenties competing with men for contracts and winning every single time. Camille Owens had been a force to be reckoned with.

Rourke stared hard at me for the longest moment before saying, “Why are *you* taking this class? Last time I checked, you didn’t need biology for a business degree.”

I bristled. “It’s part of my backup plan.”

“Backup plan?”

“That’s right.”

“You coming to the game tonight?” he surprised me by asking. When I looked at him in confusion, he clarified, “It’s our first game of the season.”

I squeezed my thighs together and shook my head.

“Why not?”

"I don't like football." Why was I lying? I *was* going to the game. At least, Molly was expecting me to go with her.

"But I want you there," Rourke probed, his minty breath fanning my face. "I want you watching me."

I swallowed deeply and sagged forward. "I can't."

Rourke continued to stare at me with that heated expression and I felt myself cracking. I couldn't handle this. Him. He was too much.

"I don't know what you want from me," I admitted hoarsely.

"It's really fucking simple," he shot back, leaning closer. "You."

"You want my body."

"I want all of you."

My heart hammered against my ribcage. "Liar."

His lips tipped up. "I'm not a liar."

No, he wasn't a liar. "Why?" Why now? He's hated me for weeks. Why the sudden change of heart?

"Fuck if I know," Rourke admitted gruffly. "But I do. I can't get enough of you, Six. I'm driven fucking crazy with the urge to get to you." He leaned closer and pressed a hot kiss to my neck. "It's probably toxic as hell and bad for the both of us, but I can't change it."

"Miss Black is right over there." I cast a nervous glance to the other side of the classroom to where our Biology teacher was animatedly explaining something about the reproductive system to an amused looking Daryl and almost hysterical looking Mason. "She'll throw you out of class if she sees you touching me like this..." my words trailed off when Rourke hooked his fingers into the waistband of my skirt, and I had to bite down hard on my lip to stop myself from moaning out loud.

"Hmm," Rourke mused before dropping his arm from my chair. My heart sank for a moment before skyrocketing in my chest when he caught a hold of the edge of my stool and dragged it towards him, my body settling flush against his.

I turned to look at Rourke and immediately realised it was a dangerous mistake. The moment his blue eyes settled on mine, a burning sensation scorched through me, settling deep in my pelvis.

"I'm never going to give in," I managed to squeeze out, cheeks flushed, breathing strained. I was afraid of what would happen to me if I

did. "Give up now, Rourke. You're fighting a losing battle trying to get into my panties."

"Christ," he groaned. "Even hearing you talk about me getting into your panties make me hard as a rock." He clamped his hand on my hip and squeezed. "Damn, Six."

"I do want you, Rourke," I admitted in a breathy tone of voice.

His eyes lit up. "Yeah?" His voice was deeper now. His face edged closer to mine.

"Uh-huh." I nodded, leaning closer to him, forcing myself not to get distracted by the mouth-watering smell of his cologne. "I want to you to shut the fuck up."

"Tease," he chuckled, his face so close to me our noses were almost touching.

"I know why you're doing this," I whispered, making a point to keep my features impassive. "You only want me because I told you no."

"Wrong." Smiling, Rourke moved closer, so close that if I tipped my chin our lips would touch. "I want you because you're sexy as fuck."

"You only want my body, Rourke." Not the rest of me. "Forget it."

"You're wrong," he told me in a seductive voice. "I already told you, I want all of you."

It wasn't true.

I couldn't allow myself to believe it.

Angry and embarrassingly aroused, I looked up at Miss Black and devoted my attention to her, forcing myself to ignore the god sitting next to me.

A low chuckle came from beside me and I blushed a deep shade of red.

Rourke was enjoying this twisted banter, but if he actually realised how much it affected me, I doubted he'd be smirking.

Sometimes I thought he was serious – sometimes I got the distinct feeling that he wasn't messing around. But it was hard to tell with Rourke. Sure, I got it loud and clear that he thought me and him sleeping together was a fantastic idea, but I couldn't go *there* with him.

I couldn't risk it.

Not now that my heart was on the line.

Daring to peek out the corner of my eye at him, I studied the way he looked so fucking amazing in our school uniform.

It wasn't fair.

The way the grey V-neck sweater looked on him only emphasised what I already knew was underneath.

A rock-hard body.

Like for real, the guy was *ripped*...

With his arm on the back of my chair once again, Rourke leaned into my ear and whispered, "I can't wait until you give in and I can taste you again."

Startled by his remark, I began to cough and splutter and basically choke on my own spit.

Every head in the classroom turned towards us then and I was pretty sure I turned purple as I struggled to catch my breath.

"It's okay," Rourke announced in an animated tone. Shoving back his stool, he stood quickly and pulled me out of my seat. "I know the Heimlich maneuver," he called out as he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest. "And CPR," he added under his breath.

"Mercedes," Miss Black said in concern as she took in my ruffled appearance. "Are you okay, dear?"

"I'm...good," I wheezed, fighting my way out of Rourke's hold. "I just need..."

"Some fresh air," Rourke filled in for me. "I'll take her."

He didn't even wait for the teacher to excuse us. He just sauntered out of the classroom with me in tow.

The minute the door closed behind us, Rourke was dragging me down the corridor towards the steps of the lower level.

"What about our bags?"

"Don't worry about them," he shot back nonchalantly. "Daryl or Mase will grab 'em."

"Where are we going?"

"There's something I want to talk to you about," he replied. "In private."

"If it involves you taking me down to the lower level then I really don't think I want to hear it," I shot back dryly, knowing from Molly that the only thing of interest at the bottom of that particular set of stairs was the janitor's room – or the sex room, as she referred to it.

If I went into that room with Rourke, the only thing of interest would be what hung between his legs.

“Shut up,” Rourke chuckled, reading my thoughts. “I’m classier than that.”

I cocked a brow. “Are you?”

Rourke opened his mouth to respond and then quickly shut it before winking and grinning. “Okay,” he placated. “Let me correct that statement to *you’re* too classy for that.”

That sweet declaration made me feel all warm and fuzzy for about two seconds before realization slapped me in the face like a bucket of iced water.

“So you have?” I croaked out, stopping at the bottom of the staircase with my eyes on the Janitor’s door. “You’ve had sex at school?” I swallowed deeply. “In there?” I inclined my head towards the door, before daring to look at Rourke. When he didn’t deny it, I shook my head in disgust. “You’re a pig.” And then another thought entered my mind. An unwelcome one. “With Britt, right?” I asked, unable to disguise my absolute disgust. “You’ve had sex with Britt down here, haven’t you?”

“Do you want me to lie, Six?” Rourke demanded, running a hand through his hair. His tone had turned angry and exasperated. “Because I’ve already told you, I’m not doing that. And besides, this has nothing to do with sex or Britt. I brought you down here because I wanted to talk to you.” Shrugging, he added, “Somewhere the entire school won’t be listening.”

I wasn’t sure what I wanted Rourke to do, but the truth sucked ass. I didn’t want to think of him down here with Britt. I didn’t want to think of him with anyone other than me, which was crazy stupid. *Lord, I needed a divine intervention.*

“What did you want to talk about?” I changed the subject by asking. Folding my arms across my chest defensively, I cocked a brow. “I’m listening.”

The frown on Rourke’s face quickly transformed into a carnal looking smirk. “Not here.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door of the Janitor’s closet. “In there.”

Knowing what was just beyond the closed door caused my heart to hammer in my chest. I was teetering on the verge of uncharted territory.

I knew I needed to go back to class, but nothing inside of my traitorous body agreed. My brain was the only part of me making sense right now – every other part was screaming *get in there with him!*

“Are you coming, Six?” Rourke wrapped his hand around the handle and pushed inwards. “I promise I only want to talk.”

With a huge amount of doubt, I followed Rourke into the dark room, bracing myself for the unknown, all the while praying my poker face would protect me.

I was overstepping all boundaries and lines with him, and still, I followed. He knew me and it provoked emotions inside of my body I wasn’t entirely sure how to handle. I couldn’t deal with Rourke. He was a force to be reckoned with and I was terrified of losing myself in all that he was.



Rourke

I WASN'T GOING TO try and bag Six in the janitor's office.

As much as she didn't believe my intentions, I actually *did* bring her down here to talk. All week, I'd been trying and failing to catch her attention. Six had done a one-eighty when it came to me and it was driving me fucking crazy.

I was trying and failing to get her to come around to my way of thinking and it was driving me bat shit crazy.

Having to see her at home and watch her at school?

Fuck, it was too much for me.

She *fascinated* me.

I was reluctant to admit that, even to myself, but there it was.

Six fucking fascinated me. I was drawn to her in ways I didn't understand and it scared the hell out of me.

Bringing up Amelia was my way of trying to open up to Six. I fucked it up, like I always did, but dammit, I was trying.

I wanted her to *know* me.

I also knew that I didn't have a hope of concentrating on the game tonight if I didn't straighten things out with her.

“Whoa,” Six exclaimed when I switched on the lights. White painted walls and cold marble floors greeted us.

The school janitor's supply room was wastefully large. One small corner of the room was taken up with cleaning supplies, the following corner pitched a couch and a small stand with a portable television on top. Everywhere else was empty.

The smell of sex and nicotine was strong; revealing what the students of Ocean Bay Academy actually used this room for.

"This doesn't look like any janitor's closet I've ever seen," Six gushed with wide eyes.

I raised a brow and fought back the urge to laugh. "Been in many?"

Her face turned bright pink. "Shut up. You know what I meant."

Turning the lock in the door, I walked over to where Six was standing and fought back the urge to grab her sexy little body and shove her against the wall. Instead, I settled on tucking a strand of her long, dark hair behind her ear.

"What did you want to talk about?" she asked, voice small and breathy, eyes locked on mine. Yeah, she could say it until the cows came home, but we both knew what she wanted.

Six wanted me almost as much as I wanted her.

"Us," I replied, closing the space between us.

"As in you and me?"

"Exactly."

"No." Shaking her head, Six took a step back from me. "I'm not talking about this again, Rourke. I can't." Her voice trembled as she spoke. "It's not a good idea."

"For who?"

"For me!" she strangled out. "I'm leaving in a few months. Once I graduate from school and get my diploma, I won't be coming back here."

"So?" I ran a hand through my hair in frustration. "You think I'm sticking around here?" I shook my head. "No fucking way. I'm getting the hell out of here, too, Six."

"Exactly. We're on different paths." Clasping her hands in front of her, she added, "Which is why I think it's better for both of us if we stop this before it gets messy."

"You really want that?" I demanded, eyes locked on hers. No fucking way was I quitting her.

Six didn't reply and it pissed me the hell off. I knew she was nervous, her body language told me that, but dammit, I needed her to be straight with me.

"Because I don't," I offered without an ounce of hesitation, hoping my honesty would loosen her up. "I really fucking like you, Six, and I think you like me back." Running a hand through my hair, I inhaled a calming breath before adding, "And I honestly can't think of another girl I'd rather get messy with." Sounded screwed up, but it was the truth. This girl pulled invisible strings inside of me. I was willing to take a major fucking gamble just to have her. "But I'm not going to beg. If you honest to god don't want me, I'll accept it. I'll leave you alone." Taking a safe step back from her, I said, "It's your choice."

Her eyes widened, but she didn't say a word. Disappointment churned in my gut, but I masked it with a smile. "Come on," I said. "We better get back to class."

"Be my friend!"

My brows rose in surprise. "Your *friend*?"

She nodded slowly. "Yeah. Be my friend, Rourke."

"Friend with...benefits?"

"I don't know. Maybe?" Blowing out a breath, she took a step towards me. "I need more than sex," she admitted, blushing a little. "I'm not some girl who drops her panties to random guys. I'm not...*like that*."

"I know."

"Our parents are married," she quickly rambled. "Even thinking about doing anything with you should be inconceivable to me. Us hooking up would be too complicated..."

"But?"

"But I can't deny that I like you." She blushed bright red. "I shouldn't, Jesus, I know I shouldn't, but I do. But I need more than sex from you. I need..."

"Friendship?"

Six nodded, eyes wide and full of uncertainty. "Yeah. I think I do."

"Then you have it," I replied gruffly. "Friend."

"I'm serious," she shot back. "You and I would need to be friends before I could even contemplate going further with you."

“So am I.” And I truly was. “I can be your friend, Six,” I told her. “I can do that.”

She looked up at me almost hopefully. “Yeah?”

Fuck yeah.

Chapter 37

Mercedes

WELL, MY RESOLVE certainly hadn't lasted long.

What the hell was I doing?

Was I stupid?

This boy was going to break my heart.

I knew it.

It was freaking inevitable.

He was going to break me apart.

So why was I willing to go along with it?

Because you want him...

Rourke smiled down at me then, revealing those deep dimples in both cheeks, and I was lost to the fluttering sensation in my chest. With his hands on my hips, he walked us until my back hit the wall behind me.

"I'm really fucking happy about this, Six." Rourke took another step and pressed his large frame to mine. "Can you feel how happy this *friends* thing is making me?" he added, tone gruff and thick. His erection strained against me, making me feel weak with want.

Oh. My. God.

"And when you get bored of this?" *Of me!* "What happens then?" I forced myself to look at him when I said, "Do we go back to hating each other? You being an asshole to me half the time, and pretending I'm invisible the other half?"

Rourke looked at me for a long moment before slowly shaking his head. "I won't do that to you again." His voice resonated with sincerity. "And trust me, Six; you have *never* been invisible to me."

I snorted. "Yeah. Sure."

"I'm serious," Rourke argued, eyes locked on mine. "I've been seeing you, Six. The whole damn time."

Could I handle this? I had an obsessive personality and this boy was like crack to my body. “You make me crazy,” I admitted, unable to stop my body from trembling. Fear and anticipation flooded me.

“Right back atcha, Six,” he replied, blue eyes burning through me.

“Okay.” I exhaled a shaky breath and forced a smile. “Okay, so we’ve established we bring out foreign emotions and personality traits in each other –”

“Six?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Rourke didn’t wait for me to answer; his lips crashed down on mine harshly, taking my breath away – and what was left of my common sense.

Gasping, I wrapped my arms around his neck as he lifted me and pressed me against the wall. I relished in the feel of him punishing my mouth with his.

He was rough and urgent and I loved every second of it. So much so, I cried out in pleasure.

Everything about this moment felt surreal. This was everything I had refutably denied I wanted since I saw him at our parents wedding. He hurt me that day and I buried my attraction to him with disgust. I couldn’t do it anymore though. Not when he tasted so damn good on my lips.

Having Rourke crushed against me, straining against me, his hands on my body and his mouth on mine, was everything I had ever wished for.

Everything about him screamed urgent, like he couldn’t bear the thought of spending another second apart.

“What about Britt?” I blurted out, panting. I hated to break the kiss, but I needed to know, dammit.

“No Britt,” Rourke whispered, trailing kisses down my neck, stopping to suckle on my collar bone. “No other girls.”

My body thrilled at the thought.

Was he saying he was mine?

“No Larkin, either,” he added gruffly. “Or any other asshole.”

“So, what?” I moaned and tilted my head to one side, giving his mouth access to my bare flesh. “We’re exclusive, um, friends?”

Please say yes.

Please say yes.

Rourke stopped kissing my neck. Leaning back, he looked into my eyes, obviously mulling over my question. "If you want something from me, just ask, Six."

Okay. "I want you to not touch any other girls for as long as we're, um, friends."

Rourke stared hard at me for a long moment before nodding. "Deal." He gestured between us. "No one else for as long as *this* lasts."

Relief flooded my body, so prominent and intoxicating that I drew his mouth back down to mine almost frantically.

I was playing a dangerous game with my stepbrother; one where my heart and pride were on the line.

"I need to be honest with you about something," Rourke panted, reluctantly breaking the kiss.

Kiss me, I wanted to scream. *Stop talking and kiss me...*

"What?" I breathed, looking up at his darkened eyes.

"This." He gestured between us. "It's not permanent."

"I know that," I forced myself to say, even if it killed a little piece of me to say it. "It's temporary and you won't ever love me. You've told me this before, Rourke."

"I just want us to be on the same page." His eyes were dark and full of heated desire as he spoke. "This is temporary," he continued to say and I wasn't sure who he was trying to convince. "But one hundred percent exclusive for as long as it lasts."

"Temporary," I agreed with a weak nod.

"I mean it, Six," he said in a husky tone. "I won't fuck around on you. That's not who I am. When I'm with you, I'm with you and no one else." His breath fanned my face as he spoke words that both crushed me and set my heart on fire. "I expect the same in return."

He was promising not to hurt me. Offering me friendship, exclusivity, affection, and sex. He was fucking perfect. The only thing missing was the promise of a future. I didn't want him to propose to me for god's sake.

I just wanted to believe that this was going somewhere. That it *could*.

But dammit, I needed to look at this relationship in a clinical way. It wouldn't last. It was just for fun. That's all. That's all he was offering me, and why shouldn't I have some fun? I'd been taking care of everyone else for my whole life. Why wasn't it my turn to kick back and have fun?

I wanted to.

“Okay then,” I whispered. *For as long as it lasts...*

The inevitability of this boy crushing my heart should have been enough to make me run. But the emotions and feelings charging through my veins, making my heart pound, made me stay. His eyes on my mine and his hands on my body kept me rooted to the spot.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad when he broke me.

Maybe, with a little luck, I'd end up breaking him, too.



I WALKED BACK TO biology class feeling more confused than I had been when I left it.

Some of the students looked up and snickered when we walked in. “Dude,” Mason chuckled. “What the hell?”

“Don't.” Rourke shook his head in warning, eyes narrowed on his friend's desk. It was only then I noticed Rourke's lips and neck were smeared in my lipstick.

His hair looked like someone had roughly dragged their fingers through it.

Someone had. *Me.*

I'd be a liar if I said my lipstick smeared on his face wasn't a huge turn on. Knowing that he was mine and mine only for as long as this lasted made me feel powerful. He wanted me. This stubborn, beautiful boy had a weakness and it was me. I was his weakness. I freaking loved it.

“Are you feeling better, Mercedes?” Miss Black asked, looking at me with a small frown.

“Um, yeah,” I squeezed out, making a beeline for our desk. My face was burning; cheeks flushed, lips swollen from his kisses.

Dying of embarrassment, I slid onto my stool and dropped my attention to the open textbook on our desk. Every nerve in my body was on high alert. The moment Rourke sat down beside me and clamped his hand down on my thigh, my nerves were shot to hell.

“So, *friend*,” Rourke whispered, dropping his mouth to my ear. “What do you want to do after the game tonight?”

“I'm...um, not sure.” Grappling with my nerves and lust, I forced out, “Hang on. I already told you, I'm not going to the game.”

“I know. I’m talking about afterwards.” Rourke pried my thighs open with persuading fingers and added, “We could go out for dinner...or eat in?” Teasing the apex of my thighs with his fingers, he added, “Whatever you want.”

“I can’t. I’m going to Molly’s party...” My voice trailed off and I bit back a moan when I felt him touch my panties. “You need to stop.”

“Really?” he purred, rubbing once more. “You sure?”

I nodded and bit down hard on my fist. “Friends first, Rourke,” I whispered. “That means no touching the other friend’s, um, private parts.”

“Gotcha.” Rourke removed his hand and snickered. “*Private parts.*”

“Don’t make fun of my terminology,” I hissed, snapping my head towards his. “I was trying to be polite.”

Immediately, I was snared in his gaze, trapped by eyes so blue I felt I was drowning in them. “Don’t be polite,” he countered, smirking devilishly at me. “Because there’s nothing fucking polite about what I want to do to you.”

I swallowed deeply, his words affecting me like nothing ever had.

Oh yeah, I was in way over my head with this boy.

Chapter 38

Rourke

FOR THE REST OF the day, I couldn't wipe the smug expression from my face. She *agreed*. Six agreed to take a chance on me. Yeah, she wasn't overly enthusiastic like I hoped she would have been, but I'd take friendship.

I could work with friendship.

I had a feeling she wasn't used to this – to guys. Obviously, Six wasn't a virgin. A girl that looked like her had to have been snatched up long ago, but something about her screamed innocent and I was not going to screw that up. She deserved better. I intended to give that to her.

"You're looking mighty pleased with yourself," Daryl noted when we met at our lockers after last period. He looked me over and I watched as a slow grin spread across his face. "You get laid?" he asked, arching a brow. "Is that what you and Sissy were doing when you skipped out of Bio?"

"Daryl," I warned with a slow shake of my head. "Don't talk about her like that."

He frowned. "Like what?"

I paused, wondering what he'd said that had offended me and came up empty. I had no idea why, but this huge surge of possessiveness was shooting through me. I didn't want anyone talking about Six. I didn't want them thinking about her. Not even Daryl.

"You have it bad," Daryl said with a grin. "Oh, man.

"Don't ask about her," I finally said. "She's... not a topic I'm up for discussing, okay?"

"Alright, man," he replied good-naturedly.

"You still going to Molly's party after the game tonight?" I asked then, veering the subject away from Six.

"Molly?" Daryl looked puzzled as he rammed his books into his locker. "Who the fuck is Molly?"

“Dude.” I bit back the urge to roll my eyes. Daryl was my best friend, I loved the guy like he was my brother, but he was fucking terrible when it came to girls. “Six’s friend. The petite blonde.” *The one with the burns*, I mentally added.

Awareness dawned in Daryl’s eyes and he threw his head back and laughed. “Molly? Shit, man, I’ve been calling her Katie.”

“You’re an asshole,” I replied dryly. Girl was completely hung up on him. A blind man could see it.

Daryl shrugged, not bothering to defend himself from what was only the truth.

“Her name is Molly Peterson. She went to school with us until the third grade.”

“Yeah, I’ll head over after the game.” He waggled his brows and grinned wolfishly before slamming his locker door shut. “Should be interesting.”

“Listen, man. I’m not trying to tell you your business or anything, but... be gentle with that girl.” I cleared my throat and looked around the hallway to make sure no one was listening in on our conversation before adding, “She’s been through hell and she doesn’t need you leading her on.”

Daryl frowned and I felt like slapping the douche over the head. “What do you mean?”

“You have the worst fucking memory, Daryl,” I shot back, voice low. “She’s the one whose mom and brother burned in that house fire when we were younger.”

Daryl gaped. “She’s *that* Molly Peterson?”

I nodded. “Yes, asshole.”

“Didn’t her family move away like eight years ago or something?” he asked, clearly confused.

“They came back,” I hissed, irritated. How did he not know this? “Dude, she came back Sophomore year.”

“Fuck,” Daryl said with an apologetic sigh. “I didn’t know.”

“Well, now you do,” I replied. “So don’t screw around with her.” The girl had been through hell and back.

Surviving the house fire that had claimed her mother and little brother’s lives couldn’t have been easy on Molly.

I remembered when it happened. It had been fucking horrible. All of the kids in Molly's class had attended her mother and brother's joint funeral.

It was a really bad fucking day.

"Dad sold Mr. Peterson the house down on Seaport Front," I explained, drawing myself from my thoughts. "The one a mile or so down the shoreline from our house."

"She doesn't look like before." Daryl frowned, obviously remembering back to that period in our lives.

"Yeah." What Daryl meant was Molly didn't look burned. "It's mostly on her arms and legs," I explained, reeling off what Amelia had once told me.

"So, it's just Molly and her father now?"

I nodded. "As far as I know."

"Goddamn," Daryl muttered, shouldering his bag. His brow was set in a deep frown. "God fucking damn."

I had a feeling from the look on Daryl's face that his plans for tonight had taken a drastic turn. "Don't tell me you're that fucking vain, dude," I growled, looking at my friend with a disgusted expression.

"Huh?"

"The burns." I cocked a brow. "You're bailing tonight, aren't you?"

Daryl looked stunned as he registered my words. "Are you serious?" he finally hissed, tone angry. "You think I'm that fucking superficial?"

I shrugged but didn't respond.

We both knew he was.

"I liked that girl when we were kids," he shot back, voice laced with heated vindication. "She was —" He paused for a moment before saying, "sweet."

I raised a brow. "Sweet?"

"Shut the hell up," Daryl grumbled. "You just go ahead and worry about banging your stepsister and leave her friend to me."



Mercedes

“HOW IS YOUR FIRST WEEK at school going, sweetheart?” my mother’s soft, girly voice filled my ears as I was making my way to the parking lot after school on Thursday. “Did you make friends? What are your classes like?”

“I survived,” I replied, biting back the urge to say if she really cared she would have been here or, at the very least, would’ve called me on Monday. “Classes are fine.” I leaned against the hood of my car and sighed. “And I’ve already made a friend. Molly, remember?”

“Just her?” I could hear the disappointment in her voice. “Mercy, you should be making lots of friends.”

I rolled my eyes. “We’re not all like you, *head cheerleader*.”

“Those were the best days,” Mom sighed dreamily, and I had to fight back the very real urge to puke.

“So, you guys will be back next week, right?”

Long pause.

Not good.

“Mom?” I pressed, holding my phone a little tighter to my ear. “You’re still coming home next week, right?”

“Yes, Mercedes. We’ll be home next week,” Mom shot back, tone sullen, and I knew right there she was pouting. I could read the woman like a book.

“Good. So, um, how’s the uh, pregnancy coming along?” I grimaced at my words. *Pregnancy*. Yuck.

“Wonderful. I’m only four and half months along but I’m so big already,” she replied with a giggle. Yep, the woman was thirty-three years old and still *giggled*. Ugh. “Gabe is being so attentive.” Lowering her voice to a whisper, she said, “He’s like an animal lately. Can’t seem to get enough of me.”

I shuddered at the thought. “Too much information, Mom.”

She laughed at my protest like it was the funniest thing I’d ever said.

It wasn’t.

Mom needed to remember we weren’t friends. She was the parent in this relationship and I didn’t need to know about her sex life.

“How is Rourke treating you?” she asked then, thankfully changing the subject. “Is he being nicer to you?”

Dammit, not this subject!

“Um...yeah,” I squeezed out, feeling the burn in my cheeks spread all the way down to my toes. “Rourke and I are actually sort of...cool now.” It was a lie. A big, fat lie that caused my face to burn and palms to sweat, but I couldn’t exactly tell my mother that her stepson was being nice to me because he wanted to get into my pants. I had a feeling that wouldn’t go down well.

“Cool?” Mom squealed excitedly. “Are you two friends now?”

I think I love him. I stopped myself from blurting that little tidbit; telling my mother that particular fear would be too traumatic. It would make it too real. This wasn’t supposed to happen. I wasn’t supposed to fall in love with him, dammit. “Um... I guess you could say that?”

“Oh, honey, you have no idea how happy you’ve just made me.”

I frowned in confusion. “I have?”

“Yes,” Mom confirmed, sounding genuinely delighted. “Gabe will be so relieved,” she added. “Rourke has struggled to accept anyone in their lives since his mother died. You two being friends?” She sighed happily. “Is a big step for him.”

“I guess,” I muttered, feeling like a fake. Rourke didn’t want to be my *friend*. He wanted to sleep with me. I, in turn, was harboring some pretty intense feelings for him.

I didn’t believe in love. I was a realist – I always had been.

I’d spent my life watching my mother fall in love over and over again. I knew that I wanted no part of something that was so easily bent and broken.

But Rourke?

What I felt for him scared the hell out of me.

I wasn’t stupid, and knew the chances of Rourke actually meaning what he had said were slim, but dammit, those words were imprinted on my brain. I couldn’t stop thinking about it... about *him*.

Did agreeing to this weird ‘*friends with benefits*’ thing make me a slut?
Probably.

Did it make me pathetic?

I was certain it did.

Did I care?

Not enough to change my mind.

A blonde head of curls entered my peripheral vision then, causing me to lose my train of thought.

“Uh, Mom, I have to go,” I muttered, watching Britt and her minions stalk towards me. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

Mentally preparing for an ass kicking, I tipped my chin up and stared straight back at the blonde bitch giving me the evil eye.

“Can I help you?” I’d managed to avoid Brittany Beckitt all week and I had been hoping to continue that. Unfortunately for me, Britt looked as though she had other ideas.

“Help me?” Her finely pointed brows rose in surprise. “No, sweetie, there’s nothing on the face of this earth you could possibly help me with.” Stopping less than a foot from me, she placed her hands on her slender hips and narrowed her gaze down at me. “But let me give you some advice; *stay away* from Rourke or we’re going to have a problem.”

“News flash,” I shot back, forcing down the urge to roll my eyes at the sheer stupidity of this girl. “I live with Rourke.”

She scowled down at me. “You know what I mean.”

Of course I knew what she was talking about.

I just didn’t care.

“No.” I shook my head and smirked. “I don’t think I do.”

“Rourke’s mine,” Britt hissed, leaning closer to me. “We’re going through some stuff right now, but don’t for one moment think that means he won’t come back to me.” She moved closer, until her lips were close to my ear. “He *always* comes back to me.”

Playing down how unnerved I was by her words, I smiled brightly up at Britt and said, “Maybe that’s because he hasn’t had a better offer until now.”

What was I doing?

Why was I taunting her?

I never cared about shit like this. High school was a circus and bitchy girls and bullies were the monkeys, orchestrated by a ring leader. It was glaringly obvious that the ring leader in the Academy was Brittany Beckitt. The rest of the student body were her monkeys. Well, not me, and this girl right here, wasn’t worth my time.

“If you even think about taking him from me, I will destroy you,” Britt threatened, eyes glittering with menace.

“He’s not yours to take,” I replied coolly. “Now back the hell off.”

“Don’t push me on this, Mercedes James,” Britt warned. “You really don’t want to get on my bad side.”

Now, I rolled my eyes; I couldn’t help it.

She was such a delusional bitch.

“Listen, bitch,” I hissed. “I don’t know what went on between you and Rourke, and I really couldn’t care less.” Turning my back on her, I yanked my car door open and sank in. “But it’s pretty clear that whatever it was, it’s *over*.”

“It’s not over,” Britt hissed. “Me and Rourke? We will *never* be over and you’re a fool if you believe otherwise.”

Ignoring her, I cranked the engine and tore out of my parking spot, determined to get away from the crazy blonde I had a bad feeling had just declared war on me.

Chapter 39

Rourke

SIX DIDN'T SHOW UP to the game tonight. A part of me wasn't surprised, she'd said as much, but another part was bitterly disappointed.

I had wanted her here...

"You the man!" Reebo cheered, clapping me hard on the back as we walked back into the dressing rooms after the fourth quarter. "You the fucking man, Owens."

"Someone get this man a golden fucking pussy," Mase chimed in. "Woo! You keep playing like you did tonight, Rourke, and we're heading to state."

I played better tonight than I had in weeks – seven weeks to be precise – and I had a feeling she had something to do with it. I wanted Six to see me. I'd scored five of our team's eight touchdowns tonight.

We had creamed Jefferson's V1 team, and I'd managed to keep my head on the game and my temper in check.

Last year, when we played off against these pricks, I'd been sent off for beating the shit out of their quarterback in the first quarter.

In my defense, I had just found out the asshole had been fucking my girl.

This year, though, none of what they had said bothered me because I didn't care anymore.

Fuck. I *didn't* care...

"You hitting Tee-Gee's with us tonight?" Reebo asked, sinking down on the bench beside me. "They're opening especially for us."

"Nope," I replied, stripping off my gear. Tee-Gees was an underage club in Dauntan, the next town to Ocean Bay. I didn't go there often, but my friends did most weekends. "Have at it, man. I have plans."

"Plans?" Reebo raised a brow. "What kind of plans?"

“The none of your fucking business kind,” I shot back with a smirk, thanking Jesus the guys hadn’t heard about Molly’s party tonight.

“He doesn’t have plans, Reebo,” Mase said loudly, butting in on our conversation. He walked over to the bench and sank down next to Daryl, who was unusually quiet tonight. “We just kicked Jefferson’s ass. We *have* to celebrate.” Leaning forward, Mase raised a brow at me. “Are you so fucking hung up on your sister that you can’t come out and enjoy yourself with the team?”

I didn’t reply to that.

His stupid fucking comment didn’t deserve a response.

Besides, I knew what Mase was doing; he was trying to get a reaction out of me.

Not tonight.

“She’s not his sister,” Reebo shot back dryly. “Quit trying to get a rise out of him, Mase.”

“She’s as good as,” Mase teased. “Her momma’s married to Gabe. Makes them related.”

“You know what else is gonna be related?” I warned, jerking to my feet. “My foot and your ass if you don’t shut the hell up.”

“Relax, Dude,” Mase shot back with a grin, holding his hands up in retreat. “I aint judging you. Go right ahead and bang your stepsister. Hell, I would too if you hadn’t cock blocked me.”

“Don’t,” Daryl hissed. Jumping to his feet, he caught ahold of me just I was about to lunge for Mason. “Get the hell out of here, Mase,” he ordered, struggling to hold onto me. “Now, asshole.”

“Aye-aye, captain.” Mason saluted us both with hand against his forehead before sauntering out of the dressing rooms, singing his own improvised version of Bloodhound Gang’s *The Ballad of Chasey Lain* at the top of his lungs – switching the name Chasey Lain to Mercy James.

Asshole.

“I’m gonna kill him,” I snarled.

“Can someone remind me why we’re friends with that douche nozzle?” Bear chimed in, joining in the conversation for the first time. “Mase is such a fucking asshole.”

“Yep,” Daryl added. “Boy is living proof that there are times in life when a woman needs to swallow.”

“Nah, he’s alright,” Reebo defended with a chuckle. “He’s just...”

“Mase?” Bear offered dryly.

“Yeah,” Reebo said with a sigh. “He’s just Mase.”



Mercedes

I SKIPPED THE GAME and went straight over to Molly’s house instead. After my run in with Britt, I wasn’t feeling particularly *peppy*, and watching that skank shake her ass in front of Rourke was just about the last thing I wanted to see.

Thankfully, Molly wasn’t too difficult to sway. Of course, I had to assure her that Daryl would be making an appearance at her party tonight with Rourke. She believed me because she had heard the rumor going around the school about us. Yeah, our little class skipping hook up had spread like wildfire around the halls of the Academy.

“Are you sure your dad’s cool with this?” I asked, looking around at the forty plus kids from our grade piled into her house, drinking and dancing to their hearts content.

“Absolutely,” Molly replied. “Besides, he’s away on business for at least another two weeks. Here, help me with this, will you?”

“I can try?” I offered, taking ahold of one side of the keg. “But I warn you now, the strongest muscle in my body is my tongue.”

That comment won me a laugh from Molly. “I’m so freaking happy you moved here,” she said as we attempted and failed to drag the keg of beer in through the back door of her house. “I’ve missed this.”

“Missed what?” I grunted, trying unsuccessfully to get the keg over the lip of the door. “Aiding and abetting minors in the consumption of alcohol? Yeah, I’d miss that, too.”

“Having a friend,” she surprised me by saying. “One that doesn’t look at me with pity and discomfort.”

My heart jerked in my chest. Is that how it was for her? “Molls.”

“I’m okay, I promise,” she assured me with a bright smile. “And I don’t want pity. Just answers.”

I cocked a brow. “Answers?”

“That’s right,” she replied in an even tone. “So fess up. Are you with him now?”

“Who – Rourke?”

“No, Axel freaking Rose.” Molly rolled her eyes. “Yes, Rourke!”

“Um, no,” I muttered. “We’re just friends.”

“Just friends?” She raised an unimpressed brow.

My cheeks burned. “With benefits.”

“I *knew* he liked you,” Molly squealed, clapping her hands in what looked like genuine delight. “Rourke has *never* chased a girl out of class like he did today. Never. Not even Britt. You are his only exception, Mercy.”

“I’m not his exception, Molls,” I corrected, cheeks hot and flushed. “He just wants to have sex with me.”

Molly frowned. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I know,” I confirmed grimly. “He told me.”

“What a douche,” Molly whispered. “Ugh.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, biting down on my bottom lip. “And guess what even bigger douche agreed?”

Her eyes widened into saucers. “You didn’t!”

I nodded in shame. “I did. I freaking did.” Throwing my hands up in the air, I released a pained sigh. “And I have no idea what I’m doing because in case you haven’t already noticed, I’m not the most experienced girl around here.” Not when it came to boys. Not when it came to *him*! “Help me, Molly,” I begged then. “Tell me what to do?”

Molly opened her mouth to say something to me, but Daryl freaking King chose this exact moment to walk over to us, distracting Molly from my love life. *Selfish asshole*.

“Hey,” he said gruffly, eyes locked on Molly. The humor in Daryl’s voice I was so used to hearing was absent tonight.

“Hey,” she replied, eyes right back on him. “I’m happy you could come tonight.”

“Yeah, me too,” Daryl replied, though he sounded anything but happy. In fact, he sounded downright depressed. “Can we go somewhere and talk?” He stared hard at Molly. “In private?”

Molly’s face fell. Seriously, her entire expression changed. “Um, I guess,” she whispered, clearly nervous now. What the heck was going on

here?

“You okay, Molls?” I asked, feeling a trickle of unease roll down my spine. I didn’t like this. Something was off. And red flags were shooting up in my head like crazy.

“I’m fine, Mercy,” she told me with a smile that didn’t quite meet her eyes. “I’m going to go speak to Daryl. I’ll see you in a bit, okay?”

With that, I watched as Molly abandoned me and our keg, walking straight over to Daryl, who pressed a possessive hand to her lower back before leading her into the kitchen

“What the hell was that about?” I muttered to myself, staring after them until they disappeared from my line of sight.

Secrets, I decided.

Those two definitely had secrets.

All thoughts on what those secrets were fled my mind the moment two arms came around me and pulled me backwards into the garden.

The scream that was on the tip of my tongue died away when Rourke turned me in his arms and planted his lips on mine.

Chapter 40

Rourke

THE MOMENT I STEPPED out of Daryl's truck and my eyes landed on Six, fighting a losing battle with a keg, I was hard as fucking rock.

After the game tonight, I hadn't wanted Britt or anyone else. I wanted Six, and not just to touch her either, but to be around her. In her *company*.

She looked fucking beautiful tonight in a pair of denim cut offs, a fitted pink tank top, and her signature Converse. Her long, black hair was pulled back from her face in a high ponytail that still swished at the middle of her back. Unable to stop myself, I strode up to where she was and pulled her back before spinning her to face me. Ignoring the small yelp of surprise that came out of her mouth, I cupped her face between my hands and crashed my lips down on hers.

The second I kissed her, she went completely pliant in my arms. She moaned into my mouth and that small sound made my dick strain in my jeans.

"Rourke!" Six finally gasped, breaking the kiss. Her eyes were wide, lips swollen, cheeks pink, and it was taking everything in me to stand here and not drag her lips back to mine. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I was kissing you," I replied dryly. I wanted her and now that I was done denying it, I didn't want a waste a second with her. "And thoroughly enjoying myself before you pushed me away." *Again*.

"Yeah, but..." Six looked around nervously, before locking eyes with me once more. "What if someone sees us?"

"So, what if they do?" I shot back with a frown. I didn't get where she was coming from. "We've got nothing to hide."

"But aren't you worried?"

"Why would I be *worried*?"

Her cheeks turned bright pink. "If people see us together, Rourke, they're going to talk. And that talk might get back to our parents." She blew

out a breath. “They’re back next week, remember?”

I bit back the snarky comment on the tip of my tongue.

I didn’t care what our parents thought.

I only cared about the fantastic fucking way this girl made me feel and how I wasn’t about to give it up for anyone.

“Screw them,” I told her. I probably should have used more tact, but it wasn’t something I was known for. I went for what I wanted, and I wanted her.

To hell with everyone and their opinions. I wasn’t breaking any damn law here. We weren’t related and, as far as I could tell, Six wanted me just as much as I wanted her.

“I want this, Six,” I said, cupping her face in my hands again. My voice was thick and husky as I added, “I want you.”



Mercedes

“I WANT THIS, SIX,” Rourke said in a husky tone as he held my face between his large hands. “I want you.”

Oh god.

Breathe, Mercy.

In and out...

“I want this, too,” I whispered, looking into his blue eyes. “You.” I swallowed deeply. “I want you.”

Rourke smiled the biggest smile ever, revealing those deep dimples. “Yeah?”

I nodded and leaned into his touch. “Yeah.”

And then, instead of resuming our kiss like I thought he would, he surprised me by stepping around me and catching ahold of the keg I’d been wrestling. “Perks of friendship,” he teased with a wink, lifting it with ease. “Where do you want it?”

“Um, the kitchen, I guess?” I replied with a shake of my head.

“Kitchen it is.” I trailed behind Rourke as he carried the keg into the kitchen, setting it down alongside the table filled with beer and alcohol.

“Do you have a pump?” he asked, looking back at me.

I shook my head in confusion. “Like for a bicycle?”

Rourke threw his head back and laughed. "A beer pump."

"Oh." My face burned. "No."

He grinned. "Been to many parties, Six?"

"Nope," I replied, deciding there was no point in lying. Rourke and I weren't enemies anymore. There was no need for me to keep such a tall guard up around him. "I'm not a big *party* person."

His gaze slid from my face to the table behind me. "Huh," he mused, reaching around me for what I could only describe as a long steel contraption with a hose dangling from it. "I never would've guessed."

I watched with reluctant admiration as Rourke quickly went to work on hooking up the pump to the keg. He looked amazing tonight in faded denim jeans and a fitted black button down. "Wow," I said with a smirk when he was done. "Watching you set that up was actually sort of attractive."

Rourke filled two plastic cups with beer and handed me one. "If you think that's attractive, wait until you see my dance moves."

Wait... "You like to dance?"

"I'm full of surprises, Six." Rourke waggled his brows and grinned. "You'll see."



"WHEN WILL I SEE?" I asked several hours later as I sat in the passenger seat of Rourke's truck. Molly's imaginary party had turned out to be a huge success, and I had consumed far too much alcohol for a school night – hence why I had to leave my car at her place and was being driven home.

In my defense, I drank because I was frustrated. And I was frustrated because Rourke hadn't touched me. With the exception of that one kiss in the back yard when he first arrived, Rourke hadn't laid a single *wanted* finger on me the entire night – much to my drunken dismay.

"When will you see what?" Rourke replied in a coaxing tone, eyes on the road ahead of us.

"You said I'd see your full bag of surprises," I slurred, leaning my head against the window. "You lied to me."

"Bag of surprises?" I heard him laugh softly. "How much did you drink, Six?"

“Too much.” I hiccupped and wiped my mouth with my hand before asking, “Did you win tonight?”

“We did.”

“Did you score a goal?”

“I scored a touchdown, Six,” Rourke chuckled. “Five of them.”

I hiccupped again. “With your hands?”

“With my hands,” he confirmed, laughing loudly now.

“Wanna score again?” I purred, trying my best to sound sexy. “In my goal?”

“Six,” Rourke groaned. “You’re drunk.”

“So?” I grumbled. “You’re supposed to want me.”

“I do,” he promised in that patronizing tone one used when speaking to a drunk person.

“You didn’t want me tonight,” I huffed.

“Because I didn’t feel you up in front of half the school?” he countered.

Yeah. I shrugged. “No.”

“I wasn’t joking when I said I’d be your friend,” he added with a smirk. “What kind of friend would I be if I felt you up in front of half the school?”

“The best kind,” I grumbled. “Asshole.”

“Well this is a first,” Rourke laughed in amusement. “I’ve never been chewed out for being too nice before.”

The truck pulled to a stop then and he killed the engine. I heard the snap of his seatbelt seconds before a car door slammed and then another opened.

“Come on,” Rourke coaxed, unbuckling me and lifting me into his arms. “I’ll take you to bed.”

“Your bed?” I slurred, snuggling into his chest.

Rourke chuckled. “When I take you in my bed, Six, you’re going to be in your full senses.”

Chapter 41

Mercedes

PAIN LIKE I NEVER knew existed was searing through my eyeballs. The sunlight beaming through my window only made the already horrible sensation a million times more unbearable.

Slumped in the passenger seat of Rourke's truck on our way to school, I remained perfectly still, afraid that the slightest movement might cause my already upset stomach to turn mutinous against my body.

"You good, Six?" Rourke asked with an annoyingly upbeat voice as he drummed his fingers against the steering wheel.

"Uh, not really," I confessed, hugging myself and wishing for some divine intervention. I was a good kid. In seventeen years, I'd only gotten drunk *twice*. I didn't think I deserved to suffer a hangover of this magnitude. "Actually, do you think you could drive me home?" *So I can die in solitude.*

Rourke frowned. "We're here now."

"Oh." Shit. "Okay."

Rourke pulled into his usual parking space in the student lot. Killing the engine, he leaned back in his seat and turned to look at me, his brows creased in concern. "I'll take you home if you're really not up to school," he offered, eyes searching mine.

"No," I said wearily. "It's fine. It serves me right for drinking on a school night."

I expected Rourke to laugh or tease me for my outrageous behavior last night.

He did neither.

Instead, he leaned across the console, and cupped my cheek with his hand. "I called Molly," he said softly, leaning close. "She agreed to drive your car to school for you."

"You did?" My heart fluttered at his thoughtfulness. "Thank you."

“It’s nothing,” he replied, blue eyes still locked on mine. “If you feel sick during the day and want to bail, just text me and I’ll make it happen.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but Rourke leaned in and pressed his lips to mine, effectively shutting me up. “If not, I’ll meet you at home after school,” he whispered against my lips. “We can hang out.”

Hang out?

Christ... “Okay,” I breathed.



Rourke

“I HEARD A NASTY little rumor today,” Bear announced as we loaded our gym bags into the trunk of my Chevy after football practice on Friday evening. “Wanna hear about it?”

“Nope,” I shot back. I didn’t give a shit. “Couldn’t care less, man.” Bear never gave a shit about idle gossip, which was why I was confused as to why he was bringing this up to me now.

Closing the trunk, I walked around to the front of my truck and climbed into the driver’s seat. “You coming?” I called out, thrumming my hands against the steering wheel. I was anxious as hell to get home and hadn’t planned on having to drive Bear, too. Of course, knowing Six was there waiting on me was a hugely motivating factor.

“It’s about Mercedes,” Bear explained, climbing into the passenger seat.

That got my attention.

Cranking the engine, I slipped my truck out of gear and gave my friend my full attention. “Let’s have it.”

“I hooked up with Clary Fisher during lunch today.” He looked a little embarrassed as he spoke. “You know; the cheerleader with the huge rack?”

I nodded in acknowledgment. Clary Fisher had been born with a pair of tits that were made to motor boat. I had no doubt that’s exactly what Bear did during lunch – in between screwing her, that is. “What about her?” I asked.

“Clary said Britt told her it’s over between you guys because you hooked up with your, and I quote, “dirty skank of a stepsister” behind her back and she gave you the uh, gift that keeps on giving.”

My entire body stiffened. “Are you fucking serious?” Was Britt honestly spreading shit about Six having herpes? I slammed my hand on the steering wheel in frustration. “What a bitch.”

Bear held his hands up. “Hey man, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m only telling you what I heard. Ain’t like I believe it or anything.”

“One, Six is clean,” I snarled, dragging the shift into gear. “Two, I haven’t *touched* her.” Fuck this. I couldn’t sit here. Slamming my foot down on the gas, I tore out of the student parking lot like a bat out of hell. “And three, the only person likely to be walking around with an STD is Britt.”

Bear shrugged. “Yeah, I figured you’d lose your shit over this.”

Lose my shit?

I was beyond that.



I DROPPED BEAR HOME before heading straight to Britt’s place. By the time I reached my ex-girlfriend’s house, the anger that had been rising steadily inside of me since Bear’s declaration was spilling over.

Fuck this. I had just managed to win Six over to my way of thinking. The last thing I needed was my ex-girlfriend spreading her venom around the school and fucking up the one good thing that had happened to me since... since I didn’t even know how long.

Britt’s shiny red Audi was out front in the same place she always parked it. Alongside it was a black Lexus with a ‘*Jefferson Jaguars Rule*’ sticker on the back bumper.

Unable to see past the red haze of rage, I killed the engine of my Silverado in the familiar driveway and climbed out. Stalking up to the house, I didn’t bother knocking on the huge, shiny red door.

Like always, her parents weren’t at home. It was something we had once bonded over. We both had absent parents. Not now though. She’d crossed the goddamn line.

Not bothering to scope out the downstairs – I knew full well she wouldn’t be down there – I quietly climbed the staircase, moving in the direction of the bedroom I knew almost as well as my own.

Like a bad dream on repeat, I placed my hand on the handle of her bedroom door and braced myself for the inevitable.

The phrase *been there, done that, got the t-shirt* flickered through my mind when I pushed Britt's bedroom door open and was met with the sight of my ex on her knees, blowing Shane Clarkson – Jefferson's V1 tight end. Britt was completely naked, her head in Clarkson's lap, paying his dick more attention than she'd ever paid mine.

Lovely.

Fucking lovely.

Last time I'd caught her with a guy in here, it had been Jefferson's quarterback Daniel Westbrook.

I cleared my throat and Clarkson's head shot u in surprise. "Mind hurrying it up, Britt. I need a word. Now."

The squeal of surprise that tore from her was almost comical. Even more hilarious was the pathetic way she began to apologize to me. "Omigod, Rourke," Britt wailed, scrambling away. "I didn't know... I wasn't...I..."

"Cut the shit, Britt," I shot back dryly. "Put something on and come downstairs. I need a word with you."

Shit," Clarkson growled. "Thought you said it was over between you and Owens?"

Clarkson's wide eyed expression told me he was expecting me to kick his ass. That's what I would usually do if I caught Britt messing around with some other guy. Shit, that's what I *had done* on more occasions than I cared to admit.

Not anymore though.

"It is," I offered in a bored tone. Right in this moment, the only urge I had was to get this conversation over and done with so I could get home to Six. "You can have her back just as soon as I get done talking to her."

Without another word, I turned around and walked out of the room. I wasn't getting myself into any more shit over Britt, and Clarkson? He wasn't worth the energy it would take me to throw a punch.

Asshole.



"YOU DIDN'T CALL," Britt said warily when she joined me downstairs a few minutes later. "You always call before coming over, Rourke."

"Didn't need to."

Shoving my hands into my jeans pockets, I looked down at the girl who had held some serious power over me for a very long time.

"We're not together anymore," I added coolly. "I don't need to forewarn you I'm stopping by anymore so you have time to hide the guys you're screwing behind my back."

Britt didn't even have the decency to flinch – or deny it.

But then again, I knew she wouldn't.

"Then why are you here?" she asked, looking up at my face with angry green eyes.

"I'm here because a little birdy told me you've been spreading shit about Mercedes."

Britt looked up at me with a heated expression. "Yeah, so?"

"So, I want you to stop," I shot back coldly. "Immediately."

"I knew you liked that little bitch." She threw her head back and laughed humorlessly. "The second you took her side at that party, I fricking *knew* you had something going on with her."

I didn't deny it; there was no point.

I had no plans on hiding Six.

Britt would hear about us soon enough.

"Leave her alone," I said instead. "She hasn't done shit to you, B, so back the hell off her and stop spreading your lies."

"Hasn't done anything to me?" She glared at me with a mutinous expression. "She stole my boyfriend!"

"You and I both know how differently you define the word 'boyfriend' to the rest of the world," I shot back heatedly. "Considering you had another guy's dick in your mouth less than five minutes ago."

"You broke up with me, Rourke," she reminded me in a terse voice.

"Because you cheated on me," I snapped, losing my temper and allowing a lot of old hurt to creep back in. "Repeatedly. For two fucking years, Britt."

"We were together for *five* years, Rourke!"

My brows shot up. "Oh, so because you were faithful for the first three, I should just forget about the last two, is that it?"

"I loved you." Britt flushed a dark shade of red. "I still do."

"Not enough," I bit out. "You never loved me enough, B."

"Are you serious about her?" she demanded.

I bristled. "That's none of your business."

"To hell it's not," she shot back, furious. "Give me an answer, Rourke. I deserve one."

I ran a hand through my hair, desperately trying to calm myself down.

What the hell did this girl want from me?

"I gave you all I had," I hissed out hoarsely. "Fucking everything. Five years, Britt. Never once in that whole damn time did I look at another girl. I was fucking loyal to you. I goddamn listened to you over my friends – took your side over people that have been in my life since I was a baby. And even when I *knew* you were on me, when *they* told me what you were doing, I took you back. I gave you chance after chance. Again, and a-fucking-gain. And what did you do? You fucked me up, B." I tapped my temple with my fingers, trying to emphasize to this girl just how close she came to breaking me. "And now I have the chance of actually moving on with my life and getting over you, you want to keep me down? Why?" My chest heaved. "Why can't you just leave me be?"

"Because you're *mine*, Rourke Owens!" she screamed. "You will *always* be mine, and that skanky, fat bitch doesn't deserve you."

"Leave her out of this," I snarled. "Don't look at her. Don't speak to her. Hell, pretend you never fucking heard of her."

"You can't tell me what to do, Rourke," Britt countered. "It's like you said; we're not together anymore." Shrugging, she added, "I don't need to do shit for you."

Anger coursed through my veins. "Keep your mouth shut about Mercedes," I hissed, voice low and threatening. "I'm warning you, Britt."

"Or what?" she shot back, jutting her chin out.

I leaned closer. "Or you and me are gonna have a problem."

"You think I'm afraid of you?" Britt threw her head back and laughed. "Rourke, I've known you since kindergarten. You would never hurt me, or any girl, for that matter."

There's a first time for everything, I wanted to say, but I refrained, knowing it wasn't true.

She was right. I would never hurt her. But I could make life harder for her. And I would if she didn't back the hell off and leave Six alone.

"Keep spreading shit about Mercedes, and I'll take everything from you," I warned her. Britt must have heard the sincerity in my voice because

she paled. I smirked in victory. “Your status at school? The one you claimed from being with me? Your father’s sweet little number at *my* company? The very fucking ground you’re standing on? Push me and I’ll take it all from you.”

“Rourke,” Britt spluttered, clearly stunned. “You wouldn’t...”

“Don’t tell me what I would and wouldn’t do, Britt,” I hissed, backing towards the front door. “You don’t know me anymore.”

Maybe you never did.

Reaching for the handle, I swung the front door open and stepped outside.

“Do yourself a favor and stay the hell away from her,” I called out over my shoulder. “I won’t warn you again.”

Chapter 42

Mercedes

ROURKE WAS IN A HORRIBLE mood when he stalked into the house a little after eight on Friday night. I wasn't exactly sure of what I had been expecting, but considering he had spent the last several days trying to get me to agree to this weird relationship, I thought he would be in a better mood – and on time.

Apparently, I thought wrong, because the moment he barreled through the front door, he headed straight for the staircase, taking the steps three at a time and completely ignoring me in the process.

Shock encompassed me as I stood in the kitchen doorway and watched Rourke disappear up the staircase, followed by a swift amount of aggravation. I had been on tender hooks – a nervous freaking wreck – waiting for him to get home. I had spent *hours* worrying and obsessing and overthinking because of *him*.

What a jerk!

The anger that was beginning to bubble inside of me because of Rourke's actions, faded away the moment he reappeared and began to descend the staircase.

"Six." His heated blue gaze was locked on me, his lips turned up in a sexy, almost carnal looking smile. It was a smile full of promise and it made my heart leap in my chest. "You were right here, weren't you?"

"Yep." I nodded, clasping my hands in front of my body as I watched him approach. "You walked straight past me. Looked like you were looking for something."

"I was," he agreed with a smirk, closing the space between us.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," Rourke said just as he reached me. His hands clamped around my hips and then I was being dragged against a strong male chest. "You."

My breath flew out in a helpless sigh just as Rourke covered my mouth with his.

The moment his lips touched mine, a fierce blast of pleasure rippled through my body.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pressed up on my tiptoes and fell into his kiss. Rourke's lips against mine were demanding, urgent and a little bit desperate. And I loved every second of it. This boy knew how to kiss. Like seriously kiss. Every thrust of his tongue was deep and deliberate, controlled and sensual. He used just the right amount of force and pressure... God, I could kiss his lips forever and never grow tired of it. I knew it was a totally cliché thing to even think, but I had never been kissed like this.

Moaning weakly, I sagged against Rourke's huge frame, shivering when I felt him tighten his arms around my waist and pull me upwards, taking my weight for me. He was so big and strong and he was giving me everything I had wanted for the past seven weeks. Possibly longer. I didn't have a clue anymore.

"Do you want this, Six?" Rourke mumbled, tone gruff, breaking our kiss. "Do you want me?"

Obviously, I wanted this or I wouldn't be standing in the middle of our foyer, half mounting him. But did I want the implications that arose with such a scenario? Did I want the feelings I knew would come from being with a guy like him? I had a feeling Rourke Owens would be hard to shake.

I opened my mouth, expecting to say something sensible, anything that would prevent me from falling into this inevitable trap of heartbreak, but the only thing that came out of my mouth were the words, "I want you."

Rourke smiled a real genuine smile that made my stomach twist up in knots. "Thank fuck for that," he said with a chuckle. "Because I honestly think I would have exploded if you changed your mind on me."

"I kind of thought *you* had," I admitted softly. He was so much taller than me and I had to crane my neck up to look at his face. "When you didn't come home after school, I thought..." I let my words trail off before biting down on my lip. "This is all surreal to me... you liking me after hating me for so long?" I shook my head and exhaled a heavy breath before admitting, "I guess I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Rourke frowned at my words. "I'm not going to hurt you, Six." Dropping both of his large hands to clamp my hips, he pulled me closer so that my body was flush against him. "I've been a dick since you got here. I get it. You don't trust me. Hell, I don't blame you for being wary." His fingers dug into the skin covering my hips as he spoke. "I showed you the very worst possible version of myself," he said huskily. "Give me a chance to show you the best."

What the hell could I say to that?

Nothing, I decided.

Absolutely nothing.

So instead of speaking and potentially making a fool of myself, I reached up and cupped his neck with my hand before pulling his face down to mine. I was sinking; drowning in his ocean blue eyes.

Pressing my soft body against his hard chest, I clung to him, kissing him deeply and opening my mouth when I felt his tongue's gentle probing. I wanted this. Him. Everything he was willing to give me. And because I was a chicken with words, I told him with my lips.

He held me close and his huge frame covering mine...it made me feel safe. I wasn't used to this. But with Rourke, in his arms, I felt protected.

The growl that tore from his chest made everything south of my navel clench and throb. I was in so much trouble. So much, but I couldn't go back now. Not now I knew that he wanted me, too.

He was surprisingly respectful, touching me in all the appropriate places; my back, my hips, my face. I was miserably dissatisfied. I wanted him to touch me like he had those nights in our rooms.

I wanted him to lose control.

God knows I had.

Pressing myself closer, I rocked against him, needing more than his kisses.

He smiled against my lips, but didn't stop kissing me. That sort of pissed me off.

Was he screwing around with me?

Did he not want this?

I was close to ripping my clothes off and begging him to make this aching feeling go away and Rourke seemed unaffected.

Well, not *totally* unaffected.

The bulge in his jeans, the one pressing against my belly, told me he was aroused.

I wanted more though.

I wanted him to lose himself in me the same way I was losing myself in him.

“Take it easy,” he chuckled, breaking the kiss once more.

“Are you serious right now?” I demanded breathlessly, looking up at him with hard, lustful eyes. “I thought you wanted me?”

“Are you seriously questioning whether or not I *want you*?” he shot back. “Look at my dick, Six.” He made a point of gesturing to the obscenely large bulge in the front of his jeans. “I’m two fucking seconds away from exploding here.”

“You’re not acting like it.” I huffed.

“Because you asked me for something,” Rourke said with a teasing lilt of his voice. “You told me you needed my friendship before anything else.” He smiled softly before adding, “And I have every intention of giving that to you.”

“Are you playing mind games with me, Rourke?”

Was he?

One minute he wanted me, and the next he didn’t?

“Are you having second thoughts about this?” If he was going to change his mind again about us then I needed to know now. I was slipping down a steep slope when it came to this guy.

I needed to protect myself.

“Actually, I’m trying really hard not to fuck this up, Six,” Rourke shot back with a nervous chuckle. I heard the vulnerability in his voice, saw it in his eyes. His words caused my heart to constrict tightly in my chest. Reaching out, he tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and exhaled heavily. “I want you to be comfortable with me.”

“Comfortable?” I croaked out, a little breathless.

He nodded. “God, you’re so fucking beautiful, Six.”

“Rourke...” The soft declaration, coming from this boy, meant more to me than I wanted to admit. *He* meant more to me than I knew what to do with. “You shouldn’t say stuff like that.”

Rourke tightened his hold on me. “Why not?”

I exhaled a breathy sigh. I was drowning. He had me snared with his eyes and his words and his...everything. "Because."

He ducked his head to mine and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. "Because?"

Oh fuck a duck, I was in so much trouble.

"Come on, Six," he chuckled, when I had no answer. Reaching between us, he laced his fingers through mine and said, "Let's hang out."



HANGING OUT WITH ROURKE was surprisingly *comfortable*. We ending up heading out for dinner and, after grabbing some food from the drive thru, Rourke drove us up to Sailor's Point, the highest point in Ocean Bay that overlooked the ocean, so we could eat.

"Favorite band or singer?" he asked.

"Pink."

"Favorite subject at school?"

"Econ."

"Favorite food?"

"Pad Thai."

"Favorite place you ever lived?"

"Friday Harbor." I sighed heavily. "I miss Washington."

"Favorite movie?"

I leaned my head back against the rest and thought about it for a moment before saying, "Rush Hour. All three of them. I can't choose my favorite."

"Nice," Rourke chuckled. "Okay, favorite book?"

I smiled. "That's easy; Harry Potter."

He raised a brow. "Which one?"

"All of them," I replied. "I'm a series kind of girl."

I wasn't sure what I was expecting when I climbed into to the passenger seat of his truck tonight, but this *amicable companionship* certainly surpassed my expectations.

He didn't try to grope me or hit on me.

He seemed happy to just sit in his truck and talk.

Of course, listening to Rourke actually make conversation caused more problems for my heart than any amount of flirting. The tiny glimpse

of the real him I was seeing blew my mind. I could love this version of him. In fact, I had a feeling I already did...

"Tell me about Britt." My voice was soft and full of uncertainty when I asked the question I'd been dying to know the answer to.

Whether I wanted to admit it or not, Britt had played a massive role in Rourke's life. He was in love with her once. A small part of me worried that he still was.

But then I thought about everything I had learned about him since I came here.

Rourke wasn't a liar. He didn't have that urge most people had to please and protect others. Rourke was brutally honest, almost savagely so. He didn't pick and choose his words either. He came right out with it, and if you didn't like what he had to say, then deal with it or get out of his way. He made no apologies for who he was and how he thought about things. I loved that about him. Even back in the beginning when he was being a heartless jerk to me, I always admired his honesty.

"And please," I added, holding up a hand. "Choose your words better than last time."

Britt is a girl I occasionally fuck.

Ugh.

"You really want to talk about her?" he asked, raising a brow.

No, I didn't want to talk about Britt.

I had to.

Mustering up as much courage as I could, I nodded once and said, "I want to know."

"Fine." Reaching forward, Rourke grabbed a bottle of water from the cup holder and took a deep sip before exhaling heavily. "Ask your questions, Six."

Tucking my legs beneath me, I angled my body to face his. "How long were you with her?"

"Five years," he replied stiffly.

"Five years?" That was a freaking lifetime. "Since you were twelve?"

"Yeah. Britt was my first girlfriend," he replied before releasing a harsh breath. "What am I saying? She was my only girlfriend." Sighing, he added, "We were close growing up. She was one of my best friends. When

we started dating in the sixth grade, it kind of felt...inevitable – like being with her was what I was supposed to do.”

“You lost your virginity to her?”

“Yeah. Sophomore year.”

“How old were you?”

“I don’t know... maybe sixteen?” He seemed to think about it before repeating, “No, I was still fifteen at the time. Britt was sixteen. She’s older than me by a few months.”

Oh my god. “You had sex when you were fifteen?”

He looked at me sheepishly and shrugged. “It was a long time ago.”

“So, you haven’t been...” My words trailed off and I blushed a deep crimson color before forcing myself to say, “Is she the only girl you’ve been with?”

“Fuck, Six,” Rourke grumbled, rubbing a hand across his face. “Are we really going to talk about this?”

“I want to know,” I admitted, jutting my chin out.

“Fine.” Rourke threw his hands up in defeat. “Yes. Britt is the only girl I’ve ever slept with. I’ve kissed other girls since we broke up and done some other stuff, but Britt?” He paused, nostrils flaring. “She’s the only one.”

Fuck.

He really did belong to her.

“Did you love her?” I blurted out. What was I saying? *Of course* he loved her...

Rourke nodded once, the movement stiff and almost reluctant like it was painful for him to admit this to me.

My heart sank. “Do you *still* love her?”

Rourke’s jaw clenched and he stared out the window for the longest time before turning his attention back to my face. “I’m not in love with her anymore.”

His answer bothered me. Because he didn’t say he didn’t love her. He said he wasn’t in love with her anymore.

Maybe I was reading too much into his words, but I wanted him so badly to tell me that he hated her guts. It would have made me feel a million times better. Even if I was only his friend with benefits.

“What happened?” I forced myself to ask.

"I got tired of being second best." Rourke's voice was low and gruff, his blue eyes locked intently on mine. "That's what I've always been in Britt's eyes; her backup plan." He shook his head and sighed. "I was never gonna be her endgame, Six. Not like I should have been. So, we broke up. Junior year."

"Second best?" I asked, confused, wondering how on earth anyone could look at Rourke and consider him second best. Rourke Owens was second to *none*. Even when I hated him, I knew that. This boy was nobody's *backup* plan.

"Yeah." He laughed harshly and it was a pained sound. It hurt my heart. His blue eyes narrowed when he said, "After the ninth or tenth time I caught her cheating on me, I'd had enough." He shrugged helplessly. "Figured I'd rather be alone than with a liar."

"Was she *your* endgame, Rourke?" I dared to ask.

"At the time, yeah," he admitted hoarsely. "She was."

"And now?" I paused before asking, "What's your endgame?"

"Now?" He exhaled heavily. "My endgame is to get the hell out of this town as soon as I graduate."

He had a plan just like mine.

How ironic.

"But you continued to sleep with her?" My voice sounded far more accusatory than I had intended. "Why do that to yourself?" I added in a softer tone of voice. "When you knew she was doing you wrong like that?"

"Because I couldn't forgive her and I couldn't move on from her," he shot back honestly. "I was stuck and Britt was...familiar."

"Rourke..."

"I know it sounds bad, Six," Rourke interrupted, running a hand roughly through his hair. "But it's the only answer I have."

"Thank you for telling me." If Rourke was expecting me to judge him then he had me totally wrong. "And FYI? Britt's a fucking idiot for letting you go."

His gaze softened. "You think so?"

Reaching across the console, I grabbed his hand and squeezed. "I know so."

"What about you?" Rourke asked, blue eyes sparkling with mischief, obviously keen to veer the subject away from him. "Don't try to tell me you

didn't leave a trail of broken hearts back in Kansas"

I scoffed. "Doubtful."

Rourke raised a brow in disbelief. "I find that hard to believe, Six."

"Yeah, well it's the truth," I shot back. "My last boyfriend gave up on me when after six months of dating, the furthest he'd managed to get was a hand job."

Rourke looked at me in disbelief. "You're kidding, right?"

I shook my head. "I kid you not. Peter called me 'high-maintenance' because I wouldn't *put out*." I forced back a shudder at the thought. "He broke up with me right before junior prom and went with Sarah Landes instead." I leaned my head back and grimaced at the memory. "Of course, I have no doubt he got what he wanted from Sarah that night, though I don't know for sure, since I blew off the dance and took a shift at work instead."

"What douche nozzle," Rourke said in a tone laced with disgust.

"Uh-huh." I nodded in total agreement. "He was a mistake."

"A should have been swallowed kind of mistake?" he asked with a teasing wink.

"Yes," I laughed. "Definitely one of those."

"Before him?"

"Um..." I paused as I thought back. "There was Michael Dauntez. We dated for a couple of months when Mom and I lived in Nevada." I smiled fondly at the memory. "He had worse luck than Peter," I laughed. "He didn't even manage to slip the tongue when he kissed me. But then again, we were in the seventh grade, so what did he really expect from me?"

Rourke grinned. "You make guys work for it?"

"Absolutely," I replied with a smile. "I wasn't going to let some hormonal teenage boy climb into my pants just because he paid me a slither of attention – I'm not my mother."

"Are you a virgin, Six?" Rourke asked, surprising me with his bluntness. His eyes were heated and focused solely on my mine.

"Do I look like a virgin to you?" I shot back defensively, folding my arms across my chest.

I had nothing to be ashamed of. Being a virgin at my age should have been a heck of lot more common than it was, but admitting it to Rourke was not easy.

“I think that’s a question I’d be a fool to answer,” he shot back, tone gruff. “I’d rather you tell me than to make assumptions.”

I didn’t want to scare him off by telling him that I’d never had sex with another guy. I wasn’t a prude and knew all about the messy aftermath of a girl’s first-time.

What if he was grossed out by the blood and pain?

Would it be painful for him, too?

I knew it would hurt me.

Rourke had obviously been through this with Britt before.

What if he wasn’t interested in a virgin?

“I’ve done it before,” I blurted out, cheeks flushed, as I struggled to maintain my composure. “Loads of times.”

“Loads of times?”

“That’s right.”

Rourke stared at me for the longest moment with an expression I didn’t recognize before reaching out and catching ahold of my chin.

My heart stopped in my chest and I exhaled a shaky breath.

Was he mad?

He didn’t look mad.

He looked...strangely possessive.

Pulling my face to his, Rourke pressed a hard kiss to my lips before pulling back and saying, “Don’t *ever* lie to me again.” With his heated blue eyes on mine, he continued to hold my chin with his hand. “You got it?”

“Yeah,” I whispered, feeling lightheaded and strangely buzzed. “I’ve got it.”

Chapter 43

Rourke

I DROVE BACK TO the house with Six's hand enveloped in mine. I had no fucking clue how we'd ended up like this, and I didn't want to tempt fate by trying to figure it out. All I knew was Six wanted me, and I felt more contented than I had in weeks. Maybe I said too much tonight, let Six in a little bit too far, but I'd be a liar if I said it didn't feel good to get it all off my chest.

I never really talked about what went down between me and Britt. I just brushed it under the rug and kept going, never stopping long enough to analyze what a fucking idiot I had been. It was embarrassing for me. It would be for any guy. I didn't want a pity party. My girlfriend broke my heart. Whoop-dee-fucking-doo.

Six didn't judge me or make me feel like a dumbass for sticking around. She was protective and angry and hurt on my behalf. I liked it. Having someone who cared. I had a feeling she did. Or maybe I just wanted to believe she did?

Christ, why had I waited so long for this?

Why the hell had I fought so hard to deny the connection between us?

I'd always known it was there; I had felt it the moment I laid my eyes on her at our parent's wedding.

Six sat in the passenger seat of my truck, looking all cute and sexy in her school uniform, and it took every ounce of my self-control to keep my eyes on the road ahead of us and not on her bare thighs where her skirt rode up.

When we got home and I walked her to her bedroom door, she turned and looked at me with a confused expression etched on her pretty face. I knew Six wanted more from me tonight – she was *expecting* more.

One look in those big grey eyes and I could see the desire. Fuck, I wanted it, too, but her vulnerability had taken ahold of something inside of

me and I was hell bent on making her comfortable. She wasn't just vulnerable; she was *innocent*.

A virgin.

Six was fucking perfect *and* untouched.

Oh, I was having her alright, but when she was really ready. The fact that she so willingly offered herself to me sparked something inside of me. Something possessive and dominant. Knowing Six wanted me to be the first one inside her was one hell of an ego boost.

"Night, Six," I whispered, pressing a quick kiss to her lips before stepping away from temptation. I wasn't going to rush this – *her*.

"Yeah, um, goodnight, Rourke," she replied with a blush as she tucked her hair behind her ears.

Nodding, I turned around while I still had the strength to and walked down the hallway to my room.

When I was halfway inside, Six called out, "Rourke?"

I swung back around to face her. "Yeah?"

"Thank you for dinner tonight." She grinned at me with this huge, megawatt smile before saying, "It is customary to thank someone when they buy you dinner, remember?"

I threw my head back and laughed. "No problem."

Six smiled once more before waving me off, and I stood in the doorway of my room watching her every move as she disappeared.

When I heard the door click behind her, I shook my head and released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Oh yeah, I was so fucked.



Mercedes

IT WAS PAST four in the morning and I couldn't sleep. Every time I closed my eyes, I was assaulted by the memory of the last couple of days with Rourke. Frustrated was an understatement for the way I was feeling right now.

Burning with anxiety and driven by lust, I threw my covers off and climbed out of bed. Padding to my bedroom door, I quietly pulled it open and slipped onto the landing.

Yeah, I had feelings for Rourke. Big, angry, swallowing-me-whole feelings. I had no clue what to do with those feelings, but they were there.

I *agreed*. I gave in to this stupid ‘friends with benefits’ deal and he had taken a sudden step back from me, slamming the brakes on our impending affair. Could you even call it an affair at seventeen? Rourke definitely wasn’t my boyfriend, but I hated the word *fling*. It reminded me too much of my mother. And although the word *affair* wasn’t much better, it seemed much more appropriate.

This is temporary.

Growing attached to Rourke was not a sensible thing for me to do. In fact, it was downright crazy. He couldn’t give me what I needed. He’d told me exactly that. A boy like Rourke Owens wasn’t one a girl walked away from unscathed. Just look at Britt for Christ’s sake. She was a black hearted mess over the guy. And I was nowhere close to being as tough as her. This was my first time...

I hovered outside his bedroom for what felt like forever before forcing myself to turn the handle of his door and creep inside.

Rourke’s bedroom was in complete darkness, illuminated only by the full moon shining in from the floor to ceiling window; identical to the one in my room.

The full moon glowing through the glass allowed me to see him, and the moment my eyes landed on his sleeping frame, something tight knotted inside of me.

He was lying face down on his bed with the pillow his head was resting on tucked in the crook of his right arm.

Long, lush lashes framed his high cheekbones; lashes that any girl would die to have. His dark hair was sexily disheveled and, to my utter disappointment, he was wearing both a t-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts.

Holding my breath, I padded over to his bed and just stood there for a moment, plotting. I debated retreating to my bedroom for a brief moment before shutting that notion down. I wasn’t going back to my room to toss and turn until the sun came up.

No freaking way...

“Rourke?” I whispered into the darkness, desperate to hear his voice and have him comfort me. “Are you awake?”

What a dumb thing to ask.

I knew he wasn't awake.

Shaking my head at my own stupidity, I leaned over him and gently touched his shoulder with trembling fingers. "Rourke?"

He didn't budge.

My eyes flickered to the black traveler's notebook laying open and face down on the mattress. Curiosity burned inside me at the sight of the familiar notebook. I'd seen Rourke with this tattered old thing on many occasions since coming to live here. What did he keep in there? Was it his journal or something? Did boys keep journals? None I'd ever met.

Don't do it, Mercy!

Don't touch it...

"Six?" Rourke's voice caught me by surprise and I gasped before quickly snatching my hand away. "What's wrong?" he asked, tone sleepy as he rolled onto his back and looked up at me, accidentally knocking the notebook on the floor.

"I, um..." How did I answer this without sounding completely pathetic, not to mention desperate? "I can't sleep," I finally offered. It was a lame excuse to be in his room in the middle of the night, but it was mostly the truth. Of course, I left out the part where I wanted to spend the rest of the night having him kiss me senseless.

A slow smile crept across his face. "Is that so?" His voice was gruff and thick from sleep, and yet held an undeniable hint of humor.

"Yeah." I nodded, feeling like a dope. I moved to fold my arms in front of my stomach, but Rourke reached out and grabbed my hand.

Tugging hard, Rourke pulled me onto his bed and sat me on his lap, straddling his hips. "How can I help?" His hands automatically moved to my hips, his fingertips pressing into my skin. "Six?" He rocked his hips upwards at the same time as pulling my body down hard on him.

Exhaling heavily, I dropped my hands to his chest and sagged forward. "This isn't helping," I breathed, feeling his erection press between my legs. The feeling of him grinding so close to where no other had been before made it hard for me to focus. "Like...really isn't helping."

"No?" Rourke whispered, repeating the movement, and this time I moaned loudly. He chuckled softly, tightening and then retightening his hold on my hips. "What about this?" he asked seconds before reaching under the hem of my tank top and whipping it over my head.

I watched, stunned, as Rourke flung my tank on his bedroom floor and sat forward. “Better?” he quipped, his lips inches from mine.

“I don’t know,” I replied breathily. “I think I’m, uh, still a little over dressed.”

Smirking, Rourke took a slow appraisal of my body. “I think you’re right,” he whispered huskily when his gaze landed on my lacy black bra.

I had to close my eyes when he trailed his fingers up my sides, moving ever so slowly to my bra. When his fingers found the fabric covering my breasts, Rourke reached up and slipped each strap down my shoulders before trailing his hands behind my back and freeing my bra clasp with an efficiency that should have worried me.

It didn’t.

I was too turned on to care how many bras Rourke had taken off. I only cared that it was *my bra* he was removing right now.

The low growl Rourke released when my breasts sprang free caused a pool of wetness between my legs. My clit throbbed, desperate for attention, my nipples puckered and strained.

“You’re so damn beautiful, Six,” he told me, eyes roaming over my naked skin.

I watched him watching me, the moment almost too intimate to take. “I’ve wanted you from the moment I first saw you,” he told me, reaching out to palm one of my breasts. “In that tight, red dress...” He circled my nipple with his fingers. “And these.” Dipping his head, he pressed a soft kiss to each of my breasts before pulling one pebbled nipple into his hot, wet mouth and sucking. “Jesus, Six,” he groaned, releasing my nipple with a loud pop. “I don’t have words, baby.”

Neither did I.

Unable to form a coherent sentence, I sagged forward and wrapped my arms around Rourke’s neck. He rewarded my move by jerking out from beneath me and rolling me onto my back in one fluid movement.

Oh yeah, this guy knew what he was doing.

I watched as Rourke reached a hand behind him and tugged his shirt over his head before tossing it on the floor. The intensity of his gaze had me pinned to the bed as he stared down at me through dark, hooded lashes.

My eyes took in his hard, chiseled chest and his toned, ripped stomach muscles that seemed to clench and contract every time he breathed. God, he

was so beautiful. The trail of dark hair from his navel, disappearing under the waistband of his boxers was so fucking hot, I wanted to lick it.

I was hot, wet, and painfully horny. I knew that was a word most associated with men, but I didn't give a shit. I was horny, plain and simple.

Deep down inside, I knew the sensible thing to do would be to put my clothes back on and go back to my room, but what I wanted was to take him inside of my body. I knew I would never forgive myself if I walked away now. My heart was racing so hard in my chest, I found myself breathing faster; exhaling in short, puffy breaths.

I was still struggling to understand why he wanted me. Why me? When he could have had a girl who would give him whatever he wanted. Why on earth did he want me?

"Are you okay?" Rourke whispered from above me, distracting me from my thoughts.

My thighs fell open of their own accord and Rourke settled between them, pressing his hard cock against my aching pussy. I still had my pajama shorts and undies on, but it didn't feel like I did. He was hard and hot and arousing me with pressure alone.

The moment my head hit the pillow, Rourke's lips landed on mine, warm, commanding and undeniably welcome.

I felt my body go pliant beneath him, my lips opening to his persuasive probing, my hips rising up to meet his every thrust.

"You good, Six?" Rourke whispered against my lips. I nodded and tightened my arms around his neck, clutching him to me. I was good. Incredibly good.

"All good," I replied, lips still melded to his as I wrapped my legs around his waist. "All very, very...good."

I felt him smile against my lips. "You're so fucking adorable."

I had no idea how to respond to that, so I didn't. Instead, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feeling of having Rourke Owens kiss the hell out of me. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I kissed him back just as deeply, massaging his tongue with mine.

We continued to kiss – just kiss – for what felt like forever before Rourke eventually broke the kiss, pulling away from me with a pained growl.

Rolling off me, Rourke twisted onto his side and pulled my back flush to his chest before covering us with the blanket. "Night, Six," he whispered and then pressed a kiss to my bare shoulder.

What the hell?

Goodnight?

"Why haven't you tried to fuck me, Rourke?" I blurted out, thankful for the darkened room so Rourke couldn't see just how red I had turned. "You hunted me down. I've agreed, and yet, no sex. I don't get it." *I don't get you.* "Do you not want to anymore?"

"Christ, Six," he bit out. "You have no idea how much I want to bury myself inside of you."

"Then why haven't you?" my voice sounded whiney, but I didn't give a shit. Rourke had me all riled up and now he wanted to *cuddle*? Ugh. "Is it because I'm a virgin?" I demanded. "Do you not want me now?"

"I want you *more* because of it," he growled, tightening his arm around me. "I want you so fucking badly I can hardly think straight, but I'm not going to rush this. You need something from me. I'm going to give that to you. Then we can talk about sex."

"But I'm ready now," I shot back with a pout. "I was ready those other times, too, you know." It was the truth. I couldn't explain it, but I was one hundred percent ready to give my all to this guy.

"I'm not going to rush you." Rourke slipped a hand under the covers and rested it on my hip. The move sent shivers through me and I involuntarily moaned. "I can wait," he added in a gruff tone. "I'm not going anywhere, Six."

"But you said this is temporary," I complained, wiggling against his erection.

Rourke stilled for a moment before thrusting himself against me, pressing the hard erection against me. "I know what I said."

"If it's temporary, then what are you waiting for?"

"Six." A pained sound tore from deep in his chest. "I'm trying to do the right thing by you here, baby."

"Well the right thing sucks," I grumbled, huffing out a breath. "I feel like I've turned you off me by being a virgin and now you're too damn polite to say so."

“Goddammit.” Muttering a string of curse words, he tossed me onto my back before settling on his knees below me, hands resting on the waistband of my pajama shorts.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I breathed, watching as he knelt between my legs.

“I’m making you come,” Rourke growled as he dragged both my shorts and panties down my legs and tossing them away. Leaning over me, Rourke tipped his finger against my nose and smirked. “And then maybe we’ll both get some sleep.”

“Don’t do me any favors,” I muttered sullenly.

Rourke stifled a growl as he slowly moved down my body, leaving a trail of kisses on my stomach in his wake. “Six, just shut the fuck up and let me taste your pussy.”

Did he just?”

Oh yeah, he did...

My eyelids fluttered shut when his mouth descended on me, his tongue snaking out to probe my swollen clit. I was aching, pulsing, and when he touched me I almost bucked clean off the bed.

“Relax,” he coaxed, resting my legs over his shoulders. Pulling me closer with his hands, he stroked me slowly, eyes locked on my face, watching my reaction. “Does that feel good, Six?”

I nodded frantically, clutching at his sheets as he spread me open with his fingers and lapped at me with his tongue.

“Fuck,” I cried out when he bit down on my clit and tugged. The sensation was pleasure bordering on pain and it caused a fierce jolt of arousal to rise inside of me.

It was too much and not nearly enough all rolled into one.

Rourke didn’t let up either. No, he continued to torture me with his mouth and hands, bringing me to the brink of an orgasm before pulling away at the last minute, leaving me crying out in frustration in his arms.

“Relax,” he repeated, coaxing me back down on the mattress with his hand. “Let me make this good for you.”

Good for me?

It was already freaking fabulous for me.

“Do you have any idea how fucking beautiful you are?” he whispered, slipping a finger inside of me. “I’ve been in a permanent state of semi-

hardness since you came here.”

“Use it,” I begged. “Please. Put it inside me.”

“God baby,” he groaned, fingers moving more urgent now. “You trying to kill me or something?”

“No. I’m trying to get you to fuck me.” I shook my head and cried out. “Please, Rourke,” I whined, bucking my hips upwards. “Make me come.”

He touched me again, shutting me up with those skilled fingers and freaking fantastic mouth. The feeling was phenomenal. His touch was so welcoming. It was like he had electric currents under his fingertips and every touch shot a bolt of sizzling, delicious electricity through my body straight to my swollen clit.

“How do I rank in the friendship stakes?” he whispered, pressing a kiss to my clit, and ignoring my feeble protests.

“The best,” I rambled, rocking and shaking beneath. “The very best. In fact, you’ve been promoted to best friend already!”

“Good,” he teased. “I love promotions.”

“Uh-huh.” Grabbing a pillow, I dragged it to my face and bit down hard, moaning loudly when I felt his tongue run the length of my slit before plunging inside me. “Oh my god...Rourke!”

Chapter 44

Rourke

THE MIDMORNING SUN POURED through my bedroom window, casting Six in a halo of light. Fuck me, she was beautiful, laying naked on my bed, all tangled up in my sheets.

Her dark hair fanned over my pillow as she snuggled her body against mine and my chest tightened at the sight of her sleeping frame. She looked so small, so unbelievably fragile, all five feet nothing of her, as she clung to my side.

Last night blew my mind. This girl was making me question *everything*. My past, my present, and scary as hell to admit, my future, too.

The handle of my door jangled and my eyes flew open just as Amelia peeked her blonde head around the door. Her gaze landed on me before moving to Six, her expression disgusted. The scowl on Amelia's face was quickly replaced with recognition when she realized it wasn't Britt in my bed. Her mouth formed a silent O before transforming into a huge smile. Her eyes landed on mine again, this time excited and inquisitive. I shook my head slightly, warning her off. I loved my baby sister, but if she woke Six up now and broke my perfect fucking moment, I was going to be pissed.

Amelia's gaze landed on me once more and she gave me a huge smile and an emphatic thumbs up before retreating from my room and closing the door quietly.

I tightened the arm I had wrapped around Six's back and exhaled a contented sigh. That move earned me a small protest.

"Stay, Rourke," she mumbled in her sleep, tossing her thigh over mine, pressing herself closer to me. "Stay with me."

Fuck me.

I was ruined.

This girl was destroying me.

“I am,” I whispered, holding her so tightly I was surprised she could still breathe, because I sure as hell couldn’t. “I will.”



MY PHONE RANG loudly several hours later, waking us both. Six was still wrapped around me, but quickly sprang up to a sitting position; the intrusive fucking ringtone startling her. I wanted to squash the motherfucking piece of plastic she was reaching for.

I watched through hooded eyes as Six leaned over me and grabbed my cell from the nightstand before swiping her finger across the screen and pressing it to her ear.

“Um, hello?” she asked, rubbing her forehead.

I smirked to myself. I didn’t even care that she was answering *my* phone. I was enjoying the view of her tits too much. Besides, I had nothing to hide.

“Gabe?” Six frowned. “Why are you calling?” Her eyes widened then. “Um, Rourke? He’s...uh...” Her gaze flashed to me and her entire face flamed. “He’s out,” she lied, wincing. “Yeah, um, he left his phone at home.”

I smothered a laugh.

She was a fucking horrible liar.

“Is my Mom okay?” Six’s body stiffened as she listened to whatever was being said on the other side of the line. “But she said –” Another pause. “Four more weeks?” She gnawed on her fingernails. “Okay, I guess. It doesn’t sound like my opinion matters either way.”

Curious to know what was being said, I pulled myself up to a sitting position and rested my chin on her bare shoulder. Six shivered under my touch, her gaze flickering to me. “Yeah, Gabe, fine. Bye – yeah, tell my Mom I love her, too.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked after she hung up the phone.

“They’ve extended their trip for another four weeks.” Her voice was so sad when she spoke, and I was instantly annoyed at our parents for upsetting her.

Six had been convinced our parents were coming back next week. I had known better. Her mother might have been good at keeping her word, but I knew my father and his word meant shit.

I pressed a kiss to her shoulder and whispered, "Is that a bad thing?"

She chewed on her lip and thought about it for a moment before saying, "I guess not."

"You're not her keeper, Six," I said then. "Your mother?" I clarified. "She's not your responsibility."

"I just worry about her," she replied quietly. "It's a force of habit." She shrugged helplessly. "I've been doing it my whole life."

Those words alone pissed me off to epic proportions.

She wasn't loved. That was it. She never felt loved by her mother. Fuck. She was lonely and uncertain. I wasn't blind. I'd been paying attention for the past two months. I was fully aware of the dynamics of Six and Cassidy's relationship and it drove me batshit crazy. As I grew closer to Six, my anger and resentment for her mother grew. She was so fucking selfish. I wondered how long Six had been left alone to deal with everything. A part of me didn't want to know, because deep down inside, I already did and it infuriated me.

"Get dressed," I announced, dragging myself from my dark thoughts.

Six turned and gaped at me. "Why?"

"Because I'm taking you out."

"You don't have to," she was quick to point out, cheeks flushed. "I know the score between us, Rourke."

Knew the score?

Oh, she had no fucking clue.

"I want to," I replied. "I'll buy you breakfast down at the pier or something."

"It's 3:30 in the afternoon, Rourke."

I shrugged. "Fine. I'll buy you lunch and dinner – whatever you want."

"How is this even happening?" she surprised me by saying instead.

I frowned. "What?"

"You and me," she replied, turning her face to giving me her full attention. "Having a civilized conversation. Being... nice to each other? Don't you think it's, I don't know, a little weird?"

I would never live it down.

I'd been a complete dick to her. She wasn't going to forget it easily. I didn't blame her.

"Six, I'm gonna make it up to you."

“Just keep being like this,” she said with a contented sigh. “Be my friend, Rourke. That’s enough for me.”

I fucking hated myself for the way I had treated Six.

She never deserved the shit I’d thrown at her.

Six was the opposite of everything I’d ever known. She didn’t hang on my every word. She fought me, challenged me, never took my shit. I liked that. It was crazy refreshing.

I’d been in love before, I had experienced it, and I knew full well the emotions Six was pulling from me were drawing me closer. Hell, screw closer, I was teetering on the edge. If I let myself fall, I had a feeling there would be no way back up for me. Problem was, every time I looked at this girl, everything inside of me screamed *permanent*.



Mercedes

LAST NIGHT WAS A MISTAKE, I decided. One huge, gigantic, colossal mistake. It just so happened that I was sitting in the passenger seat of the truck beside the boy who had played the leading role in said mistake, and right about now, he was looking like the best damn decision I would ever make.

I couldn’t believe I’d gotten myself into this. I was supposed to be smart and make good decisions and yet, here I was, getting in way over my head with this boy. Rourke Owens set me on fire every time he put his hands on me and I needed to do something to douse the flames.

He wasn’t making it easy for me though. Not when he was being so... nice. Damn, nice was a word I never could’ve seen myself using to describe Rourke, but there it was. Rourke *was* nice, and kind, and funny, and beautiful, and a million other amazing things besides that.

Most surprising of all; I *enjoyed* being with him. I *craved* that feeling I got every time he turned his face to look at me. And when he flashed me that megawatt smile, the one when both his dimples popped in his cheeks? God, I melted every single time.

Walk the Moon’s ‘*Shut up and Dance*’ came on the radio just as the server handed Rourke our bag of goodies from the drive thru and I squealed

in delight. "Leave it on," I begged when I noticed him reaching for the stereo. "Please. I love this song."

"You're such a girl," he said with a snort, but he indulged me by turning up the volume while he pulled out of line and drove around, looking for a spot to park in the already crammed parking lot.

Grinning, I immersed myself in the lyrics, singing along animatedly to every verse.

"You're a fucking horrible singer," Rourke managed to choke out through fits of laughter when I was mid-song. He looked mildly horrified and thoroughly amused.

Flipping Rourke the bird, I ignored his comment and continued to sing along at the top of my lungs, throwing some serious moves as I sang.

"If Coach or any of the guys ask, you didn't see me eating this," Rourke said when we were parked in a spot at the end of the lot. He unwrapped his double cheeseburger and took a huge bite. "Mmmm," he moaned. "So fucking good."

"What?" I looked at him in curiosity. "Are you not allowed burgers or something?"

He looked over at me and grinned. "I'm on a strict diet during football season."

I looked him up and down; taking in his huge, muscular frame and asked, "Why?" I shook my head and took another appraisal of his firm, toned body. "Rourke, you look like a fitness instructor's wet dream."

"Cute, Six," Rourke chuckled as he continued to hound down the remainder of his burger before moving onto his fries. "But there's always room for improvement."

I stared at him. "Again, *where*?"

That comment earned me a kiss; one that made my toes curl and belly to rumble with hunger for something other than chicken nuggets. *Damn him!*

The sound of a car door slamming close by caused Rourke to break the kiss. He winked at me and I sagged against my seat, breathing hard.

"Cheap date, Owens?" a male voice called out tauntingly, and Rourke stiffened.

My gaze flew in the direction the voice had come from and I glowered at the two guys standing outside the driver's side of Rourke's truck.

“You sharing this one, too?” one of them asked, tapping on the window.

The other guy laughed. “Yeah, he’s just breaking her in for you first, man.”

“Who are these jerks?” I whispered, keeping my eyes locked on Rourke. Whoever these guys were, they were seriously pissing him off.

“Some assholes from Jefferson,” he replied tightly, his fists curled around the steering wheel.

Awareness dawned on me. “One of the guys Britt slept with?”

He nodded stiffly.

I looked out the window to where the two morons were standing, clearing trying their best to torment Rourke. “Are they trying to goad you into a fight or something?”

“Yeah,” Rourke growled, jaw clenched, nostrils flaring. “If I get caught fighting again this year, I’m off the team. Permanently.” His jaw ticked again. “And they would fucking love that.”

God, he looked so enraged. I had a feeling he was two seconds away from exploding. It was that very notion that caused me to do what I did next.

Reaching across the console, I grabbed his neck, and tugged his face towards mine. He came willingly, surprise etched on his beautiful face. “Don’t even think about letting those bastards get to you,” I told him, my lips inches from his; a huge swell of possessiveness flooding my body, the urge to defend Rourke overwhelmingly strong.

“They just insulted you,” he bit out, breathing hard.

“So?” Forcing him to look at my face, I locked my eyes on his. “Stick and stones, Rourke.” Reaching up, I stroked his cheeks with my hands. “I don’t give a crap about those guys and neither should you.”

“I’m not fucking letting them...” His voice broke off and he growled. “Goddammit, I’m gonna fucking kill them.” He was shaking with restrained violence. I knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to get out of this car and kick their asses. Part of me wanted him to do that, too, but the other part, the sensible side, knew that these creeps didn’t deserve his time.

“No, you’re not,” I announced, climbing onto his lap. For the first time in my life, I was happy of my size; it made straddling Rourke so much easier. “You’re going to kiss me instead.”

His brows shot up in confusion. "What?"

"You heard me," I whispered, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. "You need a distraction." *And I need you safe.* "Kiss me."

His hands moved to my thighs, clamping down on my flesh possessively. "Six..."

"Just shut up and kiss me, Rourke," I ordered before covering his mouth with mine.

And he did just that.

God, I felt powerful.

Chapter 45

Mercedes

BY THE TIME SUNDAY evening rolled around, I had resigned myself to accept the fact that I was head over heels in love with my stepbrother, and it was all *his* fault.

Seven weeks.

That was it.

Seven weeks and I was in love?

It wasn't supposed to be this way. I wasn't supposed to fall in love with Rourke.

Ocean Bay was a temporary pit stop for me. I was leaving this all behind me. Rourke wasn't part of the plan. And now, I was gravitating towards him.

Of course, I would never tell him that. No, I would bury my feelings. I was good at that; pretending I was fine when I was far from it. I'd seen enough of my mother's failed relationships to know that it was a really bad idea to live your life around a man because when he left, and they always left, you would be on your own again.

I was turning into my mother...

"That was Amelia," Rourke announced, walking into his bedroom with his cell in his hand, wearing nothing but a pair of black boxer shorts. "She's staying at the Kings again tonight," he added, drawing me back to the present.

"Again?" I asked, looking up from the biology textbook in my lap, eyes immediately honing in on his bare chest, taking in every ridge and groove on his stomach.

Never in my life had I seen anyone so *primal*. There was something about this boy that called out to the cavewoman inside of me, and I wanted to drag him back to my cave and mount him. Of course, my cave happened to be his bed and I wasn't nearly brave enough to act out my fantasies.

Shaking my head, I wrapped my arms around my knees and fought down the huge swell of lust growing inside me.

Rourke strolled over to the huge flat screen TV mounted on his wall and slid a DVD into the side part before padding back to his side of the bed – he preferred the left, closest to the door and I liked being nearer to the window on the right – and dropping his phone on the nightstand.

“What are you doing?” I asked when Rourke settled down on the mattress and snagged my textbook off the bed before tossing it down on the floor. “Hey – I was reading that!”

“I can promise you one thing,” he purred, leaning in close to my ear. “We sure as hell aren’t spending the night studying.”

“Rourke,” I whispered, biting down on my lip when I felt his teeth graze my collarbone. “We have a test tomorrow.” His body was too close to mine; his fresh, manly smell flooding my senses. It was too much. *He* was too much.

“I know,” he whispered, running a trail of kisses from my shoulder upwards. Pausing at the point where my shoulder joined my neck, Rourke nipped down hard, and this time I did cry out. Embarrassingly loudly.

“So fucking beautiful,” Rourke whispered gruffly, maneuvering around until he was kneeling between my legs. “You’re perfect, Six.” Leaning back on his heels, he used one large palm to push me onto my back. “Fucking perfect.”

Exhaling a ragged breath, I scooted up and grabbed the hem of his football jersey I was wearing and ripped it over my body before tossing it as far away from us as possible. My skin was on fire and I didn’t want barriers between us. I wanted him. *All of him.*

Naked and trembling, I reached up and cupped the back of Rourke’s neck before roughly dragging his body down on mine. “If I’m so perfect, take me.” I pressed my lips against his and wrapped my legs around his narrow waist. “Take me, Rourke.” Thrusting myself upwards, I moaned loudly when his erection pressed against my core. The only thing separating our bodies was the fabric of his boxers. “Please?” I begged, needy and full of want. “I’m ready.”

“Christ,” Rourke bit out in a strained tone as he buried his face in my neck and groaned. “Not tonight, baby.”

“*Take me!*” I repeated, this time a pained demand, as he trailed his lips down my body.

“Six,” he growled in a warning tone, lips hovering over my hipbone.

“You’re saying *no* again?”

“I’m saying not tonight.” He continued to trail kisses over my skin.

I bucked beneath him, restless and turned on. “Why not, dammit?”

“Because I’m fucking terrified of rushing you.”

“What?” I shook my head and gaped at him. “Rourke, I am naked in your bed, begging you to have sex with me. I think it’s pretty clear you’re not rushing me.”

“I’m not good at this, Six!” he admitted gruffly. “I have a really fucking bad track record and I don’t want to fuck this up with you.” He exhaled a ragged breath against my skin. “You’re.... I’m trying so fucking hard to be your friend.” He kissed my skin before adding, “I’m giving you time.”

“I don’t want time!” I growled, tilting my hips upwards and crying out loudly when his cock pressed harder against my aching pussy. “I want your dick in me right now, Rourke.”

“Christ,” Rourke grunted. “You’re not going to make this easy on me, are you?” His hands dropped to my ass and he dragged my lower body towards his, grinding hard. The friction and sensations that move brought out in my body were entirely too much. “I’m gonna fuck you, Six, and I’m gonna make it real good for you,” he promised, his voice thick and gruff, as he dragged me onto his straining erection. “Just...not tonight.”

Bastard.

“Fine.” Locking my legs around his waist, I flipped myself into a sitting position on Rourke’s lap before wrapping my arms around his neck and crashing my mouth down on his.

Tilting my head to one side, I rocked against him, pressing myself against his cock and loving when he growled in my ear. Oh yeah, I was going to make him suffer for making me feel this way, and I had the whole night to do it.

Chapter 46

Mercedes

I SLIPPED OUT OF Rourke's bedroom at the crack of dawn on Monday morning and left for school before his alarm went off. Sure, I had to wait in the parking lot for an hour, but I gladly took that over facing him.

Knowing that Rourke had touched – licked – intimate areas of my body was too freaking much. I knew I wasn't reacting like a mature seventeen-year-old. But how the hell could I?

He was fucking beautiful and I was scared of getting too attached – more attached than I already was. The way he had made me feel this past weekend?

My cheeks still flamed at the thought. I actually came in his mouth. On multiple occasions. Like, what the holy hell?

I had no idea how I was ever going to face my stepbrother again. It was different back in his room. School was the real world.

What if he was different with me there?

I didn't dare stick around to find out.

I didn't think my heart could take it.

And so, for the millionth time since arriving in Ocean Bay, I found myself asking the same question; what the hell was wrong with me? This time, however, I voiced the question out loud, turning to the one friend I had made for answers.

"There is *nothing* wrong with you," Molly assured me during lunch. Picking up an apple, she rolled it between her hands as she spoke.

"Yeah, right," I half scoffed, half moaned. "Then why won't he won't have sex with me?"

Her eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"All freaking weekend," dropping my head in my hands, I stifled a moan, "I offered myself to Rourke on a plate and he turned me down."

"He did?"

“He’d never admit it, but I know it’s because I’m a virgin,” I muttered, dropping my gaze to my uneaten lunch. “He doesn’t want the mess, so he just goes down on me instead.”

“Omigod!” Loud spluttering noises coming from Molly caused me to lift my attention to her. “Rourke went *down* on you?” she hissed, eyes alight with excitement. “For real?”

I nodded.

“What was it like?” she asked, leaning closer.

“It was incredible,” I wailed. “Like mind-blowingly good, Molls.”

“Wow.” Smiling dreamily, she added, “You know; ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the female population at this school would *die* to be in your shoes right now.”

“You’re not helping,” I bit out, cheeks burning. “I’m completely mortified, Molly.”

“Why?” she asked. “You spent the entire weekend with him.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But we’re back in school now.” I could feel my face burning as I spoke. “In the real world, and I feel...embarrassed.”

“Well don’t be,” she shot back with a smile. “Do you have any idea of what a catch that boy is?” She tipped her hand towards me and said, “Take it as a huge compliment. Rourke is picky as hell. Most of the girls around here would scratch your freaking eyes out to get their hands on him.”

I cast a glance around the room at all the freaking stunning girls I had the misfortune of going to school with. “Great,” I moaned. “And now I’m jealous. Thanks for that, Molly.”

“Why?” She looked at me like I had two heads. “Mercy, you’re gorgeous and funny and kind. Trust me when I tell you that you have *nothing* to worry about. Besides, you’ve obviously got something all these other girls don’t.” She scrunched her nose up and paused. “Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Rourke with any other girl besides Britt.” Her brown eyes were wide and sincere. “Like *ever*. That in itself is a pretty huge deal.”

“Britt,” I sneered in disgust, scowling deeply. “Britt the Bitch.”

“Yep,” Molly snickered. “She is certainly that.”

“Why was he even with her in the first place?” I grumbled cattily. “That girl is like the she-devil with blonde curls.” I fake gagged. “Ugh.”

“I guess he was young and blind.” Molly shrugged. “They were together forever. Maybe it was like a comfort thing for Rourke?”

My brows furrowed. “A comfort thing?”

“Well, yeah,” Molly replied quietly. “Rourke hasn’t exactly had the most stable home life growing up, what with his father marrying and remarrying every other year.” Sighing, she added, “Britt’s the only constant he’s ever seemed to have.”

Well shit...

“He’s looking at you,” Molly offered with a grin, gesturing to somewhere behind me. “If that helps.”

“It doesn’t,” I muttered, squirming in my seat. Unable to stop myself, I turned my head to the side and sneaked a peek at the football team’s table.

Rourke was there, perched on top of the table, looking deliciously disheveled in his white school shirt with his tie hanging loosely. And oh yeah, he was looking at me. His focus was on our table, his eyes burning into mine.

“Okay, maybe it helps a little,” I breathed before quickly turning my attention back to Molly. “Hey – I never got a chance to ask you about the party.”

“The party?” Now Molly was the one to blush. “What about it?”

“What was going on with you and Daryl King?” I asked nosily. “You disappeared with him and I didn’t see you for the rest of the night.” Awareness dawned on me and I wagged my brows. “Did you hook up with him?”

“We talked,” Molly squeezed out, looking mortified. “Just talked.”

“Just talked?” I stared at her in disbelief. “About what?”

Just then, several cheerleaders passed by us and one of them tossed some snotty comment over her shoulder. “Boyfriend stealing tramp,” the blonde tossed out with an obnoxiously loud voice.

I responded by flipping her the bird and saying, “Run along.”

“Did you actually *speak* to me?” the blonde spat. Halting mid step, she spun around and glared at me. “Don’t think you can speak to me, you little tramp,” she growled.

Recognition flickered inside of me. I’d seen this girl before – had definitely heard her high-pitched whiney voice. “I’m the tramp?” My lips tipped up. “Have you looked in the mirror today? You have your skirt rolled so high the entire lunch room can see your boney ass.”

The blonde's eyes narrowed in fury. "Better to be bony than a fat cow like you," she quipped in a mocking tone. "Maybe you should lay off the carbs, sweetie." She looked me up and down before sniffing in obvious distaste. "Ew. Just, ew."

"Back off Ashley," Molly was quick to defend.

Ashley!

That's who she was. Ashley freaking Thomas – Britt's best friend, and the other girl at the house the night Rourke dunked me in the pool.

"Mind your own damn business, *Freddy Kruger*," Ashley hissed cruelly. Her tone was mocking, taunting, and I knew what she was talking about; Molly's burns.

Molly's face contorted in pain and she was on her feet in seconds, running from the lunch room.

"How dare you!" I snarled, walking right up to her so that we were chest to chest. Of course, this girl – like most people – towered above me, but I didn't care. I wasn't an aggressive person by nature, but Molly was my friend and I wasn't about to sit back and let some nasty cheerleader talk to her like that. "How fucking *dare* you call her that name!"

"Get out of my face, you little heifer," Ashley warned.

"Make me, bitch," I shot back before shoving her in the chest, hard.

I could hear the bustle and loud cheering around us; the word 'cat fight' being thrown around, but I didn't care. I was burning mad. "How would you feel?" I demanded. "If I mocked you for something you had zero control over?"

Ashley retaliated by shoving me back equally as hard and I staggered back a few feet. Damn, this bitch was strong. "Don't freaking touch me," she screamed.

The retort I had on the tip of my tongue, not to mention the physical harm I intended to cause, was lost the moment a pair of strong arms came around my body, lifting me clean off my feet. "Simmer down, Six," a familiar, deep voice said, and instantly, I gave up the fight to break free. Rourke was too freaking strong.

"Did you hear what she said?" I demanded, feeling tears sting at my eyes. Temper tears.

"No," Rourke replied calmly. He set me down on my feet, but didn't release me from his hold. "What did she say?"

My chest was heaving from sheer outrage on my friend's behalf. Twisting in his arms, I looked up him and said, "She called Molly *Freddy Kruger* because of her burns!" Rage coursed through me once more and I lunged for Ashley. I didn't get far though; not with Rourke's steel grip on me.

"What the actual fuck, Ash?" Rourke demanded, and he was the one bristling with anger now. "You threw *the fire* in her face?"

Everyone in the room was silent; glued to the showdown happening between us.

"She was getting up in my business, Rourke," Ashley shot back, with far less conviction in her voice now. She glanced around the room nervously before looking back at Rourke. "She should have stayed out of it."

"So that gives you the right to torment her?" Rourke shook his head and sneered at the wide-eyed blonde. "I thought you were better than that, Ash. I really did."

"She was defending me!"

I groaned internally when Britt walked over to stand beside Ashley. If I thought Rourke was bristling before, he turned completely rigid the moment Britt got involved.

"Stay out of this," he warned her, never taking his hands off me. I was thankful for that. I didn't know how I would have taken the rejection.

"Since when are you going around fighting Molly Peterson's battles?" Britt countered, green eyes locked on the boy standing behind me.

Rourke stiffened. "Since I apparently need to," he shot back, unsmiling.

"And *her*?" Britt sneered, looking down her nose at me like I was the most disgusting thing she had ever laid eyes on. "Defending her in public again, Rourke?" She laughed cruelly, but there wasn't a hint of humor in her voice. "Keep it up and people are going to talk."

Rourke shrugged and pulled me closer. "People can say what they want," he replied coldly. "I take care of what's mine and I make no apologies for it."

Those words seemed to floor Britt.

And me.

Yep.

Definitely me.

I take care of what's mine...

"Yours," Britt hissed, glowering at the both of us. "And she's your what, Rourke? Your fuck buddy? Your stepsister? Your revenge? Your rebound –"

"My girlfriend," Rourke interrupted without a hint of hesitation in his voice.

My mouth, along with several other people's, fell open. My beef with the girls forgotten, I spun around to face Rourke.

"She's my girlfriend," he repeated in a loud, clear voice, dropping a hand to rest on my hip before pulling me into his side.

I went willingly, too stunned to do anything else.

Had I just imagined this whole thing?

Or did Rourke really just declare me as his girlfriend to the whole room?

"What do you mean she's your girlfriend?" I heard his *ex-girlfriend* demand from behind me. Hell, Britt could have been having a full-blown meltdown right now, but I couldn't take my eyes off *Rourke*.

What the hell was he doing?

Was he using me to make her jealous?

No.

He wouldn't do that to me... would he?

"Screw you, Rourke Owens!" I heard Britt scream before the clanking sound of high heels retreating filled my ears.

Rourke glanced down at me then and smirked, revealing those deep dimples. I almost melted in a puddle at his feet. "What the hell was *that*?"

He raised a brow. "What was what?"

"You told her I'm your girlfriend," I half whispered, half hissed, my face burning with a mixture of embarrassment and lust.

"And?" He was staring down at me with those freaking baby blues and that mouth...god, just thinking of what he did to me with that mouth caused a pang of desire to erupt inside of my body.

"And?" I shook my head and exhaled a shaky breath. Did he not hear me? "Rourke, you made it very clear that this..." I gestured between us with my index finger "Was very much a *friendship* thing."

Rourke was completely serious for the longest moment before his face broke out in a huge megawatt smile. “About that,” he chuckled, pulling me in closer. “I meant to tell you; right around the time you were promoting me to best friend status, I was giving you a promotion of your own.”

“What are you talking ab—?”

He kissed me.

Right there, in the middle of the lunch room, in front of half the school, Rourke put his mouth on mine. My hands fell helplessly at my sides as he held my face between his hands, taking control of the kiss, taking control of everything. Stunned, I could do nothing but kiss him back, feeling more emotion than was safe for me.

Chapter 47

Rourke

IT WAS A GOOD THING our parents had decided to extend their trip; I doubted they would approve of the way I crashed through my bedroom door with Six wrapped around me like ivy, our lips melded together.

By the time lunch ended at school, I was so worked up, I couldn't take my hands off her. Thankfully, Six had wholeheartedly agreed with my suggestion of cutting class in favor of sneaking home.

"I know you're going to be trouble for me," I told her between kisses as I walked her over to my bed. Fuck, Six was an amazing kisser. I loved her plump lips and how sweet her tongue tasted when she stroked it against mine. "I know I'm getting myself into something I'm not entirely sure I'm going to be able to get out of," I added before I threw her down on the mattress and fell heavily down on her. "But I don't care," I groaned, claiming her lips roughly. "Because the way I feel when I'm with you makes it all worth it."

"Did you really mean it?" she groaned, clawing at the buttons of my school shirt. We'd already managed to ditch my sweater – and Six's – in the foyer. "About me being your girlfriend?"

It had to be at least the third time Six had asked me that question since leaving school, and for the third time I replied, "I meant it."

"I want you, Rourke," Six whispered, stilling beneath me. My heart was racing so hard in my chest, I could hardly fucking breathe, and every time I looked into her big, grey eyes, I felt like I was winded.

"It doesn't have to be now," I told her, even though my dick was straining to be inside her. "I'm not going anywhere, Six." Exhaling a pained fucking breath, I leaned forward and stroked her nose with mine. "You don't need to do this to keep me interested." *I'm already yours.*

"I know," she told me, eyes wide and full of...lust? "I just really need to have you inside of my body." Swallowing deeply, she added, "Please,

Rourke? I'm ready and I want my first time to be with you."

Well, shit.



Mercedes

ROURKE WAS LEANING OVER me with a hungry gleam in his eyes – a gleam that told me he wanted this just as much as I did. Was he trying to be a gentleman by making us wait? Because fuck that. I didn't want a gentleman; I wanted *him* in all his glory. I wanted my bad-tempered stepbrother, with the body of a navy seal and a mouth like one, too.

"Please," I whispered, eyes locked on his. I didn't normally beg, but these were extenuating circumstances, and I was willing to bend my morals if it got me what I wanted.

And I wanted Rourke.

He kept his blue eyes on mine for an aching long moment, as if he was trying to solve a puzzle in my eyes. But then he groaned deep in his throat, closed his eyes, and nodded.

Yes!

Finally...

"It's going to hurt," Rourke said, tone gruff, and excitement roared to life inside of me.

"I won't mind," I was quick to reply, breathing hard, as my gaze roamed over every inch of him. "I don't care about the pain."

"No?" Pushing off me, Rourke climbed to his feet and took a step back from where I was lying, and I watched in palpable anticipation as he kicked off his shoes and socks; his fingers then moving to the front of his shirt. "It's going to hurt like a bitch, baby." He quickly flicked open the buttons on his shirt before shrugging it off his body, revealing his tan, toned, washboard stomach. "You sure this is what you want?" His hands moved to the waistband of his school slacks. "*I'm* what you want?"

"I'm sure." I nodded frantically. "It's you. It's definitely you."

Snapping the button on his slacks, Rourke lowered his fly before shoving his pants down his muscular thighs.

Seconds later, he was standing in front of me wearing only his boxer shorts. The large bulge straining the fabric assured me that Rourke was just

as turned on as I was.

Oh yeah, it was on...

Reaching up, he stroked his thumb across his bottom lip as he studied me just lying there on his bed in my school uniform. "You on anything, Six?" The question surprised me and I shook my head, at a loss. "Birth control," Rourke clarified, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Are you on the pill?"

"Um, no," I squeezed out. "You know I haven't done this before."

"I know," he agreed with a slow nod. "I was just hoping." He ran a hand through his dark hair before exhaling a ragged breath, his eyes roaming up and down my body. "Because I am fucking dying to bury myself inside you, and I don't want anything between us when you come around my dick."

"Oh," I squeaked, eyes widening.

"Yeah," he replied gruffly. "Oh."

"Will I?" I asked, leaning back on my elbows. "Come, I mean? I've read online that most women don't actually come during penetration."

Rourke raised a brow and smirked. "You'll come for me," he assured me confidently as he crooked a finger in my direction.

Compliantly, I sprang to shaky feet and quickly closed the distance between us.

"You can change your mind," Rourke said as he towered above me, fingering the buttons of my shirt. When my shirt was undone and hanging open, Rourke placed his hands on my shoulders and slowly pushed the fabric down until it pooled on the floor at my feet.

Trembling, I reached behind my back and unfastened the clasp of my bra. "I won't change my mind," I whispered, letting my bra join my shirt on his bedroom floor so that I was standing in front of him in nothing but my school skirt.

Rourke's gaze immediately flicked to my bare breasts and he sucked in a loud breath, reaching out to cup one and gently thumbed my hardened nipple. The moment his fingers came into contact with my skin, I leaned my head back and moaned loudly. This was it; what I'd been dying for since I first saw Rourke. I wanted his hands on my body, his cock inside me, filling me up. I wanted him to cover my soft body with his hard one. I wanted him to pin me beneath him and keep me there forever.

Rourke pushed me down on the bed and made short work of removing my skirt and panties before lowering his hard body down on mine, and I opened my legs, welcoming him into the most intimate area of my body. His lips covered mine, moving slowly, lazily, his tongue dueling with mine, taking slow, deep swipes in my mouth.

He was kissing me like he was fucking me; deep and slow.

He didn't rush either. Rourke took his time. Kissing every inch of my body from head to toe until I couldn't take another second of his pleasurable torture.

"Please, Rourke?" I cried out, when I felt his tongue sweep over my swollen clit. "Please... I need you, now."

"Now?" he purred, continuing to trail kisses up and down my pussy lips before swiping the length of my slit with his tongue. "You sure you don't want me to keep kissing you here?" He teased and then plunged his tongue inside of me before pressing his thumb against my clit.

"Fuck!" I cried out loudly and thrashed beneath him. "Omigod...I can't...Hmmm...stop...please!"

He stopped.

He fucking stopped.

"Rourke!" I hissed, pulling myself onto my elbows to look at him. He was nestled between my legs with his face buried in my crotch. It was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen. "Why in the hell did you stop?"

"You asked me to," he replied, clearly amused, looking up at me from his perch. "Want more?"

"I want your dick," I growled, fisting the bedsheets. "Right now, dammit!"

Pushing myself up, I grabbed Rourke's neck and dragged him down on top of me, pressing my lips to his. Rolling my hips, I slid my hands into his hair, and threw everything I had into kissing him, meeting his relentless lips with a violence of my own. He pressed down hard on me, pushing me into the mattress and making me shake from head to toe. His hands were gentle, but his lips were hard and passionate. It was as if he was punishing me with his mouth, kissing me into submission with every thrust of his skilled tongue as he stroked it against mine.

"You're shaking," Rourke whispered. Breaking the kiss, he held himself above me. "Six?" Using the palm of one hand, he touched the

center of my chest. “Your heart is racing so hard right now.”

“I’m okay,” I assured him, covering his hand with mine and squeezing reassuringly. “I’m more than okay.”

Rourke sat back on his knees and took a slow appraisal of my naked body. Then he removed his boxers, and reached for a foil packet on his nightstand.

Mesmerized by the sheer beauty of this boy, I lay back with my head on his pillow and watched as he sheathed every thick inch of his hard cock. A trickle of apprehension flickered through my mind when I thought about how *that* was supposed to fit inside of my body. I squirmed inserting tampons, for Christ’s sake.

I didn’t have time to ponder the semantics for too long, though, because the moment Rourke had the condom on, he covered my body with his and reclaimed my lips once more.

With my hands above my head, he entwined our fingers before pressing against my opening. He moved slowly, and when he was met with resistance, he just kissed me until I felt my body loosening up beneath his gentle probing.

Pinning both of my hands with one of his, Rourke trailed his right hand down my body, his fingers leaving a burning trail in their wake. When he reached my thigh, Rourke wrapped his hand around the back of my thigh and hitched it upwards.

And then he pressed deep inside of me, burying himself to the hilt inside my core before freezing like a statue inside me. I cried out against him as a piercing pain like none other I’d felt before ricocheted through my core.

Fuck, it burned.

The stretching, tearing pain was so bad it brought tears to my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Rourke asked, tone laced with concern, remaining completely motionless above me. “Six?”

“Yeah,” I bit out, clutching his shoulders for dear life as the muscles in my channel tightened and clenched around the intrusion that was Rourke’s dick. “You’re so...big.” I clenched my eyes shut as the burn subsided. “I’m too...small for you.”

“You’re so fucking tight, baby,” he agreed in a pained tone, jaw clenched tight. “Perfect.”

“I can feel you stretching me,” I whispered. “Opening me up.”

“Fuck, Six. Please, baby. Don’t say that...” His jaw ticked and a bead of sweat trickled from his brow. “Shit, I need to move so bad,” Rourke bit out before burying his face in my neck. “Fuck.”

Angling my hips upwards, I moved tentatively, thrusting ever so slightly. It didn’t hurt this time, and the burning sensation that had been there only moments ago seemed to be replaced with a different sort of burn. A white-hot burning sensation that climbed inside of my core. “Move,” I moaned, rocking up hips up to meet his again. “Move in me, Rourke.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” he groaned and then he began to move inside of me, slowly at first, grinding his hips in a hypnotic rhythm that seemed to touch every nerve ending inside of me. The rocking sensation he made as he moved in and out of me applied just enough friction to my throbbing clit. I clung to his body like he was my lifeboat; like his shoulders were the only thing anchoring me to the ground and if I let go now, I would float away.

And then he moved faster, pressed harder, circled deeper inside of me until I couldn’t handle another second of his tortuous pleasure.

And when I finally came, it was to the feel of Rourke’s cock pressing deep inside of me. I came hard, clenching him so tightly that Rourke came right with me.

The afternoon sunshine pouring through Rourke’s bedroom window brought me back down to earth with a bang, making me aware for the first time since we crossed the threshold of his door that it was the middle of the day, and the both of us should be at school right about now.

“So, that was sex,” I said several moments later, my chest still panting from the exertion. Rourke was still inside me – we were still connected in the most humanly intimate way. Laying my head back on the pillow, I blew out a trembling breath. “Wow.”

“Wow?” I felt him smile against my neck. “Did I live up to your expectations?”

Rourke had just blown all of my expectations clean out of the water, but instead of verbalizing this, I simply nodded and tightened my hold on his neck, holding his body to mine. I didn’t want him to move. He was still pulsing inside my body, his erection still hard and probing. If I could have kept him right there inside me then I would have, but Rourke had other ideas.

“Relax, okay?” he whispered before pressing a kiss to my lips and rising above me. I winced when pulled out; the feeling alien to me. He pulled out slowly, obviously trying to ease my discomfort, but whatever pain I had felt evaporated the moment he knelt back on his heels and began to roll the condom off his still very much erect penis.

He was covered in blood.

My blood.

It was smeared all over the condom and his pubic hair.

I didn’t want to look, and yet, I couldn’t look away.

Mortification flooded my body as I watched Rourke climb off the bed and disappear into his adjoining bathroom with the used condom between his fingers.

The moment he was out of sight, I scrambled into a sitting position and observed the damage.

His bed sheets were *ruined*; marked in my virginity.

My thighs were also bloodstained.

Oh my god...

Forcing back a choked sob, I scrambled off the bed and quickly grabbed the fitted bedsheet, pulling at it wildly in my desperate bid to get rid of the horrifying evidence.

I didn’t even notice Rourke returning to the room until I felt his arms come around me from behind. “Leave it,” he whispered in my ear before kissing my shoulder. “I’ll take care of it.”

He was going to take *care* of it? “No,” I exclaimed, mortified. “I’ll do it...”

“Six!” Rourke turned me in his arms and cupped my face with his hands. “I will take care of it,” he repeated slowly, blue eyes locked on mine. He didn’t look mad or cocky or any of those horrible things I expected. He looked...pleased. “Okay?”

I bit down on my lip and nodded. “Okay.”

Rourke stared at me for the longest moment before reaching for one of my hands and saying, “Come with me.”

Naked as the day I was born, I followed him into his ensuite bathroom to where he had the shower already running. He stepped inside and gestured for me to follow.

I went willingly, walking straight into his open arms. I was trembling violently – why, I couldn’t tell you – but I was. My body wasn’t behaving the way it normally did. I suppose seventeen years of nothing and then suddenly being impaled might have something to do with it.

Turning me in his arms, Rourke pressed a kiss to my shoulder and sighed, the heat of his breath causing me to shake even more.

Sagging against him, I allowed him to take on my weight, as his fingers trailed over my skin.

He had a loofah in one hand, and when he pressed it between my legs, a low moan escaped me. My body ached, I was still sore, but that didn’t stop my skin from igniting in a burst of desire the moment he put his hands on me.

Rourke never said a word as he gently washed the blood from my body before working on himself.

When he was finished cleaning us, he pressed another kiss to my neck and whispered, “Thank you for trusting me with this.”

What could I say to that?

You’re welcome?

I love you?

I want to keep you forever?

I didn’t know what to say or how to act now. I knew exactly how I felt about Rourke, but I wasn’t sure of his feelings.

Well, I *knew* he liked me, but I wasn’t entirely sure how deep that like went. Did he like me the way a guy liked a girl he had just slept with, or did it run deeper?

Rourke called me his girlfriend today, but what did that mean for him?

I wanted to be brave enough to ask him straight.

To be the kind of girl who wasn’t afraid of a guy’s rejection.

I’d never been afraid before, but now?

Now, I was clueless.

Of course, I ended up not saying anything at all. Keeping all of my thoughts safely locked up in my mind, I turned in Rourke’s arms and kissed him instead.

Chapter 48

Mercedes - One Month Later

EVERYTHING CHANGED AFTER THAT DAY. My plans, my goals, what I thought I wanted and needed? It all changed. At the time, I hadn't realized what a monumental moment in my life it was; climbing into his car, climbing into his bed, choosing to take a risk with him. That slope I had been teetering on since July had finally given out beneath my feet in tremendous fashion. And even now, I was still falling; slip sliding and tumbling blindly for a boy whose only promise to me was that he wouldn't keep me forever.

Rourke's warnings when we first got together should have been enough to make me rethink having a relationship with him, but they weren't because I was in love with him.

There was no point in denying it anymore; not after spending every waking hour of the past month with him.

It felt like the moment accepted Rourke's offer of friendship, something inside of me gave way, allowing Rourke the power to take over every waking hour of my day.

During the daytime, I watched him from a distance, sat beside him in class when I could, and thought about him all day long.

At night, I waited for him to come to my room, heart hammering in my chest, nervous butterflies flapping around in my stomach. Every single night, I would lay in my bed waiting in wistful anticipation for the moment the mattress dipped beneath me and I was in his arms again, our bodies fused together, desperate and needy.

I was in love with him. It made me weak and incredibly stupid, but there it was. Rourke Owens had taken hold of my heart and I knew I wouldn't be getting it back anytime soon.

When I was with him, I felt *everything*. Every single emotion I had spent my whole life denying existed. An intense connection. A deep,

yearning need. This burning ache in my chest. *All of it...*



“YOU HAVE TO COME TONIGHT.” It was Friday afternoon and we were in our last class of the day. I had hoped to put my head down and learn something. Molly, however, had other ideas. “You’re Rourke’s *girlfriend*,” she hissed in my ear for the third time since class started almost an hour ago “How do you think it will look for the poor guy if you don’t bother showing up to a single one of his games?”

“I’ve told you a million times,” I shot back, forcing down the urge to choke her into shutting up about the stupid game tonight. “I don’t like football.”

Since it was public knowledge that I was dating our school’s star wide receiver, people kept coming up to me to tell me how excited they were about the game, and asking me how many touchdowns did I think Rourke would make.

One guy even had the audacity to ask me if I could somehow persuade to score a specific number of touchdowns; apparently, he had a lot of money riding on Rourke’s performance tonight and was willing to split his winnings with me if I persuaded my boyfriend to score at specific times during the game.

I told him to fuck off and I didn’t even like football. He then proceeded to get all huffy with me and say that *Britt* would have made it happen before stalking off.

Of course, the mention of the former love of Rourke’s life did little to calm me down; the opposite in fact. Hate was a strong word, but I honest to god *loathed* Brittany Beckitt with every fiber of my being.

Truly, I did.

“Do you like Rourke?” Molly challenged sweetly, bringing me back to the present.

“You know the answer to that,” I growled. I did more than just *like* Rourke.

“Then prove it,” she countered, brown eyes narrowing. “Go to the homecoming game tonight and show him some support.” She raised a brow and added, “You know he’d do it for you.”

Dammit! She had me there. “You only want me there to protect you from Daryl King and his creepy fascination with you!” Molly turned red and I smirked. “Go low with me, Molly Peterson, and I’ll go lower.”

“He doesn’t have a creepy fascination with me,” she shot back, tone defensive.

“No?” I raised a brow, calling her out on her bullshit. “Then why is he constantly watching you. And why does he always seem to show up wherever we go? Did you lie to me?” I asked then, narrowing my eyes. “Did you actually make out with him at that party instead of just talking like you said?”

“I didn’t make out with Daryl,” she bit out. “We have a past. That’s all.”

A past? “What past?” I leaned closer. “You never mentioned this before?”

“Because there’s *nothing* to mention,” Molly replied. “Daryl and I were...friends a long time ago.” She bit down on her bottom lip for a moment before adding, “And now, we’re friends again. *Just* friends. End of story.”

“You’re holding out on me,” I muttered, knowing full well she and Daryl weren’t just friends. There was something weird going on between them. Ever since her house party last month, Daryl and Molly had been joined at the hip.

“Anyway, stop trying to change the subject,” Molly said. “The game. Tonight. You are coming, Mercy James.” Damn, she was freaking relentless.

I’d been to one of Rourke’s football game at the start of the year and had come extremely close to barfing. Watching my boyfriend’s ex jump around the sidelines with her pom-poms and throw her arms around him when he was walking off the field had been enough to turn me off going to his games for life. Ugh.

For the past month, Britt had been a consistent source of discord in my life. She had this infallible ability of causing trouble for me – even when she wasn’t around. If she wasn’t spreading rumors about me or tripping me up in the hallway between classes, she was laying on the charm with Rourke, flirting boldly with him right in front of me.

To be fair to Rourke, he didn't encourage her and *always* told her to stop, but it still hurt me. Knowing there was a period in Rourke's life – a five fucking year long period – when Britt was the center of his world, made me feel incredibly inferior and insecure. And Britt, being the clever bitch she was, had immediately honed in on my blatant vulnerability and used it to her advantage at every opportunity.

Like last weekend, for example. The Falcon's had an away game in a place called Church Hall, a three-hour drive from Ocean Bay. Because of the distance, the school had agreed the team should stay overnight on Friday and travel back early Saturday morning.

I had to work last weekend and couldn't go, which I didn't even care about, until Britt made it perfectly clear that the cheerleading team would be staying over in Church Hall, too.

Several of the cheerleaders were dating footballers and both teams had inevitably ended up partying it up together in one of the hotel rooms. I didn't sleep a fucking wink that night and ended up stalking Britt's numerous Snapchat updates and Instagram posts, checking for any of her with Rourke. There hadn't been a single one, and that should have been enough to ease my mind. But I was seventeen and in love with the hottest, most unattainable boy at school; it didn't exactly bring out the confident side of me.

"I'm going to the dance, Molls," I offered then. "Isn't that enough?"

All week long, the only thing people at school seemed to be interesting in talking about was the homecoming dance tonight. It was being held at Ocean Bay's elite five-star hotel and country club on the outskirts of town. I found this totally weird since every public school I had ever attended held their dances in the school gym.

The bell rang, signaling the end of last period, and I released a sigh of relief.

"I'm done talking about this, Mercy," Molly announced, tidying her books into her bag. She shoved her chair back and stood swiftly. "You are coming to the game tonight if I have to drag you there myself," she said in an assertive tone. "Now, go home, grab some dinner, kiss the hell out of your boyfriend and wish him good luck, and then get your game face on. I'll text you in a bit." And then she skipped off, leaving me sitting at our desk with my mouth hanging open.

Shaking my head to clear my thoughts of Britt and football games, I got up and slipped the straps of my backpack on my shoulders before falling into step with the hordes of students all barging towards the school entrance, eager to start their weekend.

When I finally pushed through the main doors and managed to get outside, I descended the steps and hurried to the student parking area.

Traffic was always hectic at the end of a school day. Unlike previous high schools I had attended, everyone at the Academy seemed to either have their own car or their own driver. It was crazy. In the month I had been here, I had never once seen a yellow school bus full of kids. I guess Ocean Bay Academy was too elite and too damn posh to dabble in public transportation.

Head down, I marched through the crowd, eager to get to my destination.

When I reached the student lot, my heart began to thud rapidly in my chest, excitement churning inside of me.

There he was, leaning against the passenger side door of his truck, looking like the worst decision I would ever make, and still I bounded towards him, moving my feet in the direction of the only boy on this planet that had the ability to destroy me. Conflicted and overwhelmed with my feelings, I walked straight into the arms of my enemy turned lover.

“Fuck, I’ve missed you all day,” Rourke whispered in my ear, wrapping me up in his arms.

Rourke and I didn’t have any classes together on Fridays and it sucked.

I didn’t reply, but my heart screamed the words back at him, even if my brain tried to shield me with silence.

“Don’t say it back, Six,” Rourke teased. Releasing me from his hold, he opened the door of his truck for me and winked. “I’m in a real masochistic mood today and enjoy my girlfriend’s complete silence when I tell her how I’m feeling.”

“Are you all set for the game tonight?” I asked as I climbed into the passenger seat and fastened my seatbelt. I needed to veer the subject away from feelings because if I cracked and told Rourke how I felt, I had a feeling he would run like the wind. He hadn’t said the L word and I was determined not to be the first one to admit it. I knew Rourke cared about me

– he treated me like a freaking queen this past month – but love? I had no clue if he loved me or not and that *terrified* me.

I watched as he closed my door and rounded the truck before hopping into the driver's seat. Rourke cranked the engine and pulled into the long line of cars trying to exit the parking lot. "I'm always ready, Six," he finally replied, tone breezy.

I rolled my eyes. "You're always *cocky*."

"I'm that too." He grinned. "You changed your mind about coming tonight?"

"Yeah." I scrunched my nose up at the thought of it. "Molly threw a tantrum on me in econ. She's practically forcing me to go to the game with her."

"*Forcing* you to go," he repeated, tone deceptively low.

"Yeah," I replied. "For someone so tiny, she's actually pretty damn bossy."

I watched as Rourke's jaw ticked, but he didn't respond to that, obviously lost in his own brooding thoughts.

"Rourke?" I said, staring at the side of his face in concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," he finally replied after a long stretch of awkward silence. "Did you get a dress for the dance?"

I nodded. "Molly's going to loan me one of hers."

"Six." He turned to face me, blue eyes snaring me. "If you need money _"

"I'm fine borrowing a dress, Rourke," I quickly interrupted. I hated that; him offering to buy me stuff. It was like the time he *offered* to fuck me. It made me feel like a charity case. A burden.

"Fine." He threw a hand up in exasperation. "Suit yourself."

Chapter 49

Rourke

I HAD NO FUCKING clue where I stood with the girl. One minute everything was rosy between me and Six and the next she was pulling away from me; retreating into herself. In all honesty, I had never been more confused in my life.

Females were hard fucking work and I was quickly learning that no two were alike. In my limited experience, I always thought girls loved to go shopping and buy shit. Hell, anytime I had offered to buy Britt something when we were dating, she had practically clawed the black American Express card out of my wallet. Six had proven to be quite the opposite.

I had unintentionally offended her when I offered to take her dress shopping for the homecoming dance last weekend. And bringing it up again this afternoon had been a stupid fucking move on my behalf.

Personally, I didn't see what the big deal was. Six was my girlfriend and I knew she didn't have much – the majority of her income from the coffee shop was spent on gas and maintaining her car.

Meanwhile, I had more than enough and was willing to share it with her. But every time I offered, she shot me down with a glare and a cutting remark.

She was so damn prideful...

"I booked us a suite at the hotel tonight," I announced when I pulled into the driveway of our house a little while later and killed the engine.

"You did?" Six's voice was full of surprise. She turned in her seat, giving me her full attention. "Really?"

"Really," I replied a little cagey. I hadn't been sure of what her reaction would be. I was half expecting her to get pissed with me like she had when I brought up the dress. "Figured it would be easier than trying to find a ride home in the middle of the night."

“I’ve never stayed in a hotel before,” Six squealed. Seconds later, she had her seatbelt off and was straddling my lap. “Thanks, Rourke. This is so fricking cool!”

Relief flooded my body followed by a sudden pang of lust. Six bouncing up and down on my lap had me hard as rock. The tiny, grey school skirt she had on rode up from her movements, exposing the tiniest slither of pink lace.

“You’re welcome,” I managed to squeeze out as I clamped my hands on her curvy waist and bit back a moan.

“Rourke?” Her voice was softer now and full of awareness. Wrapping her arms around my shoulders, she made a slow rocking movement with her hips. “Are you okay?”

“Yep.” I clenched my eyes shut and groaned, my dick straining to get to her. “I’m...good.”

“Do you want to...” her voice trailed off and she rotated her hips in that sexy way that drove me out of my fucking mind. “Go up to your room for a little bit?”

More than I wanted my next breath.

“I can’t,” I bit out, jaw strained with tension. “No sex before a game.” I didn’t make the rules, and I rarely followed them, but football was important to me. When coach instilled the no sex on game day rule in sophomore year, I’d followed it no problem. But now, with my girlfriend pressing her tight, little pussy down on my junk, I was having a sudden conflict of interests...

“Are you sure?” Six rubbed against my hard-on again and whispered, “I won’t tell if you won’t.” She pressed her lips to my neck and nibbled. “It can be our little secret,” she continued to tease, as she rocked herself on top of my dick; small, breathy moans escaping her mouth with every thrust. “Our dirty, little secret.”

Fuck me.

I was done.

Football could kiss my ass.

Hell, the whole damn world could.

I didn’t care.

Growling in defeat, I caught Six’s face between my hands seconds before our lips crashed together violently.

This girl.

This fucking girl.

I felt complete when I was around her, like I didn't have to search for the comfort and approval I'd been trying to find since my mother died. Somehow, Six gave that to me. She was enough for me. Fucking her, tasting her, being inside her, was more than anything I could have hoped for. She was fucking perfect for me.

I knew most of the guys at school would kill to have Six, but she was mine.

All mine.

And I had no intention of letting her go.

Fucking never.



Mercedes

THE MOMENT WE MADE it to his bedroom and had our clothes off, Rourke was inside me, filling me deeply.

"Rourke," I cried out as the sensation of his cock filling me set my body on fire. "Omigod...yes!"

"Fucking perfect," he grunted as he hitched my legs over his shoulders and quickened the rhythm of his thrusts until he wasn't just having sex with me; he was fucking me. Raw, carnal fucking that caused my pussy to clench and suck him in tighter.

"God..." My body jolted violently from his merciless fucking and I had to press the palms of my hands against the headboard to stop myself from buckling from the pressure. "Harder," I goaded, loving every second of it. "Fuck me harder, Rourke. I can take it."

The growl that tore from Rourke's chest then was so guttural and raw that it caused my orgasm to take ahold of me, and I came hard, the muscles in my core clenching tightly around his cock.

My coming only seemed to spur Rourke on, and he moved faster, pounding into me over and over as his hands dug into my hips, pinning my body to the mattress beneath him.

"Omigod," I cried out when a strange bursting sensation filled me.

“Mmmm...fuck, baby,” Rourke moaned, thrusting harder. “It’s so fucking good this way.”

He was right. It was good. Amazingly good. But something felt... different.

“Ahhhhh,” I squeaked, definitely feeling a strange pressure. “Rourke, stop.”

“Shh,” Rourke begged, grinding into me. “Please, baby. I’m so fucking close... this is the best it’s ever felt...”

“Something feels weird.” I wiggled and he groaned loudly. “Oh my god! Pull out.”

“Fuck, Six,” he groaned, halting mid-thrust. “You’re kidding me, right?”

“Just pull out,” I ordered.

“Jesus Christ,” Rourke muttered before slowly pulling out of me and resting back on his heels. “Happy now?” he grunted, palming his dick. “Tease.”

Scrambling out from underneath him, my eyes landed on his *naked* dick and a scream tore from my throat. “Where the hell is it?”

He threw his hands up in retreat. “Where’s what, Six?”

“The condom!” I strangled out, pointing at his fully erect dick. “Where did it go, Rourke?”

Rourke’s gaze immediately went to his dick and then my vagina. “Shit,” he muttered, looking lost. He looked back and forth again and again before meeting my gaze. “Where the hell did it go?” he muttered, scratching the back of his head in puzzlement.

“How am I supposed to know?” I wailed. “It’s your *dick*, Rourke. Which means it’s *your* condom and *your* responsibility!”

“Calm down,” he coaxed before dropping between my legs.

“What are you doing?” I screamed, batting him away from my crotch.

“I’m going to get it out of you,” he replied, deadpan.

“You’ll do no such thing,” I hissed, trying and failing to close my thighs.

“It’s me or the nurse at the emergency room, Six,” Rourke replied, using his hands to spread my thighs wide open. “Either way, it’s gotta come out.”

“Omigod,” I sobbed, covering my face with my hands in shame. “I’m going to have to go to the hospital, aren’t I?”

“Six, I’ve got this,” Rourke coaxed in a soothing tone. “I love you, and I am going to get this condom out of you. And once I do? I’m going to put my dick back inside you. Okay?”

“Yeah,” I whimpered with a snuffle. “Okay.”

“Good. Now lie back and tilt your hips upwards.”

Mortified, I did as he asked, keeping my eyes closed the entire time. “Omigod,” I cried out when I felt his finger slide inside of me. “Rourke…”

“Relax, baby, and keep your legs open,” he coaxed in an achingly sweet tone. “Don’t clam up on me.”

Oh my fucking god. “I’m trying not to.”

I felt Rourke hook his finger inside me a few seconds before saying, “I think I can feel it.”

“You can?” I asked, biting back a moan. The pressure was so freaking intense. “Can you really feel it, Rourke?”

“Yeah… Hold on.”

I released a loud cry as I felt Rourke pull his fingers out of me. “Oh my god!”

“Got it.” Rourke looked as proud as punch as he slowly dragged the condom out of my vagina and held it up for me to see. “All good, Six.”

“Get rid of it,” I begged, mortified. “God!”

Chuckling, Rourke disappeared into the adjoining bathroom for the briefest of moments before returning to the room with a shit eating grin on his face. He looked so freaking proud of himself for managing to snag a condom out of my vagina.

“You good, Six?” he asked. Crawling onto the bed, Rourke settled back in the spot he’d just vacated and pressed a kiss to my pubic bone. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?” he asked when I flinched from the contact. “Are you sore?”

“I’m not sore,” I admitted. “But I think I might die of embarrassment.”

Chuckling, Rourke settled down beside me and pulled me into his arms. “Don’t be embarrassed, Six.” He kissed my temple and squeezed me tighter. “I’m not.”

“Rourke,” I snapped, flushing. “You basically just performed minor surgery on my fricking vagina! How can I not be embarrassed?” Suddenly,

my mind flashed back to something he had said and I balked. “Wait!”

I love you, and I am going to get this condom out of you...

“You said you love me,” I croaked out, burying my face in his chest.

“I did,” he confirmed calmly as he trailed his fingers up and down my arm.

“Did you...” I swallowed deeply, heart hammering in my chest. “Are you going to say it again?”

“Probably,” he replied, giving nothing away.

“Are you going to mean it?”

“I always mean what I say, Six,” he whispered.

Chapter 50

Mercedes

THE OCEAN BAY HOTEL and country club was alive with bustle and noise when we arrived at the dance. The football game that had taken place between Academy and their arch rivals, Jefferson, earlier on tonight had everyone riled up and in good spirits.

As predicted, the Falcon's kicked the Jaguar's butts, with my man scoring all but three of the Falcon's scores tonight. Pride was an understatement for how I felt when I walked into the foyer of the hotel on Rourke's arm.

He *loved* me. Or so he had said earlier today – and proved it tonight when he showed up late to the game because he'd stopped off at a late-night pharmacy on the outskirts of town to buy Plan B for his girlfriend. The same girlfriend whose vagina he rescued just hours earlier from a rogue condom.

God, I was dying to hear Rourke tell me he loved me again, but I didn't want to sound like one of those needy girls who needed her boyfriend to tell her how much he loved her to feel validated– I could do that in secret.

"You look gorgeous, Six," Rourke whispered in my ear as he led me through the foyer and into the huge venue room that had been decorated and transformed for tonight's dance.

I knew I looked good tonight – courtesy of Molly's freaking fantastic taste in dress wear, and my mother's fetish for skyscraper stilettos.

The full-length, strapless, mermaid-style red dress I had on felt like it had been made for my body type. The plunging neckline emphasized my boobs in the best possible way, and the thigh high slit on the side gave the illusion of long legs. I was short and curvy, but this dress made me feel proud of my shape.

"I love you in red," Rourke added, slipping an arm around me. "Reminds me of the first time I saw you." I felt like he was claiming me. I knew that sounded absurd considering I'd been sleeping with him for the past four weeks, but it did. Cameras flashed around us and I didn't care. They could take all the pictures they wanted. Hell, I might even download them. This gorgeous boy was mine.

"You don't look so bad yourself," I told Rourke, fighting down a blush. The boy cleaned up well in a tailored black suit, crisp white dress shirt, and red tie. The bruise forming on his left cheekbone, the one he'd received during the game tonight, only made him look sexier...edgier. *Bad!*

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked, leading me over to one of the several dozen round tables skirting the dancefloor.

"I'll just have whatever you're having," I replied, smiling at some familiar faces on the way.

"You want a whiskey?"

Whiskey? "I thought you meant punch." I turned and gaped at him. "Wait – they have an *open bar* here?" I looked around the room in surprise. Ocean Bay really was a different world to the one I'd come from. "Jesus."

"Not here, Six," he chuckled, pulling out a chair for me to sit. "But they do in the resident's bar downstairs." Rourke grinned. "And you and I happen to be residents for the night."

"We also happen to be *seventeen*," I shot back. "In case you forgot."

"Pssh," Rourke muttered, batting his hand in the air. "Semantics, baby. Ain't no one gonna refuse these hands a drink tonight." He winked and waggled his fingers in my face. "Five touchdowns."

"Oh, my god," I laughed, taking the seat Rourke pulled out for me. "You're so full of yourself."

"Maybe," Rourke shot back with a chuckle. "But we both know I can back it up, Britt."

Yes we did –wait! "What?"

"We both know I can back it up," Rourke repeated with a smirk that quickly faded when he took in my expression. "What?" he demanded, face suddenly serious. "What's wrong?"

"My name is Mercedes," I forced myself to say even though it was hard to speak with the lump climbing in my throat.

"Yeah," Rourke agreed with a frown. "I know."

“You called me *Britt*,” I bit out.

He called me fucking *Britt*!

His eyes widened in surprise before denying it, “No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did,” I pressed. “You said ‘*We both know I can back it up, Britt.*’” Swallowing deeply, I forced myself not to blink. Blinking was a really bad idea right now. Especially since I could feel my traitorous eyes watering. “You called me Britt.”

“Fuck,” Rourke muttered before running a hand through his hair and loosening the tie around his neck. “I didn’t mean to,” he added, blue eyes locked on mine. “It’s a habit.” Shrugging helplessly, he added, “It didn’t mean anything, Six Don’t overthink this, baby.”

Too late. “Okay,” I whispered, lowering my gaze to look at my hands clasped in my lap. I was already overthinking absolutely everything from the moment I met him right up to this very moment.

“Okay?” Crouching down beside me, Rourke placed one hand over mine and tipped my chin up with the other, forcing me to meet his gaze. “So... you’re okay?” he asked, tone gentle, as he scanned my face for any hint of hidden emotion. “You’re not mad?”

“No. I’m not mad, Rourke,” I whispered. And I wasn’t mad; I was fucking crushed. Rourke could have beat me until I’m black and blue and it wouldn’t have hurt as much as him calling me Britt had.

“I didn’t mean it,” he continued to say, letting out a frustrated sigh, his eyes imploring me to believe him. “It was a slip of the tongue, Six.”

“I believe you, Rourke,” I replied, forcing myself to look at him. And I did. I knew Rourke didn’t mean to call me his ex-girlfriend’s name. I knew he hadn’t intentionally sought out to hurt me. Problem was, he did and he had...

“Alright, come on.” Rourke announced. He stood abruptly, shrugged off his suit jacket before dropping it down on a nearby chair and rolling the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows. “Get up.” He didn’t give me a chance to think about his demand before taking my hand and yanking me to my feet.

“I thought you wanted something to drink?” I asked as he dragged me towards the dancefloor just as the DJ began to play Hunter Hayes’ *Wanted*.

“I’m taking you dancing first,” he replied tightly, leading me past several couples swaying to the music.

The slow, achingly sweet melody wrapped around my heart as Rourke placed his hand in mine and drew me closer. My heart was racing at a ridiculous speed. I mean, seriously, there was no need for me to be hyperventilating right now. *But I was.*

“Stop, Six,” Rourke said, tone gruff. He had one hand splayed across my lower back, the other held my hand to his chest. “Please stop thinking about it.” His head was bowed, his cheek resting on my hair intimately. “It meant *nothing*.”

“Okay.” Closing my eyes, I pressed my cheek against his chest and gave myself over to him, allowing him to lead me, trusting his every step, all the while praying he wouldn’t break me. Praying this wasn’t a warning I needed to take heed of.



“THERE YOU ARE!” Molly’s familiar voice filled my ears moments before she appeared in front of me, looking incredible in a long sleeved, full length, white lace gown. “I’ve been searching all over for you guys.”

“Wow,” I breathed, stepping out of Rourke’s arms to take a better look at my best friend. “You look...”

“Overdressed?” Molly offered with a nervous chuckle.

“Amazing,” I corrected, pulling her in for a hug. “You look fricking amazing, Molls.”

“So do you,” she replied, squeezing me tightly. “Oh, you too, Rourke!”

“Thanks, Molly,” Rourke replied with dimpled smirk. “I’ll go get those drinks,” he added before pressing a kiss to my cheek and then striding off in the direction of the double door entryway.

“Where’s he going?” Molly asked, looking from Rourke’s retreating frame to my face. “Something I said?”

“No. He’s just getting us some drinks,” I replied, forcing myself to smile and sound as upbeat as I could. I didn’t want to ruin Molly’s night by telling her I was two seconds away from bursting into tears. “So, where’s Daryl?” I asked instead, slapping on the brightest smile I could muster. The smile Molly had been proudly sporting quickly faded at the mention of Rourke’s best friend.

I literally had no clue of what was going on between those two; Molly was exasperatingly tight-lipped when it came to Daryl, but I knew they had

come here together.

“Who knows,” she mumbled. “I’m sure he’s around here somewhere talking to random girls.”

“Molls...”

“I’m okay,” she stopped me by saying. “Honestly, Mercy, I’m cool.”

“Do you want to dance?” I asked then as Cher Lloyd’s *Want U Back* blasted through the speakers. I needed a distraction and by the sound of it, so did Molly.

“Hell yes!” she squealed, catching my hand and dancing like a maniac.



Rourke

I CALLED HER BRITT.

I fucking called my current girlfriend by my ex-girlfriend’s name.

What the hell was wrong with me?

Six was pissed with me and I didn’t blame her. My latest mistake was one of epic proportions. There probably wasn’t a damn thing else I could have said in that moment to insult her more.

Hell, I hadn’t even been thinking about Britt.

It honest to god had been a slip of the tongue.

Six’s face though. She looked *devastated* with those big grey eyes full of pain.

Goddammit!

“Great minds think alike,” Daryl announced with a wolfish grin, dragging me back to the present.

I was standing in the foyer of the hotel wondering what the hell I could do to make this up to Six. My hands were full with four large glasses of Jack and coke.

Daryl was carrying his own supply; two tall glasses of what I assumed was rum and coke – his drink of choice.

“I fucked up,” I blurted out, eyes locked on my oldest friend. “I called her Britt.”

“Who?” Daryl asked before his eyes widened. “Tell me you didn’t!”

“It was a mistake,” I groaned. “I swear to god, dude, I have no fucking idea why I said her name. I sure as hell wasn’t thinking about her.” I hadn’t

thought about Britt at all recently. Not since Six walked into my world and turned everything on its ass.

Returning to the ball room, we headed back to our table and set our drinks down before claiming a couple of empty chairs.

My gaze immediately sought out and honed in on Six. She was out on the dance floor with Molly. The smile on her face was so fucking beautiful as she danced and laughed and it hit me like a wrecking ball to the chest.

I had made some pretty poor decisions in my life, but she wasn't one of them. Six was the only thing I'd managed to get right.

"What should I do, D?"

"You're asking *me* for girlfriend advice?" Daryl replied, looking me dead in the eye. "Dude, how the fuck would I know? The longest relationship I've ever had is with you!"

"Not helpful," I muttered, returning my focus on Six.

"I'll tell you one thing," Daryl offered. "You keep staring at her like that and your damn eyeballs are gonna fall out of your head."

I didn't look away from Six. I just continued to stare – stare and covet and fucking worship her from a distance. She was wearing the sexiest red dress I'd ever seen and had her black hair was curled down one side of her neck. Christ, I needed to get her alone. Maybe, if I took her up to our room, I could persuade her to forgive me with my tongue. Yeah, Six loved my tongue. Girl couldn't get enough, and I couldn't wait to get my hands on her later tonight.

"Where's your *date* tonight?" I asked when we were sitting, emphasizing the word *date* to piss him off.

Daryl deserved it. He'd given me enough shit about Six in the beginning. I figured it was only fair I returned the favor now he was hung up on Molly.

"Please don't," Daryl said with a heavy sigh. Reaching over, he grabbed one of his glasses off the table and drained the contents before saying, "I'm holding onto my control tonight by the skin of my teeth." Slamming the empty glass back down, he picked up the second glass and tipped it back. "Bring her up to me, and I'm gonna lose it."

I held my hands up in defeat. "Fair enough."

"I can't believe you called her Britt," Daryl announced a few minutes later with a sudden burst of laughter. "You're such a dumbass."

"I'm not proud of myself for it."

"You shouldn't be," he agreed. "You're the happiest I've seen you in years with that girl, and you go and call her Britt?" Daryl snorted and shook his head. "It's like you have a self-sabotage button, dude."

Didn't I know it.

"You need to apologize," Daryl added in a serious tone.

I blew out a breath. "If I apologize then it means I'm guilty of something." I turned my attention to Daryl. "Six will think I'm guilty." And I wasn't.

"And if you don't apologize, you'll be an asshole."

"So, this is one of those, I'm damned if I do, and I'm damned if I don't situations?" I asked, tone weary.

"Exactly," Daryl replied with a grin. "Good luck with that by the way. If you live to see the other side, tell me how you did it." Shrugging, he added, "You know, in case I ever fuck up and call the girl I love the wrong name."

"That's exactly it," I hissed with an eager nod. "Why would I even think about anyone else when I'm in...fuck!"

Daryl grinned. "Go on."

"I love her." I looked at him, eyes widened. "I love her?"

He nodded. "Yeah, you do!"

No. I didn't. When I told Six I loved her tonight, I hadn't even thought about it. She looked so scared and worried that I'd just wanted to put her at ease. I didn't even think about saying it; it just came out. When she'd asked me about it afterwards, I had panicked and rambled on about something or other to change the subject. I didn't love her though.

What I felt for her was a combination of lust and fondness; friendship and the pleasure of her company. I liked being around her. Okay, I loved being around her, but that didn't mean I was *in love*. Six was funny and kind and beautiful and she made me laugh. Any guy would feel the same. This tightening pain in my chest wasn't love. No way. It couldn't – "Jesus Christ, I'm in love with her." Awareness hit me like a freight train and I turned and looked at my friend, reeling to my fucking core. "Fuck, I'm *in love* with her, Daryl."

Daryl winked. "I know."

"You *know*?"

“Hell fucking yes, I know,” he said, laughing his ass off. “Everyone knows. We’ve been waiting on you to get with the program for a while now.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do with this?” Fear trickled through me. “I don’t want this, man.”

“You don’t get a choice, I’m afraid,” he shot back with a smile. “When that special girl comes knocking, your balls start dropping.”

“I love her,” I whispered, more to myself than anyone else, as I desperately tried to rationalize this in my mind. I couldn’t though, because it was true. I was in love with Six and it was the strongest, most intense emotion I’d ever experienced. Reaching for one of the glasses of whiskey and coke, I knocked it back and, ignoring the burn, quickly chased it with a second glass.

“And FYI?” Daryl offered with a smirk, watching me attempt to drown my feelings. “She loves you too, bro.”

What? “Did she say something to Molly?”

Daryl shook his head. “She didn’t need to,” he explained with a knowing smile. “It’s written all over her face every time she looks at you, Rourke. The girl is head over heels in love with you.”

Well shit...

“Come on,” I ordered, jerking to my feet. “Let’s go.”

“And where exactly are we going?” Daryl asked, but he stood up anyway. It didn’t matter where I told him we were going; he would have come with me anywhere. It’s the kind of friendship we had.

I didn’t bother replying; I figured the direction I was striding off in was answer enough. Shoving past groups of kids from school, I stalked onto the dancefloor with only one thing on my mind.

Six.

It was high time I claimed my girl.

Chapter 51

Mercedes

THE DANCEFLOOR WAS jam-packed with an assortment of drunk girls, drunker boys, groping couples, and groups of overly boisterous teenagers from school as they danced, swayed, and basically jumped around like lunatics. I didn't care about any of them though. I was too busy reveling in the feel of being wrapped up in Rourke.

He'd arrived onto the dancefloor twenty minutes ago and hadn't taken his hands off me since – or his mouth.

He was kissing me like it was the first time we'd ever kissed; fiercely, possessively, and making me weak with want.

I'd been so stupid to worry about the whole *calling me Britt* thing and Rourke was letting me know it, looking at me and *only me*.

He was so big and broad as he rocked against me, pressing his hard muscles against my soft body.

The smell of his cologne filled my senses and I sagged against his chest with my arms wrapped tightly around his neck, allowing my body to sway to the music, as he punished my lips with his own.

I had no freaking clue of what had gotten into Rourke, and I cared even less. His entire focus was on me and being the object of his sole attention was making me feel like a freaking supermodel. Oh, and the erection digging into my stomach for the past twenty minutes? Yeah, that was a major ego boost.

Bad Girlfriend from *Theory of a Deadman* blasted through the speakers, distracting me from my lust filled thoughts, and I dragged my mouth away from Rourke's before squealing, "Oh my god. I *love* this song!"

Turning in Rourke's arms, I backed my ass up against his crotch and began to twerk, moving my body to the rhythm of the song. This was a dirty, sexy song and my movements mirrored every lyric.

I felt Rourke's hands clamp around my waist before he twisted me around and dragged me roughly against him. "You shake this for me," Rourke growled in a warning tone, dropping a hand to squeeze my ass cheek hard. "And no one else."

Knotting my fingers in the front of his shirt, I pressed my chest against his stomach and leaned up for a kiss. "I know."

Rourke's other hand landed on my ass. "You're mine, Six," he said, holding me flush to him. "You got it?"

Breathless, I nodded and continued to roll my hips against him. Rourke's eyes were dark and hooded with desire as he watched me watching him, our bodies grinding against each other.

"Owens, wasn't this your theme song last year?" some wise ass with a tie wrapped around his forehead called out as he shouldered past Rourke, managing to knock us apart. "See you've found a replacement for Britt," the guy said with a sneer. He swayed on his feet, his words slurred – obviously wasted. "Does this one put out, too?" he asked, nodding in my direction.

"Walk away, Westbrook," Rourke snarled, pulling my back to his side. "Do it now, Daniel, before I lose my ever-fucking mind and rip your head off."

"Try it," the guy taunted. "You know what'll happen if you're caught fighting with one of us again."

Fighting with one of us?

Was he one of the Jefferson boys?

And then the name dawned on me; Daniel Westbrook.

I'd heard that name being tossed around tonight.

He was Jefferson's quarterback.

What the hell was he doing *here*, at our school's homecoming dance?

"I'm here with your ex," Daniel added, seeming to read my mind, except his attention was still focused entirely on Rourke. "Hey, thanks for breaking her in for me." Laughing, he added, "It's becoming our thing, ain't it, Owens? You do the dirty work and I reap the benefits." Daniel's eyes trailed over me and he smiled darkly. "Damn, bet this one's a freak in the sheets."

"Fuck you, asshole," I hissed before turning my back to him. "Come on," I said to Rourke, placing my hand on his forearm and trying to lead

him away “He’s not worth it.”

Instead of ignoring Daniel and coming with me like I expected him to, Rourke shrugged my hand off his. “No,” he snarled, his voice hard. Unyielding. His eyes were...furious. “Go up to our room,” he ordered. “I’ll be up in a minute.”

“Rourke, don’t bother –”

“Just do what I fucking say, Six! Please,” he bit out, jaw clenched, eyes locked on Daniel.

“Well, sweetheart, am I right in thinking you’re a real, bad bitch in the bed?” Daniel called out, focusing his glazed eyes on me. “I ain’t got a room here tonight, but my car’s parked out front if you wanna show me.”

That was it.

That was all it took to make Rourke snap.

Shoving past me in a violent haze, Rourke plowed into Daniel. Both boys went crashing to floor, their fists a blur, and my screams were swallowed up by the hooting and cheering of everyone at the dance who were now forming a circle around the boys.

“Rourke!” I screamed, attempting and failing to shove my way past the circle of onlookers, desperate to get to my boyfriend and stop him from doing something that could potentially get him thrown off his beloved football team. “Rourke, stop!”

Relief flooded my body when I watched a trail of security guards, led by Mr. Trimble, our teacher chaperone for the night, break through the crowd and drag the boys apart.

That relief was quickly replaced with sheer fucking horror as I watched Britt walk right up to Rourke and throw her arms around him.

Rourke didn’t push her off or try and step away from her, either. He just continued to launch slur after slur at Daniel who was being half dragged, half carried out of the room by two security guards, his face a bloodied mess.

If I was just a passerby and didn’t know better, I would have sworn Rourke and Britt were a couple. They looked like a couple with Britt fawning all over Rourke and dabbing her fingers against the cut on his bottom lip, and him standing there, *letting her*.

And then Rourke was also moving, being escorted from the room by security with Britt hurrying along after him in her pink princess-cut dress

and stupid blonde hair.



Rourke

“ROURKE, YOU’RE BLEEDING! Omigod, you’re bleeding!”

“Back the fuck up, Britt,” I warned for the tenth fucking time, jerking my head back from her. I was fully aware I was bleeding.

Westbrook busted my mouth up tonight. My only consolation was the fact that I’d beat him to a pulp. The satisfaction I’d felt when I watched him being helped from the room tonight had somewhat calmed my temper. I was still burning mad though. What he’d said about Six? I should have fucking buried him in the ground.

Motherfucker.

“I’m trying to help you,” Britt hissed, reaching up with a cotton pad to swipe my lip.

“And I told you, I don’t need your goddamn help. Christ!” I snarled, catching her hand and knocking it away. “Why are you even here?” I demanded, gesturing to the small room security had placed me in while management called my father.

Tonight was one of those rare nights I thanked Jesus that Gabe was my father. His name and my mother’s money were the only two reasons I hadn’t been hauled off in handcuffs tonight. My father owned half the town and he was a respected business man. Not by me, but the grown-ups of Ocean Bay seemed to like him and, right now, those were the ones I needed on my side.

Christ, Dad was going to be mad as hell with me when he found out I’d been fighting again. I’d barely gotten off without serving time in juvie last time.

In my defense, what brother wouldn’t beat the shit out of the prick he caught molesting his sister?

Courts didn’t see it that way though...

“I didn’t ask you to come with me,” I added, turning my attention back to Britt. And I certainly didn’t want her here. “So, why don’t you just go?”

“Rourke!” She looked genuinely taken aback. “I’m here because I care about you.” She sniffled, before adding, “Because I still love you.”

I didn't reply to that because in all honesty, what could I say?

That I hated her?

No.

That I didn't care about her?

I couldn't say that either.

"I don't..." I paused and pinched the bridge of my nose as I searched for the words to make this as painless as possible. I didn't want to hurt Britt, but I needed her to let me go once and for all. "The boy in me will always love you, Britt," I finally said with a pained sigh.

"Then take me back, Rourke!" With tears streaming down her cheeks, she continued to beg me "Please. I'm sorry, I am. I've learned my lesson. Just take me back."

"But the man?" I held a hand out, warding her off. "The man in me got over you a long time ago."

"You don't mean that," she cried, taking a step towards me and then two more back.

"I do," I replied hoarsely. "I've moved on, Britt. I'm in love with Mercedes."

"But you were fighting with Daniel tonight," she sobbed.

"Because he disrespected Mercedes," I replied in an exasperated tone. "I hit him for *her*, Britt. Not for you." Fuck, this didn't feel good, but I was done protecting Britt's feelings. "I'm all in with her," I added. "One hundred and ten percent, B."

"You said that about me once, remember?" she shot back, angry and hurt.

"I did," I agreed. "But I was just a kid who couldn't tell the difference between loving a girl and lusting after one." A sob tore from her throat but I continued to speak anyway, knowing we both needed to hear this. "I never loved you like I love her. I'm not saying this to hurt you, or get you back for hurting me. I'm telling you the truth here, B. I see a future with Mercedes. One I never saw with you."



Mercedes

SWINGING OPEN THE side door of the hotel, I practically threw myself outside. Kicking off my heels, I picked them up and stumbled blindly down the neatly trimmed lawn towards the beach. If I had known today was going to be such a fucking horrible day when I got out of bed this morning, I wouldn't have bothered shaving my legs.

I couldn't breathe.

Pain was engulfing me.

I felt winded and broken and fucking crushed.

Why couldn't Britt just leave him alone?

Why couldn't Rourke leave *her* alone?

And why the fuck had I been so stupid as to fall in love with a boy who obviously still harbored feelings for his ex?

"The boy in me will always love you."

The words I had overheard Rourke say to Britt continued to haunt me with every step I took. I couldn't stand to listen to another word after that. I had bolted from my perch outside the door, desperate to get away from the both of them.

He still had feelings for her. I hated even thinking it, but lying to myself was what had gotten me into this mess in the first place. Deep down inside, I had always known something like this would happen and I had no one else to blame for this but myself.

Rourke had been straight up with me from the beginning. He told me over and over again that this wasn't long term. I could have backed out at any time. I didn't. My broken heart was on me.

Pure emotion bubbled up inside of me, the urge to run back into his arms almost overpowering, but I managed to keep going – keep moving away from *him*.

The moment the country club was out of sight, I lost it. Dropping to my knees, I doubled over on the sand and screamed.

This was too much.

I felt broken. I knew that sounded pathetic and contrived, but it was the truth.

He was the best thing that had ever happened to me. And I had lost him to a girl who treated him like he was a fucking backup plan.

Boys were fickle, they were a dime a dozen, but I knew I could travel the four corners of the world and never find a boy like him again.

Not in my lifetime.

“Mercedes?” a familiar voice called out in the darkness. “Is that you?”

Turning my face in the direction of the voice, I let out a choked sob when I recognized the familiar blond head. “Oh, hey Mason,” I managed to say just before bursting into tears.

“Damn, sweetheart,” he muttered, concern evident in his voice as he walked over to where I was kneeling. Removing his jacket, he placed it over my shoulders before sinking down on the sand and loosely hooking his arms around his knees. “So, are you gonna tell me what happened at the dance, or am I gonna have to guess?”

“You didn’t see?” I asked, surprised.

Mason shook his head and smirked. “Nah, girl. I ditched ten minutes in when I got an offer from Casey Garza I couldn’t refuse.”

“Gross.”

“Surely whatever happened can’t be worth this amount of tears?” he surprised me by asking.

“He’s still in love with her.” Sniffling, I clasped the lapels of his jacket and pulled them across my chest. My voice was hoarse and raw. I didn’t sound like myself when I spoke. “Rourke. He’s still in love with Britt.”

“Bullshit,” Mason surprised me by saying. “Rourke ain’t no cheat.”

I turned and looked at him. “You didn’t even hear me out.”

“Don’t need to,” Mase replied confidently.

“He got in a fight with Daniel Westbrook over Britt tonight,” I protested, adding evidence to my claim. “I know you think he doesn’t, Mase, but you’re wrong. He’s still in love with her.”

“*You’re* wrong,” he simply replied.

“I am not wrong!”

“Listen, sweetheart. I know Rourke Owens. And he wouldn’t do that to you.” Frowning, Mason added, “He wouldn’t do that to any girl, but especially not you.”

“What do you mean *especially not me*?”

“Have you lost your mind inside that pretty head of yours?” he asked, turning to face me. “Rourke’s in love with *you*.” Smiling, he added, “Hell, the whole world knows it except Rourke – and maybe you.”

“You’re wrong,” I whispered.

“Am I?” Mason countered, raising a brow. “Come on, Mercy James. Do you honestly think I’d sit here and defend Rourke to you if I wasn’t absolutely certain the guy was obsessed with you?”

“Yeah, probably,” I mumbled petulantly. “You guys are friends.”

“Hell fucking no,” Mason shot back with a laugh. “Friend or not, if there weren’t feelings involved, I would be on your fine ass in a heartbeat.”

“Ew, Mase. That’s disgusting.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “What I’m trying to say is, I know Rourke loves you. It’s the only reason I bowed out.”

“Bowed out?” I cocked a brow. “When had you bowed *in*?”

Mason laughed again. “At the party that night for about five seconds before Rourke walked in and staked his claim on you.”

“I don’t know what to do, Mase,” I admitted quietly. “What should I do?”

“Go back to the hotel and talk to Rourke,” he replied without a hint of hesitation. “Talk the shit out of this with him. Tell him how you’re feeling. I can promise you, sweetheart, you won’t be disappointed.”

“No way. I can’t,” I said, shaking my head in protest before releasing a choked sob. “What if you’re wrong?”

“Damn, you’re as stubborn as he is,” Mase muttered under his breath before climbing to his feet. “Come on. Stand your sexy ass up and I’ll walk you back to your boyfriend.” Turning back to me, he held out a hand and said, “And for future reference, sweetheart? I’m never wrong.”

Chapter 52

Rourke

“DON’T FUCKING MOVE, ROURKE!” My father’s voice bellowed down the line so loudly that I had to hold my phone away from my ear. “Brawling at the homecoming dance? Jesus Christ, I thought you were over that stage?”

“You weren’t *there*. You don’t know my reasons,” I shot back heatedly as I paced the floor of my hotel room. I’d been escorted up to my room ten minutes ago and told I couldn’t leave until my father came and got me in the morning – *with a nice juicy payoff*.

“I don’t care,” Dad snapped. “Just stay in that room until I get home. I’m leaving now. I’ll be there by morning.”

“I don’t care about me,” I growled, pinching the bridge of my nose. I didn’t care about being in trouble. I cared about Six and the fact that I hadn’t seen her since I was dragged out of the dance by security. The same security that was currently standing guard outside my room, making sure I was a good little minor and stayed in my room. Fucking bullshit. I was losing my goddamn mind worrying about my girlfriend and these pricks wouldn’t let me go downstairs to find her. “I’m worried about Six. I can’t find her.”

“Mercedes?”

“Yes!” I nodded. “Christ, yes. I need to find her.”

There was a long pause before Dad cleared his throat and asked, “Why would you need to find her, Rourke?”

I rolled my eyes and bit back the urge to roar. “Because I have to!” I snapped, mentally adding the word *asshole* at the end. “Can you call her? She’s not picking up for me. I need to know she’s okay.”

“Why wouldn’t she be okay?” Concern filled my father’s voice. “What’s going on, Rourke?”

“She was with me,” I bit out. “When the fight broke out.” Exhaling a shaky sigh, I rubbed my jaw with my hand and added, “I haven’t seen her since.”

“Oh.” Dad’s tone was light then. “She’s probably just gone home with her date, Rourke.”

“I’m her date, asshole!” I roared, losing the final grasp I had on my temper. “Fuck!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dad growled.

I bit down on my fist instead of throwing my phone. “What the hell do you think I’m talking about?”

“Are you sleeping with your stepsister, Rourke?”

I’m doing more than just sleeping with my stepsister, I was about to say, but paused when the door handle of the room jangled. Seconds later, the door flew open and Six strolled in wearing another guy’s jacket. No, not just another guy, I realized when Mason sauntered into my room.

Oh, hell to the fucking no!



Mercedes

“DAD, I HAVE TO GO,” Rourke growled into his phone before pressing a button on the screen and tossing it down on the bed. “What the fuck is this?” he demanded, stalking towards me. When he reached me, Rourke quickly snatched the jacket I had forgotten was draped over my shoulders and threw it at Mason, who was standing beside me with a shit eating grin on his face. “She doesn’t need your jacket, asshole!”

“Relax, buddy, I didn’t lay a finger on her,” Mason laughed before slipping his jacket back on. “I found her on the beach, all alone and crying her eyes out. I’m just returning what’s yours.”

“Consider her returned,” Rourke snarled. “Now go.”

“Rourke!” I hissed, mortified, but he didn’t look at me. His focus was entirely on Mason who was grinning like the cat that got the cream.

“Told you I’m never wrong,” Mason said with a wink directed at me before turning and heading towards the door.

The moment the door closed, Rourke was on me. “Are you okay?” he demanded, tone thick with concern, as he cupped my face between his

hands – his usual move when he was anxious. “Jesus fucking Christ, I’ve been going out of my mind worrying about you.”

“Have you?” I replied, not meaning to sound so...catty. But dammit, I felt catty. I felt pretty damn pissed actually.

Rourke raised his brow in surprise and I quickly backed out of his embrace before stepping around him and walking over to the huge king sized bed in the center of the room. “Last I saw, you had your hands full with Britt.” The hidden accusation in my tone was obvious to both of us.

“What exactly are you trying to say, Six?” Rourke tossed back, tone hard, jaw clenched. “Because if you’re accusing me of something, then come right out and say it.”

“Fine!” Sinking down on the bed, I folded my arms across my chest and met his gaze head on. “She was all over you.” My voice sounded weak and shaky and it made me mad. I wanted to sound strong. I need to, dammit. “I asked you not to fight and you did it anyway. And then you let her *touch* you.”

“Touch me?” Rourke hissed, clearly outraged. “I didn’t let anyone touch me, Six.”

“She was all over you, Rourke.” Now I was shouting, my voice rising to compensate for the tears springing in my eyes. “She went with you when you were escorted out.” Stupid tears dripped down my cheeks. “You didn’t look back at me once! You just left with *her*.”

My words seemed to cause Rourke to lose whatever shred of self-control he’d been clinging to and he blew up like a firecracker on the fourth of July.

“What the actual fuck!” he roared, furious, as he began to pace the room. “Are you seriously mad at me for hitting that piece of shit?” Swinging around, Rourke glared at me. “He was disrespecting *you*, Six! Talking shit about *you*! Making sexual innuendos about *my* girlfriend!” He shook his head, at a loss. “What the fuck did you think I would do? Shake his hand?”

“I didn’t think you’d leave with *her*!” I screamed, losing my cool. “But you did, so I guess I’m wrong again.”

“I didn’t fucking *leave* with her,” he roared louder than I’d ever heard him. “I was removed from the goddamn room, Six. By hotel security. Britt *followed* me. I didn’t ask her to come. I wanted you!”

"I heard you," I screamed. "Talking to her! Telling her you still love her."

His nostrils flared and he shook his head in denial. "I didn't say that, Six."

"Yes, you did." I was crying now; hard, ugly crying and I didn't give a shit. "*The boy in me will always love you.*" I mimicked his voice and then released a scream. "I'm in love with you, Rourke. Me!" Hiccupping violently, I wiped my cheeks with the back of my hand before sobbing. "You made me love you. The only one I've ever given that kind of power to, and it was a goddamn lie because you'll always love *her*!"

"No! I don't love Britt. Not like that." His jaw ticked when he said, "Not like *you*. Christ, I love *you*, Six."

"Stop." I shook my head, denying it. "No, you don't." This was pity. It wasn't real.

"I love you," he snarled. "Goddammit, I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it, Six."

"Exactly," I sobbed. "Which means you meant it when you said it tonight – to Britt."

"You think what I felt for her when I was a child compares to what I feel for you now?" Rourke exclaimed as he ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "Are you fucking insane? I am so in love with you, Six, that I'm practically drowning!"

"Rourke," I whispered, unsure of what to say. My heart was hammering so hard in my chest, I was afraid I was about to pass out. The emotions coursing through me were overwhelming and Rourke's declaration was *killing* me.

When I remained quiet, Rourke continued to speak. "I am trying here, Six," he declared, tone gruff and hoarse. "To make it up to you. To show you how sorry I am for being an absolute prick when we first met. Fuck, I am trying harder with you than I've tried with anyone in my whole damn life." Releasing a weary sigh, he walked over to where I was sitting and sank down beside me. "You are all I want, Mercedes James." He shook his head before adding, "There is *no one* else. I'm not looking. I'm not fucking interested. I *only* see *you*. Get that through your stubborn, beautiful fucking head."

What could I say to that?

What the freaking hell could I say?

Absolutely nothing.

So instead, I broke down and cried.

Immediately, Rourke's arms came around me and I was in his lap, being held to his chest as he rocked me.

I must have cried for at least ten minutes before whispering, "I'm in love with you, too."

"I know, Six." Rourke's arms tightened around my body and he kissed the top of my head. "I know, baby."

"And it terrifies me," I added, my voice a broken sob. "I think I'm losing myself in your world, Rourke, and it scares me half to death." Sniffing, I buried my face in his chest. "I didn't want this either, you know. I had a plan for my life. A carefully structured, three-point plan. But you? You complicated my plan. You changed *everything*."

Rourke took a moment before saying, "You say that like it's a bad thing."

"It is a bad thing," I admitted, clinging to his body. "Because when you leave, what will I have left? Nothing..."

"I'm not leaving."

"Don't make promises you don't intend to keep."

"Oh, I intend on keeping this promise," he growled. "I'll be there, Six. I will fucking be there for you."

"But you're..." I clenched my eyes shut and forced out the words, "so wary of commitment. And in the beginning, we were always talking about us being *temporary*." Ugh. I *hated* that word.

"I was never afraid of commitment, Six. I was afraid of committing to the *wrong* person." He sounded so sincere that I tipped my face up to look at him, the urge to see his eyes overwhelming. "I was afraid of committing myself to someone who saw me as disposable," he added, eyes locked on mine. "She broke me, Six. Left cuts in me so deep I wasn't sure I would ever fully recover. But I did," he added with a smile. "And I'm here, fucking crazy in love with you. You asked me once what my endgame was." Pausing, he added, "I wasn't ready to answer that question then, but I am now."

"Rourke—"

"Ask me the question, Six."

“What’s your endgame, Rourke?”

“You,” Rourke replied without a hint of doubt or hesitation. “You are my endgame, Six.” And then he kissed me. A kiss so deep, so full of love and emotion, that I swear I melted in his arms.

I was his endgame.

And he was mine.



Rourke

I WAS BALLS DEEP inside my girlfriend, taking her rough and hard and exactly how she asked me to take her when she woke me up for morning sex. Six was screaming and clawing at my body as I pumped inside her, and I was loving every one of her hot, little moans and cries.

“Do you want me, Rourke?” Six breathed, spreading herself open and tilting her hips upwards for me to take her deeper.

Was she serious?

Was she honest to god asking me this question?

Goddamn.

“I was afraid before; of you...of the feelings I have for you,” I admitted, not breaking my rhythm. “It scared me. *You* scare me, but I’m done running from it. I’m done pushing you away because I fucking love you, Six.”

“I love you, too, Rourke,” Six cried out as she trailed her fingers up and down my chest. Her touch was so delicate in that moment, and the loving way she paid attention to my abs made it hard for me to breathe. I closed my eyes, reveling in the feel of her touch.

She paid so much attention to every detail of my body. Like she was putting it to memory. It made my chest squeeze so damn tight, it was hard to breathe. “I’m keeping you,” my words a promised grunt as her pussy sucked me in tighter. “You’re mine now, Six...”

“Rourke, I’m close,” she cried out, trembling beneath me. “I’m so...”

The door of our hotel room flew open then, a woman’s loud shriek piercing through the air, and we both froze.

“Cassidy?” My father’s voice filled the room. “Don’t panic, darling, but I think we may have a situation here.”

Six looked up at me with wide eyes and mouthed the words “Oh shit!”
Meanwhile, I grimaced and bit back a frustrated groan.
Oh shit was right.
We were so busted.

Epilogue

Mercedes - Four Years Later

“It’s your father,” I called out. “He’s facetimeing your computer again.”
I heard the familiar groan come from just inside our ensuite bathroom.
“Tell him I’m in class.”

“And leave me to talk to them on my own?” I threw my head back and laughed. “Not a chance.”

“Six,” Rourke called out in a warning tone. “Don’t make me talk to that man.”

“Too late,” I chimed, clicking the accept button Rourke’s MacBook.
“Gabe, how are you doing?”

“Oh, Mercedes, it’s you,” Rourke’s father replied.

“It’s me,” I agreed with a nod. “What can I do for you?”

“Is my son there?”

“He sure is,” I chuckled. “Let me just get him for you.” Rolling off the bed, I padded into the adjoining bathroom and leaned against the doorframe. “You can’t hide in here forever you know,” I said with a knowing grin. “If you don’t talk to him, he’ll take a trip out here and you remember what happened last time, don’t you?”

“Don’t remind me,” Rourke muttered sullenly, appearing in the doorway.

I grinned and reminded him anyway. “He brought the girls.”

Like I knew he would, Rourke shuddered at the memory of our twin sisters trashing our tiny one bedroom apartment.

His reaction made me laugh. “And my mom,” I added, barely able to hold back my laughter from the look of sheer panic on Rourke’s face.

“Fine,” he muttered in defeat. “I’ll talk to him.” He lowered his face to mine, pressing his forehead gently to mine. “But only because I love *you*.”

“Thank you,” I replied with grin. “Now go,” I added, stepping aside to let him pass, and giving his butt a quick slap on the way.

Rourke wandered over to our bed, looking ruffled and annoyed at the prospect of having a *chat* with his father while I slipped into the kitchen to give them some privacy.

Rourke and Gabe's relationship was still strained, although it had improved a lot since we left Ocean Bay after high school. They spoke on a monthly basis, unlike Mom and I who texted each other almost every day, and we had gone home to Ocean Bay for the holidays every year for the past four. Rourke and I were both in our final semester at MIT and on the verge of graduating with honors.

Instead of moving into the dorms like our friends had when we first arrived for college freshman year, Rourke had rented a small apartment close to campus, and after six months of dorm life, specifically communal showers, he had persuaded me to move in with him.

Three and a half years, a million arguments, one drunken marriage proposal followed by one sober marriage proposal, and one shotgun wedding in Vegas later, Rourke and I were still together. Rourke still called me Six and I, in turn, referred to him as Prick – when he deserved it, of course. He was still the best friend I'd ever had, and the love I'd once felt for him only seemed to grow. He also let me read his elusive notebook. I had cried like a baby the first time I read it, and if I'm being honest, every time since. The love Rourke's mother had for him was beautiful and I was so glad he had that piece of her with him, though he rarely opened it anymore.

"I can't believe you snookered me into facetimeing them," Rourke growled then, stalking into the kitchen with a weary expression etched on his face.

"I can't believe I had to snooker you into facetimeing them," I shot back, allowing him to pull me into his arms. "Gabe's your father. And the twins are our little sisters. You have to like them." Sure, our preschool aged twin sisters were a handful, but so was he, dammit.

"And I do," Rourke offered with a smirk. "From a distance. You know, the kind of distance where I send them a check on their birthdays and Christmas?"

"I can't believe you don't like them," I scolded. "They're just children, Rourke."

“I’ll like our children,” he offered, tone suddenly gruff, as he placed his hand over my swollen bump.

I was six months pregnant and expecting our first baby in the summer. We found out last week that we were having a girl and had instantly settled on a name; Camille, in memory of Rourke’s mother.

“And you?” Rourke whispered, pressing a kiss to my lips. “I really fucking like you, Six.”

The End

Sign up to Chloe's Mailing List

For updates on Chloe's upcoming works in progress and latest releases sign up to her monthly newsletter by clicking [here](#).

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You can get in touch with Chloe through her many social media pages, or drop a line to the email address below:

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Acknowledgements

This is my seventeenth attempt at writing a standalone and I've finally done it. I don't even know what to do with myself. Three and a half years of struggling to end a story in one book and I finally managed to accomplish it with Rourke and Six. I wouldn't have been able to finish this book without the support of my husband, my babies, parents, siblings and a few very close colleagues and friends.

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I also want to acknowledge my family and friends that have helped me along the way. It's been a whirlwind three years and I'm so thankful to have you guys in my corner and my cushion to fall back on when life gets bumpy. And one last shout out to my girls in Chloe's Clovers. Lads, you all should know by now how much I love and cherish your friendships. Your opinions matter to me and I'm so lucky to have a wonderful bunch of readers and friends like you.

About the Author

Chloe Walsh is a twenty-seven-year-old wife and mother of two from County Cork in the south of Ireland. The youngest of five children, reading and writing was her escape as a child.

In January 2014, she started to write about a cocky, self-assured man named Kyle Carter, and five weeks later, on Valentine's Day 2014, she self-published her debut novel, [Break my Fall](#), for a handful of friends who had called over for tea, read bits and pieces of Kyle, and wanted to read the story on their E-readers rather than printed sheets.

Shockingly – and no one was more surprised than her – the book was a huge success, reaching No.1 in the UK Bestsellers Lists. Chloe followed it up in April 2014 with the sequel, [Fall to Pieces](#), vowing that this second book would be the final chapter for Kyle.

The demand for a third installment was overwhelming and a series was born! The final book became two: [Fall on Me](#), the third book in the accidental Broken series, was released in August 2014, and [Forever we Fall](#) was released in October 2014.

[Treacherous](#), the first book from her Carter Kids series was released in March 2015, followed by [Always](#) (Carter Kids #1.5) in June 2015.

[DiMarco's Secret Love Child](#) (Parts 1 & 2) were released in later March 2015.

[Blurring Lines](#) was released in May 2015, followed by [Never Let Me Go](#), in December 2015.

[Thorn](#), is her eleventh book, and was released in February 2016, on the two-year anniversary of her publishing career. [Tame](#) followed in September of 2016. [Torment](#), released in December 2016, followed by [Off Limits](#), in January 2017. In February 2017, on the three-year anniversary of her writing career, Chloe released [Off the Cards](#), followed by [Off the Hook](#) in April. [Endgame](#), is Chloe's first standalone novel and brings to seventeen the number of books Chloe has under her belt.

An avid reader, Chloe enjoys lurking in a corner with her E-reader, and playing sports.

She has a deep love for paranormal romance and young adult fantasy and hopes to take the plunge into the genres in the not too distant future.

Other Books by Chloe Walsh

Standalone Novels:

Endgame – An Ocean Bay Standalone Novel
Seven Sleepless Nights (TBR)

The Faking It Trilogy:

Off Limits – Faking it #1
Off the Cards – Faking it #2
Off the Hook – Faking it #3

The Broken Series:

Break my Fall – Broken #1
Fall to Pieces – Broken #2
Fall on Me – Broken #3
Forever we Fall – Broken #4
Breaking Point #4.5 (TBR)

The Carter Kids Series:

Treacherous – Carter Kids #1
Always – Carter Kids #1.5
Thorn – Carter Kids #2
Tame – Carter Kids #3
Torment – Carter Kids #4
Inevitable – Carter Kids #5 (TBR)

The DiMarco Dynasty:

DiMarco's Secret Love Child: Part One
DiMarco's Secret Love Child: Part Two

Blurred Lines:

Blurring Lines – Book #1
Never Let me Go – Book #2

The Broken Series and Carter Kids Series
reading order:

1. Break my Fall
2. Fall to Pieces
3. Fall on Me
4. Forever we Fall
5. Treacherous
6. Always
7. Thorn
8. Tame
9. Torment
10. Breaking Point (tbr)
11. Inevitable (tbr)

The Blurred Lines duo reading order:

1. Blurring Lines
2. Never Let me Go

The DiMarco Dynasty reading order:

1. DiMarco's Secret Love Child: Part One
2. DiMarco's Secret Love Child: Part Two

The Faking It trilogy reading order:

1. Off Limits
2. Off the Cards
3. Off the Hook

2017 Book Releases

Off Limits – January 2017

Off the Cards – February 2017

Off the Hook – April 2017

Endgame – June 2017

Seven Sleepless Nights – July 2017

Breaking Point – August 2017

Inevitable – November 2017

Playlist for *Endgame*

(Rourke and Six)

Music is one of the most important parts of my writing process.

I create playlists for each individual character.

Check out my Spotify where I make all my playlists for my stories:

<https://open.spotify.com/user/21516ymtg7ulpype2otbeseji>

Finley Quaye – Dice
Gym Class Heroes – Stereo Love
Kate Nash – Nicest Thing
Amy Studt – Ladder in my Tights
P!nk – Fuckin’ Perfect
Dappy – I.O.U
Kate Voegle – No Good
Hozier – Jackie and Wilson
Jay Smith – Like a Prayer
Billie Myers – Kiss the Rain
Walk the Moon – Shut up and Dance
Walking on Cars – At Gunpoint
Lisa McHugh – You Aint Woman Enough to Take my Man
Black Veil Brides – Lost it All
Michelle Featherstone – Stay
Switchfoot – You
Jo-Jo – Disaster
SafetySuit – Never Stop
Blink 182 – Mutt
Annia – Fly on the Wings of Love
Gnash & Olivia O'Brien – I Hate You/I Love You
Chet Faker – No Diggity
Maggie Lindemann – Couple of Kids
Lifehouse – From Where You Are
Nelly Furtado – Try
Lustra – Scotty Doesn’t Know
Thirty Seconds to Mars – The Kill (Bury Me)

Avril Lavigne – Things I'll Never Say
Saving Abel – The Sex is Good
Eve 6 – Think Twice
Theory of a Deadman – Bad Girlfriend
Bush – Glycerine
Sam Hunt – Make You Miss Me
Little Mix – Secret Love Song
Preset's Remix – Closer
Picture This – Take My Hand
Sia – Breathe me
Blink 182 – Every Time I Look for You
Katie Thompson – Heaving is a Place on Earth
The Avett Brothers – I and Love and You
Take That – Patience
Paramore – Hallelujah
The Moody Blues – Nights in White Satin
Taylor Swift & Ed Sheeran – Everything has Changed
Nickelback – Trying Not to Love You
Eve 6 – Inside Out
Jake Coco – Wonderwall
Nickelback – Animals
Jesse J – Do it Like a Dude
Counting Crows – Accidentally in Love
Elle King – My Neck/My Back
Papa Roach – Last Resort
Def Leppard – Pour Some Sugar on Me
Hailee Steinfeld – Hell Nos and Headphones
Halsey – Not Afraid Anymore
Diana Vickers – Once
Go Radio – Rolling in the Deep
The Black Keys – Lonely Boy
Clare Bowen – Black Roses
Nickelback – Next Contestant
Jimmy Eat World – The Middle
The White Stripes – Seven Nation Army
Hunter Hayes – Wanted

Bruno Mars – Gorilla
Nina Nesbitt & Kodamine – Hold you
Boyz II Men – Iris
The Pussycat Dolls – Happily Never After
Nicole Andersson – Demons
Ben Hazlewood – Paint me Black
Caleb and Kelsey – I Lived
Kodamine – Love like This
Orchid and Beryl – I Can't Help Falling in Love with you
Mike Posner – Iris
Hunter Hayes – I Want Crazy
Ruth B – Lost Boy
Every Avenue – Only Place I Call Home
Blake Shelton – Sangria
The Chainsmokers – Paris
Ben Haenow – Second Hand Heart
Ultrabeat – Elysium (I go Crazy)
Isabella Kemp – Beggin for Thread
Seether – Careless Whisper
Shinedown – Second Chance

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