



What will break first?
My hate or your heart?

Broken HATE

WESTBROOK BLUES BOOK 3

THANDIWE MPOFU

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CONNECT WITH THANDIE

Broken HATE

WESTBROOK BLUES BOOK 3



THANDIWE MPOFU



Broken Hate

Thandiwe Mpofu

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DEDICATION



For anyone that feels like forgiving themselves is too hard a task without first loving those broken pieces in their souls. May you find a sense of self-worth and in that, maybe some peace.
You deserve all the light.

SYNOPSIS



*WHAT'S WRONG BABY BLUE? DID YOU MISTAKE HIS FORCED
SINCERITY FOR LOVE?*

Every kiss will fade in time.

Every memory will fade in time.

Every smile, every teardrop, every wound—it'll all dry up—in time.

But every lie? That shit only gets bigger and more devastating with time.

In time...I'll learn to let him go, but not without leaving my bitter mark on
him like he carelessly ruined my soul with his cold, rough touch.

In time, I'll learn to forgive those that have wronged me as savagely as they
did.

In time, I'll rise from the ashes and soar.

In time, the Blue Boys will learn to take me seriously come hell or high
water.

But for right now, we're in the final blue act, playing for hateful truths—our
audience of two-faced snakes, cheering for the hate and the breaking.

Resentment, toxic anger, lies and betrayal are the rules of the game.

The price? A bitter ending.

What will break first?

My hate or your heart?

Because baby, love means absolutely nothing when it falls on broken,
shattered souls like ours.

EPIGRAPH



You were attracted to my darkness right from the start. You were fascinated
by it, drawn to it. . .*enticed by it.*

Is it because you couldn't resist it—resist me?

Or maybe it's really because...you had the same dark depths, whispering in
your bleak, cold heart?

The same darkness, swirling behind those dark eyes?

I guess that's not the type of truth you're ready to face...

PLAYLIST



Theme songs

“Love Me or Leave Me” by Little Mix

“Ruin My Life” by Zara Larsson

“Sober” by Demi Lovato

Playlist

“The Few Things” by JP Saxe, Charlotte Lawrence

“Say” by Ruel

“One Day” by Tate McRae

“If By Chance” by Ruth B.

“Stone Cold” by Demi Lovato

“Can I Be Him” by James Arthur

“Out Of Love” by Alessia Cara

“You Can’t Stop The Girl” by Bebe Rexha

“River of Tears” by Alessia Cara

“You Don’t Do It For Me Anymore” by Demi Lovato

“Love On The Brain” by Rihanna

“Resentment” by Beyoncé

“Dazed & Confused” by Ruel

“Come Back For Me” by Jaymes Young

For more, follow my playlist on Spotify [here](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE



The wait for this book has been felt in more ways than just excitement. There was pain, there were tears here and there, but most importantly, there was an overflow of love and support that I've never known in my life and for that, I can't thank you enough for choosing to read this book after waiting what seems like an eternity for its release.

Before you dive in, please take a deep breath. Clear your mind of any, and all expectations and let Ace & Astraea tell their story as best as they can. I hope you love their story as much as my heart bled with each word that's in this book.

Love is a strange thing, but I'm finding out now that we all need it at the end of the day... especially when we don't realize we're in dire need of that sweet, painful but powerful emotion that makes this life worth living in these trying times.

Being broken doesn't mean you're out of the game.

TRIGGER WARNING



Please note that this book contains materials and scenes that might trigger psychological or emotional lapses to some readers. Subject matter might/will get dark as you go. Reader discretion is advised.
This book should NOT be read by persons under the age of 18.
This is your only warning. Step in, if you dare.

PROLOGUE



There are situations in life where even the truth can't really liberate, it can only do irreparable damage.

Light can't really expose, it can only blind.

But then there are other times where love is just a side dish, part of the main course of a brittle, dark, hard, aggressive kind of possession that creeps into your soul when you're nothing more than just a little boy; hatefully enchanted by a little girl's laugh.

You're gripped by an inexplicable, insane need for a strange girl with stars in her eyes; stars that have always been *mine* right from the start.

But this kind of hate, this vicious kind of possessiveness that we had on each other, it made us both blind to the toxicity of our kisses. We refused to realize how suffocating the hugs were.

We failed to notice that we were boxing each other in, pushing each other into faux gilded cages; restrictive as hell but so damn addictive.

I thought maybe, I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life locked together with her. Hardly ever giving each other space to breathe, existing only in our own little world, ruled by...her.

Her sweet, addictive touches that break & shatter one's soul.

Her eyes that drew me in like a moth to a flame.

Her.

It was all about *her*...

I wondered then what it would be like, to *surrender* to her.

To let go of our garbage and issues.

All of our nightmares, our imperfect trust in each other and the irreparable, broken hope that covered us like a cloak made of the roughest material.

What would happen if we both surrendered to each other? What would happen if we admitted to being broken and maybe even in love?

Love...

The truth is, love isn't really what it's been painted out to be by Hollywood and all the books she likes to read late at night.

Love breaks.

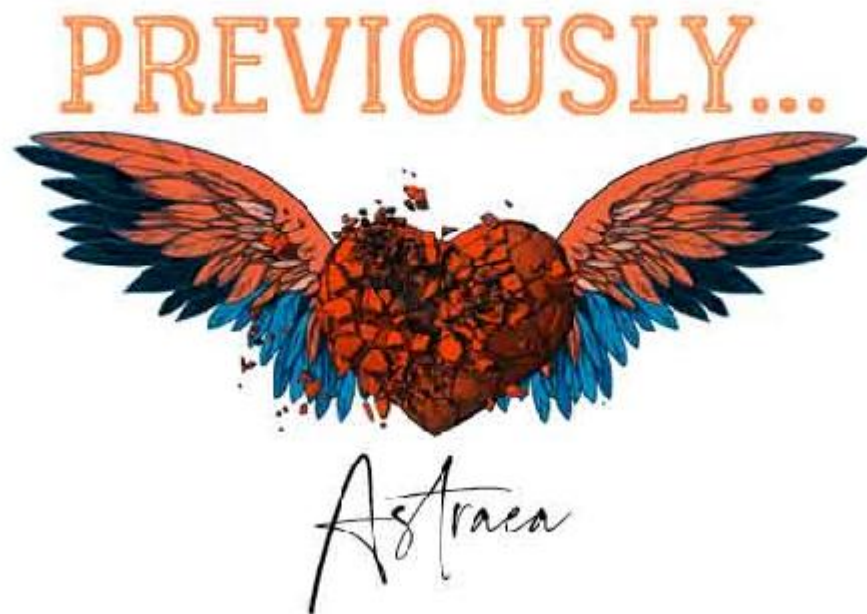
Love devastates.

Love is a lie—until the truth is too painful to bear.

The truth that, you can love broken souls, but soon, they'll break you too...

Just like another truth that makes me jerk awake in the middle of the night, with a gasp of pain, after a deep, restless, fitful nightmare. My heart beating wildly in my chest, an overpowering sense of sadness hanging over me like a cloak of death, making me shiver with a painful realization...

Love isn't meant for her and I.



I don't know when I stop screaming or when I come to but when I do, a deathly still silence is around me, a true representation of death around us.

I'm in a hospital room, with the lights muted and soft. No one is here with me but an I.V. is shoved in my arm and the machines in the room that indicate that I'm still alive, beep softly but they lie.

I'm not alive. Not at all.

I look around, my head pounding, I reach up and touch the back of my head where it feels tender. Images of me collapsing flash behind my eyelids.

I fell and hit my head, hard.

Why I didn't fall and die is beyond me.

"Get the fuck out of here before I have them arrest you, don't fucking test me and the lengths I'll go to ruin you Allory or Pace or whoever the fuck you are," Noah's voice filters from outside my door and I immediately sit up straight.

Allory?

Is Kim here?

"Noah please, I have to tell her something," I can hear Kim's stressed out voice, sounding shrill as if she's holding in tears.

“More lies? I think not,” Noah growls, getting really angry now. “She’s dehydrated, hasn’t eaten in over seventy-two hours, she has a minor concussion. If you were her real friend, you would have seen these signs earlier and forced her to fucking eat or fucking take care of her!” Noah is shouting now and I push the blankets away. I need to stop this.

“You and your fucking Blue Boys are the ones who did that to her!” Kim counters, now shouting as well. “You have so much power over her that you can’t even see it! You take her for granted. You say you’re protecting her, but all you do is destroy her,” she shouts.

“And you were, what exactly? Protecting her, too?” Noah laughs, bitterly.

I cringe as I hear the sound. “Get the fuck out of here. And a word of advice to trash like you, drive out of town, Allory,” he seethes.

“Why?” Kim’s voice is a stutter as she asks that dreaded question.

“Because as soon as Astraea is out and we bury my brother, I’m going to hunt you down and empty every molecule of the rage that I’m feeling on you!”

“Do your fucking best, asshole! I’m not leaving here without seeing her!” Kim shouts.

“Noah, shut it. You’re going to get us kicked out,” someone says, trying to shush Noah.

“Spider, get this bitch out of here and please make sure she doesn’t come near here,” Noah grits out. “That goes for you too, King. Get fucking lost!” Noah’s voice has dropped to a dangerous tenor.

Ace is out there?

I quickly walk over to the door, dragging the I.V. pole with me as I go. Opening it slightly, I peep through and immediately spot a shaky Kim whose eyes are locked on Spider.

Ace and Noah’s gazes are locked but it’s Spider who speaks first.

“Are you going to tell them or should I?” he starts and I arch my eyebrow, watching the exchange. What is he talking about?

“I came here to tell her but what about you? Should I tell them or will you?” Kim cocks her head, watching him back but Spider remains mute and motionless, watching her.

I push open the door but no one notices me yet as the first bomb drops.

“Your dear friend here, that you trust with your fucking lives and treat like a henchman, is part of the Phoenix Corps,” Kim announces, folding her

arms, turning to look at Noah. "Did you know that?"

The Phoenix Corps? What the hell is that?

I watch as Noah and Ace shift on their feet, tense and restless but they don't look shocked at all as they watch her.

"We fucking knew that, you don't have anything to say that will shock us," Noah says. "What you should be telling us is how you know about this damn lethal, fanatic organization of killers."

An organization of killers.

What the hell?

"I know more than you think," Kim seethes, getting agitated, not used to the wall that Noah has just put up, shutting her out.

"Unless of course you're going to admit that you had your best friend murdered because you couldn't handle the sting of rejection and take it like a man, then go hang."

Those last words are directed at Ace who growls low in his chest.

"Whoa, that's not what we should be focusing on," Spider says, quickly stepping between Ace and Noah. "Your little friend here, Kimberly Allory, is kind of part of the Phoenix Corps too, by blood apparently. And just like the rest of them, she was given an assignment," Spider explains, watching Ace and Noah.

"What kind of an assignment?" Ace demands.

"Well, as far as I've searched, it started the first day of school."

"The day Astraea started school with us?" Noah's voice is incredulous, filled with disbelief as he looks at Kim in shock and then disgust. She starts shaking then.

"What fucking kind of assignment was it?" Ace questions again, this time with a tone of voice that makes my blood run cold and my heart pound.

"Well, she was to spy on you and Astraea. Report your whereabouts, your habits, you know the little details and everything," Spider says.

"So...she was a plant, huh?" Noah scoffs.

What?

This is too much.

First, I find out that Ace moved on with Brittney. Brittney shit all over me, basically announcing a secret that I didn't know all along, making me look like a damn fool when she said her sister was the girl I had come to rely on.

And then I find out that Emmett is dead and the circumstances surrounding his death are suspicious and they all point at Philip King and his son who I'm stupidly, foolishly, pathetically and irrevocably in love with.

And now, it's even worse. Kim was a plant all along. A spy.

"You have no idea what I have gone through to get here, I'll be damned if you shame me for the sacrifices I've had to make for my sisters and I. But Astraea, I love that girl! She's my best friend."

"A best friend that you lied to all these months as you wormed your way into her life. You're just like your shit sister," Noah spits out, his words harsh and void of any emotion.

He just...shuts down.

"I have one question to ask you and you're going to be fucking honest and then leave, is that clear," Spider grits out, watching Kim. In this moment, Spider has this thunderous expression that makes a shiver go down my spine. From where I stand, he's the scariest as I've ever seen him. Danger and death oozes from him, morphing with the deathly stillness that radiates violently from the tall, muscular, sexy as hell, body of death beside him.

I shiver.

"Anything! I'm not a liar," Kim says and I step a bit closer, moving quietly as I slip through the door.

I watch as Spider types something on his iPad and then he extends it to Kim.

"Who is this man?"

Kim accepts the iPad but as soon as she sees the image of the man Spider is questioning her about, all the color on her face drains and she suddenly looks like a ghost.

"That's...", she stutters.

"What the fuck is going on?" Ace demands, then he snatches the iPad from Kim's hands so he can see the image himself.

"You asked me to find Brittney's father, so I did a thorough search with the new materials you got from Brittney and since you told me these two are half siblings, I did a co-search. I found this," Spider explains but I watch as Ace's whole body starts to tremble.

His fingers start twitching. His gorgeous face clouds over. Sweat dots his brow and I can feel the pounding of his heart from here.

Who is that man?

“Well, who is he?” Spider questions Kim, looking at Ace as he does. Something isn’t right here.

“That’s my father...,” Kim confesses and then breaks down crying as she sinks to the hospital floor, unable to hold her weight up.

“This man is your father?” Noah questions as he snatches the iPad from Ace who is completely frozen and hasn’t moved. He doesn’t say a word and as dread moves through me, this time its fangs sink into me until I can’t breathe. “He looks like...”

“Astraea and a bit of George.”

Devastation...

I take a step closer to them as Ace looks up then and spots me, but there’s no shock in his eyes. He knew I was there all along. But he doesn’t announce my presence, so I decide to speak.

“Show me that iPad,” I demand, not looking at anyone in particular, just at the damn iPad, feeling compelled to it somehow.

The whispers come back.

I can hear them in my head as goosebumps graze my arms.

“Astraea, you should be in bed. Go back,” Noah starts but I lift my hand up to halt his movements.

“Show me,” I say, ignoring Kim and Ace altogether, like they don’t exist. They are the face of my hurt, my anguish and my turmoil that I haven’t begun to exploit but I want to see the image on that damn iPad. I also want to see the man that just spooked the hell out Ace.

“Baby girl, I don’t think now is the time,” Spider starts but I shoot him a deadly look too.

“Show her,” Ace bites out. With a sigh, Noah extends the iPad to me, I accept it with one hand, the other on the I.V. pole.

I tap the screen to bring it to life, my stomach sinking.

As soon as I notice the dark, bottomless eyes and the scar that runs from the man’s jaw to his hairline, cutting across his eyes, where he now wears an eye patch, the iPad slips between my hands.

No...

I can’t breathe.

The man not only looks like me...

“Astraea?”

I start falling as well, following the iPad to the stark, cold tiles on the floor but Noah and Spider quickly catch me.

“Astraea do you know this man?” Noah questions, a sense of urgency in his voice.

I look at him, then at Kim who can’t even look back at me as she hugs her legs to her stomach and then to Spider who nods his head, his eyes filled with pity as he stares back at me.

I look up at Ace who still stands there, his fists now white knuckled, eyes glued on the iPad where the picture of *him* is still displayed.

I’m drowning.

No.

Oh God.

“Yes,” A broken whisper leaves me.

“Who is he?” Noah questions

Kim already answered that. According to her, that’s her father.

But to me, and what happened to me four years ago, the horrid memories now mentally flashing in my head.

This man...is the one that raped me.

And as I look up at Ace, begging him to look at me, I see it too. Our gazes connect and pain slices through me as devastation makes its final act.

The same man that raped me, sodomized and molested Ace.

And that man is Kim’s father...

Heartbeat

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

“Fuck, you die for a few hours and then wake up to this,” a voice speaks from behind Ace.

We all turn and there he stands, a dark look on his face as he stares at the image on the iPad at my feet.

Emmett, in all his cocky and sure presence.

“I got the key to George’s room. Let’s go!” He announces.
What the actual fuck?

CHAPTER ONE



Heart attack.

Heart attack.

Heart attack.

That's what it feels like in my chest right now, like a sledgehammer has just been slammed down my chest, coming out on the other side of me. I can't catch my breath, I can't move, my knees are weak, and I think my eyes are playing tricks on me.

"You..." I croak out, blinking furiously as if I'm seeing a ghost but I know I'm not. I know it's Emmett. "You're alive?"

"Hey, Astraea

It feels like the world has somehow stopped moving, the iciness of dread, fear and shock now taking root inside of me. I turn away from Emmett, my gaze dropping down to the flickering image on the broken iPad and my stomach rolls. I can't look away. No matter what, I can't look away from him...

I whimper but quickly clamp a hand over my mouth, trying to hold in the cry.

This can't be happening to me. I think I'm still dreaming.

"He's my father."

“Astraea, do you know this man?”

“Yes...” I know that man. I know him in more ways than I was supposed to. And he... he looks like me.

“Oh God,” I shudder, tears streaming down my face as I stare at the now dark iPad on the floor.

It all plays back in my head like a bad movie, the entire scene unfolding before my very eyes.

All of a sudden, I can't breathe properly, but my fucking gaze is zeroed in on *the* iPad, then I look up at Ace. There's this, stricken look on his face that I know all too well. He's looking at me, as if he's waiting for my reaction but I also saw the way he reacted when he saw the image that was on that damn iPad.

It was as if, he knew the guy as well...

No.

“Baby, just breathe,” Ace says, taking a step closer to me but I automatically take one back. I don't know what to think anymore. I can't... trust him.

“Oh God,” I whisper under my breath, covering my mouth, stopping the sob that wants to escape.

Fear floods my system as tears blur my eyesight. It feels almost like the inevitability of a plane that's plummeting back to earth like a deadweight. You know it's going to crash. You also know that there's nothing you can do.

But that doesn't mean you accept it.

“I got the key...,” Emmett repeats, waving the damn thing in the air as he halts to a stop, frowning as he takes in the scene before him. “What's going on?”

I don't have it in me to say anything, simply because I'm confused as hell. A part of me is more than relieved that Emmett is alive, but with that comes so many questions that are making my mind buzz. But as tears stream down my face, I know that's not what's making me feel like I'm about to have a heart attack.

It's the man with the really dark eyes. A mean, empty look on his face, but that scar... I'll never forget that scar or the way it protrudes from his face, making him look mean. I'm in my head now, that I hardly realize that pandemonium is breaking out around me until I hear shouts.

“Holy fuck!” Noah starts, his voice soft as he swivels around to take in a perfectly alive, healthy as a horse—although that’s a matter of opinion—silently brooding Emmett.

“Yeah, surprise,” Emmett says, his voice flat. “What’s...what’s going on?” he questions, looking around.

Something in my chest tightens at the picture of mayhem personified, in front of me. From the corner of my eye, I can see Kim, hugging her knees to her chest, a blank look on her face. Chills race up and down my spine as I look at her, realizing now that if she is Brittney’s sister, then it means, I’ve been around—and even been friends—with one of Larry’s children before.

My heart pounds painfully in my chest, sweat dots my brow and I feel like I’m going to faint.

This also means that Brittney knew what she was doing when she drugged me. She was acting as her Daddy’s little soldier—and so was Kim, all this time when I thought she was my friend.

I swear, it ages me somehow as all the shattered pieces violently shake and start shifting into place like a bad rendition of Jumanji with the Real Housewives of Beverly Hills as the cast.

“Who is this man?”

“Do you know this man?”

It’s as if lightning struck somewhere and the stormy clouds have since rolled in but this time around it’s not pouring or raining, it’s about to storm hail down hard on my ass. And the shitty part is, I never saw this coming.

“Astraea?” Emmett’s alarmed voice rings through the quiet foyer, jerking me back to the present. “What’s wrong with her?”

“What’s wrong with her?” Noah demands, reeling back as he stares at Emmett with so much anger in his eyes. He steps away from me, and Spider cups my elbow firmly. He’s the only force stopping me from plummeting to my death because for the life of me, I can’t...I can’t look at Ace.

If I look at him, then my world will definitely collapse.

“The question we are all wondering right now is what the hell is wrong with you?” Noah seethes, taking a step closer to Emmett who stands there, looking stoic and tense. “You did this to her!”

“I...” Emmett starts, then he turns to look at Ace. “It wasn’t supposed to happen the way it did.”

“What wasn’t supposed to happen the way it did?” Noah mocks, an edge to his voice that I haven’t heard before. “Your fake death?”

Emmett faked his death?

I know it all makes sense as I look at him, but why?

It's then that I look up, my gaze immediately connects to a cold, expressionless blue gaze that sucks me in. I know Syrus thinks Emmett is dead. Philip King too, and Ace agreed to it. Hell, we blamed him for murdering Emmett but... something still doesn't add up.

"Noah, it's complicated," Emmett says and I look away from Ace, knowing that if I want answers, I'm going to have to go on the offense.

"What's complicated?" I start, grabbing the I.V. pole so I can lean on it. I feel weak, slightly faint and my head hurts. A lot. "How are you alive? I thought..."

"You thought I killed him," Ace steps in, his voice a low growl, watching me as he says that. "You actually believed that I took him out, didn't you?"

I don't know what to say to that as I stare at him. He looked so damn guilty earlier on and now, he's just so cold and detached, watching me like I'm an enemy.

"Ace..." I start.

"Yes, he nearly had me killed." Emmett cuts me off, glancing at Ace with anger in his eyes but then he looks at me again, his eyes growing soft with worry. "Are you alright? Why are you in a hospital gown?"

"You've got some nerve, asking her what's going on when you should be giving us answers," Noah starts. I don't miss the acidic anger in his voice. There's only one explanation for that—whatever plan Emmett and Ace hatched up, they didn't include Noah, and that says a lot.

"What? I'll explain later. What's going on?" Emmett says instead. "I thought you'd be at school."

"I'm sorry, we didn't tell you that school and everything normal has since gone to shit since your untimely death that has since rocked the entire town," Noah explodes, his handsome face tinged red with anger.

"Everyone knows I'm dead?" Emmett questions, frowning.

"Aww, isn't your confusion just adorable," Noah mocks. "It's not like you're one of the Blue Boys, whenever you so much as take a dump, it makes headlines."

"Noah," Emmett sighs. "Can we all just backtrack for a second. Obviously, I missed something huge here, is Astraea hurt?"

“Hurt?” Noah scoffs, then he chuckles, looking at me. When our gazes connect, I see the pain in his eyes that he’s trying so hard not to show but it’s there. Then he briefly glances at Kim but quickly looks away as he swivels around to face Ace and Emmett who are standing at a distance apart. Tension radiating from both of them.

“You want to know if Astraea is hurt?” Noah starts, “Gee, let’s see. Maybe the fact that she hit head so hard when she fucking collapsed, after she found out that you were dead could be the issue.”

“Noah...” I start but he ignores me, counting on his ringed fingers.

“Maybe she’s hurt because she hasn’t been eating or drinking anything for the last three, wait, maybe it’s four days, and no one cared to check in with her,” he goes on, his voice growing harder and rougher. “Or maybe she thought that you faked your own fucking death just to go get a damn key!”

Noah’s boom echoes in the hallway, I swear the floor and the walls rattled with it. I’ve never seen Noah this furious in my life.

“I get it, it’s all messed up, but the truth is...” Emmett starts but he’s cut off by Noah.

“The truth?” he exclaims dramatically. “Okay, one shit show of truth on the way. How about we start with how the fuck you’re alive, huh?”

“It’s a long story,” Emmett starts, glancing at Ace. “One I wasn’t aware of myself.”

“What does that mean?” Noah demands, “You two are always making plans together, dealing with shit all by yourselves, like good little problem solvers, all the while putting the rest of us in danger. George was right.”

“God, that’s not what fucking happened!” Emmett starts, “King set me up!”

“What?” I gasp. “But you’re alive, and...”

And I don’t believe he’d do something as reckless or as heartless as setting his own best friend up to die.

“Here we go, playing the role I’ve been given,” Ace starts, looking away but his gaze, as has been for the past minute, falls to the iPad that lies abandoned on the floor.

“I think we should take this somewhere else. You know, somewhere private.” Spider warns beside me. He’s calm, collected and not at all worried as he looks at boys.

“No, no way,” Noah shakes his head. “No one is going anywhere until we bust this shit wide open.”

“I think Spider is right, we do need to move...” Kim interjects making everyone look at her.

“Shut up! No one’s talking to you,” Noah seethes, frightening Kim for a split second, but she frowns, getting up on her feet.

“You have no idea who might be watching,” she insists, then looks at me and Spider. “It’s not safe out here.”

“You would know,” Noah mocks, then takes a threatening step close to her but Spider stops him.

“Dude, you never speak to her, to girls like this,” Emmett says, “You’re being a jerk.”

“I wish I cared an iota about what you thought of me!” Noah scoffs. “I bet you also knew all along that she’s Brittney’s sister and she’s also Phoenix Corps.”

“What the fuck?” Emmett frowns, glancing at Kim, studying her. “You’re Brittney’s sister?”

“She’s not my sister!” Kim seethes, but I can see the unshed tears in her eyes. I want to comfort her, to tell her its all going to be alright, but I can’t even say anything. My heart still hurts with what I learned today. It’s still so fresh, saw raw and I don’t see myself forgiving her for...being my friend to spy for her sister and her father.

Larry...

“No! We’re not talking about this lying bitch right now!” Noah booms, “We’re talking about the two of you!”

“For Pete’s sake, Noah. I never died!” Emmett growls, as if that’s all he has to say for himself.

“Oh bravo, Einstein! We see that!” Noah’s sarcastic laugh is rough and makes Emmett cringe.

“It was all part of a plan,” Emmett says, looking at Noah with caution, then he glances at me.

“A plan to lie, huh?” Noah chuckles. “We figured that charming part out already, thank you very much.”

“Yes,” Emmett’s says, his voice terse and cold, glancing at Kim, then at the iPad abandoned on the floor, a question in his eyes.

“I guess you were all cut from the same deceitful, pathetic cloth of lies, since all of this was your brainchild, wasn’t it?” Noah demands, a humorless, cold smile on his face, the promise of retribution in his eyes.

Beneath all that anger, Noah is hurt. Bad.

“The plan was to get the key to George’s room. I wasn’t aware that there was going to be an attempt on my life,” The angry words are meant for me.

“An attempt on your life?” Noah questions, looking at a brooding Ace who’s silently watching everything unfold, not saying a damn thing or looking away from me.

“So, you did want to kill him?” I question on a gasp, watching him. I want him to deny it. I want him to tell me the truth and deny all these ridiculous accusations on his name.

I want him to tell me that everything is fine and that when I wake up, Larry won’t be Kim and Brittney’s father.

That the boys aren’t breaking apart so ruthlessly like this.

That we’re going to be okay.

But he just stares at me, the cold, expressionless look back in his eyes. The same cold, blank stare that was in his eyes at school when he let that bitch touch him. Right before he claimed her.

“Tell me you didn’t,” I whisper, my heart pounding furiously, like I’m in the race of my life.

“Star...” he starts, and I hold my breath, eagerly waiting for him to deny it all.

“He’s alive, isn’t he?” he says softly, watching me like he just doesn’t give a damn.

“You sonofabitch,” Emmett seethes, “Of course, you wouldn’t care if I was dead or alive, would you?”

Agony ripples through my insides. It feels like everything inside me is collapsing.

I think I’m a gluttony for punishment. This is what I get for loving him. Untold pain and disappointment.

“Not particularly,” Ace taunts. “I don’t think I care for assholes who try to take what’s mine.”

“What’s yours?” Noah reels back, staring at Ace wide eyed, like he’s just grown two heads. “Aren’t you the shithead that claimed her sister in front of the entire school?” He points at Kim who seems to shrink into herself by the wall.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ace growls, stepping closer to Noah, but he glances at me for a second. I don’t know what he sees on my face, but he stops moving all together, watching me.

“You’re damn right I don’t know what I’m talking about!” Noah explodes. “It seems that’s exactly how you like me. Clueless and out of my freaking mind. And apparently, I’m the only one who actually gives a damn about Astraea!”

“That’s not true and you fucking know it!” Ace seethes.

“Really?” Noah scoffs, stepping back. “Why don’t you tell her about this elaborate plan of yours to get her brother’s bedroom key, hmm. Isn’t it the same key that you told me weeks ago wasn’t relevant even though you suspected...”

“Noah...” Ace growls but Noah laughs sarcastically.

“No, it’s time to tell the truth isn’t it?” Noah says, spreading his arms wide in the air, dramatically, “How about we start with the rocking news we all received.”

He swivels around, locking gazes with everyone but Kim, a cold, cynical smile on his face. “How about we start with, drum roll please, Emmett, the heart liar, Easton!”

“Dude, are you drunk?” Emmett questions, frowning.

“I wish I was,” Noah grits out. “It would be better to realize that everyone in my life is a fucking liar and the girl I love has been neglecting herself, wasting away over assholes that lie to her constantly. And the fucked up thing is, we all did nothing, but please, don’t change the topic on account of my bitter feelings.”

“We talked about this already, Noah.” Emmett starts, looking at Noah with a worried look on his face.

“No, we didn’t.” Noah shakes his head vehemently, a blank look on his face. “You were beat up pretty bad by King over here because you signed a marriage contract to marry Astraea here. But you never once admitted to me the reason why you were in the hospital in the fucking first place!”

“Noah, calm down.” Spider chides. He’s tense now, watching Noah with a cautious look in his eyes. Noah is unraveling right in front of us, and at this point, I don’t blame him. “We can all talk about this another time.”

“That’s what we’ve been doing all this time, Spider.” Noah says, “We’ve been together a lot but we never actually talk about anything and then we have the guts to act hurt and surprised when secrets start coming out. People with fucking heart issues rising from the dead. I guess that too, was a lie.”

“It’s not a lie! I do have heart defects, you asshole!” Emmett seethes, stepping forward. “I’ve had enough with your pouting and whining! You have no idea what you’re even talking about.”

“Enlighten me then,” Noah mocks, watching him. “When did these defects suddenly appear? Or are you finally showing the world your drama queen tendencies?”

“Careful, Noah,” Emmett warns, “Or you won’t like what you uncover.”

“I think I’m ready to dig into that ice-cold soul of yours, thank you very much,” Noah whispers, stepping closer to him. “I wonder what we’ll find. Hey Baby Blue, you curious as to why your future husband was sneaking behind your back, looking for George’s key?”

He glances at me, a cold smile on his face but I just stand there, mute and trembling. It’s that cold, careless, wild look in his eyes that told me so much more about what he was doing. This wasn’t about the truth, this was about the constant bullshit.

“Don’t you think all these activities have been suspicious at best?” he questions softly, looking at everyone, including Kim. “If you ask me, I think Emmett and King murdered your twin and are now trying to cover it all up by having Kim, Spider and their fucking Phoenix Corps to make it seem like there’s actual danger!”

I gasp, frantically looking around the room from Emmett to Noah, then to Ace. It can’t be. Was I right all along?

No way. They didn’t murder my brother.

But why were they snooping around and lying to you?

“How dare you accuse me of murdering my own best friend!” Emmett growls, shoving Noah into the nearest wall, getting into his face.

“You know, you can take all your drama queen moves and shove them right up your ass where you seem to have misplaced your head,” Noah grits out. “Heart defects?”

“Contrary to what you might think, I actually do have those dreaded defects of death. I’ve had them since birth, you asshole! A fate you were spared, apparently,” Emmett fires back, shooting Spider and Ace a look as he says that.

“Emmett,” Spider steps in but Emmett ignores him, eyes now set on an angry Noah.

“Kinda bums to find out that I’m a lesser man with defects doesn’t it? Or maybe the fact that some of us weren’t born to responsible mothers like

others,” Emmett seethes, his voice low as his eyes move from Noah to me.

“That’s a pathetic low blow, asshole. Don’t you dare bring my mother into this! She’s not the one that lied to me about your defects,” Noah counters.

“You sure about that?” Emmett starts, his voice low, watching Noah, going in for the kill.

“What are you talking about?” I start, my voice low, dread filling in the pit of my stomach, I think I’m about to drown in it. There’s something about the way Emmett is looking at Noah that doesn’t sit well with me. It’s a look of destruction, devastation and carelessness. He doesn’t care at all about what he’s about to say but he also knows it’s going to devastate Noah.

“Emmett,” Spider steps in again, his voice a low bite. “Shut your damn mouth right now.”

Whatever it is that Emmett is about to let rip, Spider obviously knows about it.

“What?” Noah demands, staring at Emmett with suspicion in his gaze. “You’re jealous that I get hugs and cuddles when I need them?” he taunts, getting in Emmett’s face as he chuckles, but it’s hard and brittle.

“Emmett, calm the hell down,” Ace warns in a low voice, stepping between the two of them. Then that also means, Ace knows something else that Noah doesn’t know.

“Tell me, Noah,” Emmett starts and my heart stops. His voice is so soft, rough, compelling like a devil as he stares at his best friend with a smirk on his face. “How long has dear Christina been sober now?” Emmett starts, ignoring Spider’s warning.

“My mother isn’t an alcoholic,” Noah says, his voice a deathly whisper, staring at Emmett.

“Now, thank God, but not so lucky for dear old Craig,” Emmett whispers right back, stepping backward, knowing that he’s planted the seeds, now all he has to do is watch Noah go apeshit.

“Emmett, watch it boy,” Spider warns, taking a step closer to him.

“Too late for that,” Ace says, leaning against the wall, folding his arms, looking unbothered as hell. “Obviously he doesn’t give a damn about anyone but himself.”

“Too late for what?” Noah demands. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Whatever secret that Emmett's is keeping, I don't want him to say it. I look at him, silently praying that he doesn't open whatever can of worms that will haunt Noah when I know it has Craig and Christina at the core of it. But cruelty is an act that Emmett has mastered for so long, it only takes a few words to devastate an entire life.

"Why don't you ask sweet, amazing Christina about that," he whispers, reaching forward to pat Noah's shoulder like he's comforting him. But Noah evades his touch like the plague.

"You asshole!" Noah shouts, his voice rough and scratchy, but it's the look in his eyes right now. "You have no fucking idea what you're talking about!"

Before anyone can react, Noah charges for Emmett. Something snaps in me at that moment. I jump in between them, my heart pounding so loud in my chest, but that has nothing to do with this feeling of doom that I can't shake in my soul.

"Stop!" I shout, the cry shrill and loud. "I've had it with you three fighting."

"Astraea, get out of my way," Noah grits out, overcome with so much anger.

"No, you stop!" I shout, turning to look at him. "Look at you guys, just fucking look at yourselves!"

I can't help but cry as I turn to look at all of them, Kim and Spider included. I can't believe these are the people I've entrusted so much of myself into, only for them to continuously destroy me like this.

"Who are you?" I cry, each word feeling like it's been beaten out of me by a crowbar. "Can you look at where we are right now! Look around you, we are in a damn hospital."

"Star..." Ace starts but I cut him off, pointing at him. "Don't you dare say a fucking thing! All of you are nothing but common, asshole liars. Lying to each other, going behind each other's backs, destroying each other and in the middle of it all, there's me!"

My chest heaves up and down so fast, I think I'm going to go pass out soon. I'm weak and I'm so damn tired. I shake my head, ignoring the tears that I know won't help a damn thing right now.

"And you know what the messed up thing about all this is?" I chuckle but it's hoarse and pathetic. Just like me. "You don't even care who you hurt, as long as you get ahead, right?"

“Raea, that’s not it,” Emmett starts, looking at me with pain in his eyes.

“Isn’t it though, Emmett?” I question softly. “Care to tell us why you faked a death just to get my brother’s locked bedroom key several months after he’s been gone?”

Silence falls over us and I watch as he smooths his face into an impassive, blank stare, his soft green eyes void of all emotion as he looks at me. I gasp, staring at him.

“How long are you going to torture me like this?” I whisper, staring up at this larger than life, god-like, handsome Adonis of a man that my mother wants me to marry by my birthday.

“A few days ago, we found out something that changed the game and made George’s room a target that we needed to get access to, almost immediately,” Ace starts, not looking at anyone else but at me. It’s like, I’m his entire focus right now, like he doesn’t see anyone else around.

As I look at him now, I realize something too. It’s so easy to fall in love with someone as fucked up, cold and dangerous as Ace. But what happens to you from the moment you decide to love a messed up soul, is all on you.

“Why?” I question, ignoring the rampart emotions inside my cracked chest. “Where was the key?”

“In Syrus’s office building in the city,” he answers, staring at me.

“The fake death?” I question.

“We needed to get fucking Syrus Easton out of his fucking office,” he answers, glancing at Emmett as he says that. “Only, I wasn’t made aware the full extent of Emmett’s commitment to get his asshole father down here.”

Noah lets out a soft chuckle, glancing at Emmett then at Ace. “Great theatrics, glad you’re learning something from all those Shakespeare plays you obsess over,” he mocks. “I bet it was a challenging feat to get Syrus to give a damn enough to get him down here, huh?”

“Noah,” Spider calls behind him. “Calm down.”

But true to Noah’s unraveling, he ignores that warning, staring at Emmett.

“My bad,” Noah scoffs, taking a step back. “Please go on, however did you manage to separate the man from his beloved lair of dominance he seems to be infused to, 007?” His voice thick with sarcasm.

“Calm down, Noah,” Emmett says making Noah smile.

“I bet you had to pull on your big boy boxers for that one, praying not to wet them just in case Daddy goes on a rampage,” he mocks, laughing at Emmett’s darkening face.

“Noah,” Emmett growls. “It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.”

“You mean we weren’t supposed to find out what a sick bastard you are, literally and figuratively,” Noah shouts, “We got that part but tell us more about your **Plan De La Asshole.**”

“I assure you, big Em here had his plan down pat. Making it known that he has heart defects at the very place he wanted us to plant the entire thing,” Ace says, his voice flat, no trace of any emotion whatsoever. “This was, after all, your master plan. Get daddy down here and while he’s here, discussing your latest health scares, I would slip in and steal the key with the access codes you gave me.”

“Right, you have to admit, it was a great plan,” Emmett starts, “You know, right up until the part where you scheduled an emergency surgery for me. What did you do? Pay an illegitimate doctor to declare that I’m in a critical condition in need of emergency surgery only to kill me?”

“Great fucking plan that was, right?” Ace smiles sardonically. “I was thinking you deserved a lethal injection that would kill you within seconds. But I thought, you needed to feel some pain before they obliterated your heart in the O.R.”

“Bet you’re fucking disappointed right now that I’m standing here.” Emmett says, with a smile of his own.

“Nah, there are plenty of ways to get back at a pathetic defect who’s trying, pathetically might I add, to steal what’s not his,” Ace grits out, taking a step closer. “But I get it, you’ve never been good at actually going after what you want, so you try to go for those you know will just love you out of pity.”

Stunned, I stare at them, unable to believe my ears.

“Careful, King or your ill-concealed monster will start poking out, showing her what you truly are,” Emmett counters, his voice low and soft. “Nothing but a lost, scared little boy who only knows how to lie and manipulate.”

“Oh God, stop it!” I gasp, looking at Ace, but he looks over my head at Emmett, ignoring me.

Please don’t snap, please don’t lose it.

Nothing is going to be the same, not after everything that has happened here.

“Well, go on!” Noah cheers, a smile on his face. “Tell us more! Maybe put in the reason why you had to steal George’s bedroom key in the first place then go on to destroying each other with shit you’ve wanted to tell each other for years now.”

“I have no idea why the key was at my father’s office, I just received a cryptic, untraceable message that there’s something there,” Emmett says, looking away from Ace as he looks at Noah, Spider, Kim and me.

“A cryptic message?” I question, frowning as I look at him.

“Yes,” he answers, his eyes growing soft as he looks at me.

“What did you find out that has you doing all this?” I question instead, then something else hits me and I laugh.

After all these months of heartache, pain, confusion, grief that hasn’t even been dealt with. They knew. They knew I had a lot of questions and they had the answers, but I guess, they dimmed me unnecessary.

“All this time you knew that his door was locked, didn’t you?” I chuckle, hugging myself, a chill moving through my body. I feel feverish, cold and in pain. That’s what I get for being friend with liars. “You’ve been playing me right from the start.”

I hate that my voice is weak right now. I hate that I got blindsided.

I hate that I ignored my senses that something else was going on with everyone around me.

I hate that I let my guard down.

And now I’m paying the price. Matters of the heart should never come in the way of the truth and I’m learning that the hard way.

“Astraea,” Emmett starts but I shake my head. “We haven’t been...”

“Just answer the question,” I whisper, looking down at my sock clad feet. I feel lost, but this time around, I think I’ve been led to feel lost by the people I trusted to guide me out of the thick, deep forest. “Someone. Anyone.”

I don’t want to believe that they were this cruel but when the roof collapses in on you, and the truth comes out, it’s pretty hard to have hope when you had unconditional love in the first place.

“Yes, we knew.” Noah says, his voice careful, as if he’s talking to a wounded child.

“God,” I whimper, my lips trembling, and Ace steps forward, as if reaching for me but I take a step back, evading his touch. “Don’t.”

“Star,” he says that one word with so much pain in his low, hoarse voice, I almost give in but the lies surrounding us are suffocating us to death second by agonizing second.

“The truth is, we knew about that locked door. But excuse me for thinking that a fucking door isn’t hard to fucking open. Even if it was locked!” Noah’s voice booms through the quiet hallway, attracting the attention of some shadowy figures at the end of the hall but no one pays them any attention. “But you told me that it didn’t matter!”

“So, what changed?” I say, steeling my spine, holding back ugly sobs. “What changed that made you want to get the key?”

“Astraea...,” Emmett starts.

“For fucks sake, haven’t you lied enough to last a lifetime?” I seethe, hate blazing in my eyes. “Tell me the damn truth,” I demand, stress and doom mixing inside of me to a point of pain.

“We have reason to believe...,” Emmett starts, glancing at Ace, then back to me.

Fresh tears well in my eyes, blurring my vision with tears and I look up at Ace, wanting to hear it from him. I want the guy who broke my heart to tell me why he lied to me. I want him to look me in the eyes and lie to me again, to finish ripping out my heart like he successfully did before.

“Star, you know I...,” he starts but I mutely shake my head, the tears falling down my cheeks. I think I know where this is going but I want him to prove me wrong. Please be wrong.

The thing about yearning is that, it breaks you from within and it hurts like a bitch.

“George might be alive,” Ace announces, quietly, his eyes on me. Ignoring everyone else.

A gasp is heard, something drops and clutters to the floor in the distance but all that noise and chaos pales in comparison to the shocked gasp that escapes my lips.

“Fuck,” Noah whispers beside me, a stricken look on his face to match what I’m feeling.



“No...,” Astraea shakes her head, her palm now covering her open mouth, taking a step back from me but she doesn’t look away. “You’re wrong! No way.”

That one gasp filled with pain will probably echo through my nightmares and my worst days for as long as I live, but it’s the look on her face that threatens to reveal the monster in me.

Pain.

She’s in so much pain and we weren’t even at the fucked up part of it all.

“What the actual fuck?” Noah bursts then and I almost cringe. “How many fucking secrets have you been keeping all this time?”

“Astraea, you need to calm down,” Spider says as he moves to stand beside her, but she just shakes her head, her eyes on me.

“No, he’s not,” she denies with vehemence.

I know Star and George had this crazy connection between them, the kind that alerted each one when the other wasn’t doing so well. I think it’s that twin connection that led us to her that night two years ago in London...

“Baby girl...,” Emmett starts but I shoot him a look to shut the fuck up!

“It might be true, it might be false. We don’t know yet,” I start, keeping my voice low and hard, cutting through all the bullshit so I can reach her

mind. Star doesn't want to be treated with kid gloves or handled like she's made up of glass. Right now, I swear her mind is wreaking all sorts of havoc in that pretty head of hers and so there's only one language she understands right now.

I just so happen to speak it fluently.

She looks up at me, the torment that I'm feeling deep within, staring right back at me through her dark eyes that don't sparkle like stars anymore.

"Then what?" She gasps.

"The night we received the call that George was in an accident, we rushed over to the scene," I start.

"But we didn't see the body. They told us that it had already been transported to the morgue or autopsy and all that bullshit," Noah steps in then. "That doesn't mean he's alive though, the fuck!"

"Yeah, but that's when I had my suspicions," I finish. "Even the EMTs and the coroners are not allowed, by law, to move a body that fast. A body that they pronounced dead on impact of the accident, especially when it had only been fifteen minutes after the damn accident."

"But we buried...", She starts but I cut her off before she breaks her own heart. But what am I saying? It's already shattering.

"Someone was buried, that's for sure. It just wasn't George," I say, and she gasps again. "The day you came back for the funeral, we collected samples for a DNA matching test. We took your hair and..."

"Wait, hold up. How did you get strands of my hair?" She questions and I almost chuckle.

"Seriously? Out of all of that you are hung up on that?" Noah questions, a tight smile on his face.

"Color me a fool then, as you've all done before, successfully lying to me for months upon months," She says, looking at all of us, but her gaze avoids Kim altogether as if she can't stomach looking at her right now.

"Our little reunion, baby," I murmur for her ears only, remembering the day at the church, when I blocked her from running out of George's supposed funeral. The first time I heard her voice in over two years.

"How romantic of you, pulling my hair out the first time we see each other after so long," she says sarcastically. I shoot her a wink and a smirk to which she just rolls her eyes, not at all amused.

"You pulled out my hair and what?"

"Hmm, kinky," Noah jokes with a smirk.

“Shut up, Noah,” Star and I say at the same time and he holds up his arms, taking a step back.

“Anyway, we did a DNA test with your hair and the deceased DNA. There wasn’t a match,” Emmett steps in then. I look at the bastard.

I can see it in his eyes. The hunger, the calculated gleam. All this time, he’s been lying, faking his entire life with the rest of us, but in all that time, he had eyes for my Star. Lying about everything.

Wanting my girl.

His fucking heart defects.

Signing a fucked up marriage contract that tied him to my girl. MINE.

Yeah, we all had secrets, but the biggest liar of all of us was this asshole. The plan was fucking simple. We were going to try and get the key to George’s room from his fucking father—only to confirm a theory and get proof that something was in fact going on with Amanda and Syrus other than dirtying the sheets. It was Em’s fucking idea to begin with. Only I never understood why he chose this hellish setting as his playing field.

“So, who was in the coffin if it wasn’t my brother?” Star questions, bringing me back to the present.

“We have no fucking idea who that was in the coffin, probably some poor lackey that was put in there to make us all believe that it was George.”

“They said the corpse was too mangled to be recognized, so the closed casket service...?” she questions.

“Was to cover that shit up,” I finish for her, allowing her to see the truth in my eyes because I know she’s searching for it. I’d rather have her deal with the devil she knows than out there with a faceless, nameless asshole who is ten steps ahead of us at each turn.

“Wow, how fucking rich is this!” Noah starts. “You do know that now whoever is behind all this, might have George?”

All eyes turn to the iPad on the floor, the screen now dark—thank fuck. I don’t know if I can stomach looking at that sick fuck for another second.

“Now someone better answer my damn question. Who is this man?” Noah demands, picking up the damn thing, bringing it alive with a tap.

“Larry Pace. One of the high ranking members of the Phoenix Corps,” Spider steps forward, taking the iPad from Noah and then extending it to Kim who stares at it but doesn’t take it. “Am I wrong?”

Kim looks at the image, then she looks at Star, opening her mouth as if to say something.

“Don’t you dare,” Noah threatens, blocking her sight from seeing Star. “You’ve done fucking enough already and the only reason why you’re still here right now is because we want answers about your daddy—who coincidentally might be responsible for whatever shit happened to my best friend!” he growls low in his chest, breathing fast and hard.

“You have no idea what’s happening and keep your damn judgement to yourself,” she counters as she stands up now, snatching the iPad from Spider. “You know as well as I do that Larry,” she spits out the name with so much venom and anger that even Noah pauses for a bit. “Isn’t just a high ranking member of that organization from hell. He is the second in command who just so happens to have a thirst for your blood. All of you.”

So that means there’s a bigger fish at the top other than this asshole.

“What’s the name of the top dog?” I question Spider and Kim who look at each other.

“No one knows for sure, as no one has really seen him before,” Kim starts, looking at me head on, without fear then she looks at Star, moving past Noah. “But I came to tell you...”

But Noah cuts her off as if he can’t stand to hear the sound of her voice right now.

“You don’t look confused at all about who this man is, King,” Noah observes, stalking towards me. “You know him.” It’s not a question, it’s a statement that I’m fucking sure the look on my face confirms as true.

Yeah, I know him alright. Too young to defend myself, unable to fight him or push him away. Only I never counted on being in the fight of my girls’ life with that same asshole.

“And you too, Astraea. Who is he?” Noah presses.

“I think it’s best...,” Kim starts.

“No one is talking to you,” he cuts her off. They face off, so much being said in the tense silence between them. Hurt growing on hurt. Anger and deep wounds intensifying, pulsing between them and around us. It was all fucked up.

“You might not like me right now...,” Kim says but Noah cuts her off.

“I’ve never not hated you. Tread carefully, spy,” Noah seethes back but Kim ignores him.

“But the least you can do is be sensitive to the situation. You just told the girl that her twin brother might be alive, after she just spent hours believing that one of the boys she loves had died,” she bites out, ignoring Noah.

“Oh and while we’re at it, let’s add the fact that you’ve been lying to her the whole time, pretending to be her friend when in fact, you failed to see that she was wasting away and now they just declared her...,” he counters, taking a small measured step towards her like a predator.

She trembles slightly but doesn’t back away. She remains rooted in place, eyes on Noah but I don’t miss the plea in her gaze as she looks at him.

“Stop.”

All eyes fall on Star who hasn’t uttered a word since the whole George thing, now on the floor, as if her knees, like mine, are threatening to take me down.

I step forward, needing to be near her. Desperately wanting to touch her, to maybe make this all go away. I want this nightmare to stop but the bitterness of our reality hits me full force as I notice the look in her eyes right fucking now.

She’s looking up at me with a dead look in her eyes. As if all the life that once sparkled through her eyes is gone, and in its place, a churning, acidic growing anger. I’m not sure if the confusion from earlier has been cleared but I can see that calculating gleam in her eyes as she starts piecing every broken, blurred and callous part of our story together. Only the full picture will give her nightmares.

Yeah, for every action, there’s an equal and opposite reaction. Only I never counted on Larry besting me on this, coming for my girl when I couldn’t protect her.

“Star,” I start but she holds up a hand, effectively stopping my advance. It feels like she just erected a wall between us that this time, I’m not so sure if I’ll be able to demolish, like I did all the other ones she built all her life, trying—and failing—to shut me out of her life as if she had a choice in the matter.

She doesn’t.

“Don’t you dare take another step,” She grits out, looking up at me like I’m the bane of her existence. In a way, she’s the same to my life, yet I can’t seem to shake her, even after she fucking kissed my best friend. The douchebag who’s alive right now, because of me.

“Okay, I’m lost,” Emmett says, trying to diffuse the tense situation but they haven’t caught up to anything yet. Dumbasses. “Who is this Larry? Is he the one who’s been giving orders to take us out?”

“That’s motherfucking, Larry,” Noah says, picking up the iPad and then literally throws it at Emmett who catches it.

“This is your father?” Emmett questions Kim who just mutely nods her head, as if all the life and words have been sucked out of her. But girls like her, they don’t stay down for long. I wonder if Noah knows that.

Love is such a bullshit thing to feel for someone else.

“Why does he look like...,” Emmett starts questioning, making everything in me tighten. There’s no way in hell.

“Don’t you dare say it,” Star seethes as she looks past me to Emmett. “I look nothing like that monster!”

The vehemence in her voice, the violent tremor that moves through her body with the force of her words, makes every alarm in me blare so loud, I’m paralyzed to the spot.

“He looks like her! Even I’ve seen it.”

I can hear Denise’s words echo in my head as I think of my childhood molester and then the gorgeous, tear stained face of the girl in front of me. There are these similarities...

No.

There’s no way.

“Who is he?” Emmett questions her, keeping his voice low and soft, picking up the mood that Astraea is clearly not a fan of this asshole.

“Why don’t you ask his royal highness?” She spits out, watching me.

“Astraea...,” I start, my teeth grinding against each other. This isn’t anyone’s business but ours. What happened to me when I was a stupid weak boy is not for the boys to know and I’d like to keep it that way.

“Who the fuck is he, King?” Emmett questions behind me. I can feel his heated gaze on my back, but he can fucking wait. Or better yet, he can go choke on a scalpel in the surgery room where he was hiding all this time after I fucking made a deal with the most unlikely of people to keep him fucking alive!

“Star,” I start, keeping my voice low, my gaze on hers like if I so much as blink, she’ll disappear right in front of me. “You have to tell me. Is he the one?” I question, forcing the words past my throat. They come out as a low, rough growl coming from deep in my chest as if someone just took broken glass to cut up my insides. And it’s equally as painful as the look on her face.

I watch as her eyes grow wide, then with a burst of energy that I've always known she has tucked away neatly in that sexy body of hers.

It's her strength that's sexy as fuck. No matter how down she might be, I can always rely on the fact that she will fight. I'd like to believe that I'm the one responsible for that untamable fire, having programmed her since we were fucking kids to hit back harder than she got, but that's fucking bullshit. She's fire personified. She's one hell of a mouthy, tough one and fuck me, she has to be.

To survive me and take me, she has to be.

I'm a fucking nightmare in hell, but Astraea, she's messed up tragedy. A burnt-out star that I don't know why I'm wasting my time on when she's so clearly not worth it.

With that burst of energy, a war cry on her tongue, she gets up and is in my face in a split second.

"Is he the one?" She mocks, a sarcastic laugh leaving her in pants, rage lighting her eyes. Her entire body is trembling, her lips and her goosebump ridden arms.

Her dead, horror-filled eyes that will haunt me even when I'm burning in hell for every fucked up thing I've done to her. Yet I'd gladly walk through the deepest, hottest pits of hell if it means she's still breathing, still here to see another day. That she's still with me.

And mine. No one else's.

But right now, I don't know if this new horror between us will bring us together or shatter us both.

"You have some nerve..." she seethes, getting into my personal space. Usually I like it when she's this close, her chest heaving in a way that invites me to pin her body to a wall. But now is not the time.

"You're seriously asking if he's the one who messed me up four years ago, huh?" she huffs. "What's your question exactly, Ace? Are you asking if he's the one who savagely pinned me down to that hard floor, tore my clothes into shreds?"

The graphic detail flashes before my eyes before I can even stop the film from playing. For years I've had a tight lid on that particular night but as she seethes, her horrors coming alive in the silent hallway, they trigger some long ago buried nightmares of my own.

"Do you want me to tell you about the blood? The pain? My screams that no one heard for what seemed like forever?" she cries.

Suddenly I'm back there, in my dark room with only the stars in the sky shining down into my room, the only thing I saw that gave me comfort.

I can see a figure looming over me in the dark.

I can hear his heavy breathing.

Can smell the faint smell of tobacco, filters in through.

I can hear his low murmurs.

"It's going to be so good," he groaned, lowering himself onto my bed.

I can feel my entire frame shaking, my heart thundering in my chest watching Star but I'm back in my childhood bedroom.

"You're going to be a real man."

He groaned.

The fucking groans...

"Are you asking me if he's the one that was waiting for me in the dark, breathing down heavily behind me? Tracing my movements like a monster?" She questions, her voice cracking, a shadowed glint in her eyes that suggests that she's right there, four years ago.

"Jesus," Someone whispers.

We've never really talked about what happened to either of us, but right now, the lines are so fucking blurred, it feels like we're in the same fucking nightmare, yet we can't find our way to each other.

And now we run the risk of losing each other. This time, we'll lose each other forever if we sink in the deep abyss of our fucked up minds.

My jaw is locked, trying to keep myself in check. Keep myself present but I'm barely holding on as a loud sound breaks the silence. Something cracks and breaks in the distance, but I don't look away from her. If she's in a fucking storm, I want to go through it with her and looking away won't do either of us any good.

Stay with me baby. I plead with my gaze.

She blinks, catching it but then she looks away, breaking our connection like it doesn't matter.

I watch as she tries to compose herself, to pull herself together. And just when I think she's calm—because I sure as hell am not—she comes back swinging, effectively choosing her side. A side where I'm clearly the enemy.

"But that's not where the story ends, is it?" she giggles, then it grows into a full blown almost manic laughter. She doubles over, holding her

sides. Spider steps forward to her side as if he's about to reach forward but when he catches my eye, he takes two steps back.

No one touches her but me.

"Star," I start but she keeps on laughing, tears now falling down her cheeks. But these tears, are tears of death.

"You have the audacity," she starts in between her laughter. "To ask me if he's the one, when you already know the answer to that, quite intimately, might I add."

"What the fuck?" Someone, who suspiciously sounds like Noah, whispers behind us but Star and I are locked in a stare down.

I've seen Astraea in many forms. I've seen her sad. I've seen her angry. Hell, I've seen her happy and coping with the aches of life. But right now, I don't even know what to make of the girl standing in front of me. The girl who's looking at me right now is seeing me for the person I am. For the hell that I thrive in like I sit on the throne and the evil that follows me. The same evil that came after her.

Because of me.

She's looking at me, as if I'm the cause of all the hell that she's going through right now.

She's looking at me like I'm the devil. But then again, she has always known that about me. It's a shame that many times she has denied it. But that's her problem, not mine.

In that moment, I shut down because I realize something – she might be right about everything that's running through her head. And she's also come to that conclusion as everything goes to shit around us. I see the confirmation in her eyes as clearly as the trauma that glitters darkly through her eyes that hold me captive.

The answer is simple.

Star and I have just been thrust into another circle of hell.

Larry didn't just touch me and hurt me, but when I thought I had dealt with him, he came back swinging and attacked the one person he knew I actually fucking cared for and even considered her as fucking *mine*.

There are days when I feel like I can accomplish anything, days when the world seems so small and my reach is wide. I like to tell myself that I can fucking do anything, that I can see threats from a mile away—mostly because I know, they all always come for the ones I care for most. The ones I love.

Do I love her? And if I fucking did, how did fucking Larry find out about that?

I always thought that I beat Larry at his game. That I finally destroyed him the best way one can destroy a money hungry vulture—deny them of what they desperately seek. But just like before, I failed to see that as the game progressed, I had already lost.

How could I not have seen it?

How did I not piece it together that first time?

“What the fuck is going on?” Emmett demands, now looking at me, the panicked look in his eyes looking at Astraea whose face is so pale, she looks like a replica of a marble statue. Beautiful and lovely to look at, but frozen in place. No signs of life anywhere.

That damn girl Kimberly is now rocking herself as she also comes to the same conclusion of what her father has done, the devastation he caused... She starts crying silently. Noah is looking from Astraea to me, then at the damn iPad, working it out on his own since no one is answering.

“Spider?” Emmett starts, seeing that he won’t get a thing from me. But Spider glances at me for a second. I ignore him too.

“You weren’t supposed to come here,” Spider says instead.

“I had to come and tell you...how does Astraea know this man?” Emmett questions, then he finally looks at me. His eyes cold, a threat flashing in his eyes.

“What did you do now?” he demands as he steps to me but before I can answer and deck him back to that bed of death, Astraea starts laughing, turning around to point at him with disbelief in her voice.

It starts out as soft giggles, like before, then her high-pitched laughter morphs into full blown out manic laughter. She starts pointing at Emmett.

“And then there’s you...,” She laughs again, hardly able to get the words out, running out of breath. “You’re alive!” She throws her hands up, her wrist where the I.V. drip is now reddening with all those movements and that’s when I realize, she’s in physical pain. “And apparently, so is my brother,” she goes on.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Emmett says but she just laughs. But it’s all wrong, making me reach up to rub at my chest, a gnawing feeling threatening to numb that damn area.

“Lies upon lies, huh, big Em?” She taunts him with a crooked, jagged smile on her face. “Guess that declaration of love was also false, wasn’t it?”

My breath rushes to a stop as I look at Emmett, my entire body tense. He looks up at me but then looks away, unable to fucking hold my gaze yet he can “profess” his love to what’s mine like a fucking Shakespearean play. Well, he should be well versed with the tragic ends that meets most of those assholes. It might come to him, this time, much more real than a made-up tale.

“Breaking me bit by bit.”

“Astraea, it wasn’t...”

She holds up a hand, cutting him off as she turns to look at me, a wild look in her eyes.

Falling.

I can see it so clearly in her eyes.

She’s feeling wildly lost, like she’s falling, spiraling out of control.

Baby, so am I.

“Star, calm down,” I murmur, stepping forward but like she did before, she just keeps on laughing, wiping her tears away as they fall like a warrior with a rebel cause.

“And you,” she says now, looking up at me, with nothing more than pure hate in her eyes. I step forward, reaching for her.

“Star...”

“No!” She shouts, jumping away from my touch. “Don’t you dare!”

As she moves away in a rush to get away from me, she stumbles, I reach for her to steady her before she can plant her ass back to the hard, cold floor. But just like I thought, she evades my touch and that alone, destroys any last shred of morality that I have.

“Don’t touch me!” She seethes, breaking in front of my eyes, righting her balance by herself. “You did this! You don’t get to touch me. I’m not your whore!” She accuses.

I stand there, tense, silent, getting so angry with the situation, with everyone but most of all, with her. But right now is not the time for this.

“Astraea, not now,” I start. There’s a lot that she can’t see. We’ll deal with all that later when it’s just the two of us. But right now, I need her to fucking stay with me and get over all these... irrational feelings of hurt displayed on her beautiful face.

“Not now? You know, I was standing there,” she starts, pointing at the hospital room she just came from. “I saw you taking that iPad. You looked

down at the picture of...him, and I saw this...look cross your face that I've never seen before."

She better not start spewing secrets that I'd rather be kept in the dark.

"Astraea if you know what's good for you..."

But she ignores me.

"I thought to myself, what the fuck would the king of death be afraid of? You looked terrified, then you looked at me. I saw it on your face!"

"Astraea, please calm down," Noah steps forward but she ignores him, her voice dropping to a whisper, her eyes glued on me.

"He told me." A stricken look of horror crosses her face, my teeth grind together, a visceral pain twisting me up inside as if my insides are being gutted, spilling all over this floor. "He told me that night!" she cries out, those dark eyes, filled with pain. Every tear she sheds feels like acid being poured over me, from the top of my head.

Baby, stop crying...

"He did that to me because of you," she whispers and I stop breathing altogether.

I don't know what she sees in my eyes, or what she senses in me but she takes a step back, a hand over her open mouth as tears start streaming fast and hot down her cheeks, a look of complete and utter devastation on her face.

"He was right, wasn't he?" she gasps, watching me.

"Who are you talking about?" Noah demands, looking at me but I'm not seeing him. All I see is her.

"Holy shit," Emmett breathes behind me, his voice filled with shock and disgust.

Astraea ignores everyone else, her face pale in the fluorescent lights of the hospital hallway, but her gaze is direct and unwavering as she stares at me like I just grew horns on my head. In this moment, it feels like it's just the two of us, standing in the pits of hell, fire all around us, now forced to confess everything.

Not everything though...

"That night..." she starts, breaking gaze with me as she looks down, and I know which night she's talking about. I'm right there with her. She was on the floor, lying in a pool of blood, barely able to move, let alone breath, crying her lungs dry.

“He told me that he was going to make *him* pay...,” she whispers, her voice breaking. “He said he was doing this to teach *him* a lesson.”

Fluid fury moves through my system as the broken pain in her voice filters through the heavy, tense space around us like she just sprayed poison over us all but we have no choice but to stand there and inhale. Suffering along with her, splitting me in millions of pieces.

“I’ve had agonizing nightmares over the years since that night, trying to figure out who ‘*him*’ was,” she starts, slowly looking up at me. “I lay in my bed at night, trying to sleep, but each time I close my eyes, I see his face. I see him chasing me down those stairs, all because he wanted to send *him*, a message,” she shudders.

“Astraea.”

“But after all the lies, the secrets, all the pain and suffering, I get it now.” she gasps, staring at me with an intensity that rivals a cobra’s stare on its meal. “The *him* he was talking about...that’s you.”

It’s not a question, it’s not a request. It’s a fact that pierces at something in my chest, the pain stark against my skin, making it hard for blood to flow or for breath to flow in and out of my body. The words heavy in the air between us, stifling me, suffocating me.

“He came because of you!” She accuses on a gasp, as if she’s also struggling to catch her breath or even believe this, watching me as her spine straightens, her eyes glittering with something close to denial, but there’s nothing to deny here. She’s already made up her mind. “He did this to me...because of you!”

If I was a different person, if I had a conscious at all, if I was simply a better man, a man more deserving of her light, her radiant but pain-filled smiles and the stars that have since dimmed in her eyes, I would look away as the guilt churns in my gut. But the truth is simple.

I’m. Not. That. Man.

Unfortunately for her, I’m me. But that doesn’t mean I want her to suffer like this.

“Star...,” I start again but she cuts me off.

“Don’t you dare call me that!” She screams now. She takes one step closer to me and then without a pause, she slaps me hard across the face. “You’ll never call me that again.”

She could have slapped me a thousand times then stabbed me repeatedly with a dull knife for eternity but it wouldn’t have made my chest burst with

pain the way those words do to my insides.

“Damn,” Noah whispers, obviously not knowing what to do.

“Everything I’ve gone through! The pain, the humiliation, the loss, the addiction, the gut wrenching insecurities and nightmares that creep into my soul like a poison. All the nights I’ve spent tiptoeing around my room in London, let alone my fucked up home here, swearing that there’s someone in my room, lying in wait for me...,” she shouts, destroying everything that I am as tears continue streaming down her cheeks but she wipes them away in frantic anger; her chest heaving, watching me with something close to a broken spirit.

God, the anger rising in me can’t be appeased by anything other than Larry’s blood and I don’t give a shit who he might be related to.

I’m frozen in place, anger rushing through my system as she describes almost the same shit that I go through at times. Checking each nook and cranny of any space I’m in, making sure that there’s no one there.

“The anxiety, the aches, the paranoia...the crazy!” She shouts, tears streaming down her beautiful face.

“Oh my God. This asshole is the sick fuck that...,” Noah starts, as nurses start running down the hallway, only now coming to check the pandemonium and all the madness around us.

“Ask me if he’s the one?” she demands, watching me with so much hate in her eyes.

And all I can do is just stand there, with a blank look on my face, trying not to feel. Trying not to let that look in her eyes affect me, reach me, touch me or manipulate me. I won’t let it. I won’t let her.

But I’m a fucking liar.

There isn’t a part of me that this girl can’t touch. That she can’t destroy with her soft, small hands. And even in all that, all I want is to reach for her, hold her close. To tell her that everything is going to be alright because something is already in play for her justice. But this... this kind of breaking... I don’t know if I can help that.

“But...,” Emmett starts, “Why does he look...”

“He doesn’t look like me and I swear to God if you say that one more damn time...,” she seethes, anger flashing in her eyes.

“Excuse me, what’s going on here?” A harried nurse demands but everyone ignores her as Astraea turns back to look at me.

“All of that! That was because of you! It’s all because of you, isn’t it?”
She shouts in my face, arms flailing around with anger, shock and hurt lacing each word.

Crying.

Trembling.

Breaking.

Falling apart right in front of my eyes.

But that’s got nothing on how I’m feeling inside...

“Ma’am, you should be in bed right now with no visitors,” another one says and reaches over to touch her, but Astraea evades her touch, a gasp leaving her mouth and I see the fear in her eyes. It registers with me as quickly as if I’m seeing her back there, four years ago,

“No,” she gasps.

Fear of being touched...

“Don’t you fucking touch her!” I growl. Stepping forward, I look at the nurse who shrinks back a step but she quickly realizes who she is, with whatever measly authority she has just as another nurse moves to stand awfully close to Star, behind her.

“This patient is under a seventy-two-hour psychiatric hold, and she isn’t allowed any visitors,” she speaks fast but with a hint of fear as she looks around at all of us standing there. She clearly knows who we are, or better yet, she’s heard of us. “Please leave before I call the police on all of you,” she threatens.

And that alone enrages me to hell.

“Go ahead, the only one leaving this godforsaken shithole is you. I’ll destroy you. Now, fucking move away and don’t you dare lay a finger on her,” I grit out.

“King, I think you should let them do their job...” Spider starts but I ignore him, my eyes glued on Star.

“Shut the fuck up!” I roar, watching Star as her eyes start rolling to the back of her head.

“King...,” Spider calls behind me, but I ignore them all as the nurse that was behind Astraea chooses to step back, leaving Star now with a glazed-over look in her eyes.

“Hey what’s wrong with her?”

“Star?” I call, my eyes narrowing to slits as danger becomes ripe in the air around us.

That's when all hell breaks loose.

CHAPTER THREE



Ace

Astraea's face pales in an instant. She looks as white as a sheet. Then in a split second, she starts falling to the ground like deadweight. Without even thinking about it, I step forward and sweep her up into my arms, bridal style.

"Don't touch me...", she protests, her voice weak, groggy as if all her senses are shutting down, but fear lights her eyes as she looks up at me, trying to punch my chest but I hold her to me as tightly as I can, until the fight leaves her as her arm slides down my chest lifelessly.

"Astraea!" Noah shouts.

"What the hell is wrong with her?" Emmett demands, looking at the nurses.

I look down at her, seeing her eyes still barely open, watching me with disorientation and confusion, her palms weakly pushing me away as a weak protest leaves her soft, utterly kissable lips. I lean in to whisper in her ear.

"You can do your worst baby. You can fight me, you can curse my name to the deepest pits of hell and back, you can blame me all you want, but you're mine and I'll never let you forget that for even a second," I growl for her ears only as I start walking, taking her back to her room with a legion of people following behind us.

I refuse to let fear grip me by the balls as her eyes start closing. I don't even stop to think of everything else but in this moment, I want her to know.

"I know what you want baby, I'm going to get it for you," I vow.

She looks up at me, pain in her eyes mixed in with the confusion, the fear, the hurt and something else that I refuse to identify. It's so loud behind us, around us. But as we look at each other, I swear, I can hear the echoes of doomed words before she can say them, I silence her.

"Don't you dare say something that will tear us apart forever, Star. Don't you dare," I warn, my voice deep, hard and threatening.

"Ace...", She whimpers, her voice hoarse, raw and so damn sad.

"I know," I murmur back as I press a kiss to her forehead, watching with confusion as she starts losing consciousness. She looks up at me one more time, then she passes out in my arms.

"What the fuck is going on?" I demand, turning to the pink haired, strange nurse. "Why the fuck is she unconscious?"

"I'm sure she's just tired," the strange nurse says, dismissing this like it's a usual occurrence around here but I don't miss the way she looks at her feet, unable to look me in the eye. "You need to leave, now."

"That's fucking bullshit and you know it," I zero in on her. Just now, Astraea was full of adrenaline, fire in her eyes and now she's just...out. Just like that? I don't think so. Something is going on here.

"This patient has been deemed dangerous to her own health," the nurse says with a look of dismissive look on her face, clearly desperate to get rid of us.

Warning alarms blare up in my system as I look at her, then down at a passed out Astraea in my arms. A churning in my gut starts stirring up all sorts of warnings in my system that I can't shake and it's got nothing to do with the ache that's already in my chest from the toll this night has brought already.

"Nah, you did something, Sandy," Spider chews on his lip as he steps forward now, a menacing look on his face as I place Star on the hospital bed.

"Hook her up to those fucking machines. I want to hear her heartbeat right fucking now," I growl at the other nurse, who jumps into action as Noah, Emmett and Spider circle the other one—the one who stood behind Astraea like she... did something to her.

“What the hell did you do to her?” Emmett demands behind me. “You better answer nicely before I let King loose on your ass!”

“King?” she questions, her voice trembling as fear grips her by the balls that she thought she had before.

“She’s been drugged,” a voice says from across the bed. I look up. Standing beside Astraea’s hospital bed is her snake of a friend who turned out to be nothing but a fake.

“And how do you know that?” I growl as she takes a step back after taking one glance at the look on my face. “Do you often drug people in your area of expertise?” I taunt, but before she can say anything, the nurse answers.

“I just gave her a little sedative to send her to sleep. She looked upset,” the nurse quickly explains, her voice now filled with fear.

“So, in other words, you drugged her?” Noah bellows, his voice almost shaking the entire room, just as a number of security guards come rushing in, trying to push Spider, Kim, Emmett and Noah out.

“No fucking way, you have no idea who the fuck I am,” Noah fights their hold.

“Sir, please leave, you’re in violation of disrupting a...,” the suspicious nurse interjects, her voice shaky, not at all confident now as she looks at us.

“What. The. Fuck. Did. You. Do?” I growl, watching as her eyes widen. Then I glance down to her scrubs and notice that she’s got something lodged in there, something that looks strangely like a needle in the pocket of her scrub pants.

Fear strikes as I identify what it is, crippling me to the spot.

I stare long and hard at her pocket, trying to trace the object in there. The longer I stare, the more I’m convinced that it’s a fucking injection. And if her job was legit, if she was supposed to drug her, she wouldn’t be trying to hide it.

Kim is right, Star was just drugged.

My heart stutters to a stop as everything screeches to a slow motion movie. I realize two things at once:

1. Star was just drugged, which means this nurse is on the payroll of whoever wants my girl dead.
2. Whoever the asshole might be—and I have a pretty good idea on who it might be, they are watching us.

But somehow, all that doesn't matter because now, I'm gripped by this intense, crippling sense of dread as I look down at Star's limp body. Her lips turn a little blue and I freeze as a flashback from a horrendous time before flashes behind my eyes.

"No," I whisper, feeling my chest crack. This is familiar. The way she's looking right now is so familiar, I still on the spot, shaking my head.

"She can't be gone." George's broken shout from that time, echoes in my ears, haunted by the memory of Star when she...

She's not going to die...

Fuck!

I won't allow her to leave me again.

"Is she still alive?" I roar, pinning the other nurse with a murderous look and she jumps. Her short, pink streaked hair looking like it's drowning in hairspray. I know for a fact that she's the one that fucking drugged my girl. "I swear to God...is she still breathing?"

She looks young, frantic and trembling, her mouth opening and closing like a fish, not saying anything. I stare down at Star, her face is void of all color, her cheeks with dried up tears staining and I...I can't even feel her heartbeat. She looks so small on the hospital bed, not moving at all. I fumble around her, trying to feel for something. A rise of her chest, a puff of breath from her bluish lips, anything at all but I'm too frantic to settle down.

"Sir, please step back so we can do our job," the other nurses says, her voice hard and commanding. She seems older, around Marie's age if I'm to guess, her focus completely on Astraea.

"She is not touching her!" I shout, pointing at the suspicious looking nurse who looks like she's about to run.

The other nurse fumbles then presses the emergency button, as she hurriedly checks for Star's pulse.

"Well?" Noah roars, staring at Star with terror in his eyes.

Everyone stops breathing at the same time as we watch on bated breath, waiting.

Its fucking torture and I can't stop the haze of red that has fallen over me.

"King, breathe..." Spider starts, taking a step towards me but I can't. I can't take another breath knowing that Star might not take another of her own. I refuse to live a life without her.

“Is she fucking breathing?” I demand to the other nurse who looks like she literally just walked out of college, probably was last in her class too by the looks of it.

“Her pulse is there, but...”

“But fucking what?” I couldn’t stop the roar even if I tried.

“It’s a bit weak, her heartbeat is irregular,” she explains, stabbing the emergency button again.

“That’s because she was fucking drugged!” Noah seethes. “Where the hell are the doctors?”

There’s so much commotion in the room, tempers rising as panic grabs me by the balls. All I can focus on is that little bit of hope.

She still has a heartbeat.

She has a pulse.

Calm the fuck down.

Focus.

She needs you to be sane and destroy everyone who’s after her.

You haven’t lost her.

“I’m going to get the doctors,” Emmett demands in a panic.

“No, you don’t,” I stop him, my mind racing with all the bullshit that we’re now facing. “You’re fucking dead, remember that.”

“Does that even matter when someone is about to fucking die?” Noah shouts now, his eyes glistening with something suspiciously like tears. “A lot of people have seen him already.”

“Yeah, but my asshole father might be out there, and she’s NOT. GOING. TO. DIE!” I roar, feeling like my world is spinning out of control but that one fact, I won’t let go of it. I won’t let her go.

“Sir, please calm down. She’s not going to die,” the shady, pink haired trash nurse chimes in, now retreated to a corner. I bet she knows damn well that she stepped wrong and that her life is over from this point. Literally and figuratively.

“Who paid you to shoot drugs in her system?” Spider demands, stepping close to the nurse, his eyes cold, lifeless, staring down at her.

Her eyes widen again, a denial on her mouth.

“No one...,” she starts trembling, looking between a deathly cool and composed Spider, an outraged Noah with Emmett who looks like he’s a breath away from wringing her neck, angrily staring right back at her. She doesn’t even attempt to look at me.

Smart woman, but stupid and foolish at the same time.

“Think carefully about what you’re about to say right now or so help me God, you’ll regret ever living that pathetic life of yours,” Emmett threatens, a thunderous look on his face, matching the ones on Noah’s and Spider’s faces.

Only, this is not a threat, it’s a fact, a deadly promise and I think the nurse knows that as she takes two tentative steps back, as if that will save her from the fate she chose for herself. The gravity of the situation reaching her as if that will save her.

“I... I don’t...,” She tries again but is cut off by a heavy, cold chuckle from me, but Spider speaks before I have the chance to eviscerate this bitch.

“And remember, the law isn’t so forgiving for murder criminals, especially when said criminals are twenty-something year old mothers, with a toddler and an infant to take care of,” Spider’s smooth voice is soft, the promise of hell to pay evident in that cadence as he glances at me from the corner of his eye.

I’m not surprised at all that Spider has all this personal information about the nurses in the hospital, since the woman who raised him is always here, fear of losing her driving him to be an overprotective grandson.

“Tell me, how is little Josh? He’s the seven-month-old, isn’t he?” Spider taunts, stepping closer to her.

“How...?” She stutters, a shocked look on her face.

“How do I know your family or how do I know how to reach in and destroy you?” he mocks with a smile on his face, watching her. “This doesn’t have to be hard. Just tell us what we need to know.”

At this point, I think we all know who it is, but confirmation will make it clear. I’m going to kill him. And to think I thought I had dealt with that shithead before, but just like vermin, he persists in irritating the fuck out of me. Lucky for him, I’ve got all the fury and patience in the world to deal with him accordingly.

“Where are the doctors?” Noah repeats, pacing with agitation in the small room.

“What in His good name is going on in here?” Marie demands as she comes in the room, with a number of nurses and two doctors behind her, rushing into the room in response to the emergency call no doubt. “Get out, you’re not meant to be in here.”

“This pathetic, snake of a woman just shot up some kind of drug in Astraea’s body!” Noah shouts, pointing at the woman, the guards working to hold him back. “And now, Astraea isn’t even breathing properly!”

“What?” Marie gasps, looking at the woman, then she quickly snaps out of it as the doctors start snapping orders in the small room. One of them being that we should get the hell out.

“Hell no, I’m not going anywhere!” Noah spits out.

“She was drugged, illegally!” Emmett points, his voice deep and low, pointing at the trembling nurse in the corner.

“That can’t be...,” Marie starts shaking her head but the situation says otherwise.

“Marie, she was doing fine, talking and functioning but then that Barbie wanna be, pink bitch did something to her when she stepped close to her! We all saw it! Now look at Astraea!” Noah shouts, pointing at Astraea, a frantic look in his eyes, matching the storm that’s brewing inside of me. But I ignore them all as I stare at the woman, trembling and crying in the corner.

“Who?” The terse, angry word growls out of me and everything falls to a standstill in the room.

Everyone stops moving, as all eyes fall on me. I don’t even have to repeat myself because everyone heard me, the fucking nurse who injected Astraea heard me and the only person who I want to hear my voice can’t hear me right now because she’s been fucking drugged!

“No, you don’t understand. I...,” the nurse in question starts crying.

“Get them out of here,” one of the doctors orders the guards who have increased in number in a blink of an eye. A flurry of activity starts in the room.

The next thing I know, I’m being dragged out of her room with an urgency that irritates me to no end, and I start fighting the arms dragging me out.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” I fight, wanting to stay with Astraea. I can’t be away from her right now. I don’t know what I’ll do.

But the guards are strong, dragging all of us out of the room, with the nurse in question now being hauled by one guard with Marie in tow. She’s crying but Marie has a stern look on her face.

The next thing I know, we’re shoved into a private room by almost ten hospital guards. The last thing I see is an army of medical personnel, buzzing like fucking bees around Star, like a sea of white and blue clothed

people, frantically hooking her up to machines and calling orders in a surprisingly orderly manner, in contrast to the chaos in my head.

“Explain,” Marie starts, looking at all of us as soon as the door closes to the room. It’s now the boys, Kim, a pissed off Marie and one of the guards now.

“No, Marie, someone should be in there with Astraea!” Emmett starts. “Who knows what they’ll do to her in there?”

“I assure you, she’s in safe, capable hands,” Marie soothes, but her eyes are sharp and clear.

“How do you know that?” I demand. “You’d think a nurse who is legally accountable for all patients in her care to act accordingly, but instead she goes off and accepts payment to DRUG someone!”

“Alex, we don’t know that for sure,” Marie chides, trying to calm me down but it’s not working.

“But we do know! Just ask her!” Noah shouts, pointing at the nurse as he starts pacing. “Fuck!”

“Sandy?” Marie questions, a deep frown on her face but as I look closer, there’s a flat look in her eyes as she stares at her fellow nurse. It’s like she’s disappointed and not surprised at the same time. “Why?”

“They said they will clear my debt,” she rushes to explain now. “My husband...he’s had a gambling problem for fifteen years now and he amassed a lot of debt that we can’t handle. I’m the only one working and, you have to understand... I needed the money.”

“Please don’t tell me you just fucked up your whole life for that forty-year-old lazy idiot you married,” Marie says, shaking her head.

“I... I love him,”

“Oh my God,” Kim breathes, a disgusted look on her face, staring at her.

“They said they’d pay all of it off. All the debt would be cleared and our mortgage will be taken care of,” she pleads, looking at Marie who has a disappointed look on her face. She glances at the guard who nods back and quickly leaves, I assume it’s to alert the doctors working on Star.

“What kind of drug was it?” Marie questions, her voice sharp and hard, her face tightening with anger.

“I’m not sure but it was some type of opioid, maybe morphine.”

What the fuck?

“I swear, I wasn’t trying to kill her. They even said they didn’t want her to die.”

They?

“So, what the fuck was it for then?” I roar, getting in her face now, totally done with everyone and everything. I don’t fucking care what happens next here.

“It’s already starting,” Kim chimes in, then she looks at the nurse. “Who approached you?”

“He didn’t say his name and he was in a hoodie. I couldn’t really see his face clearly. It all happened so fast. But, he knew my name and all about me,” the pink haired woman whispers, her voice breaking.

“But you fucking saw something!” Noah seethes, watching her like he’s about to pounce.

“Noah, calm the fuck down or get out,” Marie warns, her gaze moving between all of us, lingering on me for longer than necessary. Can she see the turmoil in me?

“He’s right,” Kim steps forward, a steely resolve over her. “You must have noticed something about him. Like his eye color, or something.”

“Yes, yes!” she jumps. “He had short dark hair, sickly pale green eyes that made him look like a...”

“A high drug dealer?” Kim finishes.

“Yes! He did look strange and jumpy,” She snaps her fingers, agitated and relieved at the same time. I bet she’s regretting her actions, now that she realizes what she’s done and to who.

“Well, fuck,” Emmett breathes, looking from Noah and Spider, to me. We all know who it is, no need to even think far.

My blood starts boiling, tension locking my muscles in until all I want to do is let it all go. I’ve been stretched so tight, I can’t handle it anymore. Not now. Probably not ever.

“Please, you have to understand...,” She starts begging. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone.”

“Yeah but you’d accept money to drug up a recovering addict now, wouldn’t you?” Kim shoots at her, her body vibrating with uncontrolled anger.

“No, I...,” she tries to plead, snot, tears and desperation falling down her cheeks, smearing her mascara and shit.

“Shut the fuck up!” Emmett seethes, unable to control himself. “I swear if anything happens to her...”

“She’s stable now,” the elderly nurse from earlier comes in, looking uncertain at all of us. “I just thought you should know.”

Her heart is beating, grasping on to those two words but not believing them fully until I see her for myself.

She’s stable.

Thank fuck.

“Looks like your shit excuse checks out! She’s breathing for now but you better fucking pray that whatever you gave her doesn’t have side effects because...,” Noah points at the nurse.

“It does,” Kim speaks up, interrupting Noah. We all turn to look at her, a shattered and shocked expression on her face. It’s then that everything finally clicks in my head. It’s clear to see now.

The goal wasn’t to kill my girl, no. It was to give her so much drugs that she either became an addict again, or she overdosed and died. Either way, Dereck Myers wanted Astraea to meet the end that he thinks her twin brother suffered. And go scot free.

“When did you see him?” Spider questions, a worried look on his face.

“Maybe twenty minutes ago. They came in demanding to see their friends. I knew the Blue Boys of Westbrook Blues had a lot of friends so I just sent them back here. I wasn’t aware that the patient wasn’t supposed to receive visitors until nurse Jackie told me that we had to check on her. That’s when we heard your shouts and yelling, so we quickly came to see what was going on...”

“That’s when you saw your opening, huh?” Spider questions. “In the middle of all that chaos, you thought it wouldn’t hurt to stick in a needle in someone’s vein like she’s a mental patient?”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” she cries. “I didn’t mean to send those two back here. I wasn’t aware of the danger I was putting the patient or myself in.

Emmett, Noah and I look at each other. Fuck!

There’s a high possibility that Dereck saw Emmett, heard everything we just said and...

“They,” I start, stepping forward, every muscle in my body coiled, tense and ready to unleash hell. Just give me the names...

“What?” She gasps, taken aback by the intensity of the anger in my voice.

“You said, *they*. Who was that asshole with?” I seethe, watching her.

“A girl. I have no idea what her name is,” she answers, looking scared.

“Was she blonde?” Kim steps forward again, wiping away her tears as she looks at Noah, then at the nurse. “Tall, with a bitchy attitude?”

“Yes.”

“Brittney,” Noah echoes my thoughts.

Of course, they are still working together even though she fucking assured me that she wasn’t talking to him anymore. I guess days of kissing her ass weren’t worth it. She still had doubts about us. That’s good, I wanted her to feel it creeping in.

I wanted her feel the unease crippling in her dark, bleak soul. I wanted her to start questioning and second guessing herself and everything I told her. Including the way I let her touch me or run her mouth about Astraea. The only way to beat a snake is to wring it dry.

“I guess your girlfriend is now out to get Astraea, huh?” Noah starts, spitting out the words with venom, fighting against Spider, who’s holding him back.

“It doesn’t matter if Alex and fucking Brittney are now fucking...,” Kim starts.

“You mean, your whore of a sister?” Noah corrects, his rage making sense now. So much has been hurled at Noah tonight, and it’s all our fault. I’m man enough to admit that.

“I don’t fucking care what you think of me but watch your fucking mouth. That sick bitch isn’t my sister, she isn’t my anything. She’s my father’s soldier!” She shouts, looking Noah dead on as, if she desperately wants him to believe her.

He throws his head back and laughs.

“I’m sorry, maybe I’m as dumb as much as you’re a saint, but what are you then?” He questions, shaking Spider’s hold on him, taking a predatory step closer to Kim, stalking her.

“I’m not what you think but that bitch isn’t my sister and no matter what you think of me, I know that whatever Brittney is working at, whatever her angle is, she’s doing it with orders and a personal vendetta of her own,” she calmly states then turns to look at me. “But right now, I’m probably the only one who knows what she’s like.”

“What a moving speech, almost had me convinced there!” Noah starts, rage lighting up his eyes as he looks at her. “What I’m failing to see here is why we should trust anything that comes out of that garbage mouth of yours, much like your sister’s—who by the way, is just like you—with an

asshole, lunatic of a pedophile, abusive father. Did daddy hurt you, too?" Noah's sarcastic laugh fills the room.

Kim gasps, visibly flinching then hugs her arms around her middle as if to protect herself from Noah's cruelty. But he isn't done.

"At least with that bitch, you know where you stand. It's more of a fistfight that you can see coming with Brittney. You know that there'll be knives, they'll be foul play, they'll be blood. But with you..." he says it so softly, now in her face. "You hide your poison in your ratchet, alluring clothes, tucking a dull blade in your sharp smile, then have the guts to act hurt and appalled when you finally gut your target."

"Noah..." she starts but he cuts her off.

"How does it feel? To be a coward? To plunge knives at the back of the [people you claim to love?]" he spits out, his voice catching at the end, but he clears his throat, fighting the emotions that won't go away. Especially when he looks at Kim.

I can see Kim trembling from head to toe, pain twisting her facial features for a second but then she looks away from Noah, a gasp on her lips. Turning to look at me, smoothing away the hurt, she blinks, trying to clear the haze of pain but that can't be helped. There's hurt etched on her face, outpouring from every inch of her—as it is with Noah.

"You have to understand. If Brittney was here, then she's well on her way right now to tell her father about all of this," she warns, pointing at Emmett. "It's clear to see that they came to check if the rumors of Emmett's death are true or not—if so, it would be a score for him."

"Why would they want that information?" Emmett questions as Marie gasps, reminding me that she's still in the room, with the guilty ass nurse now on the floor, covering her tear stained face with her palms.

"What is happening?" Marie questions. I shoot Spider a look, his grandmother heard shit she isn't supposed to hear.

"Grammy, this isn't the time..." Spider steps forward.

"Boy, if you're running with gangs and doing drugs..." she warns, then looks around the room, her gaze finally settling on me. "What trouble is chasing you?"

"The kind that breeds in the shadows, Marie," I murmur, watching her solemnly, my heart thundering in my chest, images of Star flashing behind my eyes.

"That's apt," Kim whispers.

“Is that why you wanted me to postpone Emmett’s surgery and lie to that asshole of a man?” Marie goes on, taking a step forward.

“Wait, you were actually going to get a surgery?” I question Em and he ignores me, looking at Marie.

“King called you to spare my life?” He questions.

“More like texted me, tersely, might I add,” she rolls her eyes. “Try sending a basket of chocolates and wine, then your request, you little brat,” she says without heat in her voice as she looks at me.

“Noted. I’ll get you the entire chocolate factory,” I murmur, ignoring the look Emmett is giving me. I know he wants to talk but now isn’t the time.

“My father won’t rest until he eliminates all of you,” Kim says, looking at me.

“Why?” Noah growls.

“I don’t know!” She explodes, looking at Noah. “I’m not exactly his favorite and I sure as hell don’t want to be anywhere near...him.”

I don’t miss the way she distances herself in that equation.

“All I know is, you need to find a way to get ahead of the game because right now, trust me, you’re ten steps behind. He’s been planning this for years, biding his time.”

“What makes you think anyone in this room will ever trust you again, let alone me?” I question, watching as she swallows but like I sensed some months ago, she’s got a spine on her. And fight. Like my girl.

“Because I hate that son of a bitch as much as you do and right now, at this point, I know I have so much to lose but I’m already in deep shit so, what’s the worst that can happen to me now?”

It’s the steel resilience in her voice, the dead look in her eyes and the fire in the way she’s standing that I see why my baby made a friend out of her. Something about her is damaged, wrong and so damn flawed it freaks my best friend out yet draws him close.

Only he’s been drawn to the devil’s spawn this entire time and Astraea once again made a wrong friend. And I promised to fix that—and I will.

“Besides, you’re shit out of time and you know it. By now, my father knows that you boys are up to something and that you probably know about him.”

“I hate to admit it, but she’s right. Your boy Dereck doesn’t know about me but he does know about her,” Spider says, pointing at Kim.

“She is his daughter after all,” Noah mocks.

“Larry will be alerted of this and shit will go down sooner than we anticipated,” Spider continues, “We are out of time.”

“Yes, but I can help you,” Kim urges.

“Oh, so now you want us to help you hide away from Daddy dearest? I think the fuck not. Leave. Now!” Noah bellows.

“Alex, she’s in grave danger and you fucking know it,” she says, ignoring Noah. Or rather, trying to ignore him.

“I said go!” Noah shouts again, being held back by Emmett. At this point, the hurt in Noah’s voice is shining through so much that even I can feel it in my core. But I don’t give a damn. This girl might be many things, but she’s right. She’s got answers that we need.

“All of you get out of here and stop whatever shit you’re planning to do,” a low but stern and authoritative voice says. Without even looking, I know it’s Marie. “And just know this is the last time you’re allowed to see her as long as she’s in here. You’ve done enough damage.”

“That’s bullshit, Marie,” Noah starts, exhaustion in his voice.

“Boy, watch your tongue and your tone before I get angry,” Marie says, shooting him a look and he falls silent.

“Sorry,” he bites out and she sighs.

“Look, I know it’s been a hard night but maybe go get a good night’s rest will you. She’ll be fine,” Marie starts, looking at us with wariness in her eyes. I nod, my mind racing with every single body that I want to break and eviscerate.

“Where is he?” I question Kim. She knows who the fuck I’m talking about.

“No one knows unless he actually wants you to know where he might be,” she answers just as solemnly, not backing away as I expected her to.

“Oh great, an incognito sick fuck that touched Astraea!” The roar is so loud, I don’t recognize that it’s coming from me. I turn and punch the glass wall, and it shatters into billions of pieces right in front of me, but I don’t flinch or step away. Blistering pain passes through my knuckles, shooting through my arm.

Kim and Marie step back, watching me with wary eyes, but not my best friends. Nah they’re in the fire with me.

“You know that man on the iPad,” Noah says softly, stepping forward. “You knew who he was, and Astraea noticed too. You know him.”

I remain silent, my breathing hard and fast.

“She said he came for her, because of you,” Noah continues, realization dawning in his eyes. “You’re the fucking vicious asshole who led this...God! You led him into her life because of something you did, didn’t you?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” I seethe, anger making me clench my fists.

I start walking towards the door, unable to stay in here for one fucking second. Spider watches me—I send him a curt nod. He sends one back. We’re under agreement.

The nurse will pay.

Dereck is about to meet his maker.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Emmett demands as I steam down the foyer, towards the exit. Forcing myself not to glance at her door.

“None of your damn business. You fucking stay here and make sure she survives the night,” I grit out then turn around and keep walking.

“We have to fucking talk!” Noah shouts behind me.

Yeah, I know damn well that we need to talk. It’s been long overdue.

But as for right now, I have a deal with the devil to make.

But first, I need to find the right devil.

CHAPTER FOUR



“Broken...”

I lay motionless on the bed, my eyes refusing to cooperate with me. All I want is to open them and see the owners of the unfamiliar voices, hovering around me and obviously talking about me, but I can't move an inch of myself.

My body is so damn stiff, motionless. And each time I force myself to move anything, I'm met with a heaviness that weighs down on me. My eyelids are heavy, my chest is weighed down as if something large and heavy is pressing down on it.

There's darkness all around me but I can still hear their voices.

Am I dead?

Am I back in that mental institution in London?

I'm not crazy!

With that thought in mind, I start panicking. Forcing myself to move with all my might, I try to will my eyes to open. As soon as I try moving one eyelid with a burst of energy that only attests to the panic clawing at my insides, I'm hit by waves upon waves of pain.

I can't even wince or make a sound, shut inside myself where darkness fights to claim me, yet I'm still fighting.

“Drugs... “

I hear that same word again and with it, my heart starts hammering against my ribcage, threatening to render me dead with the violence of its beating. A high pitched sound rings in the space around me, like a machine that’s announcing my doom.

“Suicide...”

Another word is mixed in there and that really does it.

Suddenly, a piercing alarm goes off in the distance. I can feel a flurry of movement and activity around me, although I can’t be sure.

Everything hurts. Everything is getting dimmer, colder and sharper all at once. And then all of a sudden, I can’t hear anything anymore.

I don’t know what’s happening to me but I think...I don’t care anymore.

“Hold her down?” A voice demands from above me. I don’t want them to touch me! I don’t want them to hold me down but I’m drowning.

The darkness that calls my name is so damn sweet and inviting, that I can’t help but surrender to it.

“Pulse rates dropping...”

“Blood pressure is rising, she’s tanking.”

“Seizure...”

It doesn’t matter.

Nothing matters anymore, not when you’ve hit rock bottom.

CHAPTER FIVE



Two years ago...

Astraea, did you know that the sky over Westbrook Blues is starless without you here? It's almost as if the lights in the universe went out because you want everyone to be plunged into your darkness.

How could you be so selfish?

*Making sure that everything good dies with your **cold, cold heart**.*

I read the note scribbled in a messy, boyish scrawl that I would know from anywhere in the world. It's not signed or anything, just those words in the middle of the paper that's been crumbled and flattened out one too many times to be readable. But I can read the words. Boy, can I read the hate.

I can feel the venom in his words dripping off of the page like he's actually speaking the words to me with a menacing look on his face. Imagining the look isn't so hard, but at this point in my bleak, miserable life, I can't imagine it without the image being distorted with having not seen his gorgeous face for so long.

Breathe, Astraea.

He found out what happened to you and he never wanted you after that. You don't deserve to feel this kind of pain over this jerk.

I crumble the paper in my hand, intending to throw the note away—just like I've done so many other times after I received this hateful note. And just like before, I can't bring myself to even complete the act. Instead I unfold the note carefully, flattening it out with shaky, sweaty palms as best as I can.

This is my only connection to him. This is the only evidence I have that he still thinks of me. That I'm not forgotten. And as much as I hate this, it's the last thing I want to remember before I go.

"She hasn't eaten anything in days," the doctor says to the two nurses. They're all standing around the corner, whispering with their heads bent forward, glancing at me every few seconds as if they're discussing a mute patient without all her faculties about her.

"Have you tried contacting the mother?"

"She said she can't be here, and that we need to keep her here."

"Jesus." A pause. "What about the boy—her twin brother?"

"I think..." They're voices lower then, when they notice that I'm looking at them, listening to the pity in their voices.

They stand there, unaware that I have half a bottle of pills in my stomach—just waiting to finish the rest as soon as they leave.

Act normal, they don't need to see anything.

Nothing else matters anyway.

My gut churns, my heart beats painfully in my chest as it works overtime, my system half full of drugs that they've been trying to wean me off of. I suck in a deep breath as silently as I can, but I couldn't seem to be able to stop the shaking as I reach for the second letter that came almost an entire year after the first one.

They always arrive on my birthday.

Astraea, you better fucking come back and fix what you left broken here! You have no idea the chaos you left behind. Then again, you don't care, do you? You deserve to rot in hell,

*and that won't save you from me because
when I get to you, I promise you this—I'll
give you sweet pain that you'll never escape.
A kind of nightmare you'll never wake up
from—just like us here.
I'll be the monster that you used to ask me to
check for under your bed each night.
I'll be everything you wish I wasn't.
You'll regret ever leaving in the first place.
~~Star... how could you?~~*

This one is even more sinister, filled with anger and hate that I can almost taste it. Yet what I feel deep within with that last line is the hurt that echoes in my soul. The pain in that cancelled out last line is almost tangible, so raw and intense that my heart twists in my chest, but I refuse to believe it.

How could he say something like that when he sent his mother to send me away?

A chill passes through my body, going up and down my spine, ending in my toes as I read this note for the billionth time. My eyes blurring with unshed tears, clogging my throat as if I'm about to swallow a tennis ball.

I can't breathe properly.

It's already starting.

My chest heaves up and down faster as the seconds tick on by, the pain intensifying with the beating of my heart, each breath bringing me closer to the end. Even then, I try to make as little noise as possible.

The third note lies on my dresser, opened. It's the one I was most excited to receive today and it's the very one that put me in this mood.

Isn't it crazy how you can be excited over a hateful note, your heart literally skips a beat when you know who exactly it's from?

How pathetic is that? Being so lonely that just the vague idea that the boy you've been pining over for years—even when you know better—still thinks of you enough to send you another hateful note? A note that only drives the point of his hate further home?

Only this time, I received the message loud and clear.

I finally got what he's been telling me—through wicked, sinister actions mostly.

Alexander—Ace to me—hates my guts.

This latest note finally broke me, destroyed me and pushed me further into the brink of what the staff here call, clinical depression.

The note was delivered to me by a smiling nurse earlier—reminding me that today is my birthday. But when I read it, a deep nasty feeling took root in me. One that I couldn't avoid even if I tried. It felt like an icy darkness had fallen over me and no matter what I did, I couldn't shake it.

Only, I didn't want to shake it. I accepted it with my empty, worthless open arms which led me to this...

Today might also be my last. But hey, it might just be good luck for the next life if you die on the day you were born. Maybe in the next one, I won't be so alone. I won't go through all this mess and pain by myself. Maybe I'll even have friends that stick to their word.

Breathe, Astraea. Just breathe.

I close my eyes but the tears start streaming down my cheeks fast and hot. This time I don't stop them. I've been in this fucking mental institution for over two years now, but this is the first time I'm feeling like... I can't go on anymore.

I just can't do this anymore.

The nightmares.

The vivid images that assault me at random times of the day.

The looks of pity.

The absence of family and friends around me.

The trauma.

Each time I close my eyes, I see *him* moving on top of me.

I swear some nights, when I'm alone in my room, I can still hear *his* groans.

I can feel *his* disgusting sweat dripping on me, the putrid smell mixing with that of the lingering tobacco as it threatens to suffocate me.

I can sense myself still fighting, kicking and screaming.

Then those images distort, giving way to another one that chills me to the bone, making me cry for days on end.

I hear Denise's words.

"He doesn't want you here. Please, go away. And if you know what's best for you, don't bother coming back."

"No. He...he wouldn't want that."

I had pleaded my case, the physical pain giving way to some other pain that I've never felt before. A kind of pain that I don't think they have medication for.

"He'll be fine without you."

She had said, driving the final nail into my coffin that's about to be shipped to God knows where.

I shake that memory away, trying to stay in the present as I hear their voices in the corner. They glance at me every few seconds, then they bow their heads together, whispering words that I catch in glimpses.

"She's got a major depressive disorder."

"Medication..."

"Always sad."

"Maybe it's trauma."

"Rape Trauma Syndrome."

"Her mother..."

I shut my eyes again, trying to block them away as the notes that I received from Ace all flutter to the cold, dark wood floor.

"Blank..."

"Isn't present."

"Or responsive."

They keep talking and whispering as I lie down on my bed, then pull the covers over me, mentally willing them to get out of my room. I just want to be alone right now.

Just go away.

"Wealthy American family..."

"Mentally unstable..."

"Problems..."

"A victim."

The voices come back then, whispering in my head, darkness swirling through my veins, clogging my chest like thick, dark smoke, suffocating me in the process as chills upon chills pass through my entire body.

I start trembling, my entire body now coated with a sheen of sweat. I pull the covers on top of me, securing them more tightly around me as if that will ward off the cold that has since taken root in my bones. But I also want to fool the aides to think that I'm trying to rest so they can leave.

True to form, they leave, leaving the bottle of Xanax. Not checking that half of the contents is gone when they just gave me a full one this morning with instructions to take two when absolutely necessary. I guess they don't suspect anything, especially when it took me almost a year to get through the first bottle.

I stare at the bottle, watching it as if it's beckoning to me to snatch it up.

The Xanny eased the pain in my chest.

It soothed the hurt, the pain, sending me to a space of peaceful but dark bliss where nothing and no one exists. Not even a pair of frosty blue eyes, gleaming with hate and something else that makes my belly flutter.

Xanny eased the memories, until they all became nothing...

So, as soon as they shut the door, I grab the bottle, sitting up straight in the bed, I open my mouth and empty the rest of the pills into my mouth.

No, don't do this.

Do it...

You'll die.

Good, there's nothing to live for.

No one wants you.

They all hate you.

They pity you.

You're a disgrace.

What happened to you is totally your fault.

No one believes you. Not even your own mother.

Where is your father?

This life isn't worth living.

But I keep going, swallowing as many of the small pills as possible, without water or anything because nothing matters.

My body starts shutting down but I'm still hyper aware of everything around me, the weakness creeping in. My fingers start shaking. I drop the bottle, my eyes now unfocused, yet still seeing. It's a strange haze that I'm in.

Good. I like it.

I start sliding down slowly, easing into my bed. With all my strength, I pull up the covers over me.

From the corner of my tear filled eyes, I see the notes on the floor but I look away, my gaze landing on the locket that I received a few days ago. The locket the boys who I thought the world of gave me for my birthday when I thought life was full of rainbows, love and laughter.

But here, there's nothing but darkness.

Darkness and silence.

You shouldn't have done this...

You did the right thing.

I've heard some people have done it before. Hell, maybe the lady who lived in here before me actually did it because I heard that she died.

How did she die? I had asked one of the aides that work here one day.
Suicide. She said simply, solemnly.

*Everything good dies with your **cold, cold heart...***

My mind plunges me into a weird state of being. Where I'm not sure what's real or what's a nightmare anymore as everything converges together, mixing, blurring...until I'm so weak, I can only watch as everything falls apart around me as that one sentence plays over and over in my head until all I see is the hate on all their faces as they look at me.

I gasp for breath but I can't breathe.

End this. A voice in my head that sounds strangely like Britney whispers. I don't want anything. I just...can't take this anymore.

I hear a sound—someone just opened my door.

"Astraea?" Dr. Gabby calls out my name as she comes in, shooting a disapproving look at the other doctor and the nurses in the corner. "Happy birthday," she says softly in her British accent.

I look up at her, blinking slowly, hating the cheer in her voice. Trying to hide the appalling evidence that my mouth is full of pills that I'm trying to swallow but can't get down, yet I'm sure I'm going to die.

"Your brother is coming soon, he just called to say he's picking up something. I bet it's a present," she says with a smile.

A frantic look crosses my face as my eyes widen. She interprets it as excitement but it's not. Dread washes over me like thick goo as I realize that George is coming. And he's coming at the wrong time!

I don't want him to see me dying. That's a cruel memory to leave on the ones you love. He doesn't deserve that kind of pain no matter how much I sometimes resent him for not coming with me—instead, choosing to stay behind with the boys who didn't want me anymore. It hurt but I don't want him to come here, not today of all days.

“He should be here soon,” she says with a wink, obviously trying too hard to get me excited—because according to her, I need to start expecting good things to happen in life. That my thoughts should be positive and all that blah.

No.

I start looking around hurriedly and the good, yet blasé doctor, chuckles.

“Yeah, you might want to get ready and look presentable, maybe tame that long mane,” she says, gesturing to my long hair as she starts backing away. “I'll leave you to it.”

And just like that, she leaves without suspecting a thing.

I wonder how many “patients” they've lost in here because of their negligence. But that's not my main issue now. I need to... I need to get up and try and vomit these pills.

But all of a sudden, I can't move, paralyzed to the bed.

I start shivering violently, as sweat coats my brow. I feel the poison in my system, can feel it breaking apart each defense in my body. And why should I be surprised? The Xanny is doing exactly what it was designed to do when taken in excess.

To kill.

As the trembling continues, I close my eyes and allow my body to relax, accepting the consequences of my decision to end all this suffering. As I lie there, I remember the last note I received earlier today.

You told me that your arms will always be open whenever I needed a hug.

Well guess what, I need more from you now than you'll ever know.

Trust me, I'll take everything from you and you'll give it whether you want to or not. Because you and I both know, you and everybody else don't stand a chance against me when it comes to what—or who—belongs to me!

Truth is, there are parts of me that hurt every fucking day, because you're not here. And because of that pain, you enrage me to the heavens and back

*but I don't understand why you should. You're not here and so you shouldn't
affect me so ruthlessly like this.*

You lied about a lot of shit, Astraea, and I hate you for it. You know what?

Keep your pathetic hugs to yourself, I don't need them.

~~*I also don't need you!*~~

~~*Star, come back.*~~

~~*The boys are falling apart without you.*~~

We're doing better without you.

~~*No one needs you here.*~~

~~*Don't come back.*~~

~~*I wish I could get you off my fucking mind.*~~

~~*You're not in my soul anymore.*~~

I hate you!

~~*I want you back.*~~

But you're a liar.

And so am I.

God.

Which part did he lie about? Because I sure as hell never lied. I never
lied about anything until today. Not to him of all people.

I hate you!

I whimper, flinching at the harsh words. I've always known that he hates
me. When he bullied me, when he treated me like I'm filth under his
expensive, handmade shoes. I'm the only one he ever took the time to bully,
following me around, whispering sinister things in my ear that made my
heart pound, my eyes wide with fear, cheeks red, tinged with the evidence
of my excitement that he would chuckle as we interlocked our pinkies.

How fucked up was I? Hell, I still am when it comes to that boy. But
this...this is a new level. The anguish in that letter, the pain, the darkness of
it... I couldn't stop the impulsive decision to reach for the pills.

Although if I'm being honest, I think that idea has been marinating at the
back of my mind each time I stare at the bottle that's always on my
nightstand. Truth is, something in me dies each day that I'm here. Parts of
me just...shut down as the silence grows even louder, the nightmares
haunting me when I close my eyes, flashbacks attacking me at random

times of the day. A phobia of being touched in any way, loss of appetite that I can't do a damn thing about, not that I'm motivated to, anyway.

The nurses were right – I was deteriorating. So why bother wasting space?

“Ahh!”

A howling scream passes through my lips as the memories assault my mind in a slow-motion kind of film behind my eyes.

Ace's cool smirk when he looked at his handy work. Me, bullied, about to fight him yet knowing that he'll always win. But then, there was his deep blue eyes fixed on me as he wiped my tears away with a stormy war brewing within him, promising retribution.

Noah's hyena laugh that made me feel warm even on the coldest of nights. His jokes that I lived for. Noah made it so effortless to be around him. I never had to change an inch of myself when I was with him, his energy as infectious as his million dollar, panty twisting smile.

Then there was Emmett's quiet strength that always surrounded me. He never had to try to impress me, he was just good. Everything about him was solid, strong, warm. He had this intelligent kind of kindness that I gravitated towards each time. He was my safe bet.

Then there's George, my alpha protective twin brother. The one who held my hand when we crossed the street, the one who kisses my forehead each morning. He was the better half of my soul. And now, he's on his way here but I can't help it now.

My heart is beating so fast as if it's about to give way to the end of the road, where it'll just explodes in my chest. Only this time, I don't know if it's because of the note, George's impending cursed arrival or the pills.

Maybe it's a combination of all three, driving my anxiety up the roof.

“I brought you your favorite fried chicken!”

Oh God, he's here.

I know I should be elated to hear his voice since I only ever talk to him on the phone three times each week. But seeing him here, is getting rare as the days dragged on into months, and the months into years. And right now, he's the last person I wanted to see. As I hear his voice now, I curl into myself even more on my bed, hoping the darkness in my room will swallow me whole so he doesn't see me like this.

“Astraea, did you hear what I said?” He sing-songs, with a carefree, happy note in his voice that is evidence of an untouched, undamaged soul.

And I'm the selfish twin whose about to imprint an image on his brain where I'm dying of drug overdose.

All that will remain in my name is that, *she was too troubled to function. In the end, she took her own life—on the day of her & her twin's birthday.*

Yeah. I was a selfish bitch with a cold, cold heart.

Ace saw that before I ever did.

"It's our birthday! I know how you adore our birthday!" He says, coming in further into the room. "Wait, that's not true. You kinda hate our birthday since we turned thirteen," his voice grows somber.

Silence greets him instead of my response. I can't even bring myself to say anything.

"You hate everything now."

That's true.

"But no matter, I'm here and we're going to have the best night of our lives!" He cheers with a happy note in his voice that I know he forced into it.

My brother hates being here but he tries to make it look like being in a mental institution - even if it's just for a visit to his messed-up-in-the-head sister who one day up and left because she couldn't handle it anymore and needed psychiatric attention—doesn't bother him one bit.

I know better.

That plastic smile melts away into disdain and aggravation as soon as he thinks I'm not looking.

His body language is always tense and robotic, his fists clenched each time he passes through the fancy, iron gates that cage me in here like I'm a prisoner of my own mind. But in a way, I was.

He hates it here and I know he's always counting down to the last second until he can leave. Yet, he's the only one I truly have left.

But George being George, he still smiles and puts on the biggest, most entertaining show—channeling all the shenanigans he learns from Noah. They were after all, "soul-brothers."

A sad smile plays at the corner of my lips as I hear him move, all my senses heightened to a point of pain. Convulsions start like little tremors in the pit of my stomach, a small whimper leaves me, but I clamp my lips shut with all the strength I can muster at this point.

"Go away," I croak, hardly able to say a thing, working to swallow the pills still in my mouth. I can do this. There's no going back now.

“What?” he questions. I think I can hear him moving or maybe that’s my imagination. Hell, maybe he isn’t even here right now and my foggy, shutting down messed up mind just conjured an image of him as if to ease the pain as I slowly let go of this wretched life.

“Why the fuck is it dark in here?” he questions again. “Tell me you’re not sleeping through your birthday, baby girl,” he chuckles.

He noticed how dark it is in my mind? He’s definitely a figment of my own messed up imagination. He’s in my head and just maybe, he’s in my soul as well.

“I don’t know,” I whisper, feeling broken but I try to smile at him. Can he see me? Does he know that he’s in my subconscious?

“Astraea, I’m going to fucking open the blinds. You need some light in here. It’s cold and gloomy as fuck!” He curses and then starts moving around but I still can’t see his beautiful face. I can still feel his movements, I guess that’s all that matters now.

“No, I like it dark,” I croak out.

“Why are you doing this to yourself, Astraea?” I feel the acute, sharp pain in his voice as he speaks. “You can’t even tell me the real reason why you’re here in the first place. Why did you leave?”

Because I had to.

Because he sent me away.

“Because I’m tired,” I croak again, not wanting him to know exactly what happened to me. It’ll be a cruel fate to live with when I’m gone. I don’t want that for my twin turbo.

“Why, Astraea?” His frustrated voice rings clear in the room. “I feel like I’ve been missing a lot of shit for a while now. It’s driving me insane but I’m not leaving today without either of two things: the truth or you.”

God, I can’t hear any more of this because he’ll be leaving here with my corpse.

“I had to leave because I couldn’t stay,” I murmur, talking to my brother in my head, giving him the truth, even though it’s half-assed. He’ll just have to learn to live with that one.

Sometimes the truth does more harm...

I know he deserves more than that, he’s the only who’s stuck by my side through it all. And if our own mother can’t tell him the truth—or his best friend for that matter- then I guess what happened to me doesn’t really matter now, does it?

“I couldn’t stay anymore,” I whisper, repeating the words I’ve repeated a thousand times to the nurses here, my doctors, or anyone who asks why the hell someone so young is in here.

But tragedy cares not for one’s age. It just wreaks havoc as it does best. Destroying lives left, right and center.

“What?” he questions. “I can’t even hear you.”

Okay, here goes nothing.

“Everything is pointless,” I start, straining to get the words past my clogged-up throat, trying to explain it all to him, because I don’t want him to suffer as much when he receives the news that I’m gone—or when he feels it in his soul like I sometimes do when something’s up with him.

“I hate it here. I hate my life. I hate not being with you, Emmett, Noah and even Ace,” I can feel tears now falling down my face just as the sound of curtains opening pierces my dark, empty mind.

“Astraea, get up,” He says softly, but there’s something else in his voice now that I can’t place.

Urgency?

Caution?

Alarm?

“It’s a bright day outside, we can go on a tour of London. This place is creepy as fuck, like somebody died in here. You know today is a good day, right?” He questions, his voice strained with something I can’t place.

I can hear the forced cheer in his gravely, deepening voice. So why is it extra coated today?

“I can’t get up and you’re not here,” I mumble back to him, still believing that he’s not real because everything around me is falling away as the convulsions become stronger, more forceful.

I feel lightheaded, but my entire body is damn heavy, I can’t move anymore.

“Astraea, seriously, get up,” he demands and that’s when I feel a nudge. But at this point, I can’t be sure. I feel so numb now and all the pain is dissolving one second, then coming back with an intensity that makes me arch my back as something weird starts happening in my stomach, as if everything is going away and there’s just...nothing now. But I know it’s something.

“Astraea?” George whispers. “I know you’re not asleep. You’re a shitty actor.”

“Just know that I love you. I tried to hold on for you,” I murmur.

“What are you saying?” George’s urgent voice filters through my ears now and then in one move, the blanket on top of me is pulled back with so much force, I feel the chilly breeze.

“Holy shit!” A loud gasp makes my heart flutter for a bit, then it kicks into overdrive as it hammers away in my chest, one convulsion after the other wrecking my body.

George’s voice is suddenly so close like he’s no longer in my head.

“Astraea!” He shouts and suddenly, I can’t respond anymore as a pain so acute, cuts through my mind like my brain is being obliterated from the inside, as if I’m starting to have a seizure.

I don’t know what’s happening now.

In the distance I hear an ear piercing, high pitched chilling scream that I feel deep in my soul. It takes me a while to realize that the bloody, toe-curling, shiver inducing scream came from me.

“Fuck, Astraea!” The shout is full of pain and shock but I can’t breathe right anymore. I can’t control the tremors or keep the convulsions in check like I was doing before. I can’t do a single thing now.

Everything is so still. And right now, I think I need that stillness.

“Somebody, help!!!” The voice bellows.

Suddenly, I’m weightless, as if I’m floating in the air and soon, I register the strong, steel arms around me. I’m airborne now, being moved to God knows where. But it’s too late now.

It’s time to go.

Who knew overdosing on Xannies would be this painful?

“What the fuck happened?” Another voice joins in and everything in me screeches to a halt as that deep, curt, tense and angry voice washes over me like bitter honey.

It can’t be...

“I don’t know. I just came in and... fuck, get it out of her mouth!” The panicked voice pleads. “What is that anyway?”

“Pills,” the angry, terse but strangely calm voice growls. I feel my hair being pulled away from my face as fingers pry into my mouth. I can barely stay awake now, as another shockwave attacks me.

I scream.

“Holy fuck, what’s happening?”

“She’s having a seizure and losing consciousness fast.”

“Shit, shit, shit! What should we do?”

Everything hurts. Then in a split second, I feel like I’m drowning underwater, my lungs shrinking by the second and I can’t catch my breath.

Silence fills the space as fingers probe my mouth. I feel so lethargic, and have no feeling everywhere else. That’s a good thing. All the memories are gone.

“I’m going to get those fucking nurses! I think she swallowed the entire bottle.”

I can faintly hear the pounding of feet against the floor, the vibration rocking through me as I’m laid back on the cold floor, dragged out of the ocean of water. I fight to keep my eyes open but at this point, nothing matters anymore.

There’s comfort in the dark, a kind of comfort that I need. Desperately.

“This isn’t how you fucking go, you hear me?” The voice demands and every muscle that’s still working locks up at that voice.

I don’t understand why it’s so...cold and angry. So unyielding yet I feel strangely drawn to it with my entire being.

“Why, Star?” A heated whisper washes over me.

Star...

He just called me Star! Only one person in this entire world has ever called me that and he isn’t here. My heart starts pounding painfully and I feel like I’m shutting down but in that moment, a burst of energy hits me and I fight to open my eyes.

“Open those gorgeous eyes right fucking now! If you’re going to go, then fucking say goodbye properly!” the voice demands, with so much anger and broken passion. But the heavy, weary sadness... I can’t get past that.

This person, he talks as if he’s in pain. As if that pain was caused by...me.

Oh, God.

I struggle to open my eyes as I feel myself being moved and suddenly, I feel like I’ve just been laid over something cold. Then I feel a lot of pressure being applied to my stomach.

“Open your eyes, beautiful. Let me see you,” He begs this time, his voice catching at the end. “Let me see those stars.”

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

"I won't let you leave me! I don't fucking choose a life without you in it, even when you did," he keeps going, pressure intensifying in my stomach. I want to open my mouth and tell him to stop.

I want to tell him that it's too late.

But as soon as I open my mouth a violent torrent comes up my throat and he flips me over until my head is now stuck in the toilet, retching my guts out. And it's so damn painful.

"Stop...", I protest weakly. I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to feel all the things that ravage me, tossing me to the violent winds constantly, anymore.

The intense sadness.

The acute loss.

The grief.

The nightmares.

The darkness.

The heartache.

The loneliness.

"Let me go," Tears start falling now but I'm moved again, more pressure being applied to my stomach, every part of me now sore, some parts numb and shutting down, others hyper aware of *him*...

"You'll fucking stay alive."

"But you...you hate me," My voice is groggy, doesn't sound like mine at all.

But the pain? That's mine.

The hurt? That's mine, too.

The pathetic longing for affection and attention from a boy who decided a long time ago that he was going to hurt me? That's definitely me.

~~*Star...how could you?*~~

How could I? What did he mean by that? How could I do what exactly?

"I got your notes," I start, needing to say this. "I'm sorry, but I did what you wanted."

"And you of all people know what I want, huh?" his voice is suddenly rough, angry with something else that I can't place.

"Yes," I whisper. *You wanted me to leave.*

“You hate me,” I croak out, not caring how I might look like to him right now. This isn’t how I wanted him to see me after all this time, but now that he’s here, nothing matters anymore.

That fact reverberates through me, ringing true each time.

“If you fight this, I promise, I’ll leave you alone,” He pleads, anguish coloring his voice. I can detect that kind of soul wrenching pain from anywhere. I’ve felt it all by myself all this time.

“Please open your eyes,” he pleads.

In that moment, I just want to see him. I want to see his gorgeous face for the last time before I go. I want him to see the love in my eyes. I want him to always know that I love him, that I have always loved him, even when I most definitely shouldn’t have.

I want him to know that he’s always been the one, right from the shaky start, even when we were too young to understand that or even appreciate it.

I know it’s Ace. I can feel it deep within my soul that it’s him.

No one touches me like he does. He touches me like I’ve always belonged to him. Without hesitation and with a sensual gentleness that one so young shouldn’t possess or know so intimately, but he does.

He touches me like he knows I need tenderness. yes. But right now, a firm denial of our harsh reality is needed.

He touches me like he...

No, he doesn’t love me.

But I do. I love him.

No one sees me as clearly as he does. His cold, angry, crystal blue gaze looking through me each time, probing my depths like they irritate, yet fascinate him. And now as my eyes flutter open, I wonder if he can see that I’ve given up, that I’m done with this life.

“No,” The denial is roughly worded, cutting through the thick slumber that has fallen over me. He sees the turbulent yet defeated acceptance in my eyes.

He hasn’t accepted it.

“Open them, damn you!” He growls as soon as my eyes flutter closed.

My eyes fly open at the vehemence in his voice and then it becomes a fight to keep them open, and another struggle not to see the look in his eyes as he looks down at me.

I try to reach up and palm his chiseled cheek; he looks so damn good. Time has been nothing but gracious to him. And why not, he’s a fucking

King. Nothing but the best for the Kings.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, then give him my best yet shaky smile—hoping that he can see everything that I want to say but can’t in my cloudy eyes.

He gasps just as the noise starts growing louder by the second as if an army of people are rushing to invade our personal space. I ignore that, savoring this final, painful moment, as dangerously icy and cold, captivating blue eyes connect with mine.

They pierce my walls. These eyes probe into me, seeing me and everything that I am. Everything that I lost. Everything that I don’t have anymore.

The strength that I lost.

The hope that I lost.

The life I lost...

I don’t have my boys anymore.

I don’t have *you*...anymore.

Then he leans in as the pain in my stomach intensifies, my consciousness slipping by the second. Darkness clouds in from my peripherals and I can’t keep my eyes open.

“I won’t hurt you anymore, just stay alive. The boys need you,” he pleads, watching me now, pushing tendrils of my hair out of the way. “Keep your heart beating.”

I can’t. I try to tell him. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. He looks down at me and I don’t know what he sees in my eyes. For that split second, I don’t want to die. I don’t want to go.

But it’s too late now.

“Hold on, I’ll make all the fear and pain go away.”

Chaos breaks through our little bubble. Before I lose sight of him, he presses a kiss to my forehead and whispers in my ear. I’m not sure if I heard that or maybe I wished it as darkness snatches me into its deep depths where nothing but coldness breeds.

“I love you...”

God, if that’s true, I want to stay alive for that.

I want that.

The last thing I remember is a hunger to live and a sad realization that I’m so desperate for crumbs from Ace that I wouldn’t mind doing his bidding just to hear him say that.

But that’s the thing about love, wasn’t it?

It was all a brazen, seductive figment of one's imagination...

CHAPTER SIX



“No matter what game life decides to play, you’ll always be the most powerful force in the game.”

Star’s softly spoken words from so long ago, yet it feels like it was just last night when we gave each other names that we didn’t even know would impact our lives this much—echo through the dark recesses of my mind, weakening my knees as if they are a lethal poison all of a sudden.

Am I though? Am I what she thinks of me? Am I what she sees when she looks at me—other than the monster who destroys her toys, the asshole that sees her tears as a declaration of war, desperately wanting to make sure that anyone who makes her cry, including myself, suffers the worst pain?

I feel like someone just doused me in gasoline. Maybe those were Star’s tears. I’ve always known that her tears are deadly, they bring out the worst in me. They make me see red. Those tears make the world spin out of control, the ground to quake and shift under my feet. But tonight, those tears were my undoing.

She destroyed me as soon as all the fucked up truths and lies were shot right at us.

“He did this to me because of you!”

I flinch, the words echoing in my head, messing me the fuck up. I need a damn drink.

“Fuck!”

I knew Larry got to her because of me, I have no doubt he knew that she was mine. But I wasn’t expecting her to fling the truth at me like that, breaking apart with that shit.

And now, I’m burning up so much, everything I touch is catching fire.

Friendships... all on fire, burning to ash.

My plan...burnt to hell.

Astraea...

But no, fire is good. It’s the symbol of destruction.

Fire destroys everything in its path but at the same time, fire purifies.

It forces us to rebuild, to start afresh and make everything better. I wish I believed that shit, but I don’t. Because I know fire is a powerful symbol for damnation—and I’ve been damned right from the moment I decided I wanted her for myself.

Fire made everything insignificant. I guess that’s the beauty of it all. Fire consumes everything and nothing stands a chance against it. Everything is vulnerable to fire, nothing and no one can escape. And if you do, you’ll have the evidence to show for it.

Burned fingers, charred skin, something always burns into ash.
Something that hurts.

Because fire always has evidence.

No scratch that, I like setting shit on fire.

My favorite thing in the world, was setting shit on fire. All I had to do was light the match and watch that shit burn as I chug down a cool beer.

It takes one strike to burn a barn. It takes a few of those matches to burn down a house. I was about to set fire to my father’s backyard.

Philip King, the self-proclaimed king over Westbrook Blues. The asshole thought himself invincible, confident and foolishly assured in the fact that his plans are going according to plan. He can’t smell the burning of his own castle.

“Alex,” Denise’s gasp bounces off the walls of the large foyer as the big, imported oak front door of the mansion bangs against the wall with so much force, I bet she felt it in her cold ass soul.

“Slow down, sweetie,” she cautions, making me roll my eyes. “What’s going on?” she questions, but I ignore her.

“Alex, where have you been?” my mother questions as I stride past her. She wavers in her pointy heels as she pivots to follow me.

“I thought you would be happy, now you can get the girl,” she continues, following me as I go.

“Oh please, don’t pretend like you want me to be with her,” I say, shooting her a glance over my shoulder as I keep going. “Am I wrong?”

Silence greets me and that’s my confirmation. Yeah, thought as much.

My mother wasn’t a champion for whatever messed up relationship I had with Astraea. Hell, she found out what happened to the girl I love all those years ago and then she...

I freeze, as a thought passes through my head. Fuck!

“You know I think you can do better than her and in time you’ll see that she’s nothing more than a common girl, just like her mother,” Denise goes on, sipping her wine, unaware that I’m frozen in place. “I’m sure with time you’ll see for yourself that she isn’t worth it and I’m also positive that you’ll find someone suitable for you. Someone who won’t destroy your future.”

I listen to the bitterness in her voice, the aloofness in the way she just dismisses my feelings towards said girl, but she just goes on, unaware that I’m completely unhinged tonight.

She goes on. “I bet she even hiked up her slutty skirts and spread her knees for...”

“Me!” I growl quietly as I turn around to face her head on.

She gasps, unconsciously taking a few steps back as she takes in the look on my face. I would have smirked at that cowardice move but not tonight.

“Astraea is mine and I’m the only one who will ever have her and it’s not because of who you think she is, all the names you like to call her. But it’s because she allowed me to! God knows what she sees in me or why she lets me, but it’s always been her and I!” I seethe, watching her. “She isn’t for everyone. Unlike some people,” I say and she has the decency to look away. We both know what I’m fucking talking about.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” she whispers, looking from left to right. Huh, looks like Denise doesn’t want Philip to find out about her discretions and illicit, disgusting affairs with other men.

Why is that?

“Tell me something mother dearest,” I start, my tone soft, even a bit cheerful. But inside, I’m anything but. “I’m sure you don’t want Dad to

know about all your explicit escapades with... oops, I forgot. How many men were there?" I question, taunting her.

"I remember the three assholes in suits. Those were Dad's business associates, or competition, weren't they? You know the ones he hates because they aren't selling their companies to him?" I tap my chin, pretending to think about it. "I bet you also know that he absolutely hates—but really envies—those assholes that you fucked, am I right?"

I shoot her a tight smile, watching as she swallows, her lips pressed into a fine line. How is this cold, calculated woman my mother? Why did I luck out on life like this? Could I have been a better man if I had a better mother? Would Star have loved me?

I halt my thoughts right there. I don't have the time or the luxury to dwell on 'what ifs'. They do nothing for me anyway. No point in wasting time over things I can't change.

"Oh, and then there was the senator of..."

"Shut your damn mouth right now!" She threatens, fear coating her skin in sweat.

Why are you sweating, mother?

Let's dig a little deeper and press on those shameful wounds, shall we?

"He cheats on you, why aren't you angry about that?" I question and she takes a large gulp from her wine, not saying a word. "Instead, you're not even the slightest bit surprised when you find him with one of your friends—oh wait, you don't have friends," I chuckle.

My mother is a cold, hard woman who thinks she doesn't need anyone to get where she wants. She's friendless, considers people a threat, and I know she wants me to be just like her. Friendless and alone.

"Royalty doesn't need friends. They only make you weak," she starts with a cynical smile on her face now.

Of course, she's never wanted me to be friends with the boys—especially the Fields twins...

"Yeah, just like your best friend made you weak. Ditched you in an orphanage, she got a better life. Then later in life, she fucked your husband," I watch her growing angry by the second, her eyes narrowing, her freshly manicured fingers tightening around the stem of the crystal wine glass in her hand. I smirk then.

The subject of Amanda Fields—or whoever the hell she is—presses my mother so hard, the vicious hate in her bleak soul lights her eyes now.

“Why aren’t you mad that Dad fucked Amanda?” I taunt, but the blunt truth is, she’s hellishly mad. “Why didn’t you do anything?” I drop my voice to a soft, sympathetic cadence as I go in for the kill, fury rising in me with the thought of what my mother might have done four years ago.

“Is it because you don’t care or is there something else?” I question, studying the twitching of her face. I raise an eyebrow, waiting for a response but none comes, making me chuckle. She remains mute, like a doll, not saying a word.

“Does the great Philip King know that his wife was sleeping with another man right under his bloody roof? A man he actually trusted? Because we all know how excruciating it is to gain his trust,” I step forward, watching her closely. She starts trembling and my fists clench. How the fuck did she manage to hide it?

“Does Dad know about you and his friend, *Larry*?”

A gasp leaves her, and she works hard not to drop the now empty wine glass in her hands.

“How?” A flabbergasted look of shock on her face as she watches me, with something close to fear in her eyes.

“What? How did I know that you fucked the man that crept into my room at night?”

No matter how much I try, I can’t keep the humiliation and the agitation or the boiling fury and grief out of my voice but that’s another thing. Something else—or rather, someone—is at the forefront of my mind. Hell, my whole damn life.

“Tell me this, Denise,” I start, walking closer to a woman who has done nothing but stand aside as all manners of hell happened to me when she was supposed to be my mother. A fearless protector, watching over me—but she never did.

“When you sent away a little fourteen-year-old girl, you knew what had happened to her?” I question but she already told me this. But as she looks me in the eyes, her entire Tom Ford - or is it Balenciaga?-clad frame shaking slightly as she tries to keep herself in check. I know she sees it coming.

“Alex, let it go...”

“You knew, didn’t you?” I repeat, fighting to keep control.

“Nothing good will come out of...”

“You fucking knew!”

“Yes!” She gasps out. “I heard the doctors talking and I saw the report,” she admits, her voice now a hoarse whisper as a look of faux devastation crosses her face. I snort, disgusted by her.

“Please, save the theatrics, Denise,” I growl as I step closer to her because I’m not done.

“How did you know that something had happened to Astraëa? According to her, you were one of the first people to get to the hospital.”

Star isn’t a liar. Hell, she would gladly walk through hell if that was a way to be truthful. Which is why I know she’ll never forgive me for all of this fucked up mess.

The lies.

The betrayal she believes I caused her.

Fuck!

“I...,” Denise trembles and I wait.

“You also knew something else, didn’t you?”

She starts backing away again, shaking her head as she goes, as if that will take away what she did, the truth she kept to herself this whole time.

“Tell me you didn’t...,” I start, a deep sense of helplessness falling over my shoulders, the weight of the nightmare threatening to overwhelm me.

“Tell me you didn’t know all this time that he did that to her?”

I watch her, forcing each word out because I think I swallowed a ball coated in sandpaper, everything hurts. Everything.

“Alex...”

“Your fucking fuck boy molested, brutalized and savagely raped a little girl and you knew who it was!” I roar, unable to stop myself. Unable to control the tremors in my body or the way I’m stretched tight like a rubber band.

She drops the glass then, her hands flying to her chest and mouth as if she’s about to dry heave all over her century Persian ottoman that is strangely in the middle of the great foyer.

“Oh God, Alex. I wasn’t sure...”

“Yet you rushed to the hospital because in your fucked-up soul, you knew! And then you had the guts to look me in the eye and say that there were letters brought to the house, letters that you no doubt made up!” I point at her.

“I didn’t make up the threats,” she cries out but I’ve heard enough.

“Yet you knew who they were coming from and still you did nothing!” I can’t control the dread filling up in my stomach no more than I can control the direction this night has taken. “You knew he...”

I can’t do this.

I turn away from my mother, in fear that I might do something that I’m not sure I’ll regret. It’s one thing that she was never really my mother but it’s totally another to actively sabotage my life like this. Forget the biological relationship we grudgingly share, what about being a decent human being and report a suspect that committed such an inhumane, cruel crime against a young girl? Against me?

What about that?

But as I go up the stairs, going in search of the man I came here for, I think better of it and turn back to look at her. The dead look in my eyes makes her flinch. I almost smile.

“I lost a lot tonight,” I start, and she takes a deep breath, as if to steady herself. This is the most honest I’ve ever been to a woman that I doubt ever breast fed me—maybe that was a good thing. “I lost more than you’ll ever know and that’s just made me a vindictive son of a bitch—yes you’re the bitch in this equation—but I’ll never forgive you for protecting Larry for what he did to her.”

Our eyes are locked, she doesn’t look away and that’s good. I need her to understand this. I need her to prepare for the epic finalé. Her finalé.

“I’ll never forgive you for what he did to me, when I was too young to defend myself,” my voice is steady now and that’s when she looks away, unconsciously stepping on the broken glass around her feet. I shouldn’t have had to defend myself against a pedophile predator. They should have known, they should have listened, but they never did.

“Alex, you don’t mean that,” she starts, stepping forward, something shining in her eyes, but I ignore that. “Surely you don’t mean to be so cruel to your mother...”

But I do. And she can see that on my face.

“I never want to hear a single word about Astraea coming out of your filthy mouth. You might be my mother, but she is my everything and *nothing* compares to that.”

She gasps again, flinching as if I physically slapped her across her plastic, updated face. My jaw tightens. I clamp my mouth shut and turn away from her.

Tonight, I want answers.

“Alex, sweetie...”

“Don’t you dare call me that either!” I shoot over my shoulder as I go. I hate that one word, loathe it with everything in me.

“But...Alex?” she calls and I ignore her as if I hadn’t heard her. Right now, she might as well be invisible as she has been absent my entire life. Physically she was here but everything else that mattered, everything that makes a mother—she wasn’t.

“Alex?” she calls again. I turn and stare at her. I don’t know what she sees in my eyes but she finches then takes two steps back, glass crunching under her shoes, clutching her delicate gold necklace that’s as superficial as her plastic face.

I walk past her and start walking down the large foyer as quietly as I can. I don’t bother making a sound. I just remain cool, composed for when I close that door.

I hear the shuffling of papers, then his low baritone voice that sounds so damn archaic as if he’s a king, issuing out his decrees to his subjects.

Philip King thinks he lives in a fictional, made-up place, where he’s the ruler overall. To him, what he says goes. But I heard what Syrus Easton said tonight. My father might act like all of this is his, but I remember our conversation in the elevator earlier today after I left Astraea at school, her taste and smell still on me after angrily fingering her as if that would make her see what’s going on.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Hours before...

“Well done, my boy,” Philip King says, as he watches me with a calculating eye. We’re in the elevator of the hospital on our way up to the surgery floor.

“It’s not done yet,” I murmur, ignoring his heavy pat on my shoulder. I can barely look at him, with fear that he might see the hate and ire in me growing with his arrogant proximity to me. I’m about to burn a lot of bridges by doing what I’m doing but I don’t give a fuck. I’d make a deal with the devil himself just to keep Emmett alive, but something tells me, this fucking game is far from over.

“Oh, but it is. Everything is going according to plan,” he chuckles, enjoying himself. “I can’t wait to see the look on Syrus’ face when he realizes that, with his only son gone, he just lost everything,” he says.

“Maybe he won’t be there,” I murmur but I know better. Syrus Easton will be there, if his son’s plan—that I stupidly agreed to way before I ever knew that he had his health issues—holds any water. “He hasn’t cared about his son, not once.”

Syrus Easton is a piece of work, an asshole who doles out fists for punishment to a six-year-old boy and his mother. He doesn’t care about

anything that doesn't have dollar signs on it or if said thing doesn't have the continuation of his legacy as its main focus. And in this case, Emmett was the continuation of the Easton legacy. And in order for us to find out what the hell he's up to, I know damn well that he'll be here today, just as Emmett assured.

I just hope the motherfucker is still alive or else I'm owing more than I'm willing to pay. Not that his life particularly means something to me when he...

"No, that sonofabitch will be there. I made sure of that," Philip says with a chuckle.

Of course, you did, you, filthy asshole.

Nothing goes past Philip King. Least of all something as mundane as inviting his enemies to witness him destroying their lineage.

"Why are you doing this?" I question him, keeping my voice cool and indifferent. But my body is coiled so tight, my fists clenched to the point of pain as I try not to grab him by the back of his drab, silk suit that fits him as much as a tight dress fits a hooker.

"Are you having second thoughts now, son?" He questions, eyeing me like he knows something's up.

I'm not your son—not in all the ways that count anyway.

"No, just making sure your head isn't too full with some shit like 'another man is better than you'. You know, the kind of shit that makes you jealous of Syrus?" I grit out, baiting him at the same time.

And true to form, he bites. Hard.

"Syrus is not better than me!" He seethes as he turns around to look at me. "And I'm certainly not jealous of that prick."

Ego.

That's what will bring my father down.

"If anything, Syrus is beneath me! I gave him everything that he has. Everything that he is—I made him! And I'll have the satisfaction of taking it all away from him," he growls.

See, the thing with my dearest, loving father is that he had a serious god-complex which was so pathetic, but it also made him just as ruthless, materialistic and carnal—just like Syrus.

But killing off Emmett? No, something else is going on.

"So, murdering his son is your way of doing just that, huh?" I question, rolling my eyes as the elevator stops on the second floor. We need to get to

the fourth floor.

The doors start opening as slowly as the damn old thing has been moving for the past hour, like a snail with herpes.

I need to get out of here but not as much as I need ammo against this asshole.

“Yes,” he says, looking proud of himself.

“If you wanted to get to Syrus, you could have done that by now,” I say, ignoring his dark, twisted humor.

“True. But son, it’s all about timing,” He answers, keeping his tone light and cheery.

Yes, timing.

There’s something about this particular time that has all my senses on high alert as if someone chained a ticking time bomb to my ankle. And no matter what I do, no matter how much I try to distance myself from it, the damn thing is still attached to me, and I know the one person I care about most—the one girl I can’t shake out of my system, no matter what I do—is going to get fucking hurt.

“So murdering Emmett will ensure, what exactly?” I demand, getting antsy, knowing damn well that Astraea will be walking through the front hospital doors in less than five minutes. I made sure that Noah got a text about all this shit. He’ll bring her here and all hell will break loose.

“Dominance, of course! Keep up, son. You have an important role to play,” He waves a hand carelessly in the air, as if he’s about to decree some shit in his kingdom.

“What does that even mean? You planned out this shit all by yourself, you obviously didn’t need me to end someone’s life,” I say, thinking of the call I had with Denise.

“Aww, how suave of you, thinking you never had any part in this. You sealed your fate a long time ago when you were born a fucking King,” he says, his voice dropping to a temperature that makes my jaw lock.

“And what’s to stop Syrus from retaliating?” I question, facing our dim reflections on the elevator doors. “What’s to stop him from getting rid of me to get even with you?” I question.

It’s not a fear of mine right now and I do know men like Syrus Easton. Getting their hands stained with blood isn’t their thing—but hostile takeovers? Now that’s more like it. I wonder what kind of hostile takeover he’s been planning for my father...

Snakes are snakes, yes, but they thrive in different environments.

“Syrus is a fool, but a smart fool nonetheless. He won’t have the balls to do anything to you. Not that a man like you, with your...reputation in this town, can be dragged down by some invalid like Syrus,” he says, rolling his eyes like a fucking sorority bitch-boy.

“But even if he does, he won’t succeed,” he says, a hand now planted casually in his suit pants pocket, with the other now rubbing his chin as a contemplative look enters his eyes.

My father is still brewing a plan.

It’s so clear to see and his reluctance to share tells me everything that I need to know. Still, I need proof. So, I’m going to play the role I’ve executed so well over the years.

Being a fucking asshole.

Not just any asshole. A conniving asshole. I am after all, my father’s son.

“I want no part in this,” I start, my voice casual as if I’m talking about the fucking weather. “I won’t have a hand in his murder,” I say, looking straight ahead at the doors as we reach the fourth floor.

I can feel his gaze on my profile. I can feel his anger growing and morphing in this enclosure.

Yeah, that’s it, asshole. Get angry and let’s see how far you’ll go. Let’s see if you’ll undo your belt and use it right here, right now. Let’s play.

But instead, he lets out a small, humorless chuckle.

“God, I was wondering when you’d show your true colors,” he starts with a cool voice as if he’s finally dropping his act. Gone is the cheerful, taunting in his voice. He’s back to his normal, archaic asshole self.

“Your charade was boring me to death. For a moment there, I actually believed that you were on my side,” he chuckles, glancing at me for a split second.

Yeah, two can play at this fucked up game alright. I snort and he grows silent.

“What makes you think I’d ever be on your side?” I question, a small chilling chuckle leaving me and he tenses. Good. “Don’t tell me you want a father-son relationship this late in your almost expired life?”

He tenses even more, then turns to look at me head on as the elevator dings. The doors slowly opening.

“See, I knew you were too much of a weakling. No way were you going to be a fucking man, be the King that so many would kill to be. I knew you weren’t ready to go through with the plan to get rid of Syrus’ abomination of a seed. So, I took precautionary measures.”

Precautionary measures?

I tense up and he starts laughing.

“I’ve had my eye on you for a long time, boy. I know all about your little business. I know about the illegal racing. I know about the fighting ring,” he starts as the doors start opening.

The condescending tone in his voice irks me the wrong way but it also reminds me of his more creative ways of showing me the error of my ways. The times he would call me into his office and forced me to kneel and not make a fucking sound—the way he would whip me harder if I so much as made a mistake of letting a tear fall down my cheeks.

“Kings are made of sterner stuff than water works, boy”.

I can still hear those words loud and clear. And now as I stare at him, everything in me starts shifting, demanding to be felt—wanting me to do something about all of this.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say as I start walking out of the elevator but he stops me with a firm hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t play dumb with me, son. I taught you better than to be a common liar,” he seethes. “You’ve been staining my name all over town, but I have to hand it to you, your most recent activities are stellar! Award winning, really!” he says with a slow clap.

I turn around to look at him. My father is the same height as I am. With the same inky black hair that I’m sure he has done up to keep the grey hidden, as if that will stop time from doing its thing.

But as I look into his eyes, it’s then that I see it. My father is too cocky, too sure of himself and relaxed in this. That can only mean one thing.

He’s got something on me.

“See, that night that I showed you that live footage of your dearest best friend, planning and conniving in to take your girl, I knew you would use your dick to think and would go to that hospital room—in fact, I was counting on your hot-headedness.”

“What did you do?” I question, my nostrils flaring as my fists clench at my sides.

“Why, I simply laid back and watched you hand me the evidence I needed to make sure that if you step out of line in any way, you were going to regret it,” he seethes, watching me and then he looks down at my fists. “Hmm, I see those knuckles are still busted and that poor boy’s face is still swollen,” he tsks.

“What. Have. You. Done?” I demand again, forcing the words out of my gritted teeth.

“Well, I just made sure that when they kill the boy, it’ll be evident that he was murdered—after they do an autopsy, of course. It just so happens that Dr. Hans—the good doctor who is right now doing what I paid him to do—signed a confession that he’ll leave behind when he’s done with life.”

Done with life?

Holy shit!

I knew my father was in a class of his own when it comes to being a manipulative shithead but this, this is extreme.

“He’s going to commit suicide,” I state, watching as his eyes light up. He doesn’t say a word, but that silence only confirms the picture I’m seeing. A picture that he’s been painting all along.

“And in the confession, he’s going to say that I paid him to kill Emmett Easton,” I finish. He starts smiling then, a wicked glint in his eyes.

“Now you see it!” he exclaims, dramatically. “Yes, everything points back to you, son!” he chuckles.

“The 1.5 million dollars that sits in Dr. Hans offshore account, it’s traced back to you. I mean everyone knows you’re wealthy and can afford a hit on your enemies,” he whispers now, watching me.

I remain silent, this new information soaking in. I should have known better. Should have seen that my father had a plan B all along.

“And that video footage from the other night, it shows you beating up the boy, quite ruthlessly, might I add and then you threatened his life! I’m sure if they need witnesses, that girl of yours will be ready to send you off to prison for a really long time. You know, when she finds out you killed her husband-to-be,” he finishes, his eyes now cool, hard and threatening.

Everything in me stills and drops to the floor like a bag of cement. I can see the merriment in his eyes, the mirth, the evil lurking there. He simply has no remorse. As I stare at him, I feel like I’m seeing a mirror image of myself.

He was the image that people saw when they looked at me. When people looked at me, they saw him and now as I look at him—I see myself.

Fuck.

“So, let me get this straight,” I start, watching him as if he’s nothing, as if everything he just said doesn’t mean shit to me. “You have a recording of that night with the fight with Emmett?”

“Haven’t you been paying attention to a word I just said?” he questions with a smirk on his face.

“Do you have the footage or not?” I demand again, needing to make sure.

“You mean the one where you press a poor boy with heart defects to the floor and punched the shit out of him, yelling bloody murder, making it clear that you were going to kill him? That recording?” he questions, looking every bit a clown asshole that he’s trying so hard to be but then the smile vanishes.

“Yes. I have it and I have no problem with showing it to the authorities.”

“Unless what?” I murmur.

With my father, there’s always a price. There’s always something that he has over someone else in order for them to do his bidding. I just need to know what the fuck he intends for me to do for him.

“Well, it’s simple really, it’s not as complex as you might think.”

“Get to the fucking point,” I bite out, unable to keep the anger from pouring out of me as my body trembles slightly with the need to end his fucking life.

“You see, I’m expecting everything to go according to plan,” he starts, now striding over to the waiting room, his voice low but stern. “Your friend Emmett will die today—actually, I received a notification five minutes ago—he’s gone.”

I pause, my breath catching. Fuck, I hope Marie came through...

“So, what next?” I question, keeping my voice plain and uninterested.

“Next up, dealing with Easton because as we both know, he’s about to put one hell of a fight,” he says, shooting me a look.

“And so, you want me to what? Be your bodyguard?” I mock, rolling my eyes. I have zero respect for this man—there’s nothing in me that honors him as a father—but when it comes to orchestrating shit to blow up and destroy lives, I have to hand it to him, he’s the best at it.

So, it won’t hurt when his life blows up in epic proportions too.

“Don’t be such a smart mouth, son. I simply want you to be ready, alert and make sure that when Syrus cries that there’s a snake in the chicken coup, you’ll discredit him.”

I pause. Is that really all he wants me to do? That can’t be it.

“Is that it?” I question, watching him.

“Yes, and oh, to keep you little friends in line because next up is the youngest Montreal,” he chuckles, now rubbing his hands with an excitement that I don’t understand.

“You’re going to get rid of him too? Permanently?” I question, the words coming out of gritted teeth.

“Well, it really depends, you know. With Dave out of the picture, I’m not really sure how everything will go just yet.”

The waiting room is bustling with a muted kind of energy. There’s a flurry of activity, but it’s also calm in a way that reiterates the fact that we’re in a hospital where the fates of different lives are not certain.

My fate, for one.

The fate of the Blue Boys.

The fate of my girl and I, especially after the whole Brittney shit earlier. Fuck!

“So, here’s the thing. Mr. fucking Easton will reign down on us in less than a minute. He’ll be hurt, wounded, grieving the loss of his power and reign in this town because he just lost his only heir and thus, my dear son, is when the claims will start.”

Claims that his son was murdered. And I have no doubt that Syrus will know by who’s hand his son was murdered.

“And with all the outrageous claims that are about to be flung at us, there won’t be any short of fingers to use in pointing the culprit--or the murderer,” he says, watching me seriously.

“He’s going to blame you, surely you know that,” I mutter, not giving a damn about that but wanting to see where this goes.

“I’m sure he will start with me,” he smirks as if he can’t wait for that confrontation. Then he starts walking again towards the nurse’s station. “I, of course, am a model citizen of this thriving, prosperous town. I uphold the law. I mean, I keep the fine folk of Westbrook Blues and beyond in jobs. My name is spotless and so, whatever he says, it won’t hold up.”

Yet it will definitely hold up on me. Yeah, we had a pretty solid father-son relationship, no doubt.

“I’ll be a good father. Protect you and keep you out of harm’s way,” he says, clapping my back with solid, hard thumps that are meant to cause pain, but he should know by now, I feel nothing.

“But if you so much as go against me or do anything that will hinder this operation...,” his voice drops to a low timber, watching me from the corner of his eye, but I ignore him.

“That is all up to you, of course. I mean, when I ordered the hit on the boy...guess what I did?”

I remain deathly still but I’m listening, connecting all the dots.

“You’re no fun. Anyway, I made the call through a line that’ll trace back to you!” he exclaims, clapping his hands, watching me with a cold smile on his face.

We stare at each other for what seems like forever. I don’t blink, I don’t show a single sign of emotion, but I do call his bluff.

“Seriously? And you think that will hold any weight?” I question.

“Oh, couple that with everything else. The confession from the good doctor, the video footage of you beating that boy to a pulp...you should see someone for that anger issue you have, son,” he says smoothly and again, I’m reminded that I’m so much like him, it’s almost uncanny, it makes me sick to my stomach at the same time.

“Besides, I know something else. Amanda just re-opened a little case with the police and that, will probably lead back to you, if her plan works out.”

Amanda?

Emmett believes that Star’s mother has been working with Syrus on some shit—and that the fact that she’s now having George’s case re-opened...that’s not a coincidence. Coincidences don’t happen in Westbrook Blues.

“What does that have to do with me?” I question, my blood pumping against my veins with a ferocity that threatens to give me blood clots if I’m not careful.

“Oh, haven’t you heard? Your girlfriend didn’t tell you? What a shame,” he chuckles.

What the fuck does that mean? What does Astraea know that she hasn’t told me about? I have no idea where all this shit is going but if there’s one thing I’m certain of, it’s that I’m being screwed from all angles.

“So, be a good boy. I’d hate to visit you behind bars for murder because you couldn’t contain your jealousy and that was all after murdering that poor Fields boy—oh and that was great that he died when he did! Saves me a lot of time. I’ve just got one more to take care of, then everything will be great.”

And with that, he turns to talk to the nurse, leaving me stewing in muddy thoughts, breathing hard as if I was in a fight with a wild, relentless bull that’s hell bent on destroying me.

There’s no doubt in my mind now. My father doesn’t trust me. He knows more about what I’ve been doing all these years under his nose. And most of all, he just admitted to wanting to get rid of Noah as well.

But, if he didn’t have George murdered. Then who the fuck did?

Hell, is George even dead?

“Let the games begin to end,” he declares, with a wink.

CHAPTER EIGHT



I burst into his office, the double door hitting the walls with a startling thud as I stroll in like I own the place, not caring that I just threw one of the double doors off its hinges. He's rich, he can have that replaced in a heartbeat.

"What the...", he starts but as soon as he sees me coming, a wide smile appears on his face as if I'm his favorite person in the world.

Fucking asshole.

"Well done, son," he chuckles, as he leisurely pours himself a glass, then another, with three fingers of scotch.

Why did he have two glasses already waiting on his desk? It's almost as if he knew I was coming. Or maybe, he was expecting someone else to join him in a celebratory toast?

"Well done, huh?" I question, trying to keep the anger in check.

Trying to stay under control, I take in deep breaths and visualize an image of Astraea smiling as she looks up at the stars in the sky. She's all I see. The entire world just falls away, making her my sole focus.

"Yes. The bastard's son is dead. He just transferred the rights of power to his Westbrook ownership, all his companies and wealth over to me and will

now be moving to Iowa or something,” he says, raising a glass as he extends the other to me.

I stare at it then back at him.

“It’s that easy huh?” I question, my voice raw and hoarse. I shouldn’t be having this conversation with him. Not now anyway, when my mind is buzzing with images of Star.

“Why yes, it was that easy,” he smirks, taking a sip of his poison, watching me.

“He just gave everything to you, then?” I question again, feeling the oddness of the entire situation. Syrus Easton, who went out screaming and kicking, just gave Philip King a win?

“Congratulations are in order then,” my tone is dry, sarcastic as hell. “Did you want us to throw him a going away party in conjunction to his son’s funeral?”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary. I already took care of that. After all, he is my oldest friend,” he raises his glass to me, then. “A toast.”

“To what?” I question, forcing myself to step forward and accept the other glass, trying to fake this camaraderie with my father, knowing damn well that his backyard is on fire.

“To enemies finally being vanquished and the strongest, fittest of them all, rising to supremacy,” he says.

“There’s so much wrong with everything you just said,” I state, keeping eye contact with him.

“What? You think Kings were born to share?” he mocks. “Tell me, were you two boys going to share that poor girl? Is that how you young people do it nowadays and call it something as ludicrous as love?”

I tense up again, thinking of that night when I walked in on Emmett and Star kissing. No matter what I do, I can’t wash that image out of my eyelids. It fucking drives me insane with rage to the point where I wish I could gorge out my eyes with a salad fork. It would hurt way less.

“I’m surprised you even know that word,” I say instead, dropping into the chair directly across from him. “Can you spell it?” I taunt with an easy smile on my face.

“You’d be surprised at what I can spell,” he counters, watching me as he sips his drink.

“Spare me the gory details of what you can spell,” I twist my face in disgust. “But I do want to know something, just to be on the safe side with

Easton and everything that went down tonight,”

“I’m sure you have questions,” he says, settling more comfortably in his large chair. “Out with it then.”

“What did Syrus mean earlier?” I start, deciding to get straight to the point with this jerk.

Watching him, his body language, the way he carries himself. He remains stiff for the most part but I notice the slight twitch in his hand.

“What did he mean by what?” he questions but something about his poker face doesn’t seem right or confident. He knows what I’m talking about.

“Who was he talking about?”

“Syrus says a lot of things, but that doesn’t mean all that blubber makes any sense let alone, the truth,” he waves his hand dismissively, but I don’t miss the stiffness of his body or the way he avoids looking at me as he looks down into his drink.

Hmm.

But in the next second as if he thought better of it, he looks up at me. “He wasn’t talking about anyone significant.”

I swear if I didn’t know any better, I’d say it looks like the great Philip King is more than a little rattled.

“Insignificant, huh?” I question, making a mental note to pay my respects to Syrus—not that he’ll be needing them because soon his son will rise from the dead.

“Yes. That old asshole was just making it seem like we have a bigger threat when we don’t,” my father says, taking a large gulp of his drink, then quickly pouring another one.

A threat? What kind of threat has you rattled like this then, dear old Dad?

“Educate me, then,” I start, chugging away at the scotch in the glass until the glass is empty, well aware that my fucking father shouldn’t be offering me alcohol. But like always, he doesn’t care.

I lean back into the chair as I grab the decanter with scotch. I open that shit and chug away, ignoring the burn in my throat. Wiping my mouth, I look him directly in the eyes, watching him fight not to squirm or look away.

“Syrus said the one who owns Westbrook Blues is coming,” I start, my voice hoarse. “What did he mean by that?” I demand, watching him.

He chuckles then, leaning back into his own chair, watching me over the rim of his reading glasses that he takes off now. “All the books I had you read and you’re still so dumb.”

“My genes aren’t particularly stellar,” I shoot right back, with a shrug.

“Westbrook Blues is more than what people think,” he starts after a long pause. “It isn’t just a wealthy town where the biggest, toughest motherfuckers live up in the hills. It’s not just about money or power—even though all that is important and we have it—but this place, it’s the Mecca for the underground world.”

Everything in me freezes, my breath stutters to a dead stop and my heart starts pounding even faster.

“What the fuck?”

“You never saw that one coming, huh?” He starts laughing as if he just pulled one over me. Then I watch as he gets up from his chair and starts pacing in agitation.

“So, in other words, this is a crime town?” I start.

“Every city in the world, every town that has as much wealth as this always has crime in it—but not your everyday, rookie, daylight shooting rubbish and drugs in the sewers, no. Deep in the underbelly of these cities, there are true, hardcore criminals who wear the most expensive suits, pay their fair share of taxes—and still have taxpayer’s dollars fund their production of arms and have politicians as their puppets,” he explains, pacing back and forth.

“And Westbrook is such a town?” I question, curious despite myself. It’s been clear right from the start but I never saw it coming.

“Well, it used to be,” he answers, reaching over for his drink with a shaky hand.

“Everyone in this God-forsaken town thinks that this city is drug-free, crime-free, nothing but a beautiful, clean town with a wealthy population. But the truth is, every single one of these motherfuckers that live in this city, they all have dirty money in their offshore bank accounts.”

Dirty money?

“Dirty money bought their mansions and estates. Dirty money pays for their plastic surgeries, the stocks they buy and think they keep afloat. Dirty money keeps their fucking yachts docked in Monaco, the private islands they own, the race teams they fund,” he spits out, pacing the length of his office and back.

“Dirty money built your fucking school. It’s the roof over your fucking head. It’s the jobs that we provide to the folk from the Valley, feeding their children and providing a cycling motion where their children and their children’s children keep working for us. Dirty, bloodied money built Westbrook Blues from the ground.”

“How?” I question, taking advantage of his rambling—a clear sign that his mind is racing.

“Well nothing ever builds itself now does it, Alexander?” he chuckles, his hand shaking as he gulps half the contents of his drink back without wincing.

“You see, we’re not gods. There are kings that rule—us. There are bishops and knights that defend and keep the game going. Of course, the pawns matter but fucking forget about the queen. She doesn’t do a thing, she doesn’t matter because she brings not a damn thing to the table in this game,” he growls.

Yet, it seems like said queens are the reason why we’re all playing.

“If we’re not gods, then who created all this shit,” I question, watching him closely as he takes a deep breath as if to calm himself.

“No one that matters because they don’t have power over this shit,” he dismisses, turning to look at me.

Really? If that’s true, why are you so out of your element, looking like you’re about to piss your pants, dearest Dad?

“So, there is a ‘someone’,” I say slowly, taking another swig of the aged scotch as he paces. He doesn’t say a thing but that’s the answer I need. There is a top dog in all of this. The alpha creator of Westbrook Blues.

And that man is coming back.

“So, what does all this have to do with eliminating Emmett? What do you gain by getting everything the Eastons own?” I question, my voice hard because suddenly, it all doesn’t make one drop of sense.

“They never deserved a single thing that he got. See, I’ve made many sacrifices to be here in this town. And I won’t let anyone get in the way of what I have going on here. Of the establishment that I’m trying to stabilize and grow.”

“You mean some goat and chickens sacrificing cult you’re trying to join?” I murmur, keeping my voice indifferent, not knowing if I’m correct or not but like a hungry, clueless fish, he bites the worm.

“A cult?” he starts laughing, taking a sip of his drink then he starts coughing. “It’s so much more than some stupid cult, boy. It’s power. Untamed, unlimited world dominating power.”

Everything always comes down to power with this man.

“Did Syrus want to join this...group of power hungry assholes too?” At this point, I can’t keep the bitterness out of my voice as much as I can’t stop drinking. Yet the alcohol doesn’t numb anything –instead, it gives way to a deeper need in me to be with Astraea right now.

“Easton is a pathetic man. He thinks he’s been playing the same game as me, thinking the rules are the same. Him and that bitch, Amanda thought they were smart.”

I don’t miss the way he practically spits out Amanda’s name. As if there’s a story there too.

“Hell, Syrus can’t even get his head out of the gutter to realize that we’re in the big leagues and anything can happen.”

Including killing off people’s sons.

“Pathetic, isn’t it?” Philip says, shaking his head in faux sympathy.

Not as pathetic as you’ll be when I’m done with you, sir.

“So, what’s the purpose of all this then?” I question because my father might be many things, but he isn’t stupid

“Oh, I thought it was clear to see, son. Your presence here is to show the world that the Kings are rising.”

Seriously? How pathetic is that?

“I knew you were a piece of work right from the start but a liar too?” I shake my head, cleaning off the rest of his scotch in one last swig.

“But son, we’re cut from the same cloth. You’re just as much of a conniving bastard as I am, if not more so,” he shoots back, with a smirk on his face. “Everything I trained you to do, making nice with those boys, then later becoming solid friends? That’s how you study your enemy. Know their weaknesses and their issues that you can exploit later.”

I remain silent, anger making me shiver in the chair.

“No doubt you already know just how to destroy that Montreal boy. And that’s what I need you to do next,” he finishes.

Yeah, fat chance in hell for that asshole.

“And what makes you think I’ll go ahead with that—the evidence you think you have on me won’t hold,” I call his bluff and he throws his head back, laughing like a sadistic asshole.

“You’ve got some balls on you, boy. I bet you got that from me,” he shakes his head. “Is that a gamble you’re willing to make, huh?”

I tilt my head to the left, keeping my gaze steady as I stare right back at him.

“I’m not your soldier. I don’t follow your orders,” I say instead, my voice low and steady.

“But you’re a natural at it! I mean, look at the plan you’ve exquisitely executed for so many years that I can’t fucking wait to see your little band of misfit assholes that you call yourselves The Blue Boys, break and divide,” he spits out, laughing humorlessly.

My jaw clenches and I’m a split second away from bashing his head into the hard planes of his large office desk.

“But this, my dear son, isn’t about you boys. This is about something much bigger than your pathetic lives,” he goes on.

“Explain,” I bite out. We both know that I don’t fucking like him and my camaraderie with him was all in the face of making my “best friends” pay for taking the girl I wanted away from me.

“It’s simple really. Westbrook Blues, contrary to popular propaganda passed down the rumor sewers for years, is not really ours,” he says.

“What does that mean?” I question, not that I ever believed that an entire land ever belonged to just three—well, four—families to begin with.

“It means that taking the lives of Syrus’s son and that blockhead, Dave’s son, is not personal. It’s purely out of necessity and what needs to be done in order for the true kings to get what rightfully belongs to us.”

“You told me my whole life that Westbrook Blues was already ours, just how far do your lies go?” I question, looking bored and completely uninterested when inside, I’m seething like mad.

“I thought so, yes,” he starts, and I watch as his face grows somber.

“Until what?” Obviously, something happened, or rather, someone. And my suspicions are confirmed.

“Until someone who I thought I had buried a long time ago resurfaced on my radar.”

Silence fills the space between us as we stare at each other in his large office. I swear, I can hear his thoughts even now, so I decide to kick him even more.

“Then it looks like you’re a shitty planner,” I taunt with a bored tone, leaning against the back of the chair, smirking at my father, the man in

whose image I was created.

In hate and in ire.

In vengeance and in darkness.

“I wouldn’t say that, if I were you,” he threatens, getting riled up now.

“That man is coming.”

I can still hear Syrus’ words from earlier. I need to fucking find out who this man is. I know damn well it isn’t Larry, but I’ll fucking bet my balls that he’s connected to this man. Whoever he is.

“I assume then that you have a plan, beyond this one, that is,” It’s a statement and my only confirmation is his low, humorless chuckle.

“I see I taught you well.”

Oh, you taught me a lot asshole, like how to break a person. Too bad you’ve been the target for years now, you just don’t know it yet.

“Well, do you have one?” I demand.

“Of course, I do. All you need to know Alexander is that, whenever a plan is in motion, it’s not the only one at play. Something, somewhere, is always happening.”

And isn’t that the truth?



I have no idea how I make it back to the hospital that night in my drunken state of oblivion after drowning every single beer in my mini-fridge. But here I am now, standing in the doorway of her room.

She looks so small, so damn fragile and vulnerable in that hospital bed it makes my chest ache. Star doesn’t belong in here. She doesn’t deserve to be suffering this much but here we are.

And it’s all been because of me. I’m the reason for everything.

Larry.

My father.

My mother.

Brittney.

The threats.

Dereck fucking Myers.

All of it all leads to me. She was right before, I’ve caused her suffering, but this is the first time that I feel the tragedy of it, the weight of my part in destroying her like this.

I look around the hallway. Noah is passed out on one of the chairs. I have no fucking clue where Emmett is but as long as he hides his fucking face, that's fine. Spider has been texting me all night, but I've been ignoring him. I'll deal with all that tomorrow. Tonight though, I just want to hold her and be there for her.

I don't think I'll survive the night if I don't have her in my arms.

Slowly, I walk into her room, grateful that the lights are dim, casting shadows so I'm hard to make out if she's awake even though I know she isn't. I close the door softly behind me, then make my way to her bed.

The beauty of Westbrook Blues Private Hospital is that the beds are large enough to accommodate at least three, so I take off my shoes, throw my jacket to the lone chair in the corner. Pulling down my jeans, so that I don't make her uncomfortable, I climb onto the bed, careful not to disturb her, then ease in behind her.

"Ace?" she groans, and I freeze. I lean over slightly but notice that her eyes aren't open. She's half asleep then.

"Yeah, baby. It's me," I whisper in her ear, placing a kiss there and then at the base of her chin, unable to resist the powerful lure of her. I know I should calm the fuck down, but I...I need her.

"Where did you go?" She croaks out, her voice hoarse, dry and sleepy.

"Shh, baby. Get some rest now," I whisper in the dark, pulling her back into me until her ass is nestled directly on my hard dick. Just the feel of her there drives me insane but now isn't the time. I shift my eyes and concentrate on the fact that she isn't dead.

None of my best friends are dead yet—well with the mystery of George hanging in the air.

"I...", she starts but I place a kiss to her lips then, silencing her with that chaste innocent kiss that I know she won't fucking give me for a long time. Not with how angry she's at me.

"Don't, baby," I whisper as I pull back. "Don't hate me."

I have no idea why the fuck my voice catches, and I hope to God that she doesn't remember a single thing that I'm saying tomorrow. I'm not used to being this fucking raw but something about this night, something about her demands that I give everything I am to her. My damaged insides and all.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, pulling her even closer, my arms tightening around her, not allowing the feeling of her getting away from me to grow. "I'm sorry that I did this. I'm sorry that I led a monster to your door."

Anger is in my blood, yes, but so is grief for the hell that I've put her through when I vowed at a young age to keep her safe from everything that haunts me. Everything that attacks me at night, but fuck!

"I'll never forgive myself for not staying with you that night," I go on, ignoring the tear rolling down my cheek. I'm not actually crying, it had to be the alcohol, not me. Kings don't fucking cry.

Which means everything belonging to them shouldn't either. Especially her.

"I blame myself for everything that went downhill, everything that hurt you. But baby, I never, not once knew that...that monster would," A pain so acute pierces through my chest, making me feel everything. The agony of the situation, the pain that I know she's in right now. The drugs in her system. The devastation I've caused her and all the fucking secrets.

I clear my throat now, not allowing my emotions to take control of me. No, tougher men always control everything they feel. But when it comes to Astraea, she controls that shit.

"Ace...", she groans as I trace my finger on her belly, my left hand reaching for her left hand so our pinkies can join.

I don't know if she feels anything but as soon as I interlock mine with hers, instinctively she locks her own and I sigh in relief, not knowing that I was fucking holding my breath, waiting for her acceptance.

"I'm going to make it right though," I whisper in her ear, my voice hard with a promise that's been marinating in my head for a while now. I knew if I ever found out who touched Astraea four years ago, I was going to go ballistic. It just so happens that everything is so damn interconnected.

But no matter, I'll accomplish what I set out to do.

"I just need you to stay with me. I need you to keep fighting, to keep going," I place kisses all over her face and she groans with each one. Not with arousal but with pain. I can feel it deep within me.

"Fight for us, baby. I'm fighting for you each day that I breathe," I whisper. "You're everything I have. Your heartbeats mean everything to me."

The raw truth is, Astraea is it for me.

I didn't lie to my mother. And I fucking know that as long as I'm in her life, she'll always be in danger. But I won't ever give her up. It's impossible to get her off my mind on a normal day, forget the unbearable thought that she'll never be mine or that I'll never hold her in my arms like this.

“I’ll make it right,” I whisper vehemently, knowing damn well that there’s a whole lot of shit I have to do now. A lot of it, she won’t like but it’s the only way. She stirs in my arms as if she’s now dreaming.

Yeah, dream baby. And make a wish for us, my beautiful Star.

“I’ll make it right. Even if it’s the last thing I do.”

I know she’s already asleep, but I can’t help admitting this, it’s the closest I can get to letting her know my plan without jeopardizing her in any way. She’s too important for me and has been hurt one too many times to be mixed up in this.

I just hope she’ll see it the way I see it, that when she wakes up, she’ll understand that I got her.

“He did that to me because of you!”

I flinch, remembering when she looked at me with pain and accusation in her dark, tear-filled eyes.

I am to blame, baby. I couldn’t see that everything that happened to you was actually because of me.

Just don’t wake up tomorrow and push me away because of it. I’m going to make it right.

But as I settle more comfortably around her, tucking her into my side so I don’t crush her with the weight of my body. I don’t mean to cause her harm or pain but somehow, it always seems to happen. I look up and my body tenses with a rigidness about it, noticing Emmett standing in the doorway of Star’s hospital room with the light behind him, casting a shadow in here.

I know he wants to talk. I know he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. Instead, he locks gazes with me for a long minute, cursing my name to hell and back.

I just look away, seeming to dismiss him but I know he’s watching, and then I place a possessive kiss on the shell of Star’s ear.

She’s mine.

And I don’t give a damn if he knows that or not.

CHAPTER NINE



Astraea, 12; Ace, 13

It's the last day of summer and school starts tomorrow and already, these idiots have done something that I swear officially declares the new school year open with a bang. And they were in so much trouble!

"What did you do?" I question dropping the novel I was reading under the tree in our backyard, while simultaneously hiding from my mother and keeping my distance from Dad who has been acting strange for days, maybe even weeks. Or was it months? I wasn't sure how long he's been in that mood but one thing I know for sure without even trying, something was off.

"Why are you covered in paint?" I question. It shouldn't be a shocking thing that the three of them have smears of colorful paint on their clothes, hair, shoes, skin, everywhere since they were boys and would play with anything.

So, I knew without a doubt that wherever they're coming from, they did something bad and it had nothing to do with a bit of harmless fun.

"Hey, Raea," Emmett greets, avoiding eye contact.

"Hey, twin turbo," George greets, an easy smile on his face that as I look closer, looks a bit forced, over cheery and not at all real. I frown, watching

them.

I should have known that when the boys disappeared, telling me that they had an errand to run five hours ago, with barely contained excited looks on their faces, that they were going to do something as stupid as this. Because excitement for these boys, means blowing something up or causing all sorts of mayhem around town.

“Oh, hey, Baby Blue!” Noah greets, wiping away the red paint on his brow. “Got your garden hose somewhere close?” He looks around the yard and Emmett and George start taking their shirts off, paint covering their forearms and hands.

“Yeah, Randy was just about to water the flowers...what’s going on?” I question, the braces in my mouth still a bit new and irritating. I get up then looking from one boy to the next, noticing that Ace isn’t with them.

“Actually, where were you and what did you do?”

“Oh, you know, we just decided to do a thing,” George starts, looking at Noah and then fist bumping with Emmett, clearly proud of themselves. For what though, I’m going to find out.

“What thing?” I take a few steps closer, watching them. I smell a rotten rat that probably has red, yellow, and green paint all over it.

“We painted a house,” He explains calmly. Too calmly.

Painted a house? For the hell of it? I don’t think so.

“Whose house?” I question with a frown.

“Some teacher’s house. Not sure whose it was,” He shrugs, speaking way too quickly. I pause watching him, thinking that there’s a joke somewhere. Instead, as serious as a heart attack, he takes the hose from Noah and they go about their business washing off the no doubt dried-up paint.

“You’re kidding,” I frown.

“Nope. Not kidding,” He shrugs nonchalantly, knowing damn well that I’m snooping. “We painted a teacher’s house.”

“A random teacher or a teacher from our school? Someone we all know and respect?” I question, looking between them carefully as they pass the hose to each other, holding it as the other washes their arms and hands.

“Someone we all know but I sure as hell don’t respect that shithead,” Noah says dismissively.

“He’s a douchebag,” Emmett echoes and they start laughing, cracking jokes between them.

“Okay, did this teacher ask you to come help him paint his house?” I question, trying to look for a plausible reason when I know that there’s none. Not to this.

“Help that schmuck? In what world?” Noah scoffs.

“Astraea, we destroyed his house and left him a colorful message to see every day,” George casually explains.

“You what?!” I shriek, looking at my brother with wide eyes.

“Yeah, we did some home redecorating today,” Noah shrugs, a satisfied smile on his face. “It was actually great,” he laughs.

“Oh great, now all those hours of Bob the Builder were put to some good use now weren’t they,” I taunt. Noah and Emmett burst out laughing.

“Shit, you’re right! I knew I learnt my painting technique from somewhere,” he chokes, laughing so hard the words hardly come out.

“Oh my God you guys, this isn’t funny!” I start. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” I question and it hits me then. They committed a crime, a felony!

“You vandalized someone’s property!” I gasp out.

“Yeah, that’s what we just said,” George looks at me funny as if what I’m saying is absurd.

“Can you hear what I’m saying? You committed a crime!” I shriek again and they pause, turning off the hose to look at me, but I’m all the way gone, freaking out.

Oh God and I know what they did. They just confessed. God, I’m not ready to go to jail! I mean, I knew I was going to end up in there one day but I wasn’t banking on it to be now.

“Oh my God!” I shriek, panic setting in.

“Why are you panicking?” Noah questions, clearly confused.

“Because now I’m guilty by association! You idiots confessed your crime to me and I...,” I start breathing hard and fast, almost hyperventilating.

“Raea, calm down,” George says but I ignore him, clutching my chest.

“I don’t want to go to jail. Or juvie! They’ll send us all to the juvenile detention center!” I shriek, as dread soaks into me, thinking of all the horror stories I’ve heard about jail from school and some documentaries on T.V. Then there’s that show on T.V! With the crazy, trouble making kids being grilled by the inmates. They shout at them in their faces! Oh God, I don’t

want anyone with bad, jail breath to shout at me for a crime I didn't commit!

I read books and water plants and stay out of people's hair. I volunteer. I give. I'm compassionate and I'm allergic to cats and Mom won't allow me to get a puppy and...

I'm unaware that I'm rambling my thoughts out loud until they start laughing.

"Raea, calm down. We know that you're a do-gooder," George chuckles.

"I gotta hand it to you, Baby Blue, you'd make a great addition to Beyond Scared Straight," Noah laughs as they try to hold each other up from laughing at me.

"Me? You're the idiots that vandalized someone's house!" I shout.

It's not like it'd be hard to find the culprits if the police are looking for them right now, they're freaking covered in bright paint! Aliens from outer space can see them without even trying.

"Calmmm downwn, Raea," Emmett starts, his almost gone stutter mixing in with the laughter that he can barely contain. "It's nottt as baad as you think."

"Yeah," Noah echoes, still laughing and I shoot him a glare.

"And besides, his house needed a bit of color anyway," George finishes, dropping down to pick up the hose so he can wash the paint off of his arms, as if that will help.

"Oh, so I guess this teacher—since you clearly don't know who exactly this teacher is—should just what? Thank you for your generosity to paint their entire house for free with bright, cheery colors that will no doubt put a smile on his face and a pep in his step?" I wave my hands around, feeling like I'm going to get a heart attack with all the shit these boys do.

Hell, the entire summer was quiet, and if I'm being honest with myself, I was a bit sad all these months, even before summer started. I refuse to pin that on the fact that a certain blue-eyed boy wasn't here all summer. Well, if I'm being precise, he wasn't here since the last half of the school year and I haven't seen him since that time. Haven't heard even a word from him, even though technically, I know that he talks to my brother on the phone all the time and they email each other.

Why hasn't he reached out to me? Does he hate me that much?

I only heard his voice earlier today—right before the boys disappeared but not his face... And God do I want to see his face.

My heart starts pounding painfully in my chest, sweat coating my palms as I think of what he'll do when he sees me. Why did I feel so hollow without him here? Where did he go?

"We live to make people's lives a bit brighter," Noah smirks. "We're good boys like that."

"Good boys?" I question with a snort, looking at the three of them like they've suddenly grown three heads, each one with horns, an extra eye on the forehead, and a long nose for all the lies they tell. "What is wrong with you?"

"And Emmett?" I turn to look at him head on. "You, too?"

I have always counted on Emmett to be the voice of reason amongst them. He's the one that calms them down, keeps things sane and definitely not illegal.

"Raea, calm down," Emmett starts softly, his light green eyes looking at me with that warmth and kindness that radiates from him in waves. "It wonnn't come ttto all of that and besides, ttthe fucker deserved it," he seethes.

And just like that, the warmth is gone, replaced by a hard edge in his deepening voice.

"What do you mean, 'he deserved it'?" I'm unaware that I'm now shouting.

"It means exactly that, Raea," George says with a sigh.

"Oh, so that means you can go around and commit crimes just because the offended party deserves it?" I shout at the them. "Do you know that vandalism is a crime?"

"Oh, is it?" Noah chimes in, looking confused. "I wasn't aware of that, did you know about that, George?"

"Nope, I wasn't aware of that little fact," He shrugs, washing the paint away, clearly unbothered by the fact that they just committed a felony!

"Urgh!" I groan, face palming myself. "What the hell is wrong with these airheads?" I whisper under my breath, feeling a headache coming on and it's not even the first day of school where I know Brittney Pace will be waiting to torture me for a certain someone's absence in school.

"What'd you say, Baby Blue?" Noah questions with a smirk on his face.

"Nothing," I pout.

"Are you still talking to yourself?" George questions.

“Wait, thought she grew out of that shitty phase,” Noah says, turning to look at George.

“Nah, she does it when she’s nervous,” George says, dismissing me while discussing me at the same time!

“Or when she’s frustrated,” he goes on.

“Or when she’s angry,” Emmett jumps in.

“Yes! And when she’s hungry and angry!” Noah snaps his fingers as if he just discovered the eighth wonder of the world and they all double over laughing. I folded my arms, my cheeks growing hot with embarrassment or maybe it’s anger. I just don’t know anymore.

“Are you kidding me right now?” I shout and they pause. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in right now?” I sarcastically taunt, shooting them a glare.

Vandalism is a serious offense in the entire state of California and we all know that properties in Westbrook Blues cost more than just an arm and a leg. I mean, you could sell all your organs, including your heart, and it still wouldn’t be enough to rent out a place, let alone buy any of the property here.

“I’m so sorry that you’re not well versed with the freaking LAW!” I shout. “Maybe if you actually knew it and abided by it, you’d know that vandalizing property that doesn’t belong to you is a felony!” I point at them. “And you vandalized a teacher’s home! A freaking teacher from our school! Do you have any idea the amount of shit you’re in right now?”

“Astraea, language!” George chides, frowning at me and I take a step back, my eyes widening.

“What about my language, George?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“You’re not allowed to curse,” He simply says, and I gasp, unable to believe my ears. This is insanity.

“What the ever loving hell?” I say, taken aback by the words coming out of his mouth.

“Astraea,” he growls but I ignore him. Where the hell is Ace? I feel like I’m going crazy without seeing his face.

“Let me get this straight,” I start, sarcastically. “I’m not allowed to curse but you’re not bother by the fact that you—all three of you—went ahead and vandalized someone’s property?” I shout, incredulously.

“Nottt three, we were actually four. King wwwwas with us,” Emmett interjects and my heart stutters. “Ittt was his idea annnyway.”

“That doesn’t matter! You vandalized a house that I bet is worth like a good 500K!” I soldier on, ignoring the messed up feeling of elation in my belly from hearing the mention of *him*.

“Hmm, more like 2.5 mil.,” Noah shrugs, with a smirk on his paint splattered face.

“Shut the fuck up!” I shout at him and he raises his arms and backs away.

“Astraea!” George exclaims again, frowning at my colorful language. Oh the irony!

“Just correcting you, Baby Blue. You’re getting all red faced and worked up,” he says softly with a smirk on his face.

“Don’t you dare tell me how red I’m looking and how I feel inside!” I start in on him. “You have no idea how I feel inside!”

Sad, hurt and depressed by the fact that *he* wasn’t here for months upon months and there’s a deep hole in my chest that aches each second, missing the boy that bullies me but makes me feel so alive. And all this time I missed him with a pain so acute, I could barely function at all.

What with all the bullying at school when the boys weren’t looking, and my crappy teacher, Mr. Smith, acting strange towards me—I swear that man was hating on me all because I exist. And when I tried telling him about what Brittney and her minions were doing to me, he did nothing about it. And all of a sudden, Brittney was now his favorite student. And she isn’t even smart!

“Raea...,” Emmett starts but I put up my hand to stop him.

“Don’t start!” I shoot him a look, then turn to look at my brother, my arms folded.

“You can say curse words anytime, to other people and to yourselves. You can shout it from the rooftop when you’re up there at night and I’m not allowed to?” I question, beyond livid with the lot of them.

“You’re damn right, you’re not allowed to curse,” George counters, not backing down, staring at me like an impossible wall. Unyielding and unrelenting.

“Why the hell not? Is it because I’m just a girl?” I elongate the word, stepping closer to my brother.

George and I hardly fight. We’re so close, always attached to the hip and agree on a lot of things and enjoy each other’s company more than anything in the world. I love my brother with everything in me but when we fight—it

feels like the heavens are going to shutter with the promise of anger and retribution falling over our heads.

Because when you know someone's soul as much as I know his, you have the map to their weaknesses, the fears, their strengths, and what made them hurt. And that made both of us dangerous to each other, because we both know just how to hurt each other.

And right now, we're heading down that nasty road.

"Don't put words in my mouth," He shrugs instead. "I didn't say that."

"Yes!" Noah starts. "It's exactly because of that. Girls don't curse, Baby Blue!" He shouts and then he starts laughing when I shoot him the stink eye.

"Ugh! I can't believe what I'm hearing," I throw my hands in the air. "My own brother and these two fools are misogynistic asshats, who think girls can't do what they do or say what they say!" I stomp my foot on the lawn, beyond angry now.

"But I... I nnnever said a damnnn thing!" Emmett says, trying his hardest not to laugh and I glare at him until his words register in my brain that's about to short-circuit.

"What did you just say?" I gasp, taking a step closer to him.

"What?" He frowns.

"You just said 'damn'!" I point at him.

"Yeah. So what?" He looks around confused at what I'm saying.

"That's a curse word and my point exactly!" I start, turning to look at my brother. "Why didn't you chide him for cursing too, huh?"

"Oh snap, she's using big words again! Spending a lot of time in the library these days are we, Baby Blue?" Noah laughs.

"Yes, Noah. Some of us do spend time in the library to get ourselves ready for school and organized because we are smart and know that it's not charming to be stupid," I huff, glaring at him. "Spending time in the library actually helps with finding information about...well I don't know, say, state laws. For example, the section on VANDALISM is particularly interesting!"

They just stand there, blinking at my outburst, looking at me like I've just grown a rather large pair of horns and I'm breathing fire all of a sudden.

"Okay...", Noah says softly, looking at me with wide eyes as if I'm the crazy one who's just lost her mind, his arms raised in surrender.

“Yes, Noah, and that’s exactly why I spend time hiding in the library,” I finish with a huff.

And not because I spend time in there hiding from some pretty mean stupid kids who pick on me because of where I live, and who holds my hand when we get to school each day (George) or who holds my bag after school because I borrow so many books from the library my bag is always heavy (Em) or who sits with me during recess, attracting attention from everyone with his colorful jokes, and charming, Hollywood smile (A Blue fairy). It’s totally not because of that.

“I don’t hide from people,” I say, trying to convince them but the looks on their faces call bullshit. Damn, I just told on myself.

“Hiding from who?”

Everything halts right then.

His voice washes over me and suddenly my heart starts pounding in my chest, just as a shiver of awareness shoots up and down my spine with an intensity that rivals the power in a lightning strike. The hairs at the back of my neck stand up on end, freezing me to the spot.

Ace was an enigma but...he’s here!

Finally.

I turn around slowly, making sure that my lips are sealed together, I don’t want him to see the metal still in my mouth. Suddenly, I’m self-conscious of myself, of what I’m wearing, of how I might look like to him right now with my face red with anger and my toenails painted with black nail polish with blue streaks that I added in last minute because they reminded me of his eyes. As I turn around, those eyes are all I want to see.

And there he is, striding over to us with his hands in his pockets, a few towels hanging over his shoulder—he proceeds to throw one at each of the boys.

“Who are you hiding from, brace face?” He questions, not even looking at me.

Wait, how does he know that I got braces? Ugh!

“No one,” I rush to say after an awkward silence of me just staring at him.

I take in his inky black hair, it’s longer now on top than it was a few months ago, giving him an even darker vibe. He’s definitely taller now, but all of them are taller, like they just shot up this summer.

But the difference between Noah, George and Emmett's growth spurt from Ace's is that the three of them were freaking here. I actually witnessed their growth!

He wasn't.

Ace wasn't here and it's been killing me in a way that I don't know if I understand.

"But you better get ready to hide right now for what you did," I say as an afterthought, feeling a bit disgruntled and useless as I watch them wash up most of the dried up paint and dry their arms with the towels Ace came back with.

"Why should we hide?" he questions coolly, his eyes freezing me to the spot where I stand.

How does he do that? How does he render me stupid and motionless with just a look? I hate that it gives me tingles and irritation at the same time. I hate that he confuses me. I hate that I even care so much that he confuses me.

But currently, I hate the indifference in his voice.

"Why?" I screech. "I don't know, maybe it's because you committed a crime!" My anger returns tenfold, noticing the cool, unbothered ease they're all carrying themselves with, as if they did nothing at all.

"Remember, Raea, we're minnnors," Emmett says, shooting me a soft smile as if that will placate me.

"And we're wealthy as God," Noah chimes in with a hard chuckle.

"Oh sure, that gives you the right to just do whatever you want. Destroy hardworking people's properties and be on your merry way, huh?" I place my hands on my hips, not knowing what the heck to do with them. Because for some reason, my fingers itch to reach for Ace. To touch him, feel him and see if he's alright.

God, I missed him and he's looking at me with a scrutinizing gaze.

"If being a minor in a town like Westbrook Blues, which is full of privileged assholes, isn't a license to be petty, I don't know what is," George says, and they all start laughing. What is wrong with these idiots?

"No, George! That's not how you should look at it," I chide, appalled by their complete lack of remorse for breaking rules and laws! "Good God, am I the only one who's worried about what you've done and the amount of trouble you're in?" I stomp my foot again, ignoring Ace's probing gaze on me.

“Yeah, you are,” Noah starts. I shoot him an ugly frown. “And besides, why should we hide, Baby Blue? The douchebag saw us anyway,” Noah says, drying his hair with the towel that Ace bought but there’s still some paint in his hair.

“He saw you?” I gasp, unconsciously walking towards him so I can wash his colorful hair because clearly, he can’t do it himself. This idiot!

“He saw us do it, yes,” George says, looking unbothered at all by the entire situation.

“Jesus! You’re all going to be suspended!” I point out.

What’s Dad going to say? He’s going to be so furious with George. I’ve noticed the tense air around the two of them for a while now and this will surely knock the boat over, and I can’t swim as perfectly as my twin!

Let’s not forget Emmett’s father is a strange monster who treats his son like an invalid. And Noah’s Mom is going to wring his neck tonight as soon as she sees him. Just because rich folk can afford every single building and the people in it, doesn’t mean these boys don’t face consequences for their actions.

“You better pray that Mrs. Montreal doesn’t grill you on an open fire tonight,” I seethe as I grab the hose and aim it for Noah’s hair and spray him in the face with the powerful current.

“Ahh, Astraea!” He shouts, gurgling water, turning to run away but I aim the hose at him and turn the water to full power, satisfied by the powerful torrents.

“Baby Blue, you’re going to pay!” He shouts. “Help me, you mofos!”

But before George or Emmett can jump at me and grab the hose, I turn around and get them too, laughing when I catch Emmett by surprise and he just stands there, gasping.

Then I turn to hit George. “That’s for saying girls shouldn’t curse, you idiot.”

“I didn’t say girls shouldn’t curse. Hell, they can say whatever they want for Pete’s sake but you Astraea Claire Fields shouldn’t and will not, curse a day in your life!” He shouts over the water, running away but I follow him, making sure to spray at his shoes and shorts.

“Yeah sure, that makes it all better,” I laugh and shout at the same time. “Let’s see if a nice, cool shower will help you realize that I can say and do whatever I want!”

“Raea, stop!” He shouts, hiding behind Emmett and I get them together, knowing full well that I’m out of time, someone is coming for me, so before Noah can creep in on me, I aim the hose for him and get him in his face again.

“Oh! For fuck’s sake,” He shouts.

“Noah!” I gasp, unable to hold in my laughter. “Language! There are ladies in the vicinity.”

Then I turn in search for the last of the Blue Boys. He isn’t where he was standing before and I start searching for him frantic that he left already.

But then I see him, charging for me. I scream, my heart pounding in my throat and hastily aim the hose at him. But before I can do anything else, I’m tackled to the ground by his large body, knocking the breath out of my lungs and we plummet to the wet, grassy lawn. My laughter is cut short, every single inch of me locks up, aware of the slightly dry body on top of me.

“That’s enough of you, brace face,” He murmurs in my ear, effortlessly taking away the hose in my hand that I was gripping so tight, my palm is red and a bit swollen.

“Stop calling me that,” I seethe, looking at his cold blues that stare down at me. “I’m not a brace face.”

“Nah, you are,” he says slowly, watching me. “At least you’re doing something to fix those crooked teeth of yours.”

It feels like I’ve just been slapped in the face, reality seeping back into my body all at once. I start pushing him away as all the heartache, the sadness that I couldn’t shake away over the months comes back to hit me in the chest.

“Get off of me,” I whisper vehemently and in one swift move, as if I just slapped him hard across his face, he gets off me and then extends a hand down to me. But being a bitter little girl that I am—that’s a new one my mother called me the other day—I ignore his ‘gentlemanly’ gesture and get up on my own, tears coating my eyes. It’s not the brace face comment or the fact that he remembers that I had crooked teeth, but the fact that he’s still mean and doesn’t see me the way I wish he would.

The way I see him.

Before I can say anything, the back door opens and my mother steps out with a hard look on her face. Speak of the devil—actually, think of her—and she’ll appear to raise hell.

“What on God’s green earth is going on out here?” She says, her voice now smooth and elegant, just like Ace’s mother and Mrs. Montreal’s. If only they knew that she never talked like that before. She didn’t even dress like that either. My mother changed when we moved here. She changed for the worse.

“Hello, Mrs. Fields. How are you on this lovely last day of summer?” Noah shouts, an easy, charming smile on his face. Ass kisser.

“Hey Noah, what’s going on out here?” She says sweetly, a look she has NEVER shown me.

“Oh, you know, us boys were just messing around and then we decided to cool down some,” Noah says with a big smile on his face, making me roll my eyes to Heaven and back. “We thought you wouldn’t mind, and we also thought a bit of harmless fun wouldn’t hurt after such a long, tiring day.”

A long and tiring day where you all committed a felony in broad daylight at a teacher’s house. Yeah, it was the last day of summer alright. I snort quietly and Ace smirks at me as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking. I wouldn’t put it past him. I’m sure the devil can read minds.

“Oh, and George, you boys get that hose to the shed and make sure you don’t get in the house and leave a wet trail on my floor, thank you very much,” she says sweetly, but with a hard edge to her voice. As always. I roll my eyes, like she has ever lifted her hand to clean an inch of this house since we moved here.

“Yes, mother,” George says, rolling his eyes as he shoots me a look. Yeah, we both know how our mother is but he’s also aware of the distance between my mother and I. Whatever. It doesn’t bother me at all.

“Young lady, why are you wet and covered with grass?” She questions with a hand at her waist, watching me with a frown.

Yeah, I lied. It bothers me, the way my mother treats me. It bothers me a lot.

“I tripped and the grass was just cut,” I mumble, not daring to look her in the eye. I have no idea why she’s so indifferent towards me. I have no clue as to why she’s so cold and unimpressed by me. Maybe I did something and she’s still mad at me about it. But what did I do? It bothers me a lot and some nights, I can’t even sleep.

Worse when Ace was gone. It just felt even colder than before around here even though this was one of the hottest summers we’ve had on record. Was it all part of my imagination or did I really miss him that much?

“Really?” She questions, a delicate brow lifted, looking at all the boys, no doubt noticing how wet and drenched they are, with the hose at my feet and a slightly wet Ace by my side. Yeah, I’m the ringleader of the pack. I’m the one that causes all this trouble.

“Astraea, come in the house right now,” She demands sternly, looking at me with a frown, then she looks at Ace but then quickly looks away.

“But it’s still warm out and I...,” She cuts me off like my explanation doesn’t matter to her at all. I don’t think it does anyway.

“Now, young lady. You have school tomorrow and your hair looks like a bird’s nest that just survived a storm. Get in here. Now,” she demands sternly, and with that, I look down at my wet tennis shoes, not wanting the boys—especially Ace—to see the tears in my eyes or the embarrassment on my cheeks and walk towards her. I can feel their gazes on me as they stand there, silently watching me go.

CHAPTER TEN



Still in the past...

A chilly breeze picks up with each step that she takes towards her large mansion. She doesn't so much as glance back or seek anyone out as she goes, effectively leaving me feeling strangely bereft, cold and wet, not knowing that seeing her has been all I wanted to do since being back from New York City where I spent months with my Grandfather, who just so happens to be the only man I tolerate simply because of his hate towards my father.

But even with all that time away, spending my afternoon beside a dying man's bed who taught me more about being a man than my father ever will, she was all I could think of and then when sleep claimed me at random times of the week, she still starred in most of the nightmares that jolted me awake with cold shivers and heavy deep breaths, her dark eyes so much like the ones I try to forget, haunting me even beyond consciousness.

It's all so messed up.

She's different now somehow. As I watch her go, I notice that she's a bit skinnier, as if she hasn't been eating well, when I know for damn well that she's got an appetite like a builder. Hell, if there was an eating competition between a crew of builders and her, all my money would be on Star. The

girl could eat and put it away smoothly. But now, she's wasting away...that bothers me.

"Why the hell is she so skinny?" I question George, my voice unintentionally sharp as I turn to look at my best friend.

When I got here this morning, I came straight to the Field's mansion, collecting Em and Noah on my way to George's because for one—and my actual cover when they grilled me—I missed my best friends, but the truth is, I wanted a full report on Star.

My Star.

"Well genius, as you can see, she's been agitated as fuck lately. Hell, she can go from friendly banter to angry real fast," he says with a frown of his own as the door closes behind his mother who shoots me an indecipherable look, and then shuts the door with a bit too much force than necessary.

"You think she finally got her Moon days?" Noah questions with a straight face, voice low. I don't know if he's making sure that Star doesn't hear him because truth is, she might be watching but I know she isn't.

"Nah, that hasn't started for her—much to her annoyance. She feels like she's been left behind," George answers, also with a straight face. But I'm over this conversation. If anyone should be discussing Star's menstrual cycle, it should be her and not us. But it does help to know what's going on.

"What do you mean she feels left behind?" I question, snapping my head back to look at George.

"Well, almost all the girls are parading around that they've gotten theirs," he answers with a frown on his face.

"Apparently, it's made them women, ripe and ready for the Blue Boys," Noah chimes in laughing.

"And I bet you took your pick, huh?" I roll my eyes, watching my best friend remembering the story he told us over a conference call about kissing some random girl from the Valley.

"Back to Astraea," I say. "You think Brittney's still making fun of her?" I question, gritting my teeth.

"You're damn right she is. Especially since you've been gone," Noah growls. "God, I hate that twat."

"Language!" I mock. "You'll give George a coronary with that mouth of yours."

We all burst out laughing, clapping George on the shoulder.

“You, you ripped her a new one today,” Noah laughs. “I thought she was going to kill you with all that rage in her eyes.”

“Yeah well, it’s better than the dead look in her eyes on most days,” he says, and all the laughter cuts off right then. “At times she seems like she’s not really present and then the nightmares...”

She’s been having nightmares too? What the hell?

“Let’s not forget how sad she’s been lately,” Em says, coming closer.

“Yeah and quiet. It’s just so strange and confusing,” Noah chimes in and I look at him, blue streaks of washed out paint dripping down his face.

“We dealt with that douchebag, Smith,” I say calmly. I’ve heard all about his antics at school of treating Star unfairly all because her grandfather — well, Richard’s father, the Senator of Westbrook Blues — didn’t hire his wife for some shit or the other. Or is because the wife and the senator had an affair? The semantics are useless, and frankly I don’t give a damn other than the fact that he made life a bit harder for Star who was retreating into herself even more. I know he was subtly punishing her the entire last half of the school year all because of association.

Richard isn’t even Star’s real dad anyway, but that didn’t lessen the anger that has been building in me with the reports I got from the boys. But these past few months were hellish. I thought if I spent time away from this town, I’d forget all about her. The world is bigger than just Star but no, she proved that she’s a bigger, more potent poison in my system.

Without her, I woke up most days feeling inexplicably angry. I spent most of my days pissed, prompting my Grandfather to say that I’m turning out to be a vicious, dark and angry young man. It should have disturbed me but the only time I felt like I could actually breathe fine was when George did me a solid by sending emails with pictures of Star and the boys. But even then, I could see that she was sad.

Just like I was.

“I’m still so fucking livid at that shithead!” George starts. “And you know that Astraea won’t say anything, even when you catch someone bullying her, she just says its nothing and goes about her way.”

Yeah, she goes about hiding in the damn library. Hiding from someone no doubt. And I have a pretty good idea on who it might be.

“Shit but she’s right. You know we’re getting suspended if not a worse punishment,” Em says slowly, looking at all of us.

“We’ve got the second part of this plan in motion already, right?” I question George who nods.

“Yeah, he’ll be home in a few hours,” he says in a clipped tone. “That is, if he’s not bumping uglies with his secretary.”

To say George and Richard had a super tense relationship would be an understatement. Actually, hell had more chances of freezing over than the chances of either of us having normal and healthy relationships with our sperm donors. Neither one of us had that, we had each other and maybe our Grandparents. I know Noah and his Grandfather are close, not sure about Em—he gets closed off like a damn clam most times and George, well, he already knew what Star didn’t. Richard wasn’t their biological dad.

“Oh well, not that that would be surprising. You think he’s still talking with my shithhead of father?” Em questions.

“I think so. Syrus was here the other night. I have no idea what they were talking about,” George explains.

“You think they’ll bail us out if vandalism gets out of hand?” Noah questions with a smirk.

“Nah, if it gets to that, and Smith doesn’t learn his lesson, the good ole King will write a check,” I smile, but it’s hard and has an edge to it. We all fall silent for a while. The boys know better than to ask and I know better than to say a word about my father.

We all knew better.

“In other news, mofos,” I start, breaking the tension, thinking that it’s best to break the news now than later. I have stuff to do later tonight. “We’ll be in the same grade this year, asshats,” I announce, wiping the water that Star sprayed on me.

Man, it was so good to hear that laugh again, just as beautiful as she is. Her laughter feels like the first rays of sunshine, warm and comfortable—giving you a feeling of calm and sense of peace. She was just like that. You know, when she was angry at you for committing felonies.

“What? You dropped a grade?” Noah questions, a smirk on his face, excitement lighting his eyes.

“Well, it doesn’t make an iota of sense if I continue when I missed an entire semester of school now does it?” I shake my head, punching him, hard, on the arm.

He grunts but shakes it off, all good natured and shit but I can see the heaviness in his eyes. Something’s going on with him and my money is it’s

happening at home. If you look closely, all the problems of every kid, they always seem to start at home. Home is the place that either fucks you up royally, or molds you up for royalty. There was no in-between.

I just so happened to be a royal fuck up. I'm thirteen and I know that already. Good job, Denise and Philip King.

"An iota, huh? Looks like you and Baby Blue have been learning big words this summer," he laughs, punching me in the arm right back but I shrug him off.

"I thought you were being home schooled," George says as we begin rolling the hose to bring it back to the shed.

"Yeah, I hated the teacher they got from New Jersey. She talked funny," I shrug, but I know why I did what I did. I deliberately made a calculated choice, knowing damn well in whose class I want to be in this year.

Something my Grandpa said before he passed struck a nerve in me this summer.

"When you get old, you'll look back and realize that there are so many mistakes you made that you could have avoided, had you seized the moment. Don't let your golden opportunities slip by, Alexander my boy. Sometimes stars don't always align to lead you to your golden promise."

I don't know why or how it happened, but I immediately thought of Star and how my aging might stop me from being close to her. From keeping an eye on her and right now, I failed to keep her safe. I knew it was only one year, but I knew by the time she was in her senior year, I wouldn't be around to keep my eye on her even though I'm pretty sure I hate her.

"What if it's already too late to change the present?" I had asked my Grandfather and he chuckled then gave me a surprisingly strong pat on the back.

"You're King. If anything, you change the future. Fate lies in your hands, Alexander."

Yeah, fate rested in my hands alright. Starting with being close to her.

"Syre, you hated how she talked alright," George says, shooting me a smirk. By now he suspects that Star does something to my insides, that she affects me so much, I can't hide it from my best friend. The fact that I don't even have to question him about her, he just offers up free information about what's going on with her.

He's the one that's been keeping tabs on Star while I was away, letting me know that she's been having nightmares but won't talk about them.

That she screams out my name when that happens.
That she's been acting a bit differently for days upon days.
That she sometimes walks up to my gate but never goes in.
That she definitely wonders where I am but won't dare open her mouth to ask because she hates me.

Well, that didn't bother me at all. The fact that she could forget about me and not wonder if I was alive or not—that didn't bother me at all. I clench my jaw subconsciously, unable to stop my reaction to her indifference.

How can one so small, with blue braces in her mouth, have so much control over me?

“Right King?” George nudges me with an elbow to my ribs, jolting me to the present.

“Yeah, you know how it is on the East Coast. All busy, useless flurry of activity. Running around like headless chickens with quick tongues and shit,” I shrug and keep moving, itching to go to Star but knowing it's not time yet.

Later. I'll grill her about what's eating at her later.

“Talking about headless chickens and shit, Myers has been sniffing around Astraea for a while now,” George says, and I frown, my fists clenching impulsively.

“Who's Myers?” I question, unable to place the name to any face I know. But the name is familiar.

“He's the preppy kid. You know, the one who's always buzzing around us thinking he's going to be the fifth Blue Boy just because his Dad is the president of King's Hedge Fund Company,” Noah explains, and I frown.

“The fifth member of the Blue Boys? Please tell me you don't actually say that to people,” I groan, thinking of that stupid name Star gave us years ago. I have no idea why it stuck but it's still around, much to my great dismay since my Grandfather was kind enough to tell me what blue balls are, a few months before he died.

It kinda makes me think that we were named the Blue Boys because we suffered from blue balls but when my Grandfather mentioned it, I thought what were the odds that he knew what the little girl—that I couldn't shake—called us.

“He does,” Em says quietly, dropping the folded hose in the corner poof the shed. “And so dd...does everrrryone else.”

I notice his stutter is less pronounced now, his confidence to speak actually impresses me. He's the one that told me about Smith's behavior. I clap his back and then pull his head down from the back of his neck to rub the back of his head and I start laughing.

"You keep talking like that and you might actually say some shit in class," I say and he punches me in the gut but it's without heat.

"Oh, shit! I bet he'll even say something smart in Geography," Noah says, doubling over in laughter. "No wait, in Calc!"

We burst out laughing and Emmett tries not to join in but it's a losing game. "Well at least I'll have something intelligent to say, unlike other people who still call themselves blue fairies," he spits out and we all laugh again.

"What, you wanna make a wish, Em? Loose a tooth and put it under your pillow, I'll come by at seven, you know, when you go to bed."

"Shut the fuck up," he growls and I start laughing, evading his punches as we start rough housing.

"Myers, hello," George jumps in between Em and I with a serious look on his face. "Can you douchebags be serious for one second."

"Yo, chill, George. What's up?" Noah questions as we all grow serious, noticing the stress on George's face.

"I'm worried as fuck about Raea and I sure as hell don't trust that sucker. There's something unhinged about him to be honest."

And I don't like the fact that he's been sniffing around what's mine and the fact that he's on my turf now makes it all very easy to nail him and obliterate the douchebag.

"Why don't I know him?" I question, frowning as I try to place him but I can't.

"Dude, he's the one who always kisses your ass at football practice. You know, getting you water and shit because he wants you to like him." Noah explains.

"There are a lot of those ass kissers who want to hang with us," I mumble.

"The Myers just moved up here from L.A. Kid thinks he's made out of gold," George spits out.

"Ah, he's one of those, huh?" I nod my head slowly, already picturing this Myers kid. "He's the one that shows off about everything and nothing at the same time?"

“Yup, thinks he’s God’s gift to the world and that he swims in money. You know how these new money shitheads are,” George goes on now pacing, deep in thought and that’s when I notice that he’s really bothered.

George is hardly ever bothered by anything.

“What happened?” I question, suddenly on alert, watching my best friend closely.

“I don’t fucking know, all I know is he’s weird as hell. There’s something about him.”

“What?” I question, my fists already clenched, ready to do irreparable damage.

“I don’t know,” he says, shaking his head. “Sometimes you just know when something feels off about another person, you just feel it. I asked Raea about what she thought of Myers a few weeks ago,”

“What did she say?” Em questions, watching George carefully.

“He gives her the creeps,” George answers with a hard chuckle. “You know, Raea never has a bad thing to say about people, but when she doesn’t like someone, she’s usually vocal and that fiery rebellion acts up.”

“Exhibit A, she just blew our heads off about vandalizing and destroying Smith’s property,” Noah chimes in.

“Yeah, that kind of fire but I don’t know dudes, she keeps quiet about a lot of shit these days, I have no idea where that fire has gone,” George finishes, agitated meanwhile I’m getting angry and slightly worried.

Who’s trying to snuff out her fire?

She is different alright. That I can see, but why is the question.

“I bet it’s that little tramp, Brittney. She makes fun of Astraea all the time,” Noah seethes, something close to rage flashing in his eyes. “God, I can’t stand her, and the fact that she’s been nagging us about you this entire time.”

“And now you’ll be in our class, just great,” George says, his arms flailing in defeat.

“Guys, relax, it’s not that bad,” Em steps in, speaking in his low, calm voice. “She said she wants an opportunity—which is her polite way of telling us to fuck off—to make her own friends,” Em says softly. “You know, without you mofos breathing ddddown her neck.”

New friends huh? The girl has always been a loner and she sure as hell didn’t need anyone else besides the boys I’m standing with right now. She doesn’t need anyone else, and hell, people are fake. They are all snakes and

they'll all want something from her, or use her. I'm trying to protect her from all that mess.

"She doesn't need any friends," I growl.

"Yeah, she's got us," Noah echoes, slightly angry now but he's right.

We were all a unit, we were a tight group and since I came back this morning, I've felt different, harder and a whole lot more aware of her.

I know she saw that in me, she's still so nosy. God.

"Well, you better pray that you don't annoy her any further because apparently, we promised to give her space," Em says with a shrug.

"I never promised such a thing," George huffs.

"And besides, Astraea isn't good with female friends. Let alone other dudes," Noah says, making my head snap up.

"Are you saying she's been busy making friends with other boys beside you three?" I question, feeling the tingling sensation of my blood boiling. Why do I always react this strongly when it comes to anything that has to do with her?

"Uh dumb head, haven't you been listening? There are guys that approach her at school, trying to be her friend but really, all they want to do is to get with her, trying to get her first kiss," Noah explains.

I don't know why everything in me locks up with those words, a visual of some stupid schmuck touching lips with Star flashing behind my eyes, immediately making me see red.

"Her first kiss?" I know that I look crazy right now but if I so much as hear that Star kissed someone else, some dumb block who doesn't know the first thing about her, I have no idea what I'd do.

"Nah calm down dude. She hasn't and if I have my way, she won't be exchanging spit with some idiot for a long time," George vows, a serious, hard gleam in his eyes. If he only knew that I actually want to kiss her... but some things my best friend doesn't need to know.

"As if that stopped you from exchanging said spit with Lara Marrison," Noah laughs, showing his own mouth full of braces that he got at the same time as Star.

"Wait, Lara Marrison the chick with the...," I start but before I can finish, George shoots me a look and I chuckle, holding up my hands. "Dude, you...uh, you do you. I support you no matter who you decide to suck face with."

Emmett and Noah start laughing as well, trying their best to cover it up but no, this is epic. Lara and George, kinda has a nice ring to it, if only Lara didn't look like a...

"It's not funny, shut up!" George says, now red in the face, clearly embarrassed.

"Oh, but this is gold," I laugh, feeling light all of a sudden. It feels great to be back with my boys and close to her...

"Tell me, how did it feel, you know, to have your tongue down her..."

"Shut up before I shove my foot up your million-dollar ass," He grits out and we all double over in laughter.

And the teasing continues well into the night.

"Okay so Myers?" He questions, as we sit around the fire pit in the backyard.

"Yeah. What are we going to do about him?" Noah questions as I mule over it.

"We do the logical thing and find out what the hell he's up to," Em answers and we all nod in agreement.

"A guy like that always has a motive, a hidden agenda," I say.

"You think he's been sent by his Dad to get close to you for favors and shit?" George questions.

"It's not out of the question but why target Astraea?" I question, knowing that she's looking down at us right now as if she isn't wondering what's going on down here. But when George asked her to come down and chill with us a few hours ago, she refused, claiming that she needs to tame her hair and get ready for school. If only she knew that her wild hair matches her wild beauty that no one can tame or dim out.

"Because he and everyone else knows that she's everything to us," Em says quietly, the words resonating within all of us. "I mean, if I were coming for either one of you, I'd start with what you care for the most."

"Well, damn you've got a bleak soul, son," Noah starts. "That's dark as fuck."

"But true," George points out, popping open another soda.

"See, when executing revenge, that shit better be profound and absolute," I say solemnly, watching the flames roar in front of me.

"Well damn," Noah whistles.

"But the question is," George starts, looking at me.

“Why someone we don’t even know, is seeking revenge on us,” I finish and we all stare at the fire, knowing damn well that it’s about to be a heavy ass year.



Later, I pretend to leave but I stay in the shadows and then I sneak through the always open backdoor of the Fields’ mansion, moving silently in the dark all the way up to Star’s room. I’ve done this so many times but always when I knew that she was sound asleep. Going into her room, driven by curiosity to see how she’s like when she’s asleep.

This time though, I don’t bother knocking, knowing that it won’t be locked and that she’s definitely wide awake.

She’s lying in her bed, under the covers, the nightstand lamp the only source of light. That’s how she likes it when she’s reading the latest novel of Nancy Drew Mysteries or whatever detective shit that catches her interest. It’s a crappy book with a plot that you can solve within the first few chapters but it gets her flushed with excitement, sometimes she squeals when things don’t happen the way she would have predicted and right now, she’s flushed alright, but not because of the book.

I’d bet my entire inheritance from Grandpa that she’s flushed because of a certain boy King with issues. A young king who’s obsessed with her, yet she’s the source of his nightmares and panic. She brings out the worst in him, yet he’s driven by this almost overwhelming need to protect her.

Why on earth am I referring to myself in the third person? Or is it the fourth person?

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why am I so damn...nervous all of a sudden?

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she gasps, jerking upright in her bed, making the sheets pool at her waist as I close the door softly behind me. I don’t want to get her mother’s attention. She’s a cold one, Amanda Fields but colder to her daughter. Is she the one bothering Star this much?

“That isn’t exactly you telling me to get out,” I point out, stepping into her room with ease. I’ve been in her room before, she just doesn’t know that the few times I’ve ventured in here, it’s always been to check if she sleeps better than I do and that she doesn’t get scared of the dark. Which so happens that she can’t sleep with the lights off.

She talks in her sleep about that crap, but she doesn't need to know that I know.

"Common sense should tell you to get out of a girl's room," she says, gritting her teeth, watching me uncertainly.

"Well, lucky for me common sense isn't so common, now is it?" I counter, walking closer to her, taking my time. "I mean, you should know all about that."

"I know plenty about it," she whispers hotly, rising to her feet. "Unlike some people, I actually possess a highly functioning and remarkable set of common sense. One might even say that I'm more intelligent than most."

Intelligent, yes you are baby but you're also hiding something from me.

"Who are you hiding from, Star?" I question quietly, aware of the shiver of electricity that I don't understand—passing between us the moment I step closer to her, eliminating all the space between us as my chest brushes up against her chest.

"Whaa...what?" She gasps, taking a step back and I remain standing there, not knowing what to do with myself.

"Who are you hiding from?" I question again, watching her.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not hiding from anyone," she rushes to say and that right there is her tell. The stutter, the way she's breathing fast and hard, yeah, she's a bad actor.

"No wonder why you got booted from the drama club. You suck at acting," I mumble, dropping down to sit on her bed.

"I don't suck!" she gasps, getting angry. "I happen to be great at all my extra-curricular activities."

Yup, she's a nerd. Loves reading a lot, knows a lot of big words—that I happen to know the meaning of because I spent all my time reading large volumes of books these past few months, continuing to follow the decree from his royal shittiness, my father.

"If anything, I'm the one who left drama club!" She folds her arms in outrage.

"Why did you quit then, if you're so good at it?" I mumble quietly, watching as her eyes widen.

"Well, if you must know, it was a bit too crowded there," she mumbles back, taking a deep sigh.

"Crowded?" I question, narrowing my eyes. I smell a rat.

“Yeah, you know how hard it is for Mrs. Michaelson to be organized with herself, let alone an entire club of over-eager students who only want to be in the limelight,” she says, waving her hands in the air, turning away from me. “And she better not be a victim of today’s vandalism, I happen to like that woman, even though she needs a hug and some love that she doesn’t quite get from all her cats.”

Yeah, that’s Star alright. Always thinking of others, yet still noticing the subtle things about them. No status upholding middle schooler cares that some adult is sad all the time, but she does. I cock my head to the left, taking her in and that makes her self-conscious because she starts shivering.

I make her nervous but what she doesn’t know is she terrifies me.

There’s something I don’t understand about this girl though. Why does a girl like her, as beautiful and full of life as she is, keeps to herself like that? Why doesn’t she let anyone in?

“Don’t you want to be in the limelight?” The question blurts out of my mouth before I can stop it, but when she turns to look at me again, I don’t regret asking the question.

“What’s the point of being in the limelight when you’re the source of people’s judgement, criticism and hate?” She questions, looking somber for a moment and that has my alarm bells blasting, but I’ve got to tread this line carefully.

“What do you mean?” I question softly, watching her.

“It means just that. I don’t like being judged and hated,” she shrugs, looking away.

“Because of the limelight?” I have a feeling we’re talking about something much bigger than just the limelight.

“Yes and because of any and all association to the limelight,” she answers quietly, after a long pause.

“So, association to the limelight does people more harm than good?” I question slowly, my heart pounding in my chest as I get the meaning of her words. Association with the Blue Boys—her close proximity and familiarity with me—is a danger to her, because in the last couple of years, she’s become a target.

“Most times, yes,” she nods her head, her body now trembling as if the cold draft in the room is making her uncomfortable when I know better. I make her uncomfortable.

“Is that why you hide in the shadows? Making sure that they don’t find you?” I question softly, anger making me see red. Star is not someone that should be hiding from anyone, if anything, they should be hiding from her.

“Yeah. If I’m out of sight and nowhere near the limelight, I’m safe,” she whispers, opening up in riddles but I’ll take what I can get from her.

“Do they know that there are monsters that hide in the dark? Vicious predators that you lead? That you rule?” I question slowly, taking a step closer to her. “Do they know that you lead a pack of sinister and dangerous young wolves who will devour anything and everything that might be a threat to you?”

“I...,” she stammers, watching me with each step that I take closer to her.

“Because Star, they should know. And they should be afraid,” I murmur, feeling the need to tear up that entire school for all the shit they did to Star when I was away. And mad at her for keeping her mouth shut and not reporting all this shit to the boys.

“Why?” She questions, “Nothing scares the haters.”

“You’re wrong, brace face,” I chuckle, enjoying the shiver that passes through her body as I step closer.

“Everyone is scared of something,” I say matter of fact.

I take her in, wearing her large black sleep shirt—and as I look closer at it, I notice that it’s a boy’s shirt.

“Whose fucking t-shirt is that?” I grit out, stepping closer to her, my eyes narrowed on the offending, ugly large piece of fabric that adorns her body, swallowing her up, making me irrationally angry and a whole lot offended.

“What?” She questions with a frown then looks down, seeming confused. But then she realizes what I’m talking about and she snorts, shrugging her delicate shoulder.

“None of your business,” she dismisses.

“Star, don’t try me,” I grit out, my fists clenching. She chooses tonight of all nights, when all I have in mind is to be reunited with her, to defy me. She was one fucking class act this girl.

“Or what, Ace?” She whispers hotly. She folds her arms, raising her chin defiantly. God, I missed her, the sparks in her eyes much like glittering stars in the dark sky, the way she gets a rise out of me so easily like she knows which buttons to press.

“Do you really want to play this game, Star?” I cock my head to the left, studying her.

“I’m not playing a game,” she smiles sweetly, watching me get agitated. Silence stretches between us as we stare at each other. There’s a lot that could be said in this moment, the air around tense with anger and something else I can’t even name yet I know it’s because of her. It’s because she affects me so much.

“Whose fucking t-shirt is that and why the fuck are you wearing it?” I grit out slowly, feeling my heart pound in my chest. I go away for a few months and when I come back, some shitheads are hovering over her, trying to claim what’s mine. To top all that shit off, she’s wearing some asshole’s t-shirt.

“It’s my t-shirt,” she counters but her voice lacks conviction.

“You’ve always been a shitty liar, Star,” I growl. “Whose. T-shirt. Is. That?” I demand slowly and she narrows her eyes at me, getting angry herself.

“You don’t have the right to question me what I wear or who it belongs to,” she seethes, watching me with a hard gleam in her eyes. “You don’t even have a right to be in my room right now.”

“Is that so, Star?” I question, taking a step closer to her as she takes one back. In this moment I don’t know why I feel like attacking her, why I want to rip that t-shirt off of her body, but I just do.

“Yes,” she grits out defiantly.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” I start, speaking slowly. “Whose t-shirt is that because we both know that it’s not yours.”

Now, she’s backed into the wall behind her, with me right in front of her. I could mesh our bodies together but I don’t think I’d be able to control myself. When I kiss Star, I want it to be natural. I want her to want me to kiss her but right now, anger is flashing in her eyes, making me pause.

“Star...,” I growl but she gets into my face, moving away from the wall.

“Where were you?” She seethes instead, anger flashing in her eyes. I take a step back, blown away by the vehemence and hurt in her voice.

“Star,” I start but she cuts me off.

“You just up and left without a word to me, without so much as a ‘see you later I’m going off for the rest of the school year’ note?” She shouts now, forgetting that someone in the house might hear us.

It’s in that moment as we stare at each other that I see the pain in her eyes, and that cuts me deep.

“Where did you go, Ace?” her voice drops down to a painful whisper, just as a tear rolls down her face.

God.

A piercing pain so acute and potent shoots through my chest and I almost groan in pain at seeing that one tear rolling down her cheek.

I did that.

I made her cry.

I hurt her.

Immediately, I step closer and swoop her into my arms, wrapping my arms around her so that I lift her up. She wraps her legs around my waist and clings on to me like a koala bear, her body shaking and quivering with repressed sobs.

Sobs! Shit.

“Star,” I whisper, unable to hide the pain in that one groan. “Don’t cry.”

“You left!” She accuses in between sobs as I walk us to her large bed.

“You left me.”

“It wasn’t like that, Star. I swear it wasn’t,” I whisper and I sit on the bed.

A heaviness presses down on my chest, remembering the indescribable agony of being away all these months. All I knew was, something was messed up in my head, something was off with me, but it wasn’t until I started dreaming of her that I knew she was what made my soul quiver with missing her so insanely.

I move backwards until my back hits the headboard of her bed, with her small body in my arms. God, she’s delicate. So fragile to the eye but I knew she was one hell of a strong girl to keep four boys in line—myself included.

“It wasn’t like that,” I repeat, rocking her in my arms, glad that I worked out this summer, getting ready to take my football game to another level. And to impress a certain girl.

“What was it like then?” She demands, pulling back to look at me, tears still rolling down her cheeks, breaking me apart.

I reach up with my free hand and wipe away her tears, our eyes locked together.

“Grandpa was sick,” I start on a swallow, needing the pain in her eyes gone but not knowing how to do it. How do I keep a girl like her? How do I keep her with me?

“He was sick, and the doctors said he would die within three months,” I say, thinking of those bleak months that passed by so damn slowly but fast at the same time.

“Grandpa Phil King Snr?” She questions sweetly. “Your favorite adult in the whole world who taught you how to hunt and tie your necktie?”

I chuckle, thinking of the time I told her that out at our sport a few years ago, staring up at the stars. Grandpa taught me many things, that’s why staying by his side all these months wasn’t an opportunity I would miss, no matter how much I missed her.

“Yeah, the very one,” I mumble, the heaviness back in my chest.

“What happened? Is he okay now?” There’s a look of hope and optimism on her face that if I was a better young man, if I wasn’t as messed up in the head, I would protect her optimism by all costs. I would weave a tale about how my Grandfather is alive and well, running around, ruling the world with understanding and true respect from those around him.

But I know life is cruel. Life has been nothing but brash and blunt with me right from the word go and I don’t want her to live a life of fairytales. Hell, she hates that shit anyway.

“He died,” I say, my voice unintentionally hard, as I look away from her. “He had Stage 4 lung cancer, which gave him brain cancer in the end.”

She gasps, covering her mouth with both hands but doesn’t look away I can feel her compelling gaze on me but I can’t look at her right now without risking the chance of the flood of emotions that I have no business feeling over a dead man who’s already six feet under—who told me that tears won’t bring the dead back to life, all we have left is to fight for the living.

“Ace,” she starts, sympathy dripping with that one word.

“Don’t Star,” I whisper, tuning back to look at her beautiful face. “Just don’t.”

She’s quiet for a second, watching me, then she tentatively reaches up with her cold palm, our gazes locked on each other, and she wipes away a lone tear that I wasn’t aware I had shed.

What the hell?

I’m crying.

I jerk away from her touch, feeling embarrassed and mad as hell at myself for being so weak, Girls like Star don’t like weak boys, She’ll chew them up and spit them right out and I happen to like myself whole, thank you very much. I move back but she moves with me.

“Don’t do that, Ace,” she whispers softly, tightening her legs around me until I’m caged in our embrace with nowhere to go and if I’m being honest with myself, I don’t want to go anywhere.

“Don’t hold back what you’re feeling just because you want to seem strong,” she whispers.

“I am strong,” I grit out, getting annoyed at her as well. “I don’t have to ‘seem’ what I am already!”

She rolls her eyes with a sigh.

“I know that, silly but that doesn’t mean strong people don’t hurt at times,” she says with a sad smile. “It’s okay to hurt because you lost someone you love.”

Yeah as if I’d accept losing anyone I loved graciously. Shed a few tears and move on.

“Maybe that’s true for good people, Star,” I start, locking gazes with her. “I’m not one of those people.”

“Yes, you are,” she whispers hotly with conviction in her voice that almost has me believing. “You’re good, Ace. Well, you can be a demanding, cruel asshole most of the time but you’re good.”

“To who?” I question, my chest tightening as I look at her. I want this answer from her so desperately, I ache with anticipation. I watch her as she slowly licks her dried lips, her gaze dropping to my lips for a second, making me lose my breath.

“Who am I good to, Star?” I question, my voice turning bitter and hard with each second that passes with her silence as if she doesn’t have an answer. She knows I’m bad and her sad, pathetic attempts at trying to soothe me are just that...sad.

I snort, about to move her so I can leave, but she tightens her hold on me and with a surge of strength, she pulls me into her arms, hugging me with a ferocity that has my heart beating so hard between us, I’m sure she can feel it.

“You’re good to your best friends,” she whispers in my ear, her breath hot, making my ear tingle along with the rest of my body.

“You’re good to me, too,” she whispers softly, hugging me even tighter to her small frame, until it feels like we’re one unit.

She breathes, I breathe.

She moves, I move.

When she feels, I fucking feel along with her.

“How can you say that when I’ve been terrible to you?” I question, curious despite myself. I’m not oblivious to the fact that I’ve been mean to her at times, that I bully her but I can’t explain the need I sometimes have to punish her for her uncanny resemblance to a monster that I’ll make sure never gets within a mile of her. Sometimes the urge to hurt her is intense but other times, I don’t know...I want her attention on me not on anyone else. I want to be the only one she fears, the only one she ever needs to run from.

“Honestly, I’m crazy to even say this or even believe it. You’ve done nothing but make my life harder,” she says, watching me but before I look away, she palms my cheek, holding my gaze. “But there’s something in me, a twisted large part of me that believes that you actually...,” she cuts off, looking uncertain all of a sudden.

“You actually what?” I question, feeling like I’m hanging on by a thread with each word that she utters.

She clears her throat and brings her other hand to palm my face in her small, delicate hands.

“Against my better judgement, I actually believe that you somehow care for me,” she says softly, watching me with uncertainty in her eyes. “Am I wrong?”

Silence stretches between us, the power to break us in the air, hanging over us. She knows it too, watching me with bated breath. What I say from this moment on will seal our fate and I sure as hell don’t want to mess it up.

“I won’t lie Star, sometimes you make me so mad when you don’t look at me. When you act like you don’t care about me,” I start, wanting her to understand.

“Ace...”

“Let me finish, baby,” I whisper, the term of endearment feeling so damn right in that moment, I can’t help but stroke her back rhythmically as we stare at each other.

“There are times when I feel like you have too much power over me. Times when I’m not sure how to act around you,” I say solemnly.

“So, you decide to act like a douchebag?” She quirks her eyebrow, watching me unimpressed.

“Well yes,” I say with absolute conviction. “And don’t you for one second think I’ll let you get away from me after this,” I threaten, and I swear her lips twitch with a repressed smile that I know is breathtaking, when she lets herself really smile and feel that joy deep within.

“Why is that, Ace?” She questions.

“Because I care,” I admit, the confession falling from my lips like a prayer, everything in me tense and coiled, feeling exposed in front of this girl who can burn me at any moment. “I think you’re the only thing we care about, the boys would go to great lengths to make you smile, but Astraea,” I tug her chin up, making sure she understands the gravity of this moment. “I’d lay my life down for you because you’re it for me.”

She watches me, her mouth slightly open. Maybe that’s in shock.

“What does that mean?” She whispers, watching me.

“It means something that I hope we’ll both understand and take seriously one day soon,” I say after a while, hoping to God I’m right.

But the thing about growing up though, is that there are always hidden pains.

“Now, remove that damn t-shirt,” I growl, and she starts laughing, much to my annoyance and delight—I’m not sure which will win out.

“Are you serious right now?” She gasps, then she smiles a beautiful, show stopping smile that melts my insides, demanding me to be the best man I could possibly be. For her.

“I thought you forgot about that.” I say, feeling like this moment right here, is everything.

“How can I forget that you’re wearing another guy’s large t-shirt?” I grit out, getting angry all over again.

“Hush now, this is George’s shirt,” she explains, moving back so she’s fully seated on my lap.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe I already knew that it might have been my best friend’s t-shirt since they’re twins and all, but I doesn’t make me feel better.

“Why are you wearing it?” I question, watching her with narrowed eyes.

“I don’t know, they’re comfortable and they make me feel less alone in here,” she confesses, looking down at her hands in her lap.

I watch her for a second, enjoying the nervousness of her chewing her lip.

“I have to go home,” I announce after a while and she looks up.

“Now?” She questions, sounding disappointed and bereft all of a sudden. That makes me feel a little bit better about leaving, knowing that she doesn’t want me to go.

“Yeah,” I mumble.

I have to go because I have to talk to my father tonight about some shit that doesn't even matter, Case and point being, he'll be looking for me.

I tap her hips with my fingers and with a heavy sigh, she gets off my lap and flops down on her bed. I chuckle, knowing that she's getting pissed.

Getting up, I pull up my shirt and throw it at her. She catches it automatically, her jaw on the floor.

"Careful brace face, flies might fly in that open mouth of yours," I say and she snaps her jaw shut, looking at my naked torso without blinking.

Yeah, take a look baby, I know I look good. All for you.

Shit, the stuff that runs through a boy at the cusp of teenage hood is messed up. I'm horny. I want to kiss her. I want to hold her. I want to be with her, in her bed. But even I know that it's a bad idea and honestly, I don't know how I'll react if she touches me when I'm this frame of mind.

"I don't want to see you wearing George's shit or anyone else's for that matter," I tell her, my voice hard. "If you need shit, I'm your guy. You got that?"

She nods mutely, watching me. Unable to resist, I lean in and press a kiss on her forehead and linger there for a bit. She shivers and so do I, but I quickly pull back and then turn to leave.

But when I get to the door, she calls my name and I turn back to look at her.

"I missed you," she whispers, her voice soft, almost making me blow this whole night to shit and stay in here with her. But we both know that's a bad idea.

"Me too, baby."

And with that, I sneak out, feeling like all the stars in the universe are aligned between me and my golden opportunity.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Astraea

There are times in a person's life where we all get depressed. I've found that it doesn't really matter who you are, or how much money is in your bank account. It certainly doesn't matter if you have everything or nothing at all, sadness will always creep in because it's part of life. Just like death.

But this...this cold, barren, endless abyss of darkness, I think it was tailored and hand crafted just for me. I don't know what happened to me but when I wake up next, I'm so weak and disoriented that I don't feel anything at all.

But one word resonates in my soul over and over again.

Breaking...

"Astraea."

When something is breaking, everything stops. In that split second, you're paralyzed to the spot, you hold your breath. Your heart stops beating as everything—all your senses—zero in on that devastating action or feeling that you know, deep in your heart, you can't stop from happening.

It's something close to the fading of life. When you're down to your last breath, and nothing matters anymore. You simply feel irrelevant, your insides feeling like they've long since collapsed and you're nothing more than a pathetic shell of who you used to be.

Broken...

It suggests that something is damaged. Sometimes, that thing can be repaired or restored. But then in other circumstances, especially where matters of the heart are concerned, broken dreams, broken souls, broken trust, broken hearts, broken people...they're almost always, beyond repair.

"Astraea."

Broken...

You realize that there's no going back to stop it from happening. There's no turning back time, no matter how desperately you wish you could go back and made a better decision or avoided being so attached to something you knew even then, would be toxic to you. There's no point in reliving the mistakes made before, the very mistakes that have now rendered you...broken.

It just is and sooner or later, you're going to have to finally accept it.

But the sweet thing about it though, was that when a soul breaks, there's nothing else to live for so you just...surrender.

"Astraea."

You surrender to the blissful promise of nothing. Where there's no pain. No anguish. No tragedy. No devastation.

No secrets or lies.

No broken promises or continued destruction.

You just simply...break.

"Do you know why you're here, Astraea?"

The slow beeping of the machines in the room is the only sound that can be heard around me. Well, other than the inquisitive, annoying voice coming from my left that I've been ignoring, choosing instead to drown back in my thoughts.

Breaking was like an art...

"Astraea," she starts again, her voice more forceful this time around.

"We have to talk. I'm not going anywhere until we do."

"You don't say," I say, sarcastically. I can hear the same question before her monotonous voice asks it again. In my head I'm already screaming for her to stop talking.

No, I don't know why I'm here. I don't know why I'm still breathing. I don't know why I'm still allowing myself to feel everything, to be here, breathing in all this devastation, pain and hurt.

I just don't know why I'm here.

“Can you tell me why you’re in here? In this hospital room, right now?” the voice questions again, still as monotonous as before, no exasperation indicated for the silent treatment I’m giving her.

“Can you tell me that at least?” she questions again, her gaze burning a hole in the side of my head.

No, I can’t do that either. All I know is one moment, I was at a party and the next, I was raped.

Then the next four years were agonizing. Then I came back to all of this...blueish wickedness curated in hell just for me.

“Okay, let’s take another approach at getting to know each other,” she says, and I groan internally, feeling like I’m so over this one-sided conversation already. “Maybe try telling me what you love,” the voice goes on asking me questions that mean absolutely nothing but the moment she utters the word ‘love’, I whip around so fast to look at her, my eyes hardening, my heart pounding and my fists clench so tightly, I think my nails just dug into my palms, drawing blood but I don’t feel it nor do I care.

The machine in the room that monitors my heartrate starts beeping faster, as my breaths come in labored pants. But my eyes, those are trained on the woman.

“Astraea, calm down,” she starts, her eyes widening, as she looks at the machine, then back at me, abandoning her fancy notepad, uncrossing her long legs that are wearing the hell out of that high slit business skirt of hers, paired with her killer red bottom heels.

“Maybe you should just sit back and try to relax, dear. You’re working yourself up,” she chides, watching the monitor, then looking back at me with wide eyes but her voice is still gentle.

I don’t say a word, watching her still, refusing to think or even let that one word sink into me. It means absolutely nothing.

It’s fake.

It’s wrong.

It’s an illusion.

But most of all, it’s a word that binds people like rusty old chains secured tightly around them with a ten-ton ball chained to each of their ankles to match. As if that wasn’t enough, you have to drag yourself to hell, with all the weight and burden of loving someone who doesn’t love you back, only to get there and be tortured by them.

Love doesn't liberate, it anchors one to a sinking ship, a burning house or maybe even a collapsing building.

Love wasn't all its painted out to be because love, just like my life, is a lie.

I hate that four lettered word and I don't want to hear it ever again.

"Astraea," she calls again. "You need to talk about it."

"I don't want to talk about anything, especially not that," I start, my voice clipped and rough.

"Why not?" she goes on, an optimistic look on her face.

"Because love is a lie. Because I don't feel it. I don't have it in my life. It doesn't include me in its coveted embrace, and frankly, I'm done with it too," I say but as soon as I utter those words, I feel horrified. I just reveal my inner turmoil to a complete stranger.

"Why do you say that?" she questions, but I shut down all over again.

The stark white walls of the hospital start growing hazy as my vision blurs. I can't seem to catch a breath, like there's a fist gripping my throat, squeezing the life out of me.

It's that word!

That's what it does! It grabs hold of you like a vice, then suffocates you to death!

"Sweetheart, you need to take a deep breath," she starts as she stands up now, her voice now a bit high pitched but steady as if she has been in these kinds of situations before.

A situation where she has to deal with someone who's basically having a mental meltdown. Watching someone lose their shit at the mention of just one, four lettered word.

But this, my reaction is too violent, too gloomy and dangerous like a hailstorm and maybe even a bit too ridiculous if you were standing from the outside, looking in. And to me, I can't stop this visceral reaction even if I wanted to. I can't help it that I'm negatively affected by something that's supposed to make a person feel warm, make them feel at home, safe and sound.

I can't help but be broken by that one word.

At the same time though, I can't let it affect me this much. I can't let him and everyone else that has fucked me over, affect me and take over my life like this, working me up to a point of pain.

“That’s it, keep taking deep breaths,” the woman says softly as she watches me, her crystal blue eyes staring down at me, unwavering laser focused and so damn worldly as if she’s seen it all.

Been there, done that. Nothing peculiar about little broken girls with questionable family dynamics and a broken compass when it comes to navigating the truth when she surrounds herself with people that have lies and betrayal in their DNA.

But it’s the color of her eyes that hardens my insides. I hate that color. I’ve always hated it right from the start. I look away from her, turning to look out the window, my lips pressed in a firm line.

Silence stretches between us, my mind racing with thoughts that I can’t pin down or even understand. My heart is still beating in my chest and right now, I guess that’s all that matters.

After a while though, I feel calm with the silence that has fallen over the room. And just like before, I allow my mind to go blank, carrying me away with it. Allowing myself to be swallowed back into the darkness that I’m now realizing, has always been present since I was born.

Some people believe in angels watching over them, that they keep them safe and unharmed.

Why wasn’t I kept safe? Why wasn’t I protected by angels? Why was I the exception?

“You know, I understand what it’s like to retreat within yourself,” the woman’s voice is soft, the faux understanding in her voice irritates me though.

“Really?” I bite out, unable to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” she answers softly, watching me but I ignore the compulsion to look at her.

“I also understand that sometimes our minds are not the best place to be in at times,” she continues, as if the cold shoulder I’m giving her isn’t a hint for her to leave and go do finger paints with some other, losing their shit kid in this hospital. There can’t be just me who feel like nothing matters. I just so happen to be the one who doesn’t give a damn anymore and that can’t be helped.

Silence once again hangs over the room like a dark cloak. It’s heavy and pregnant with so many things that should be said, everything that shouldn’t. Memories that nick at your insides, haunting realizations that tear through your heart.

It was just too much. It doesn't seem like such a bad idea to retreat to the only place that you knew what to expect from. There were no surprises in your mind. It's all the same coldness, the same darkness that lulls you to a false sense of comfort, especially when one doesn't have much to live for or look forward to.

"Did you rest last night?" she questions after a long while. I frown. She's still here but I resume my position from before – looking out the window, watching as snow falls lightly. "Not just sleep but I'm talking about actual rest. You know, when you let go and switch off your mind."

I almost chuckle at her question as my heart tugs and the voices in my head start whispering, threatening to bring up bits of images and devastating conversation from before.

"Thanks to whatever drugs they're feeding me, I slept like a baby, thank you very much," I say, feeling vindictive and reckless.

"Okay, I understand that you're frustrated, cranky and restless but in all my years of therapy, I'd say talking about something helps about half the time."

"I'm not talking about mushy, rainbow and unicorns kind of feelings with you," I seethe.

"You mean you won't talk about love?" She raises a brow, staring at me but I look away, unable to hold her stare. "The fact that you vehemently don't want to talk tells me a lot."

"Really?" I scoff. "Tell me more."

"Well, when we go through certain situations in our lives, we almost always have these, complex emotions that we hold on to, cling to, if you will," she starts, watching me. "For instance, when a loved one isn't feeling well, practically on their death bed, we tend to cling on to hope that they'll get better. That the cancer won't take them away. We pray, we hope, we wait but when they finally go, most of us feel robbed."

"Please stop," I whisper but she goes on.

"We feel robbed of the time we could have spent with that person. We feel robbed of the love that was still there, so as time goes, a lot of people tend to just, let go of that hope. Letting go of that love because it's easier to not hope, to not love than to go through the pain, right."

"I can't..." I start but she doesn't hear me.

"The pain that we avoid the most is the one that we haven't addressed. Like a heartbreak of the death of a sibling," she goes on.

George....

My heart aches, twists and stutters in my heart as I think of the constant love I had come to rely on as my support, my rock, my strength. And now, it's gone. He's gone. You could say, that was love denied.

"Or pain that comes from being alone, after being abandoned by the ones that matter the most to you," she says, watching me. "You start feeling your heart aching, your soul shaking and everything feels wrong."

Yes. Heartbreaks have aftereffects, aches and grave consequences, they all come with the most intense and acute love of all. The kind of love I've felt for a dark, ruthless and cruel brute.

I squeeze my eyes shut, as a violent shudder passes through me, refusing to think about it or him any further.

The lies...

The secrets...

The woman sighs as I feel her gaze on my face, then I hear the chair scraping on the floor. Opening my eyes, I see her taking a seat in the chair beside my hospital bed, still watching me.

"Astraea, sweetheart," she starts.

"I'm not your sweetheart," I grit out. She sighs heavily instead.

"Either way, I didn't mean to upset you. I just..."

"Wanted me to talk," I spit out, hating each second that she's in here, trying to probe my mind.

"This is the second time I've come to talk to you," she says instead.

"I don't remember you," I mumble, looking away.

"Yeah, I'm sure you don't." I can feel her shaking her head, her patience running out, no doubt. Sorry to have wasted your time lady, I don't need you getting into my head.

Hopefully if I ignore her like I did whenever she came, she'll pack up her stuff and leave. Why she came back is beyond me but if she's interested in a heavy dose of a wounded, damaged, bitchy attitude, then she's come to the right hospital room. I thrive in that shit these days.

I stare out my window watching the snow fall. I wonder if it'll stick to the ground because Westbrook isn't as elevated as other mountainous parts of Southern California. Although there's something about those snowflakes that capture my attention.

What do those icy, cold flakes remind me of? A cold, frozen heart that's bleeding maybe? And then, whose heart would that be? Mine?

Or maybe the sky is crying the kind of tears that hurt, tears that are cold and angry. Tears that I'm bottling up because I'm done.

"I don't know if you remember anything I said yesterday when you collapsed and gave yourself a concussion, but that's the least of all the activity you were involved in since the afternoon I left you."

What? So, everything that happened with Larry and the boys was after I had already met with this her?

"I highly doubt you remember, so here we go. Again," she starts, clearing her throat. "My name is Dr. Summer. I'm a licensed therapist and I have a private practice here in Westbrook Blues."

That explains the custom expensive threads then.

"I'm here because I do pro-bono work in hospitals," she finishes, and I snort.

It's not like folks in Westbrook can't afford therapists. Hell, I bet they'd pay ridiculous amounts of money just to sit in a stylishly lavish office, lying in a chaise, staring at the crystal chandelier, only to recount an incident when one of their ponies reminded them that they were never given as many hugs as their other sibling from their stepmothers.

"Not a lot of work at your private practice to keep your nose in people's business?" I taunt.

"Not enough people who care for those that have lives in tax brackets well below yours," she counters right back without malice in her voice and I grow quiet, not knowing what to say.

"There are people that suffer every single day, Astraea, but not everyone can afford a therapist," she says.

"Then you should know that I can afford any therapist I wanted. That is if I wanted one, to begin with." I say, bitterly.

"True, but in your current state, I think you'll find I'm your only source of help right now," she counters.

"My current predicament?" I question, turning back to look at her, my eyebrows raised.

"You don't remember what I told you yesterday?"

I just stare at her. If I remember, I wouldn't be asking now, would I?

"Well, I don't think I'm the right person to tell you that. Perhaps your doctor when she returns will inform you."

"So what help are you then?" It's not my intention to lash out at her but I'm finding that I now have a major problem when it comes to people

keeping important information from me. Especially information that concerns me.

“I’m simply here to talk to you about the reason why you’re in here,” she says, her voice soft but firm. “The reason why you’ve been starving yourself, not taking care of yourself.”

Our gazes are locked. I notice the confident way she holds herself, the laid-back quality about her that no doubt triples the digits in her bank account. If I have to guess, she gets paid to just sit there and let her patients ramble on and on about their lavish but miserable lives. And that in turn makes her feel like her degree isn’t worth a damn so she decides to do pro-bono work, a goody-two shoe saint, just so she can find something—someone—more challenging and worth of all the time she spent in her Psych classes.

“You’re not a challenge,” she says cocking her head to the left, letting me know that I was rambling out loud and she heard my evaluation of her.

“Aren’t I though?” I watch her right back. “I don’t know what they told you about my case or what the hell they asked you to do in here, but they sure as hell told you my name.”

She stares at me, not saying a word. Her pen poised over the notepad as if she’s ready to jot down something as mundane as her diagnosis of me.

“You know that I’m a Fields. You know that I come from a wealthy family. Yet, I’m here. That gave you chills, didn’t it?” I mock. “Tell me, what are you hoping to get out of this?”

“To help you,” she answers without missing a bit.

“Bullshit,” I seethe, staring her down. “Everyone wants something, including you. Am I right, Dr. Summer?”

“Astraea.”

“You want the fame and recognition of having ‘treated’ an unhinged, damaged girl from the estates, don’t you?”

“Astraea.”

“You want your peers to praise you and give you a pat on the back for taming a rich bitch like me, huh?” I taunt. “You know, use my name as part of your resume so you can bag more clients, hopefully those that have trust funds like mine?”

I don’t have a clue if I have a trust fund or not, but I don’t give a damn. Besides, that’s not the point.

“You came here because you want connections to the Blue families, don’t you?” A piercing pain shoots through my chest just thinking of the so called Blue families.

“Well, you’re shit out of luck! I don’t want anything to do with them!” I have no idea that my voice is growing louder as the ringing in my ears grows louder, the pain in my heart intensifies.

I start hyperventilating but I fight for control and she lets me. She just silently watches me as I calm myself down, a trick I had to learn when I was in London.

“I came here to understand you a bit better because, honey, you need someone to understand you,” she softly says after a minute of silence. I can feel her steady gaze on me, burning into my profile as if to challenge me, daring me to speak.

Something about that just irritates me so I open my mouth and go for the same, brash effect as she’s giving me with her judging eyes.

“Then I’m sure an intelligent, understanding woman like you knows why I’m in here. Surely, you do know how to read,” I don’t even bother looking at her as I glance at the chart at the foot of my bed, the one every nurse checks before they hover around me almost every hour it seems.

“I certainly do know how to read as much as you know how to lash out,” she retorts, her voice still soft, firm and steady as she watches me. “Lashing out won’t make me go away.”

Really? We’ll see about that.

“Then you should take all that coiled up tension and your fun, reading skills and put them to good use,” I say, not looking at her as I stare out the window, feeling her steady gaze still on me.

“You know, you’re too bitter and angry for a girl your age. A girl with your kind of issues,” she says, dismissing my dig at her. I snap my head back to stare at her, feeling attacked and bewildered. Feeling empty and yet, too full as if I’m about to burst.

I don’t want to be here.

“My issues?” I question her, tilting my head to the left, studying her as much as she is studying me.

“Yes. I’ve been in contact with Dr. Gabriella. Your doctor from London,” she starts. My heart stutters and then it starts pounding but I try to control my breathing as she goes on. “She gave me quite a lot of information about you.”

“Is that legal?” I question and I watch as an eyebrow shoots up.

“You’re intelligent, she did mention that about you. And yes, this is legal,” she says.

“How?”

“You’re not eighteen yet, so your mother signed the permission slip. Also, the little fact that legally, I’m allowed to look into your mental health history, seeing as you’re under psychiatric hold at this very hospital, and all that,” she shakes her head, her eyes still clear and sharp, no sympathy in sight.

Somehow, I’m grateful for her brusque nature, it saves me from feeling the burn of pity when people look at me like I’m a broken puppet.

“I have to say, your mother is one hell of a woman. But in the end, even she had no choice but to cooperate,” she says casually as she opens her notepad again then takes out a printed sheet of paper. Without pause, she starts reading out loud.

My mother? Amanda is here?

My heart starts beating faster.

“My mother is here?” I interrupt the good doctor and whatever bullshit she’s spilling now. She stops then looks at me silently.

“You have quite a number of eager and impatient visitors waiting to see you just out that door, Astraea,” she informs, her gaze set on me. “But none of them will see you until you and I have talked.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a risk to yourself right now,” she answers just as frankly. “May I continue now?”

I distinctively remember her or was it someone else saying that yesterday, but I was completely out of it. I never cared. Today, however, everything feels heightened somehow. Every emotion is sharp and acute. Every thought felt like a loaded gun was just fired directly to my heart.

That’s what happens when you spend time with yourself – you become aware of just how lethal every emotion you possess can be.

Feeling resigned to my fate and oddly grateful that I don’t have to confront anyone for the time being, I mutely nod my head and wave my hand dramatically, giving her the floor which she can go ahead and plant her face in when she trips in those ridiculous heels, for all I care.

“You were hospitalized at the age of thirteen in a mental institution after a traumatic event,” she starts now, her throat cleared and ready to rip into

my past like she owns it. Like it's her trauma to live through. My agitation comes back seven fold almost immediately, I start shivering.

A traumatic event...

I can still smell the tobacco even now. I can still taste the blood in my mouth as I bite my lip in pain.

I can still feel the ripping of flesh and can still hear the groans.

I can still hear my own screams and cries.

My begging...

But what's a traumatic event? What does that mean, when just less than twenty-four hours ago, what seemed like a hailstorm rained down on me, the stones heavy and hard, pounding me until I felt small, battered and bruised as if they were trying to kill me until I burned in hell.

A traumatic event...

The silence of the mansion and the prickling of my senses when I felt predatory eyes on me. Is that the traumatic event?

"Welcome home, *Astraea*," his raspy voice had said behind me, making my skin crawl like insects had just been poured inside my shirt.

But his face...

"*Kim, who is this man?*"

That's my father..."

"*This man is your father?*"

"*He looks like...*"

I gasp as I shake my head, my eyes narrowing on the woman as my heart twists, and this time, the pain threatens to take me under. Dr. Summer just continues as if I'm not about to pass out right then as all the memories I've been trying to shove at the back of my mind try to escape. I locked them behind a door that I haven't visited in a long while, but the flashes behind my eyes come back with each beat of my heart. The images are vivid and they're here to remind me.

To torture me.

To haunt me.

"At this institution in London, there was also another traumatic event. One you very well weren't supposed to survive," she says, her voice still soft.

A traumatic event...

The image of my mother and Denise comes back to haunt me, floating through my head like a ghost that won't leave alone. I can clearly see them,

looking at me with dismay and disgust in that damn hospital room, both of them whispering to each other about what to do next.

I remember Denise saying she'll take care of it.

I remember her 'trying' to comfort my mother who never cried. All my memories of that day might be fuzzy and not so clear but that little detail that my mother never cried when she found out what happened to me, I remember clearly.

She looked stoic, tense, the hate in her eyes blazing.

She looked like she would have wanted to disown me in that hospital, distance herself from her disgrace of a daughter if it was possible.

I remember the fear that gripped my heart when she looked at me. I remember thinking that she didn't want me anymore, that she was going to leave me or throw me away.

And in a way, she did.

In the end, I wasn't enough for my mother anymore. I wasn't worthy of being her child.

Pain makes me shudder as all the memories assault my mind, voices echoing through my ears like a chilling rendition of one of Billy Eilish's songs. It didn't matter which, all of them just make you feel...something.

It's that day when they signed the papers to send me away. Away from their lives. Away from everything and everyone I knew. Everyone I cared for.

I can still feel the loneliness that surrounded me for months after that.

I can still recall all the notes that I received, can even recite them right now because those vicious words are engraved on my heart like it's a tombstone.

I remember the fights I had with my brother about why I was in London.

I remember my birthday and the note I received that day...

Which led to the 'traumatic' decision I made in my weakness. The night I swallowed all those pills...

A traumatic event...

"What happened at this institution?" Dr. Summer's sharp questions jerks me out my head once again, her blue eyes steady and focused on me.

Watching me, probing me for any signs of responsiveness that she might diagnose or whatever the hell she does when people react to certain words or situations. I just continue to stare out the window.

A traumatic event...

“Astraea, you tried to take your own life while you were at that clinic,” she gasps, shock now in her voice, making her voice drop a few notches as it’s now colored with what feels a lot like pity. I don’t want her pity or her damn sympathy.

It’s then that I lash out at her.

“I don’t need your sympathy!” I seethe as I sharply turn to look at her. Her eyes widen, watching me in shock.

“Astraea, I’m just trying to navigate...”

“Navigate what exactly? What a screw up my life has been since the day I was born?” I seethe, getting even angrier with each word. “You want to navigate just how far I’ve fallen in my short years of life? A life I’ve barely lived, only fighting every single day to stay alive and not get swallowed by darkness?”

“Astraea...”

“You—in your fancy outfits and perfectly made up face, no doubt trying to hide how imperfect and damaged your own life is—you come in here and have the nerve to start talking about my issues?” I cut her off, my voice rising, watching her as her jaw snaps open.

From the corner of my eye, I notice a beautiful ceramic vase with beautiful vibrant flowers that feel oddly out of place, resting on top of the little table beside my bed. Why is that there? I hate those flowers!

“You have no idea what my issues are!” I shout, feeling restless and agitated.

My voice is hoarse, dripping with venom as I look at her, my heart pounding as sweat dots my brow making the violent shudders come back with a ferocity that I wasn’t prepared for.

Yet even in all that, I can’t help but feel like there’s something shackled in me that’s demanding to be released, clawing at my insides, demanding to be felt. Needing to be let loose. I clench my fists and grit my teeth, the wave of paranoia washing over me.

“I’m just here to help,” she says softly, her eyes still wide with shock at my outburst. “I’m only here to understand and help you...” But I cut her off before she can continue.

“You think just because you took some class on human emotions and probably have an esteemed degree in how the brain works, or how we respond to ‘trauma’,” I say tauntingly using air quotes, my voice dripping in

sarcasm. “You think that gives you a right to understand what I’m going through or that you can be Saint Summer and ‘help me’, am I right?”

My voice is sarcastic, raw and angry, lashing out at her because I don’t understand what’s happening to me. I’m feeling feverish and hellish and at the same time, I can’t stop the word vomit from being spilled.

“You think you can save a rich girl like me, huh? You look at me and all you see is a little damaged girl who might be from a wealthy family but to you, she’s poor in her soul as well as her no doubt shattered heart, am I right?”

“Astraea, that’s not what’s going on at all,” she interrupts. “I’m trying to get to know you.”

“Well, newsflash doctor, I don’t want to be known!” I shout, feeling like a caged in, wounded animal. “And I sure as hell don’t appreciate you speaking to me like you do.”

“Astraea...”

“So, don’t you dare start talking about my trauma as if you know what I’ve been through! You know nothing!”

She flinches but she doesn’t back away.

“I’m just trying to help...”

“You know nothing!” I bellow, the words being uttered out of my belly as they knock around in my soul.

I’m trembling so hard right now, my hands twitching as I start looking frantically around for something, anything. The monster in me demanding its release. There’s so much pressure in my chest, I can’t breathe at all. My vision dims, it blurs in front of my eyes.

“Astraea, try to calm down and steady your breathing. You’re about to have an anxiety attack,” the doctor says, her soothing voice says but for some reason it’s not really working.

Then for a split second, I think I’m back in that bathroom in London, with Ace looking down at me with anger, sadness and hopelessness.

Breaking...

Then I’m back to the present, unable to catch my breath. My stomach rolls and I feel like vomiting as nausea hits me full on. I start sweating and heating up. Inside, I feel so cold.

“What’s happening to me?” I question, feeling so woozy and flushed. Everything feels so wrong and I feel so heavy. My eyelids are heavy but each time I blink, I see myself as if from an out of body experience,

watching myself lying on the floor of the bathroom in London, my stomach being pumped, my skin cold, my face white as a sheet.

Breaking...

My vision blurs again but I look up at Dr. Summer only to see the alarmed look on her face as she carefully studies me. The machine monitoring my heart rate is beeping even faster now and a puzzled look crosses her face as she looks at me then to the monitor and back,

“What’s happening to me?” I pant, feeling like something is happening but I’m not sure what. Neither is she by the looks of it.

“Dr. Gabriella told me that she put you on a drug weaning schedule before you came back to Westbrook Blues,” she starts, keeping her voice low. Maybe she’s trying to soothe me but I’m getting even more agitated.

“Yeah, sometime before, I...”

“Got addicted to Xanax,” she finishes for me when I trail off. “But you took an active part in trying to get off them completely?”

“Yes,” I whisper, the tremors rocking through my body. Xanax pills are not the kind of drugs to just stop taking, the dangers were highlighted to me by Dr. Gabs before she put me on the program. Even back then, I was the only one responsible for myself, not anyone else that should have been there.

So, we decided I’d slowly get off the damn pills with a program where she tempers my dosage, one pill less each day until I was completely off them. But my dependency to the pills wasn’t as high back then.

Now, I’m itching for one or two little pills to pop.

“It was hard at first but by the time I came back here, I was now only taking one a day,” I tell her with a frown. “Then someone took them away from me and it’s been a few weeks now since I’ve popped a pill,” I explain brokenly. “The urge has hit me a few times but I never took them, not once. Too much has been going on already,” I rush to defend myself as I think of the gory details that the boys told me about George and how someone killed him with drugs...

My heart rate spikes again.

“What the hell happened to me?” I demand, feeling another wave of panic wash over like acid has been poured over me.

George...

Drugs...

Feeling hot and cold all at the same time.

“You’re having withdrawals,” Dr. Summer says after a while as she comes to the same conclusion as me, her hawk like eyes still watching me.

“You might be experiencing tremors, shakes, paranoia, heightened anxiety, stress, hypersensitivity and even hallucinations, but Astraea, know that you’re perfectly safe and all you have to do now is control your breathing.”

What the hell?

“How is that possible?” I question. “How is it possible to suffer from withdrawals that should have started over seven or eight weeks ago?”

I never took drugs—not recently at least but now the craving that I’m experiencing right now...

“How is this happening to me?” I demand but it’s then that I remember confronting Ace, screaming at him really, in the hallway.

I remember the devastated look on his face as I charged at him. I remember the nurse rushing towards us and Ace tensing up as he stepped closer to me protectively. I also remember that he was too late.

I felt the pin prick of a needle being injected in my lower back, but I never saw who it was. But it’s all coming back now.

“Someone did this to me?” I gasp, the question heavy in the air between as silence stretches in the room. She doesn’t even have to say a word. I can already see the truth in her eyes.

I start panicking. Someone is after me for real. Someone wants to kill me like they did my brother.

Through drug overdose!

But...

“We have reason to believe that George might still be alive.”

What the fuck is going on?

“Astraea, calm down!”

Dr. Summer says as she stands up immediately, stepping close to me but for a split second, my vision blurs as I look at her.

I don’t know what happens to me but as I see her about to reach out for me, her hand extended, everything in me screeches to a halt. My heart stops beating, fear grips me by the throat and my body is flushed to a point of pain. I see the hand reaching for me, coming for me. In that split second, I make a decision that I don’t even know or understand where it came from but I do it anyway.

“Astraea, calm down...,” she reaches over to touch my arm but a flashing memory attacks me.

I see a large hand reaching for me in the dark room, the stench of tobacco suffocating me.

“Calm down, little girl.”

No.

Not again!

“Get away from me!” I shout. Panic and dread settling in my stomach. All of a sudden I can’t get away from him. I can see the man’s large, burly hand reaching for me, his dark eyes—like my own—watching me like a predator, tracking its prey.

“Don’t touch me!” I cry, backing away but feeling trapped and at the same time, my eyes tracing the hand reaching to touch me.

“Please, don’t,” I beg but then I hear his chilling laughter. The way he found humor in my begging.

“I’ll make it quick,” he whispers. “Who knows, a rich bitch like you needs to loosen up. I can help with that.”

I scream as loud as I can but even I know no one can hear me or come to my rescue just as he laughs.

“Don’t touch me!” I’m frantic, trying to bat away the hand that’s reaching for me, about to rip me apart and cause me more hurt than I’m able to handle. I have to run.

“They’re just hallucinations, Astraea,” a different voice says. “It’s not real.”

But I don’t believe that. I keep screaming as darkness closes in on me, trapping me inside the large mansion.

My pounding heart is beating so damn loud in the dark room. Why did I decide to leave the lights off? I can feel him moving closer, I can feel him breathing down my back, his large presence raising the hairs at the back of my neck and all I can think is, I have to run.

I can see the front door just ahead of me but he reaches for me.

I have to fight! I have to get away from *him*.

I scream and on instinct, I grab the vase by the table and splash all the water and flowers at the grainy, dark face in front of my eyes. A face I can’t see.

He had a mask! He had a ski mask hiding his face!

A loud shriek pierces my ear, but that's not where the chaos stops. I don't wait to listen to him, I grab the vase and I'm about to whack it over his head but he ducks, but the momentum in my swing makes the vase hit the bed rail instead, shattering loudly in the dark room.

The shocking, harsh sound jerks me back to reality. I gasp as the hospital room comes into focus, the brightness of the room shocking my nerve endings. Panting, I look around the room shocked, my heart still pounding with water and flowers on my lap. Shocked and disturbed, I look around only to notice Dr. Summer backing away from me, her chest moving up and down so fast, the look on her face making me realize something.

Horror sips into my bones, my insides shrinking with what just happened.

It's not a *him*. It was never *him*. Instead, I attacked her. An unsuspecting therapist who wasn't even there four years ago, where I was so convinced I was not only reliving, but it was happening to me all over again.

"God," I whisper, pain slicing me a million different ways as Dr. Summer backs away, her mouth hanging open in bewildered shock.

In that moment I realize what I'd just done.

I was under an intense hallucination that felt so real. Hell, it tasted so real, I swear I was back there. That night, it was his large hand that reached for me as I backed away. That hand was going to touch me and as I look down at Dr. Summer's hand, noticing all the differences that I should've seen but disregarded in my stress.

Where hers is small and delicate, his was large with sinew and hairy.

I gasp, my heart pounding as I look at the shattered ceramic vase on my bed and on the floor.

I almost...

"Oh God," A cry leaves my lips, pain making my stomach clench so tight, I can hardly breathe as disgust rolls into me. Disgust at what I was about to do. No—what I actually did.

"I'm so sorry. I...", I cut off, unable to even explain myself.

"What has happened to me?" I whisper wildly, everything in me protesting at the fact that I was about to bash the good doctor in the head with the vase. I was going to hurt her, mistaking her for...Kim's father. Who might be my...

"Ahh," I cry, violent shudders making me tremble.

Am I actually mentally challenged like my mother thinks? Am I crazy?
Am I as unhinged as they all think? Am I losing my mind?

What happened to me?

A deep sense of morose, embarrassment and sorrow grips my soul in that moment and all I want to do is die. Tears start falling down my cheeks as the stench of violence wafts in the air around us, hearts still pounding so damn loud, I can't even think.

I just want to die.

I can't deal with this. I can't even deal with myself.

It takes only but a moment to make the decisions that will make or break our lives, but when the knowledge of what you're going to do—or what you really deserve—is already in the deepest, darkest parts of you—you just act.

As Dr. Summer gasps for breath, still backing away, looking at me with fear and horror, I can't take the look on her face so I make a grab for one of the thick, broken, jagged and sharp pieces of the broken ceramic vase in my hand. I stare down at it with an urgency that I can't shake, feeling a deep need of release that I can't shake.

"Oh my God," she gasps just as the door bursts open, but I don't look away from the piece in my hand.

"Astraea, no!"

Without a moment of hesitation, I hold in my breath and quickly bring my wrist closer and slit it. Deep and hard.

"Stop her!"

"Holy shit!"

"Astraea!"

But I'm not listening. I just need all these feelings to stop.

I transfer the broken piece into the other hand as blood starts gushing out, making me feel oddly calm and lighter, the pressure diminishing with each glorious drop. But it's not enough. It's not nearly enough to what's ravaging inside me.

I'm about to slit my other wrist with the bloody, sharp broken piece but a strong, calloused hand reaches over and restricts my hand, the one gushing blood all over the sheets and on me.

I freeze almost immediately the moment he touches me.

I would know his touch from anywhere. But I don't want him right now.

"Let me go!" I fight but the hold on me only tightens, knowing that soon, people will be rushing into the room. I start struggling, kicking, trying to

push him away.

In the distance, I can hear the faint echo of someone's screams. They sound like animalistic howls, deep cries that shake me to the core, sounding like they're being ripped from deep within one's soul. It takes me a while to realize that it's me. Those screams are coming from me.

I'm the one making that sound as I struggle against him.

"Let me go!" I shout, my voice growing louder.

"Stop, Astraea."

"Let me go, I can't do this anymore!" I scream.

I just can't...

Dr. Summer manages to grab the piece of broken ceramic piece from my tight grip, looking at me in horror. Without a pause, she runs for the door, shouting for help.

But I'm tired. I'm tired of this life.

I'm tired of being treated like I mean nothing.

I'm tired of losing at every turn.

I'm tired of being treated and seen as an invalid.

But most of all, I'm tired of being cast aside, unwanted and unloved.

"Get her some fucking help!"

"She's bleeding so bad."

"Help me get all these broken bits off before she grabs another," Ace instructs someone. "Fuck it, I'll do it myself."

He lets me go with a deep growl, his growl, but I'm not done. I'm still fighting for a way out.

I grab at the I.V. drip that hangs on the pole beside the bed and all the machines around me, then I rip them off my flesh as quickly as I can.

"Oh my God."

"Astraea!?" A voice bellows in anger and I know he's going to reach me in a second, but my reflexes are still in top shape, what with all the boxing classes I took before, trying to get some kind of self-defense training.

I grab the drip bag and without even stopping to question why the hell they put me on a drip. It doesn't matter though. This will do.

I rip into it with my teeth, blood spilling everywhere from the bleeding wrist. I bite into the thick bag quickly and as Dr. Summer turns around with hysteria in her eyes, sweet oblivion is already taking over as I gulp down the liquid.

The bag is ripped away from me by a viciously angry Ace, but I don't mind as sweet lethargy takes root in me. All my limbs grow heavy, everything shutting down. I know this feeling well; I've been there before.

"Baby Blue!" Noah shouts but I don't look at him, I stare right at Ace as my vision blurs. His jaw is clenched, standing beside my bed, looking helpless. He doesn't say anything though, but I wasn't expecting him to. I just allow him to see the fading of life within me.

Everything collapsing around me. Noises fade, my senses shutting down. The second time we've been here. Only this time, there's no pumping of my stomach, no playing the hero. I don't need a hero.

And I certainly don't need this life after all.

The last thing I hear as I surrender to the darkness is his voice as he growls, his eyes on me.

But I don't care, not anymore.

I'm broken after all...

CHAPTER TWELVE



Ace

Watching her destroy herself has to be the most painful thing that has ever happened to me. Prompting a side of me to shift into focus as echoes of the past come barreling into me, threatening the thin cloak of civilization that she keeps intact by being who she is.

She keeps me sane. She keeps me calm but now, she just ripped away every shred of humanity in me and I don't even recognize myself as I turn to the fucking therapist that was in here with Star and is probably the one who caused this.

"What the fuck did you do?" I bellow, advancing on her.

"Please calm down," someone says as a harem of nurses and medical people come rushing into the room, pushing us out all over again. It's like déjà vu but with way more blood.

"Don't you dare tell me what to do!" I shout, looking back at Star, her bloody wrist hanging at the side of the bed as nurses hover around her, touching her.

This could have been avoided had they just left her the fuck alone! Banning me and everyone else from seeing her was their mistake and they're all going to pay for it!

“You did this!” I accuse, pointing at the woman that was in there with Astraea.

I expect the doctor to tremble or to back away, but she doesn’t. Instead, she studies me carefully, as if noting something.

“You must be the Westbrook Blues heartthrobs,” she says, looking sure and certain.

“Listen lady, I don’t care who you think we are but what did you do to her?” I demand.

“What I discuss with patients is none of your business unless you are her immediate family, who are you?” she questions, not at all intimidated.

“The guy who you shouldn’t be messing with,” I warn, my voice low and threatening.

She studies me for another long second.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” she observes, “You’re the one who broke her heart.”

“What?” I reel back, feeling like I just got slapped across the face.

“What the fuck?”

“And you must be one of the boys that broke her spirit,” she says, looking over my shoulder.

“Oh no, that honor belongs to his highness over here,” Noah seethes, staring daggers at me.

“I don’t know, I think you know you’re at fault here,” she says. “You know you affect her deeply.”

“Excuse me?” Noah reels back, like I did. “I’ll have you know...”

“Listen, if you care for her at all, give her the space that she’s desperately asking for,” the doctor says, looking from Noah to me, but she lingers on me.

“I can’t do that,” I state, stepping forward. I messed up with how I handled everything, nit this time. “I can’t stay away from her.”

“What just happened in there, although gravely tragic, was not unanticipated. She’s in a lot of pain right now, hurting in more ways than the people around her realize.”

“But...” I start but she cuts me off.

“Don’t be the one who pushes her over.”

And with that, she nods and leaves, her high heels clicking down the corridor. We watch her go silently until Noah breaks the silence.

“Did you hear that?” he questions, shaking his head. “Astraea is hurting way more than we realize, but you...you don’t care.”

“Shut up, Noah,” I warn. I’m not in the mood for all of this.

“What?” Noah taunts, “The truth is too hard to bear now? Typical of the Kings of Westbrook Blues to threaten and destroy everything and everyone they touch.”

I don’t bother turning around when I hear the anger in the voice behind me, unable to look away from the door with Astraea behind it, once again with nurses and a doctor around her, trying to save her from herself. But I can’t get what the psychiatrist just said out of my mind.

Am I the reason for all of this?

“You’re damn right you are you, selfish prick,” Noah responds behind me. “You are a King after all.”

“I’m not my father,” I grit out, annoyance making me feel cagey and probably terrifying because the poor man takes a step back.

“You’re not your father but you sure do follow in his footsteps.”

“Shut the hell up,” I grit out, now pacing as I stare at the door.

“This is all your fault!” he growls behind me. “Maybe if you weren’t such a hot head, Astraea would get all the help she needs right now,” he chuckles sarcastically. “Or wait, maybe if you had just stood by Astraea, been honest with her right from the start. If you had just been there for her when she desperately needed you, she wouldn’t be in there right now, fighting for her life!”

But he’s wrong. Astraea isn’t in there fighting for her fucking life. She’s in there giving up on it. Giving up on everything, on me.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I grit out over my shoulder.

“Yup, I won’t argue with that,” he chuckles, his voice hard. “At least when I speak, it’s the fucking truth.”

“Fuck off,” I whisper, feeling the impact of the glaring, bitter truth washing over me like someone just dumped hot horse shit all over me.

“Doesn’t feel so good, does it? Knowing that you’re the cause of all this chaos, all this pain, and everyone sees it too,” he goes on, his voice growing louder with each step that he takes coming closer to me, driving all the nails into my coffin.

A coffin that holds a half dead king, rotting from the core without the light of his bright shining star.

I know he’s itching for a fight. I knew it was coming, but now isn’t the fucking time!

“I know your little feelings are hurt because that doctor told you about yourself, but you have no idea of what you’re talking about,” I grit out, feeling tense and restless, my life literally crumbling to ash right in front of me.

“I wonder what George would think about all of this. Especially when he finds out that you’re the reason why his sister was violently, so ruthlessly moles...”

I don’t let him finish. As quick as a bee, I turn around, grab the asshole by the collar and slam him into the nearest wall, tightening my hold on this collar.

But Noah being Noah, he only laughs. A sadistic, sardonic laugh that grates on every nerve ending in my body.

“What are you going to do now, your highness?” he croaks out, a wild look in his eyes reflecting the wild turmoil in me. “Are you going to beat me up to a pulp because I’m spelling out the truth that you can’t bear?”

“You know nothing about the truth,” I growl in his face.

“Because all you know are lies and secrets,” he grins in my face, all traces of humor completely absent. All that’s there is brazen loathing, resentment, pain and hurt that dims his eyes, hiding a much sinister emotion and intent that is mirrored in me.

Fear.

Fear of the unknown.

Fear of losing the one girl that means so much to us. No one else understands the hold she has on all of us.

Fear that our world is crumbling and we’re going to lose everything.

Fear that we’re no longer what we used to be.

Fear that the Blue Boys—the boys she brought together—won’t be anything worth a damn anymore without her.

Fear that comes with the fact that as she breaks, we’ve shattered.

I open my mouth to say something, anything really, but nothing comes out. What’s there to defend anyway, when everything he’s saying is the truth?

I’m the cause of everything.

But I’ll be damned if protecting the ones I care about is a crime, including this asshole who doesn’t yet know that there’s a bigger game being played or the fact that he’s my father’s next target.

I step away from him, pretending to dust off his collar when really, I'm threatening him with a sardonic smile of my own to match his.

"What's wrong, baby Noah? Are you feeling sour because you weren't in the loop of what's been happening? Or is it because you know whatever shit is happening right now is about to hit you next?" I whisper, stepping away from him as the security guard eyes both of us, looking weary and alert.

"Or should I start with all your faults," I continue, watching him. "You know, like how the fuck you let that bitch get close to Astraea all this time, allowing her to be 'friends' with her when really, she was fucking spying on my girl?" I almost roar, getting angry all over again as I think back to all the shit that has happened in that last three days.

"I didn't fucking know!" Noah shouts, getting closer so he's in my face.

"You didn't know, huh?" I taunt, keeping my voice down. "Or maybe the truth is you were too busy chasing pussy—as always, how fucking cliché—to notice that Kim Possible was the snake in the hen house?"

"King, I'm warning you..." he threatens but I get into his face.

"Warning me from what?" I demand. "For fuck's sake, you're the one who declared her clean and harmless."

"I fucking said there was nothing yet to report about..."

But like the asshole I am, I cut him off.

"That's not what you said and you fucking know it! You're the one who let her in. You're the one who let her get close to her," I point out Astraea's hospital room. "You're the one who put his fucking Noah-awesomeness—seal of fucking approval on her and let her get fucking close to Astraea!"

I'm looking for a fight, I can feel the pulsing need thrumming through my veins. I'm almost itching with the insane need to let it all go, but I'm not fucking leaving this hospital. If I have to fucking fight everyone in here, then so be it.

"Oh, I see where we're going with this, asshole," he growls, with a tight smile on his face. "The rest of us made fucking mistakes and we're to blame for everything. But you, the master—no, the fucking King—of all this chaos, is blameless am I right?"

I tense up with each word, knowing that it's true but he takes that as an invitation to kick me while I'm fucking down.

We're at each other's throat, standing toe to fucking toe. Going at it like fucking road runners, now neck to neck. Even though he's a few inches

shorter than me, right now is the first time we've ever had this heated fight.

"Well, newsflash asshole, she called you out on it and you got mad! She fucking chose Emmett over you, and you fucking saw red!" He shouts in my face and I'm about to launch at him, but he's ready. "You can't get over your fucked up issues enough to get over the fact that she rejected you! That she chose someone else, so you took it upon yourself to get rid of..."

"Boys, boys! That's enough, don't you think?" an amused chuckle comes from behind us, making me tense up even more as I hear his booming, thunderous voice that's so damn amused, calm and slimy as he is.

Philip King has joined the chat.

"There's really no reason to fight, my dear boys. After all, we're all friends here," he chuckles, his voice low. I bet he fucking enjoys seeing this, me fighting with the people that have cared for me for so long when those that should have, never did.

My eyes are locked on Noah, who's watching me back, a puzzled look on his face as he takes in my reaction to dear old Daddy. I close my eyes for a second and when I open them, Noah is looking past my shoulder to my father.

"Noah, my dear boy. I haven't seen you in so long," Philip starts. "How have you been?"

Noah and I lock gazes then and I hope to the fucking stars I swear on Astraea's name that he catches on to a bit of my plan and that he doesn't fucking blow this shit.

Trust me, asshole. My eyes say.

I'll fuck you up. He threatens and I roll my eyes in exasperation.

Dealing with Noah is a full-on career. I might need to get a degree on his mood swings and fury. But then again, he, Em and George might be the only experts on who the fuck I am. But Star...she's part of me.

So, knowing that if I delay looking at him, he'll pick up on our silent exchange. I turn around and step away from Noah but keep him in my line of sight as I face my maker, for all intents and purposes.

"Father," I greet the snake, hating that one word with every fiber of my being. "I wasn't aware that you'd be coming back to the hospital," I observe, knowing that his presence here isn't a coincidence. He's looking for something and right now, I'm fucking relieved that Em disappeared to God knows where.

I can't deal with all of this shit right now though.

Astraea is in there and I fucking need to get in there and force her to fucking stay with me, not deal with all this Blues bloodline and superiority crap.

“Yes, and right on time before you let Christina loose on us for threatening her son,” he chuckles again, obviously in a better mood than he was last night. “By the way, Mr. Montreal, how is your mother?” my father asks a tense Noah, whose chest is heaving up and down with a tempo that matches the pounding of my heart. Noah hates my father with an intensity that rivals mine. Maybe it’s because he was the one who convinced his father to leave...

“Last time I checked, she didn’t care much for assholes like yourself,” Noah bites back and I almost sigh in relief.

If there’s one thing that you can count on Noah for, it’s his charming snide remarks that make him an asshole. And right now, to deal with this man and prevent my plan from crumbling, I need Noah to be a dick to my father. Because for him, he thinks the Blue Boys are falling apart. I won’t give him the satisfaction of letting him know that he’s actually right.

“Hmm, she must be proud of your lingo then, boy,” Philip narrows his eyes at him but I can see the amused expression on his face. He’s enjoying all of this.

The breaking apart of the Blue Boys.

The ‘death’ of Emmett and George.

Thinking that he defeated Syrus, besting him at this proprietary game of his.

Silencing Astraea.

And thinking that he has me boxed in under his thumb and doing everything he wants.

In his book, my father right now is winning and by God, I’m going to allow him to enjoy his victories for now. Let his pride take over until it sinks him.

His time, like everyone’s fucking time, is coming. Keep smiling, oh dear father.

“Just as proud as you must be of the murderous son you have here,” Noah counters. “Hmm, he’s even the spitting image of you with the same beady snake eyes. Must be one hell of a gene pool,” Noah chuckles, forcing himself to be less tense, now with a cocky smile on his face as if he’s

actually enjoying this, but I know better. He's fucking terrified and angry right now.

Terrified of losing Astraea and angry at myself for allowing all this to happen.

All the same feelings I'm harboring about myself.

"Careful, boy. You wouldn't want to make accusations that you can't back up without evidence," Philip says softly, stepping closer to him. "What happened to that boy, Syrus' son, happens all the time to defective people with incompetent hearts that can't keep up with the realness of life. He was a weak piece of shit, right from the start."

Noah's nose flare, his eyes widening a bit.

"I'll have your ass know that Emmett..."

Fuck no!

I turn sharply to look at the fool who's about to snitch, but before Noah can finish, I cut him right off.

"Emmett was a fucking weakling and you know it," My voice is impassive, cold and aloof. "That asshole couldn't even talk for shit, and he deserves to be dead. Good luck to the hell that will burn that fucker."

I force my voice to be unbothered but inside, just underneath the fucking surface, I'm bristling with untamed anger and tension. I look at my father as I say that, then at Noah, fucking hoping to God that he gets the message. It only takes him but a few seconds to go with it.

"I guess he deserves to be dead only because he almost got the girl that you didn't, huh? You're an even bigger shithead than I thought," Noah bites out, his eyes locked on me, a question lodged there.

Later. I'll explain much fucking later. Right now, just ride with me.

"Well then, it doesn't matter now, does it?" Philip says, a sly grin on his face as he turns to clap me on the shoulder, a proud smile on his face. "See son, I told you that you'll have her in the end."

I'll have her? As if she's some kind of animal that I'll own.

"You sure did, father," I grit out, but he doesn't notice, his attention now on the room with all the nurses and doctors coming in and out.

"Is the girl sick?" Philip questions, his eyes narrowed.

"Because of you and your disgusting son," Noah butts in before I can answer. "So, if you'll please get lost, your disgusting and horrid presence is making me feel sick too."

Philip looks at Noah, then back at me, but he doesn't say anything in response. He only looks at me. "I'll see you at home later then, son, so we can discuss the next stage of that plan."

"And what plan would that be?" Noah steps in again.

"Why, to be there for old Syrus in his time of tremendous loss, of course," he says, a smile on his face. "Losing a son can be a gruesome, devastating thing. You know, just like losing a father. Isn't that right, Mr. Montreal?"

I tense up as soon as he says those words, an attack directed at Noah no doubt. Fucking hell!

I turn towards Noah, about to plead with him to keep calm before he lets something slip through his anger. Before I can say anything, a loud, rambunctious hyena laugh breaks the tense silence as Noah dramatically doubles over, laughing.

"There's nothing funny about this," Philip says, shocked at Noah's response. I know he was expecting Noah to get even angrier or to attack him, but he doesn't do that. Instead, he just got another side of Noah he wasn't expecting.

"Oh, I'm sure it's the same. But I have to say, that little, almost tangible hurt in your voice though, your bloody highness, Mr. King, that almost made your sob story pathetic," he says, his voice low and menacing, going in for the kill. "Tell me something, your highness. Did your daddy leave you?" Noah taunts, with a grin on his face as he watches my father who is now bristling. My lips twitch with a repressed smile as I think of my Grandfather and how he practically loathed his son. Hell, in the end, something happened between them...

Wait.

Grandpa Phil Snr and my father were enemies...

Before I can think of it further, I notice my father taking a menacing step closer to Noah.

"Boy, I'd think very carefully about the words that come out of my mouth if I were you," he threatens in that low voice of his.

"Hmm, tough words right there. I wonder what your daddy would say about them. I wonder if he's turning over in his grave at what a pathetic excuse of a human being you are," Noah goes on, making Philip King's face grow red with repressed anger. "Or maybe, he just doesn't give a damn about you...", he whispers with a wink.

I look away, holding in my laughter. These types of pissing off contests, embarrassing people, making them feel small by trash talking them with the truth and hard facts, being petty, that was Noah's ball game. The motherfucker knew he had the pettiness to power an entire country, and he'll never run out. He knew just how to press people's buttons, making people angry and bitter, having them all up in their feelings and shit. The guy was talented!

"Little boy..." Philip starts, stepping closer to Noah who only grins like a loon, knowing damn well that he just hackled Philip.

"You have no idea what you're talking about and frankly, you don't know a thing about my life," he says, his voice tense and low.

"Trust me, I know more than I care for," Noah winks.

"You think you're so smart with your smart mouth, but you're out of your league here, boy. I'd advice that you go hide out with your father where he is or you'll both be turning in your graves when you realize that poor Christina is all alone," he threatens.

"You keep my mother's name out of your mouth," Noah threatens right back, but I know that tone. It's not a threat like my father's, it's a loaded promise that Philip isn't aware of.

No matter what goes down here, Noah is going after Philip for even mentioning Christina's name like that.

"Hmm," my father murmurs, watching Noah, studying him. Then he turns to look at me. "You know, it's a shame that you had to suffer through forming some semblance of a friendship with these...ill-bred boys. But no matter, you don't have to pain yourself in that, son," he steps back and Noah tenses.

I almost step forward to punch the asshole.

"What do you mean by that?" Noah demands, looking at my father, then at me for answers that I don't have.

"Oh, you didn't know?" he chuckles, knowing that he just got the better of Noah.

"Noah..." I start but Philip beats me to it.

"You see, my son was pretending to be your friend all these years," he announces, a proud smile on his face. This time, I can actually say it's genuine.

"Why would he do that?" Noah questions, not looking at me at all. Shit.

“Noah,” I try again but like before, my fucking father is enjoying this.

“Oh, to learn all your secrets, keep you and your pathetic families in check. He reported all that information back to me,” he goes on, waving his hand in the air like a fucking magician. “For example, I know that you wept like a rejected baby when daddy left, didn’t you, little Noah?”

It’s as if the breaking takes place in slow motion as Noah swivels his head back, as if the words just struck him across the face. Then he turns to look at me with a dead look in his eyes.

Yeah, that’s what betrayal looks like.

“Tell me, son,” Philip steps forward. “How does it feel to be worthless and not worth anyone’s time? Least of all, your father?”

Silence stretches between us as my fists clench at my sides, wanting desperately to deck my father and dump his lifeless body in a rock crusher. I can see the same look in Noah’s eyes but then he glances away, looking at my father.

“I don’t know, but tell you what, since you’re so curious. I’ll make sure to ask your father when I meet him. Or your mother,” Noah starts, tapping his chin as he brings in the big guns. “Wait, I think she’s the one that sucked my cock last night for a dollar. Guess being born from a common whore does make a man.”

I raise my brows, realizing that Noah knows more than people give him credit for. I don’t know much about my Grandmother. Hell, I never met the woman enough to even call her that but from the stories I learned from my dying Grandfather, she was a whore for real.

And as my father grows deathly pale, I realize with amusement that he didn’t see that one coming.

“Now listen here, little boy...,” he starts, but before he can say anything else, the tapping of high heeled shoes comes down the corridor and the next thing that hits me is the scent of a powerful, nauseating perfume mixed with hard alcohol, wafting towards us.

Then I see a woman marching over to us, obviously drunk and unsteady on her feet but she’s determined, with fiery hate in her eyes, as she heads straight for my father who’s now turned in surprise to look at the newcomer.

It’s almost like a bad accident really as the mother of the girl I love, charges for Philip King.

“King!” she slurs on a shout, but that doesn’t stop her, or slow her down. She’s drunk and angry as hell right now.

“Ahh, drunk as a skunk Amanda,” Philip smiles, turning around, composing his face as he turns on his disgusting charm. “How can I...”

But before he can finish that sentence, I watch in shocked anticipation as Amanda lifts her hand in one fast motion and slaps him hard, right across the face with all her strength.

I almost flinch at the sound it makes, but instead I notice Noah’s face breaking into a smile as he watches the show.

“What the fuck?”

“Damn,” Noah whispers in glee.

But before Amanda, the unfortunate, strange and drunk woman can explain herself or shout at my father, she drops to the floor in one hot mess and is out cold before anyone can react.

“Well, at least she did what I think the entire female population has wanted to do,” Noah says.

Accurate as fuck.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Like a watershed, the stream of consciousness finally seeps into me with an ease that makes me think of new beginnings. Everything flows in slowly, there are no tides, rushing waves or turbulent, troubled waters. It's almost peaceful, seductive and inviting. I want to exist in this space for as long as possible.

Because I know what I tried to do to myself.

A flood of memories crashes into me, waking me up completely as the river rushes into the large ocean of pain and misery.

"Astraea," a soft voice calls my name, the voice so close as if it's right beside me. "Open your eyes, my sweet girl."

I know that voice. I know it from somewhere. It's sweet, melodic and soothing and it also makes the tears I've been holding for a while now, start to fall silently down my cheeks.

"Why?" I croak out, feeling the wetness of my cheeks but refusing to open my eyes for even a second. I just want the darkness. I can't handle this right now. Or ever.

"So, you can see a new day. The snow has fallen on the ground," she softly informs, her voice gentle.

“Does it snow in heaven?” I question, maybe I’ll finally see my brother if he’s here. But then, he might be alive...

Might.

Hope is a strange thing. It’s a beautiful sentiment no doubt, but it also gave people a false sense of security. Making one believe in one thing, almost having them desperate and panting. When really, the reality is way harsher and undeniable.

“Oh baby, I hope not! I hate the cold,” she says with a hearty chuckle.

“Why? I thought you liked when it snowed,” I mumble, my heart aching with each beat.

“When it snows on earth!” she snorts. “But even then, not so much. Anything that’s cold isn’t my cup of tea. There’s something about cold, dry things that makes sure that there’s no life around. Makes sure that nothing can grow or survive.”

Just like Ace’s non-existent heart.

Just like my mother’s love and care.

Just like the empty, hallow feeling inside my heart.

“So why should I open my eyes?” I croak out, my voice dry and rough. “When I’m barely surviving and there’s nothing to live for?” The tears keep falling as the recollections of the decisions I’ve made flash behind my eyes. I feel more than just a little broken. I can’t even explain the emptiness in me.

“What’s hard, my love? Life is wonderful,” she states, her voice non-judgmental. I guess that’s why I’ve always liked her, finding her easy to talk to. With her, I don’t mind opening up to her.

“Life comes with many things, Marie,” I finally open my eyes to see the older nurse who has been there for as long as I can remember. It’s funny how she’s always there even in places that I vowed never to be back in. “But it never came with an instructional guide.”

She laughs then, looking down at me with a warm smile.

“That’s true! Imagine if we were born with a little booklet tucked under our tiny arms to help the shitty people we are born to. Maybe then my daughter wouldn’t have done what she did,” she looks away as she says that, a faraway look on her face. “But I still bet we would find a way to screw everything up because we’re fickle minded. We have a destructive nature that swallows us whole.”

“Yeah, tell me something new,” I scoff.

“But baby, we’re the ones who should personally decide what kind of ‘things’ or people can affect us. If it’s going to hurt you this much, then it should matter, it should mean something to you. Don’t let mundane things and irrelevant people affect you this much.” she says softly, allowing me to just cry, her voice low and calming.

“But what happens when you’re not the one in charge of your own life? When, not just one, but a number of people manipulate your life, shaping it into what they want it to be? What happens when they’re the ones shaping everything you do and go through?”

Because that’s my life in a nutshell.

I can feel my heart squeezing painfully in my chest and, at this point, it’s not even like the stupid muscle is wrapped around someone’s fist. Instead, it’s in my own hands and I’m squeezing the life out of it because for fuck’s sake...I did this to myself, damn it!

I did this! I let other people control me. My emotions. My thoughts. My instincts. My every move.

“What do you do when they take your power?” my voice breaks, hot tears streaming fast down my cheeks. I look up at Marie who steps closer to my bed. She grabs my hand, an understanding look in her eyes.

“Then you, my dear girl, have to take that power back, you have to take back control of your life. Because you know what, my love, it’s your damn life,” she says, her voice hard now, brooking no argument.

“Beautiful words, Marie, but the problem with them is that someone I got seriously close to, someone who I thought was my ride-or-die, used those very words...”

“And then stabbed you in the back with them,” Marie finishes for me and as I nod my head, more tears keep rushing out. Marie sighs, watching me like a wounded, hurt child. Of which, I am if you really look at it.

“I wish I could help you out with all of this mess, maybe take your burdens because, my God in Heaven, you have been through so much already, you don’t deserve all of this baggage on top of that.”

“So no, I don’t believe you when you say we have the power over our lives. We simply don’t. Not when we care so deeply for other people that we surrender everything we are to the essence of them, giving them power over us,” my voice is hard as I speak, feeling the bitterness of the truth sucking the life out of me.

Something starts stirring in the pit of my stomach. I feel hot, like a tingling or an awakening that starts with a spark of fire.

“But the worst part is, you don’t even realize that they have taken all your power until they bend it over backwards, stretch you beyond your capacity, then they snap it like a fucking rubber band,” I seethe, anger bubbling inside me.

I’m unaware of it, but suddenly my voice is deeper, stronger, firmer as anger starts to slowly coarse through my blood stream like a deadly poison. My words become even more vicious with barely contained rage as flashbacks of everything that has happened to me start rolling like a movie behind my eyelids.

“How can someone take so much power from you until all you want to do is give up?” I look down at my bandaged wrist, tears falling fresh down my cheeks as I remember what I had wanted to do. Then I look up to the side of my bed, noticing that there isn’t an I.V. pole anymore. There isn’t a vase of flowers on the nightstand. The room is clean and barren of anything that I might use to harm myself and that makes me sad.

Not for the fact that I can’t hurt myself, but the realization that my will power, my drive, my own strength—it’s all been taken away from me to a point where I feel so desolate. I hurt myself, for God’s sake.

“You’re not weak, Astraea,” Marie says, her voice hard, looking right into my eyes. “You’ve never been a weak anything in your life. Don’t insult me by making yourself look small and petty.”

“But Marie...,” I start but she cuts me off.

“You and I both know that you possess a powerful sense of self-control and strength over yourself than anyone realizes. Even after everything you’ve been through, you are brave, strong willed and fiery.”

“Some days, hell, most days, I don’t feel like that at all,” I mumble. “Lately, I’ve felt so drained.”

Marie sighs and we both look at my wrist, embarrassment coloring my cheeks, knowing that everyone probably knows what I did. Gossip travels fast in Westbrook Blues.

“Something tells me that this has everything to do with the pacing brutes out there. More so the young, ruthless king who’s peaking in through the window every few minutes since last night, itching to get in here,” Marie says with a knowing look but there’s no judgement there.

I sigh, not wanting to address that. The fact that he's been here this entire time just makes me angry at myself because of the butterflies in my belly.

"You know, Astraea, love does conquer all," she whispers softly, after a long pause of heavy silence.

I let out a chuckle then. A rough, humorless chuckle that makes shivers race down my spine in a shudder.

"Love, huh?" I chuckle again, each sound bitter than the last, as I remember the night I confessed to Ace, with everything I had in me to give to him—the parts of me that I was holding onto so tightly. I once thought I couldn't give anyone everything but fuck me upside down because when I finally realized that I had nothing left to give, everything I was, everything I hoped to be, I had given it all up to him.

And what happened after that? The worst kind of pain froze my insides.

Heartbreak was, for all intents and purposes, the worst kind of death a soul can experience, and it just so happens that I had been through all of them.

"Love is a losing sentiment, Marie. Do me a favor and believe in it yourself," I can't help the bitterness in my voice in the way I feel like I'm hardening inside. It almost feels like, with the haze of confusion, the hallucinations and everything else that has happened, anger is now my new best friend and there's no space for anything that doesn't give me a fighting chance.

"You don't mean that," she says, disappointment in her voice, but I ignore it and face the large door of my private hospital room which is directly ahead of me. Pretending not to notice the hurt in her eyes as I crush my own heart to the ground and try to stomp out the burning flames within that have consumed me for so long.

Burning for a boy that doesn't deserve the fire of my love.

It's my fault for mistaking the raging fire in me for burning love when really, that was a burning soul. He never deserved my soul.

What he deserves though, is the fire of my hate. Because I'm realizing something.

I hate him.

"I do, Marie. At this point, I can't...," My voice catches and I look down, letting the last of my tears fall, knowing damn well that these are the last tears I'll ever shed for myself. I won't feel sorry for myself anymore. I can't

do that and fight at the same time—the two don't mesh well together and right now, I need to find my damn self.

"I can't let them drag me through hell with a smile on my face," I whisper, wiping the wet trails on my cheeks, my voice hardening. "If I'm going to suffer, we're going to suffer together. If I'm going to burn, we're all going to burn together," I grit out, looking up at her.

Marie looks down at me with her lips pressed together, studying me for a minute. I let her see. I don't look away or blink. I allow her to see what's going on in me.

"Why do I get the feeling that you don't mean that in a romantic sense?" she questions, eyebrows raised.

"That's because romance and love are fairytales for girls with dreams. Girls who spend days upon days daydreaming. Those girls have a light about them, joy, truth and all that bullshit they get brainwashed with when they watch Disney."

"Don't you have a bit of that yourself?"

"I wasn't raised on Disney Princess movies, Marie. I was raised by the toughest of them all," I snort, thinking of my mother.

"I wasn't allowed to watch TV most days, let alone stand in the rain and dance. That's what girls who dream do. They dance in the rain," I whisper, watching as a large figure passes by the little window in the door. It goes back and forth but never really looking in. I know who it is without even thinking about it.

"Girls like me though? We try to soar, but we don't realize that our wings have shackles, and soon, we crush and burn into ash," It almost feels like I'm in a hypnosis, the words flowing out of me like a river.

"Well damn," Marie whistles, making me look up at her.

"But the beauty of it all, though, is that there's a chance at rebirth from the ashes."

"You're scaring me," Marie says as she presses a hand to my forehead to check my temperature. "I hope you don't get out of here only to go purchase a gun to go on a shooting spree," she says seriously.

"Come on, Marie," I snort.

"I'm serious! Because I'd hate to have to be interrogated by the police and the news anchors. That shit isn't for me."

I laugh then, not knowing how much I needed that laugh. I pat her hand in mine. "Don't worry, Marie, your soulful eyes will make everyone tune in

to watch you talk about the deranged rich bitch who murdered the heirs of powerful empires!"

She lets out a chuckle then, but it dies down as she begins moving around my room.

"So back to business, young lady," she starts sternly. "You're not getting any pain relievers for the concussion you suffered when you collapsed two days ago, because you my dear, are now a recovering addict."

"A recovering addict?" I gasp, my heart pounding as I watch her move but she only raises her brow with a no bullshit expression on her face.

"You know what I mean," she says, a hand now at her waist, her poise hard and unyielding. Yeah, I do know what she means. "You drank about 5mm of concentrated morphine."

"What?" I explode. "That was morphine?"

"Unfortunately, yes. It looks like when you were drugged, someone came in and switched your I.V. drip from much needed nutrient fluids to pure morphine."

"Oh my God."

"I know. I'm so sorry, baby girl. I don't know what's happening for sure, but I'd guess someone wants you out, just like they took your brother out," Marie says, shaking her head with a solemn smile on her face.

"But...but how did anyone not notice that..."

"That your bag was switched out?" I nod my head, mutely, still in shock. "Well, you being here is big news. Also the fact that Emmett is all over the news because of his sudden 'death', the staff has had a lot of activity these past few days. And in that chaos, it doesn't surprise me that someone slipped it."

Oh God.

I flop back on the bed and really feel it.

Someone is trying to kill me and that someone obviously has a good supply of drugs.

"But, I'm still not a recovering addict," I defend, sitting up again to look at her. "Someone drugged me!"

"Yes, and I'm so damn sorry about that, child. The stupid, money-loving bitch nurse is being dealt with by the authorities and I do think that's a good thing. If those boys ever lay their eyes on her again, next thing we know, she'll be floating down the little river between the mountains. But I fear, with the morphine thing, that she's not the only who can be bought."

“Do the boys know about the morphine?”

“They kind of figured it out. Morphine is only used in severe cases; you had a mild concussion, at best. The I.V. was only to get you the nutrients you needed because you’ve been out for three days.”

“Three days?” I explode, shocked despite myself. “I’ve been in here for three days.”

“Actually, if we add the days before the slitting of the wrist and the whole morphine thing, it’s five days.”

“What the fuck?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve got homework you haven’t done?” she jokes.

“At this rate I doubt I’ll even graduate high school,” I say helplessly.

“A smart girl like you?” she snorts. “You’ll graduate top of your class. That is, if you stay alive.”

“Well, I fucking hope so,” I murmur. “Where did you say that nurse is again? The one who drugged me?”

“In police custody,” she answers cautiously. “Why?”

“I’m just checking. Wouldn’t want her to be somewhere marinating in lye before I strangle her to death,” I mumble.

“Ah la la la,” Marie sings, her fingers in her ears like a little child. “You can’t tell me all that, remember? Go contemplate murder on your own free time.”

I chuckle but then it soon grows somber between us. I can see the question in her eyes. She wants to know.

“No, Marie. I know what you’re thinking. I haven’t been taking Xannies anymore...,” I start to explain, hoping that I can talk my way into getting those damn pain meds. I need the relief.

“Yes, that’s true but you know what else you haven’t been doing?” she questions, with a frown on her face.

“What?” I dread to ask, but do it anyway.

“You haven’t been taking care of yourself, for goodness’ sake, Astraea!” I almost jump from the bed as Noah’s voice shouts through the door. I look up and there he stands, looking into my room, obviously eavesdropping.

“This joker. He’s been itching to see you but no visitors for you right now,” Marie says, looking at me then to the door.

“Go away or I’ll hurt you! I’ve got your mother’s permission!” she shouts.

“Will you use a ruler or a belt?” Noah shouts back. “You know my toosh is very sensitive and I love that fifty shades kind of shit, sweetheart!” he shouts through the door, blowing Marie a kiss who flips him the finger, barely containing her laugh.

“This boy,” she shakes her head

“Yup, clown extraordinaire,” I murmur, watching him. “And a liar.” Just like the rest of them.

“By the way, I think I hurt your granddaughter...again,” I say, thinking of Ivy and the devastated look on her face when she walked in on the chaos that I had inadvertently caused. Another burst of pain and disappointment in myself flashes through me.

I remember the broken expression on her face that night in Emmett’s hospital room. If I close my eyes and concentrate just a little, I swear I can hear the echo of her gasp from the door where she stood as she watched Emmett and I with all the drama that unfolded that night.

“I was wondering,” she muses. “Ivy is one hell of a tough one but lately, she’s barely able to function,” my heart thunders in my chest at those words. God, what have I done? It’s one thing to mess up your own, but another when you break another person’s heart. Worse still, a bystander in all of this, really. And the fact that Emmett’s feelings are complex at best...

“But worry not, I’m sure you girls will patch things up.”

Somehow, I don’t think ‘patching up’ this torn fabric of our lives will work. Not this time.

“If she’ll talk to me,” I murmur with a wince.

“Ivy can hold a grudge, just like you, Astraea but she’s also nurturing and forgiving. She’s the one who brought you those flowers that you so delicately tainted with blood.”

I remember the vase with the vibrant flowers. If anything, I remember the pain from the vase with a clarity that threatens to send me to a dark place. Again.

“She did?”

“She sure did. Everything is going to work out just fine, you just wait and see. You have more in common with her and that girl who broke your heart than you think.”

“The girl who broke my heart...,” I question, looking confused as if I don’t know who she’s talking about.

“Don’t insult my intelligence, young lady.”

“Sorry,” I mumble thinking of Kim. I don’t even want to think about it.

“Well, that was nice of Ivy. Please thank her for me,” I mumble, looking away from her.

That girl is too fucking nice for her own good. But in my defense, I’m still perplexed by everything that happened that night with Emmett and the pretend kiss, Ace barging in...

God, there’s been so much of every negative feeling and thought this past week.

Breaking.

Misery.

Pain.

Loss.

Hate.

“So, before I let your mother in here...,” Marie starts and I freeze, my breath coming to a halt.

“She’s here?” I gasp.

“Unfortunately, she is. She came in here drunk as a skunk a few nights ago, slapped the shit out of Philip King then collapsed,” Marie says with a disapproving tone in her voice.

I cringe as the visual comes alive in my head. I can just about see Amanda walking in here with her perfect but imperfect wrinkled clothes, with her Amina Mauddi high heeled boots, looking like a high sorority bitch, with a stick up her ass persona on full display, only to make a fool out of herself.

“Tell me she at least got alcohol poisoning and is on her death bed right now?” I seethe, thinking of that witch and all the plans she has brewing for me.

“I wish I could, but she’s still your mother, Astraea. And since you’re not yet eighteen...”

“She has to sign me out of this place. Yeah, I heard about that from Dr. what’s-her-face,” I sigh, thinking of the incident when I almost bashed her head with the vase.

“Dr. Summer?”

“Yup, that’s her name,” I mumble. “How is she?”

“Well you know, you didn’t scare her as much as you hoped. She’s coming back to see you so if you want out of this place, you have to talk to her,” she smirks but I can detect the seriousness in her voice

“Why?” I question, feeling confused. You’d think when someone almost gets knocked over, they’d get the message to stay away but clearly the good doctor wasn’t in on social clues.

“Hospital policy is one. You are still under psychiatric hold, dear. The state requires the hospital—in cases like these—to make a full evaluation of the patient before being discharged. We can both agree that things escalated here.”

“And the final thought that you’re holding back?” I question, knowing that she has something to say.

“Well, before life forced me to become a nurse and the sole provider for my grandchildren, I always thought that ‘talking’ to someone was for rich, white people. I thought therapy wasn’t necessary, that it was a waste of money. There are, after all, much bigger issues in the world to deal with than some childhood drama. I used to be like, ‘so, what if Daddy was never home or Mama ignored you, there are kids starving.’”

“Then what happened,” I whisper.

“I raised two beautiful but traumatized kids in my house and I saw firsthand what trauma will do to a person’s mind. I had my fair share, they had their own and together, we didn’t even know how to talk about it, let alone start the journey of healing. Now, mental health is my number one priority. I’m not saying this to hurt you, but I’m saying this to get to your core. Get help.”

“You mean I should go back to a mental facility?” I frown.

“God, I’m so damn mad that they sent you away like a dog,” she chokes on those words, tears now in her eyes. “That was mean and so damn cruel but that’s not what I mean and you know that.”

Yeah, I do know what she means. I just don’t want to talk about it. Not yet and maybe never.

“So, where’s mother dearest? I’m almost bursting with the need to see the woman that birthed me,” I sarcastically say, rolling my eyes and trying to lighten the heavy, tense air around me.

“Probably demanding for the hundredth time to see you,” she says rolling her eyes, blinking her tears away.

“You blocked her from coming in here?” I question, a small smile on my face. Well, at least I have one person in my corner, if no one else.

“You’re damn right she isn’t allowed to see you for now. That door,” Marie says, pointing to where we can see the top of Noah’s head. “Is

locked. No one can go in or out unless the doctor says so.”

Is that because of my visitors or because of me? It almost feels like another cage.

Don't think about it, Astraea.

“That’s brilliant! But how did you get in?” I question, puzzled by the semantics of the whole psychiatric hold that I’m in.

“Oh, I used the emergency entrance from your bathroom. Each private suite has two entrances, those dumb heads just haven’t figured it out yet,” she says with a shrug and I smile.

“But locking the door is extreme, even for a hospital,” I say, fishing for information. There’s something she isn’t telling me.

“Well, there was a lot of activity last night. With you and...”

Attempting to kill myself...

“Well, let’s just say the doctors are keeping you on a strict observation right now and now that you’re awake, a doctor will be in here soon to talk to you. And let’s not forget Dr. Summer,” Marie explains patiently.

“Oh, joy!”

“It’s really for your own good, baby girl. But don’t change the topic. You need to talk to someone.”

So much for letting people probe around you as if they can fix shit, when we all know, no one can piece together a shattered person. If their mind is already gone, there’s no fixing that.

“I don’t need a head shrink to examine my head and probe my issues. I already know what’s wrong with me,” I grumble as I look at Marie but I don’t hold her gaze. “I don’t have anyone so I don’t need anyone,” I whisper under my breath but she catches the words as she sighs deeply, tears shining in her eyes.

“I wish you knew just how not alone you are, just how strong you really are, Astraea.”

Well, I don’t feel strong. And being alone? I’ve been alone for a long time, it’s nothing new. There’s nothing new about the blue illusion that I bought into, orchestrated by three—no—four boys. George is as much to blame for all of this as the rest of them.

“Sometimes strength isn’t enough when you’re constantly being knocked down a peg,” I whisper, looking down, my voice a whisper but I’m not crying. That’s good.

No more tears left to cry.

“I wanted to go. I hate that you stopped me,” I say, steeling my voice as I avoid her probing, intense eyes. Marie looks at me like she’s looking through my soul and I’m not interested in that right now, simply because she won’t like what she’ll find.

I won’t like my own soul either, even if it stares right at me. The shattered parts of me crumbling even further with each secret, each lie that has been told since before I was even born.

“It’s not your time yet, baby girl. And I refuse for you to go out like that,” she says the words with a catch in her voice as if she’s about to cry. After a split second, she pulls herself together and looks at me.

“You might think that you’re done with this life, Astraea, but I don’t think that’s the case. I can see the fire in your eyes. I can see the fight in you growing and expanding,” she says as she steps closer to my bed, holding my gaze and daring me to look away. “There’s vengeance lighting your eyes, a promise of hell and retribution in the way your body is coiled right now.”

“I’m not so sure if that’s a good kind of fight but whatever it is, fixing the wrongs that have been done to you, I say, ‘Rock on!’” she says, pumping a fist in the air.

“Even if I decide to set generations of kings on fire?” I question with a smile but we both know that I’m dead serious.

“Astraea, you’re in the fight of your life right now. Ask yourself this, what will the closing chapter be? Will it be that you gave up or that you fought and you fucking fought hard and conquered, even if it kills you in the end?”

My heart pounds against my rib cage, demanding to be felt. It’s like a war cry, like a battle cry being birthed in me. My breath catches, everything in me tenses up.

Will I conquer, even if it kills me? Or will I give up, tuck my tail between my legs and allow all of this...injustice to carry on? Will I allowing people to continuously hurt me, giving them power over me?

Marie watches me, her soulful eyes taking in the hard set of my shoulders. Then she cocks her head to the left.

“What will it be, Astraea?”

She looks at me for another long second and with those words, turns on her heels and leaves the room.

Leaving a crumbing mess, of a broken soul behind.

But even then, I gather all the pieces of me that have been shattered as my resolves grows and I make my decision.

Nothing else matters when you hit rock bottom.

There's nowhere else to go when you're between a rock and a hard place, but to fucking manipulate the situation. Starting with what rightfully belongs to me.

My life.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“You’re such a drama queen, aren’t you?”

I don’t bother turning away from looking out the window as Amanda fucking Fields walks into my room. Oops that might not even be her real name. I ignore her, not saying a word as I listen to the *click, click* of her heels as she waltzes into my room. She doesn’t care for my silence and keeps going.

“I think you like this, being the center of attention and the town’s topic of choice to gossip about. You like making a spectacle of yourself, embarrassing not only yourself, but your family,” she goes on, her voice hard and her eyes trained on me. I can feel their pinpricks like needles.

I steel my spine and steady myself as I turn to look at her then.

She doesn’t look so good. She looks like she’s just been ran over by a truck in the rain, her hair a wild mess. Everything about her is out of place, her always perfectly pressed threads now creased and a bit dirty.

A spectacle of myself, huh? She should look at herself in the mirror.

“Hello, mother,” I spit out the word, a false smile now gracing my face as I watch her frown. I grate on her nerves? Good. “Have you been out on the town? You look a mess,” I point out sarcastically.

“It’s because of you, you little...,” But she cuts herself off as she looks at me, taking a deep breath as she takes me in.

“Little what?” I snort. “Attention seeking drama queen? Yeah, you mentioned that already.”

We stare at each other for a beat and I swear, the same hate that I’m feeling deep inside, I can see it reflecting back at me through her eyes as she looks at me. How did we get here? How did we become...this? But then, as she takes me in from the crown of my hair to my sock clad feet, there’s a look that passes through her eyes. And before I can place it, it’s gone.

“I wouldn’t have to look like this if it wasn’t for you,” she finishes, her voice calmer now.

“Yup, I did this to you,” I wave my hand, the one that doesn’t have a thick bandage wrapped around my wrist. I ignore her inquisitive gazes as it falls to my banded wrist, no doubt noticing the darkness that I allowed to seep into my bones and overpower me in my moment of pure hopelessness, but she doesn’t anything.

I gesture at her disheveled state, a frown on my face. “I’m the one that told you to get drunk and make a fool of yourself here when all you care about is status?”

She just stares at the bandaged wrist for a long while, not saying a word. But when she looks up, a hard look is in her eyes.

“You’ve always been a disappointment, Astraëa. But I never thought you would stoop so low as to take yourself out like that,” she says, not looking me in the eye as she steps into my room even further. “You know, next time you try to take your own life, at least have the decency and self-respect to do it in private. You know, it shows dedication and commitment to the cause.”

What the fuck?

I gape at her words, shocked that my own mother is even saying that.

“You can’t be serious?” I gasp, watching as she drops her bag on one of the chairs in the luxurious suite, then she walks over to the bathroom, shooting me a look.

“No, honey, you are the one who’s not serious. Slitting your wrist then drinking morphine straight up like it’s vodka,” she shakes her head as if she’s the one disappointed in my methods of harming myself.

“What, did you want a drinking contest?” I taunt, following her to the door of the bathroom as she opens and closes cupboards. That’s when I

notice that she had a duffle bag slung over her shoulder. “Are you bitter that I didn’t wait for you?”

“Please, little girl. You wouldn’t be able to keep up with me even if you tried,” she says now distracted as she moves around the bathroom effortlessly as if she knows the place like the back of her hand. She places the duffle on a small table in the bathroom then starts taking out things that I can’t really make out from here.

“Trust me, I don’t want to be in your league,” I mumble, confused at what she’s doing.

“Oh, but you’re well on your way,” she shoots over her shoulder. “Heard that you’re now a recovering drug addict. And that some stupid nurse drugged you,” she pauses then and turns around so fast to look at me.

“Mind telling me how that happened?” she demands her eyes narrowed.

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” I defiantly say, folding my arms and hating this stupid hospital gown that I’m wearing. It makes me feel like an invalid; like I’m not worth much.

“Don’t be silly, it is my business. Who do you think is paying for all this expensive shit?” she says, her voice sugary sweet and fake.

“Richard,” I bite out, my voice dropping to a glacial tone, my eyes narrowing.

She tenses up the moment I mention her husband’s name, then she turns around and continues what she was doing before. Unloading the bag, opening cupboards and checking the shower as if she’s a health inspector. Nodding to herself, she starts placing what looks like shower gel, shampoo and conditioner, while removing the hospital-provided ones and tossing them in the bin. She even brought two of her personal three-ply, silk-like toilet paper.

What the fuck?

“We all know that Richard funds your expensive lifestyle. You made sure of that a long time ago, that you wouldn’t have to lift a finger a day in your life,” I seethe, my anger coming back tenfold.

“You have no idea the shit I’ve had to do in this life to be where I am right now.”

“Hmm, I think I have a pretty good idea, Amanda,” I roll my eyes, my chin rising. “What’s your name exactly though? I mean, you obviously had to change it at some point because of something you did. I’m guessing it’s something illegal.”

She grows deathly still, almost to the point where she's no longer breathing, facing the mirror in front of her. I cock my head to the left, studying her reflection as she looks back at me, our gazes connected.

"Or maybe you slept with someone else's man like you did with Philip King? Spreading your legs open for another woman's man, only you didn't realize that wifey would be deadly and come after you, did you?" I press, watching her but she doesn't say anything, making me feel reckless.

"You were running, that's why you changed your name," I finish, my voice dry and hard, hating her for all her threats and the way she has treated me over the years.

"Let me tell you something, Astraea," she starts, turning around to face me. "You've always been a pathetic little shit. You wanted a way out, didn't you?" she mocks, looking down at my bandaged wrist as she slowly walks closer to where I'm standing in the doorway.

I grow tense with each step that she takes and that makes her smile. She knows she rattles me more than anyone else, knows that she gets in my head. She brushes my slightly longer hair back, palming my cheek in a faux loving gesture, then leans in to whisper in my ear.

"You're a foolish girl to think that you can do something as mundane as slitting your wrist to escape your messed-up mind."

I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest so hard as if it wants to burst out of its cage – where I've shackled it in and threw away the key. I'm sure she can feel it, making her proud of her cruelty.

"Let me let you in on a secret, my sweet child," she says, pulling back as she goes back to the bed, seemingly looking as if she has calmed down. I can still see the tense set of her shoulders as if she's practicing restraint. "You can never escape this life."

I snort, shifting on my feet as I watch her unpack perfectly pressed and folded clothes.

"This life? You mean the expensive, high class life that you thrust George and I into, neglecting another child in the process. *This* life?" I question, feeling bitter and angry with each word, barely holding my breath as she turns around to look at me, like a sleek panther tracing its prey. Hell, my mother moves like a panther too, her sights set steady and lethal on me as if she's about to attack.

Anything is possible with this woman, I'm realizing. Anything can happen but what I'm so done with, is letting her see just how much she

bothers me.

I'm not going to let her see that she gives me nightmares and that she terrifies me to the core. Not anymore. One day I'll get over the fact that she has never loved me, or more accurately, that her love for me disappeared a long time ago. One day I'll get over the dead look in her eyes when she looks at me like she doesn't even see me. One day in the future, I'll think of the manic look in her eyes and tell myself that whatever screws that are loose in my head, whatever is messed up in my life, will not grow as extreme as hers.

But for now, I'm painfully aware of the similarities between us. I have the same hair and eye color as her. I have her high cheek bones, and the same button nose. I have her smile and maybe even her frown too. I'm basically my mother.

Everything like my mother. And nothing like my mother at the same time. So, was I as cold, dark and empty as my mother? Who was I?

"You should be grateful that I gave you this life millions of people all over the world can only dream of, wish for as if wishes come true. Hard work and an ironclad will can get you where I am," she counters, her voice rising.

"Well, do you want a statue erected in your honor for your selfless service, mother?" I smile at her and she huffs.

"This life, that you have resented, taken for granted and have done all manner of chaos to upend, is not the life that you were going to have," she counters, her voice rising a bit, her nose flaring.

I frown, my body coiled with so much tension I feel like I'll snap at any moment now. That's what she does to me, this woman. She affects me so much that she controls every reaction from me, every feeling, every thought. I wonder if children have that same effect on their parents.

No. The truth is, I wonder if I affect her as much as she affects me.

"What does that mean?" I question, our gazes locked in the mirror when she turns back and grips the counter with her manicured fingernails almost scratching the ceramic wash-basin.

"You know exactly what I mean," her eyes harden, the knowledge that she knows that I know about her past life now obvious, but there's no anger in her eyes. It's just a sort of sad resignation.

Who is my mother?

“Some of us know what real struggle is. Some of us have lived the toughest situations known to man and we’re still here, Astraea,” her voice is sharper, with an edgy emotion to it that I can’t place. With each word, she straightens her spine, her gaze never leaving mine. “Some of us know what it’s like to be hungry, to constantly lack basic human amenities. To have shoes on your feet that are not suitable for the harshest weather conditions. To be out on the street with nowhere to go.”

She takes a step closer to me, lowering her voice, “And Astraea, some of us know what it’s like not to have a place you can call home, with nothing to your name. Biological family that’s as toxic as the decisions that we later make, but we make them anyway because we have no choice!”

Without even meaning to, I shudder with repressed emotion, sadness moving through me as I think of my mother at a young age and what she might have gone through.

Even though everything she says has a potential to all be a lie, I doubt it. There’s something about the way she’s looking at me right now, as if she’s trying to say something but isn’t quite saying it that has me standing at attention. Before I can say something—hell, I don’t have anything to say to that—she takes another step closer, her eyes hardening, the emotion vanishing as if it wasn’t there to begin with.

“But all of that shit doesn’t give anyone – especially not anyone that comes from me—the right to quit,” she seethes, her eyes blazing with fire. Taking a step closer to me. “You’re my child, you’re the daughter of a fucking warrior, Astraea, you don’t get to roll over and give up!”

The vehemence in her voice has me almost reeling back but I’m paralyzed by shock.

“You don’t get to take the easy way out. Not after everything I’ve been through to get you here. Every sacrifice I’ve made, every hard decision I’ve had to face,” she gets in my face literally,” she says, her voice hard with a slight tremble to it as if she’s overcome by emotion, I’m not quite sure about that. But then, her eyes are almost glistening with something...maybe tears? Emotions?

My jaw drops open, unable to look away from my mother.

“Mama, I...,” I start but get choked up, but as soon as I say that one word, as soon as I call her what I used to when I was younger, I see the change in her. She stiffens right in front of me like I just slapped her across the face.

I hold in my breath, waiting for...something from her.

For a moment, I think to myself that I might have my mother back. That she might be seeing that I'm in dire need of her love. For a moment I think that she's back, that everything is going to be alright from here on out but instead, she shuts her eyes for a long second. When she opens them, a vacant look is in her eyes.

Talk about devastation of a deeper level...

But it hurts even more that calling her *Mama*, is like her kryptonite, like it's her poison and she's deathly allergic to that word. Or maybe, that word coming from me.

God.

"Listen, little girl," she starts sternly. "You better pick yourself up, dust that shit off you and grow up."

I gasp, my jaw dropping open all over again.

"What?" I stutter, hardly believing what I'm hearing.

"It's been a burden to have you. An even burden to raise you up in a world the complete opposite of what I had when I was coming up. I've worked so fucking hard to get you here and I'll be damned if all my hard work goes to waste..."

"No one asked you for it!" I cut her off with a roar. I can't take this shit from her right now. "No one begged you to come back for us from the damn orphanage you abandoned us at!" I hate that I almost start crying. I hate that my voice breaks. I hate that I've associated a lot of my own toxic decisions with this woman. That in everything I've ever done, where I thought that she didn't affect me at all, that I wasn't that little girl trailing after her mother in the kitchen watching her back anymore. But most of all, I hate that I still care what she thinks of me—or more uniquely, that she doesn't think of me at all.

"Certainly, no one forced you to spread your legs for anything that has sperm..."

But I don't get to finish my angry rant as a blow strikes my face, shocking me into silence. I'm not even shocked at the fact that she hit me. I'm shocked that I didn't see it coming. We stare at each other for a second and my fight or flight instinct kicks in.

This time, I choose to fight back. I'm not going to just sit there and take it.

Before she can take a step back or move away, I bring my palm fast, making sure that I put all my strength in it, intending to cause her pain and hurt that she just caused me and more. Feeling enraged and broken hearted, I take a step closer, intending to strike her right back but suddenly, I'm pulled back by a strong arm wrapping around my waist, restricting any more movements from me.

"Let me go!" I shout, not caring who the fuck is holding me back. I start thrashing around, watching Amanda stepping back, a shocked look on her face.

"Let me go!" I shout.

"Baby Blue, you don't want to do that," Noah says from the corner of my room, a hint of amusement in his voice, but he's not the one holding me back.

I look over my shoulder and Emmett's pale green eyes stare back at me, an unreadable expression on his face. For a moment I'm frozen, not knowing what to do or what to say. But as our gazes lock, flashbacks of what happened in the past few days between us comes back to me and I start struggling again.

"Let me go!" I grit out.

"You don't want to deck your own mother now, do you?" he questions, his voice soft and his eyes on me. A ripple of awareness moves through me at his words, but the anger in me is too hot and furious to analyze the situation.

"That's none of your business. Let me go."

"Astraea," he warns in a low murmur, tightening his hold around me.

"I won't hit her," I admit after a few, calming seconds. My heart is still pounding in my chest. I still feel animalistic but the urge to hit my mother back has ebbed some.

"Astraea," he warns again, as if he himself is uncertain about my actions. I'm uncertain about my entire life right now, let alone the fury churning in my gut.

"I said I won't."

He lets me go immediately, taking a tentative step away from me, but I know better. I know that he's ready to jump in and grab me again if I so much as decide to attack my mother. We stare at each other for a bit, then I look at Noah who has a tight smirk on his face, which looks a bit crooked if you ask me. Is he drunk?

As I watch them, they look over my shoulder, no doubt noticing my mother. Swiveling around on my heel, I almost start laughing at the look on her face.

“You...,” my mother gasps, taking more steps back until her back hits the shower stall. “You,” she points at Emmett, her face growing as white as a sheet, as if she’s seeing a ghost.

“Oh, Amanda, I thought you were tougher than that,” Noah starts chuckling. “You can’t faint on us just because you’re seeing Em in the flesh.”

“You’re supposed to be dead!” my mother gasps, her hands now flailing in the air as if she’s in outrage. “How?”

No one responds to her, but my mother, always as perceptive as ever, takes the heavy silence in stride, piecing the entire thing together. She looks between the three of us, trying to figure out something as if she also smells a dead rat.

Then her gaze falls on me.

“You,” she points her dainty finger at me. “You really went all the way out on this escape route plan of yours, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I deny, watching the confusion in her eyes fade away, her confidence returning with the color to her face.

“No, my dear, but you do,” she starts, her voice now back to its normal faux sweetness, as if what just happened—when she smacked me across the face—didn’t affect her at all.

Like I don’t affect her at all.

“It looks to me like you made a deal where you tried to fake dear old mini Syrus’ death.”

“I’m not a mini Syrus!” Emmett interjects, getting angry but his voice is still low and deadly like a storm is brewing within him. Which, if I look closely, has been brewing within both he and Noah since...the last time I saw them and all hell broke loose.

“Look in the mirror darling,” my mother shrugs, then looks at me.

“Well?” she arches an eyebrow, waiting for a response that I know on instinct to deny, when in fact, I don’t really have the full details regarding Emmett’s dead-not dead-circumstance.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re crazy for thinking there was ever a plan,” I seethe, but even I know that my voice isn’t

convincing.

“Don’t insult my intelligence, Astraea,” she warns, her eyes flashing with a warning.

“That’s assuming you have any intelligence, mother,” I counter, still feeling a lot reckless.

“Surprised you’re one to talk. Aren’t these little boyfriends of yours the core reason why you’re in this mess? Why you tried to take your own life?” she questions, a haughty look on her face while watching me trying to hold the broken pieces of me in check while I internally scream as she looks at Noah and Emmett. “You think I don’t know that someone tried to kill you —well, before you decided you wanted that honor all to yourself. And I’m betting my non-college degree ass that all fingers point to that King boy and his minions.”

“Minions?” Noah gasps, his face twisted in disgust. “I’ll have you know that I’m no one’s minion, Amanda. I’m a full-grown young man, capable of making my own decisions.”

“Yeah, like lying to me constantly,” I whisper but he heard me.

His face falls, the atmosphere in the room rises to a tense note, loaded with all the secrets and lies.

“Baby Blue...,” he starts but I cut him off.

“Don’t,” I whisper, feeling that acute, now familiar sense of pain mixed with dread churning in my gut as if getting ready for something.

“But I...”

“Not now,” I turn away from him, my gaze connecting with Emmett’s at the same time.

“Oh, trouble in the Blue band?” my mother chuckles lightly. “You really ought to get you a better band of friends, Astraea,” My mother continues, shaking her head in disappointment. “Even I can see how toxic these boys are to you.”

Yet she wants me to marry one of them.

My breath rushes out on a silent gasp, pain prickling my eyes with the need to cry and scream all at once because as my mother says those words, I realize how true they are.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

“Hmm, I guess I’ll let that one rest in your hands,” she continues, watching me with a knowing look in her eyes. “But let’s get back to this miraculous, risen from the dead spectacle that is your future husband!”

No one says a word as my mother starts clapping in obvious delight, reminding me of a child who’s just received their first gift on Christmas morning.

“Oh, don’t look so crestfallen. This is a wonderful turn of events,” she says. “Not that his death was going to change anything. Gosh, I can’t believe you all had the audacity to fake a death and have the whole town talking.”

“The whole town?” I gasp.

“Oh no, silly me,” she shakes her head. “I meant the entire world. News of the Easton Empire’s heir battling for and then losing his life in a delicate, heart surgery has been all the rave since what, forty-eight hours ago? And it’s news all over the world too.”

Shocked, I swivel around to face Emmett. As far as I know, he and the boys had a plan. A plan to get my brother’s bedroom key. But then, is that all?

“And now, the entire world is going to know that Emmett Easton is alive and well and will soon marry my daughter, Astraea,” she sighs dramatically, placing a hand over her heart. “Isn’t that romantic? I know the entire world will love that ‘young couple save each other through love’ romantic story. I know you like that sort of shit.”

“Guess what, mother? I’m too fucked up to even appreciate romance,” I growl, hurt piercing my chest like silver bullets, leaving holes through the shattered pieces of my heart.

Pain does come in stages. It comes with different intensities and shock waves that have their own levels of aftershocks. But still, pain was pain.

“Astraea, haven’t I taught you better. Fairytales are...”

“Bullshit,” I cut her off. “Yeah, we established that when you threw away all the ‘wretched’ and ‘misleading’ princess books I bought. Or the movies you never allowed me to watch.”

As I say that, I realize that I’ve been through so much more than I ever talk about or realize. I’ve been messed up for a fucking long time. Was that freaking Dr. Summer right about me?

“Damn, Amanda,” Noah whistles, shaking his head. “You’re one cold, cold, woman.”

My mother shrugs instead, but doesn't look anyone in the eye.

"Some sacrifices have to be made when you're raising a specific brand of warrior," she whispers under her breath, as if she doesn't want anyone to hear. But I heard her. I step closer and she snaps her head up just then.

"I think I did my daughter a service. Would she have survived in this town if I had let her think people lived happily ever after? That it's all roses and bright colors?"

"Well, she nearly didn't survive this damn town, you heartless waste of time!" Emmett growls, his fists clenched as he stares at my mother with a hard, dark gleam in his eyes.

"Whoa, what a foul mouth you have on you, boy. Must have picked that up from your father," she smiles almost innocently at him, going in for the kill. "How is your mother?"

I tense up knowing that the mention of Emmett's mother is more than just a sore subject. But my mother isn't done rubbing it in, she knows exactly what she's doing.

"I was actually looking forward to planning the wedding with her," she goes on.

If only looks could kill, my mother would have never made it past her teens and I wouldn't be living this hellish nightmare of a life. But the way Emmett is looking at her right now, you'd think that he wants to correct that human error.

"I'll ask her as soon as she picks up the phone to call me and let me know that she's alive," he bites out, his voice getting even deeper with anger and that twist my heart even more.

"Enough with you!" I shout at my mother, hating that she's so reckless and chooses to destroy people as a sport. She isn't even sensitive – forget her brain to mouth filter – she just simply doesn't care.

"Astraea, I'm not the one to blame for the drama in the Easton household," she continues, waving her hand dismissively.

"You have no idea what went down in that house, so you don't have any right to say a damn thing!" I growl, my fight coming back.

"Please, Astraea, this is Westbrook Blues. I'm the only one who talks. Hell, I do my best to bat those rumors down. God knows the boy's mother was a wonderful woman," she says, her voice almost seeming contrite and sincere.

“Was that your guilt of sleeping with Syrus that drove you to do what you did?” I snort. “If, in fact, what you say is true. But just know, you’re still a whore that spreads her legs for powerful men that’ll only manipulate you in the end.”

She gasps, taken aback.

“You little...,” she gets up so fast and steps closer to me. She raises her hand as if to strike me again, but I grab her wrist before the boys can get closer to us.

“If you lay your filthy hand on me now or ever again, I promise you, I’m going to hit you back!” I seethe, the words feeling like they’re being engraved in the space between us. I tighten my hold on her wrist to let her know that I fucking mean it.

“I’ll have you know, I’m still your mother...”

No, I don’t have a mother. I don’t have parents, as far as I’m concerned. But I’ll be damned if I keep taking hits and not doing a damn thing about it. Not now. I’ve been through too much to take a beating sitting down.

Amanda cuts herself off, studying me. Then she takes a step back, not saying a word.

“Okay,” she whispers, taking another step back with her arms raised, then she sits back down in the chair, crossing her legs as elegantly as she always does. Appearance be damned.

We stare at each other for what feels like an eon, then she looks over my shoulder.

“I have to hand it to your little boyfriends, Astraea, making it seem like he died in that fucking surgery. That was brilliant. But that was small thinking. Honestly, I have no idea what that was going to achieve,” she shrugs, watching me.

I also have no idea why the boys did what they did. I have no idea where everything stands.

“I still have no idea what you’re talking about,” I say, straightening my shoulders and I stare at her. How could she be so...evil?

“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit now, my dear sweet child,” she says, her eyes now gleaming. “I’m sure you know exactly what I’m talking about. Too bad, Syrus is beside himself with rage to do any digging for himself, not that that asshole ever cared about his son to begin with. No offence, young man.”

Syrus Easton was a piece of shit, but so was Amanda Fields. They were two birds of the same, vile feather.

“But I wonder, what exactly were you hoping to achieve with that though?” she questions, tapping her chin as she thinks it over. “Were you hoping that you wouldn’t have to go through with the marriage if Emmett had died?”

I don’t say a thing, my knees growing weak with each word she says, but she goes on, driving in the nails.

“But what you fail to realize though is, it doesn’t matter,” she shrugs.

“What do you mean by that?” I question, dread swirling in the pit of my stomach as I look at her.

And just like before, she throws her head back and starts laughing in mirth, knowing that she holds all the cards in the game and can direct any way she wants it to go and I’m her pawn. As always.

“You see, Astraea, you’re not out of the woods yet and you’ll never be free of me,” she finishes, watching me as I tremble from head to toe.

“Actually, I am,” I say with all the confidence I can muster up in that moment, refusing to lose but knowing it’s inevitable right now with the way she’s looking at me.

“Oh, I get it. You think you’re a big girl now. You can take care of yourself,” she mocks, as she retreats and falls into a high backed, expensive chair. She folds her legs at the knees, her skirt riding up. “You think you’re untouchable now.”

“In over a week, I’ll be legal and nothing you say or do can change that,” I say, feeling some kind of relief as I realize that the days are moving. Soon, I’ll be able to get out from under her thumb. She won’t control me.

“Is that what you think? *Tsk tsk*,” she shakes her head, watching me as she waves her dainty, manicured finger in front of her face. “You do know that your little boyfriend, that boy King, will soon be arrested and charged with murder, right?”

I freeze.

She throws her head back and starts laughing, watching me. My heart starts pounding all over again.

“You wouldn’t dare,” I threaten, my voice breaking and uncertain.

“Oh, not me!” she starts laughing. “Syrus Easton is the one who you should be pointing fingers at.”

Emmett and Noah tense up, looks of disbelief on their faces.

“Oh, and it’s not just his son’s death that he’s pinning on that poor boy, but he also took all the files I have on your twin brother’s murder as well,” she smiles. “All it’ll take is one measly phone call. I can almost hear the sound of chains and locks that’ll never be opened.”

“You’re lying!” Noah seethes, taking a step closer to my mother threateningly but she only smiles, unbothered, looking at me.

“Tell them I’m lying Astraea,” she says softly, her eyes fixed on me. I don’t dare look away from her, afraid that I might break myself again if I choose to believe that this isn’t happening. When in fact, this is real. This is happening right now.

“Astraea?” Emmett says my name softy and I know what he wants.

“She’s not lying,” I confirm, not looking away from her.

“Well, fuck!” Noah explodes, now pacing the room. “Okay, we need a game plan.”

“Yeah, but where the hell is that asshole?” Emmett questions, exasperated and stressed as he messes his hair.

“You’re the last one that was with him,” Noah points out. “Where did he go?”

“I don’t keep a leash around his neck,” Emmett fires back.

“Well, you should,” Noah growls.

“Both of you, shut up!” I yell and immediate silence falls in the room, no doubt the two of them shocked at my outburst. Yet again, my mother is not.

“Baby Blue, this is serious,” Noah starts softly. “King could really do serious time. Not to mention the whole matter about Geo...”

I cut him off before he can go on blowing shit up in front of my mother. Especially the huge question of my brother’s state of being.

“Just shut up, Noah,” I shoot over my shoulder at him, then turn back to look at my mother, knowing what she wants from me. I can see the triumph in her eyes, I can smell her victory and the stale stench of my surrender. I hate giving in before I can even fight but if there’s one thing that I won’t do —no matter how much I’m beginning to hate him for real—is let Ace suffer for some messed up shit I know he didn’t do.

Well, I’m not entirely sure about the deal with Em, but the guy is pretty much alive right now, so that must mean something positive. Right?

Taking a deep breath, I face her, and she smiles, knowing the exact words that are going to come out of my mouth.

“What do you want?” I question, feeling powerless and resigned.

“My sweet, beautiful child,” she starts, her voice soft and calculating. She stands up then and comes closer. Without hesitation, she palms my cheek so softly, it’s almost as if she cares. “You are indeed a sight for sore eyes,” she says softly, the look in her eyes almost sincere. “You’ve got fire in your eyes. A kind of fire that I know all too well. I just hope it doesn’t burn you alive.”

And with that, she picks up her diamond studded Balmain purse, opens it and pulls out a thick envelope that I know all too well.

“No,” I gasp, and she smiles.

“I’ve given you enough time, Astraea. I’ve given you space, waiting for you to come to your senses and realize that the boy you thought cared for you, murdered your brother.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, my voice strained and hoarse.

“Maybe, or maybe I’m aware that he isn’t here with you in your time of crisis. But on to some hard facts here,” she starts. “I will call Syrus right now and tell him what’s going on here. You and I both know that there’s more than enough evidence.”

Stunned into silence, I watch as she takes out a fountain pen with her name engraved on it, then she shakes out the marriage contract.

“Is that...?” Noah starts but he cuts himself off.

“Do both your hearts a favor, Astraea and sign it,” my mother says, her voice soft. “I would really hate for this to turn ugly. And if it’s love you’re looking for, you and I both know that Syrus’ boy didn’t sign this for nothing.”

“Shit, you signed it already?” Noah explodes, staring at Emmett, shocked but Emmett just watches me.

I stare at him, holding his gaze. His soft, green eyes are watching me. I don’t know what he’s thinking but whatever decision I make right now will definitely change the nature of our relationship.

“You know that Emmett loves you, Astraea,” my mother chides. “Just sign it.”

I close my eyes and see him. His blue eyes, his inky black hair, his gorgeous, orgasm inducing face. There’s no way I’ll ever get over him. But if I want to be free of him, there’s only one answer to that.

“Give me the pen.” I demand.

“Baby Blue...” Noah warns, but I cut him off.

“Shut up, Noah,” I grit out, grasping the pen in my hand.

Don't think, just do.

“Raea, think about this before you do it,” Emmett warns softly, and I smile weakly. Then look away from him.

I notice Emmett's signature at the bottom, then the empty line where mine is supposed to be. Taking a deep breath, I press the pen to the paper and sign my life away to a marriage with my best friend who has loved me in secret for years.

Oh, and he's best friends with the guy I gave my everything too.

“Wonderful!” my mother exclaims, joy radiating on her face. “You made the right decision.”

I stand there, staring down at my signature, my heart pounding at a rate that I think it shouldn't be. I have sweat dotting my brow, chills racing down my spine.

What have I done?

I can feel Noah and Emmett's hard gazes on me, their silence speaking louder than the chaos in my head.

“This is the best decision you've ever made in your life,” Amanda says, looking breathless. She takes the contract, then folds it back into the envelope, her cheeks tainted with color.

Tucking the contract into her purse, she turns to leave, but when she gets to the door, she turns back to look at me.

“Oh, and Astraea, wash up will you. Get yourself presentable. Right now, you look like death warmed over. But then again, it's already knocking at your door.”

She swivels on her heel and before she can leave, I stop her.

“Mother,” I say calmly, my breaths even and steady. She freezes but she doesn't turn back, but that's alright. I don't need her to look at me to understand the gravity of my words. “I meant what I said.”

Silences stretches between us for a hot minute. The she glances at me from over her shoulder.

“Marriage suits you, my baby.” she says, her voice soft.

And with that, she faces forward and leaves as gracefully as only my mother can, knowing that she's a glutton for trouble whether her clothes are finely pressed or she looks like she was in a bar fight with some bitch.

I let out the breath that I didn't know I was holding when the door closes behind her.

“Astraea?” Emmett starts but I hold a palm up.

“Just don’t,” I start, my words coming out as a labored gasp, feeling like I’m about to hyperventilate.

Control your damn self.

It’s time to war.

“But we have to talk,” Noah says, with a concerned look on his gorgeous, Milan Fashion Week Model worthy face.

“You’re damn right, we need to talk,” I grit out, anger now blasting through me, making me push through the haze in my head and the hurt in my chest. “But I’d prefer doing it when all three of you are here.”

“You want to talk to him?” Noah questions and Emmett looks at me seriously, watching me with a knowing look. It’s been at the back of my mind that Ace isn’t here but I won’t let that bother me.

“Yes, go get him,” I say, unable to look either of them in their eyes.

“Are you...,” Emmett starts, but I cut him off.

“No, we’re not going to tell him.”

And with that, I leave and go to the bathroom, shutting the door behind me.

Don’t think about it. You made a decision for yourself for once in your life.

I look around and notice the neatly organized products that were not here before realizing what...my mother brought. She brought me fresh, clean clothes, my Converse sneakers, and an entire set of lingerie. All my shower products.

Speechless, I look around, taking everything in.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I have no idea what to think of my mother. And that alone, unsettles me like no man’s business.

But in other news, I think I’m married.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Ace

Walking into the Pit, I drag my tired ass up to the bar, keeping my head down, covered by the hoodie that was in my car. The same hoodie that still fucking smells of Astraea from all the times she's put it on. All the times I've pulled it off of her sexy body in my car, misting the windows, enjoying her loud, sexy moans that bounce off in the car. Astraea, like me, was not afraid to let herself go when we fucked. But when we fucked in the car, I swear, she got even more wet and greedier than ever, her tiny feet locked at the small of my back, demanding me to fuck her harder as she bites my ear, telling me to fuck her like there's no tomorrow.

Fuck!

"Boss," Jack greets slowly, watching me pull up a stool at the corner, away from the busy part where there seems to be a bachelorette party or something, filled with reckless drunk ladies.

I nod my head in greeting, unable to say a damn thing, feeling the weight of the world on my shoulders.

"Can I get you something?" he questions, looking at me with an unreadable expression on his face.

"A beer will do," I murmur, looking around the Pit. Today isn't fight night and that pisses me even more because I somehow wanted that tonight.

I wanted to feel the pounding of flesh, the smell of blood in the air as I hit the shit out of some asshole, but I don't think I want to spend the rest of my life behind bars when I accidentally murder someone with the way I'm feeling right now.

Jack opens the beer in front of me and before he can pour it, I stop him, extending my hand for the bottle.

"Rough night?" he questions. I know the guy probably thinks that I'm a fucked up teenager. He isn't wrong about that, but he was also hired to do his fucking job and provide for his sick daughter and pregnant wife, not to diagnose my shit.

"Something like that," I murmur. "Did someone come in looking for..."

Before I can finish, a deep, authoritative voice speaks from behind me, making the hairs at the back of my neck stand up on end, my fucking nerves start acting up as I tense and grit my teeth.

"King?" the voice questions, but it's really a statement, a fucking knowledgeable one. As if the man knows everything there is to me. Including what I fucking eat. And if what I know about him is true, I think he probably knows that and my shoe size.

I still myself, standing up without saying a word because I'm not a fucking punk. Turning around, I come face to face with a large man, with dark hair like mine. His dark blue eyes are hard as they look at me. His features are hard, everything about him is and I guess that's why everything I've heard about this man that my Grandfather told me about years ago, suggests that Charleston Beaumont was one of the most feared men on earth, it was his son, Eli, that was an even bigger enigma, a slayer of man, revered, feared and unknown.

True power, real power, was after all, silent. But whenever you were in its presence, you knew it.

But now as we stare at each other, sizing each other up, I notice that he's dressed in casual street clothes. A dark hoodie beneath a black leather jacket with a pair of jeans and sneakers.

"Trying to blend in?" I question, eyebrow raised.

"I hate this town," he simply says in that deep voice of his, still studying me. I have no doubt that he knows everything about me.

"Can't say it's working," I murmur, subtly noticing that people are still glancing at us, wondering who we are, the suspense making the atmosphere a bit tense.

“That’s on you, son,” he says, pulling up a stool and sits without waiting for me. Everything about him screams that he’s a man in control. A man in charge and is sure of himself. That’s why I know that my Grandfather was right all those years ago. This is the man that my father can’t handle.

As I sit back down, I notice a few tense, military looking personnel trying to blend in with the clubgoers but they only stick out like sore thumbs.

“Can’t say I’m impressed with seeing you with security,” I say, reaching over for my beer as I signal for Jack without looking at the man I’ve been in contact with for almost two years; all through encrypted phone calls and emails.

“They’re here for everyone else’s safety, not mine.”

He says the words so casually that I have no doubt in my mind that he means them. He orders a beer just like mine when I, for sure, thought that he was going for more sophisticated stuff—like my father. But then, Eli Beaumont was a man few understood.

“Rich men drink beer?” I question silently, looking around the Pit while trying to ignore the yearning in me to be with Astraea. But last night when she was in my arms, I accidentally fell asleep and was gripped by a fucking nightmare where she was the face of Larry...

“I’m wealthier than fucking God, but even I’m not a snorty asshole like your father.”

“I’d rather you not refer to him as that,” I grit out, anger at my fucking father returning anew. I grip my beer so tightly, my knuckles are now white.

“How is dear, old Philip?” he questions with a smile, that almost looks familiar but soon it fades away. “Does he know that you’re consorting with his sworn enemy?”

I snort, thinking of my father.

“Well, he knows about the Pit, the illegal racing and shit. Looks like beside threatening to pin my ass for murder and shit, he’s quite happy. Why? You miss him?” I grit out, unable to keep the anger and vehemence out of my voice.

“Oh, we’ll have our reunion soon. I’m looking forward to it.”

As he says that, his eyes gleam with something close to dark, unfiltered anger as if there’s a story there between him and my father. A story that drives him to want to destroy my father.

“Well, then,” I whistle under my breath. “Is that what you called to tell me?” I question.

“Why, you have somewhere to be? Like the hospital?” he takes a swig of his beer, looking around the room with a disinterested eye. “This place turned out better than I expected. It’s a shame it’ll all go in flames soon.”

“Are you having me watched?” I grit out, looking at him head on. I won’t ever appear to be a weak ass in front of anyone, let alone him. He terrified the shit out of me when I first started talking to him. But now, meeting him for the first time, I feel like I need to prove something to him. That I’m a fucking man and I am strong, not a fucking pussy.

“Well, when you call me to switch doctors for a pal of yours, then having me make sure the other boy sneaks into his father’s office while dear old Marie Irving has to make sure that he doesn’t get murdered, I make sure to understand why.”

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. There was something about Eli that made sure that you would never cross him.

“What did the doctor do anyway?” I question. I was going to ask Emmett what happened but every time I look at him, I see him with his fucking paws on my girl, kissing her!

“Oh, he got in there and dispelled the fucking surgery. Kept your boy in there for an evaluation.”

“So...wait, the guy you sent is a legit doctor?”

“He’s one of the best cardiologists in the world. And according to him, your friend has a seriously complicated heart issue.”

A weird twisting starts in the pit of my stomach and my fists clench again. So, it appears that Emmett is actually sick after all. The sucker wasn’t lying.

“And beating him up wasn’t exactly a good thing to put a guy like him through,” he continues, watching me closely.

Well, he fucking deserved it but that’s none of anyone’s business. Even if I respected Eli.

“You got the footage, didn’t you?” I ask, thinking of the very same footage that my father threatened me with.

“Yup. Here’s a copy and it’s been cleared from the servers that were linked to the cameras but there was evidence that another hardcopy was made,” he says, extending a small, silver flash drive with his initials on it.

“Don’t tell me this is made out of silver?” I question, examining the small, heavy thing in my hand.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not that predictable and common,” he says, taking another swig of his beer. “I only do titanium.”

I pause for a moment, looking at him. Then I reach for my beer.

“Good to know,” I say. “Where did you get the humor?” I question.

“From some boy that just showed up, claiming to be my long-lost son,” he answers after a long pause. I swivel my head around to look at him in shock.

“You’re a father?”

“I fucking doubt it,” he says calmly. “I’ve seen the best doctors in the world and they’ve all said I can’t have children to save my life.”

“So, he’s after your money then,” I finish, thinking of just how money can drive people to do the craziest things, consequences be damned. Money and power.

“I don’t fucking have a clue. Seeing you and your father, I don’t know. I couldn’t fucking destroy my son.”

“Aww, that’s cute. You care for me,” I sarcastically say, taking a swig of my beer.

“Only because of good ole Phil,” he says quietly, referring to my Grandfather.

“Well, he hated this town. Just like you.”

“He was a wise man. He knew when to get out of shit that wasn’t good for him,” he turns around at me, a hard look in his eyes. “He knew what worked and what didn’t. And he fucking knew when he was being dragged into the vile, darkness of a town like this with Blue, toxic promises.”

I look away from him, looking around the bar. “What do you know about Blue promises?”

“I know more than you’ll ever know,” he starts, his voice deepening. “But I’d advise you to stop for a second.”

“Not until I bury that motherfucker,” I grit out, ignoring his penetrating gaze. I can’t really guess how old Eli is but I think he’s slightly older than my father. He’s obviously been here which means he knows a whole lot of shit about Westbrook Blues and hopefully, the Phoenix Corps.

“Care to enlighten me about this Blue shit?”

“It’s nothing more than a vicious cycle put in place by angry men who think they can keep power within and among the pillar families.”

“You mean the founding families?” I question, my phone vibrating again. “My fucking amazing family, the Eastons, and the Montreals.”

“Notice I said the pillar families. Not the founding families.”

I look at him then, silently probing him to explain. Yeah with all the joes and sarcasm, I’m still fucking aware that this man cannot be forced to do or say anything that he doesn’t want to, which means I have to tread lightly and keep my fucking head down when inside, with Noah’s fucking calls, I feel like exploding. And I fucking feel like I’m running out of time.

“Surely you must know by now that your so-called founding families haven’t been in Westbrook Blues for as long as your stories and legends that have been altered to fit your narratives, state.”

“So, they were discovered by someone else.”

“Every place in the world always had its own original inhabitants. I’m sure a smart boy like you learnt about Columbus and the Indians.”

“I missed a lot of history lessons, but I vaguely remember that one.”

“Good, then you should know that your ancestors were monsters,” he counters without missing a beat.

“I wasn’t aware that you had a huge heart for people’s lives.”

“Oh, I’m a heartthrob,” he counters, his lips pressed in a sinister smile that suggests that he’s anything but.

“Is your illegitimate son as sarcastic as you are?”

“Probably, but that’s just a shit show I can’t get into right now because the guy is digging into my life for things that, if he’s actually my son, he’ll have to inherit.”

“Thought you weren’t looking for an heir?” I question, watching him.

“Like I said, I’m not that cruel to impose my life to someone else, like the Blue promise.”

“Which you haven’t really explained,” I point out, trying to ignore my phone.

“You should answer that.”

“They can wait.”

“Not unless it’s news about the girl you’re doing all this for,” he says with a straight face.

“About that girl...,” my heart starts racing as I think of Astraea and the shit I just learned in the past hundred thousand hours of hell, “I found some information a few days ago,” my voice is hard, rough and fucking deadly as my entire body tenses.

“What kind of information?” he questions, now on high alert, probably a response to the vicious anger in my voice.

“Information that involves the identity of the man who fucking hurt her,” Without even noticing it, the bottle I’m holding breaks in my hand from the pressure. Because of the loud music, no one actually notices but Eli and I do. He studies me for a second. I don’t react or anything as my palm bleeds.

He reaches over for a wad of tissue, passing it on to me. Silently, I accept the tissues, pressing them to the cuts in my hand as Jack quickly and efficiently cleans away the glass, shooting me a concerned look.

But the pain from the cuts does absolutely nothing to me. It doesn’t even feel like anything compared to the hellish turmoil in me that I can’t fucking control.

“I want you to find the asshole for me,” I grit out.

“He hurt her,” Eli questions. Once again, it’s not a question but a statement. He knows what I mean.

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

“I only know his first name.”

Hell, I’ll never forget it. I’ll never forget his face. Fuck!

“Anything else you know about him?”

“Yes,” I start, dabbing some Neosporin on a cotton ball to apply over the cuts. I struggle a bit, my movements stiff and jerky. Not unlike all the other times that I’ve had to patch myself up. Without asking to, Eli reaches over for the cotton ball and my wrist. I tense up but he just ignores me while he does his thing.

“No deep cuts,” he states, unfazed by the look I’m giving him.

“I knew that,” I grit out, not knowing what to make of this situation.

“What other information do you have about this scumbag besides his name?” he questions, now reaching for the bandage to wrap around my palm.

“We just found out that he’s in some fucking criminal organization.”

“A language I speak fluently,” he says, tying the ends. “Which one?”

“It’s a serious one and I’ve recently learnt that they are after me, my boys and my girl because of this man. It’s called the Phoenix Corps.”

Eli tenses right in front of my eyes. He looks up to stare at me, a dark gleam in his that, if I wasn’t a tougher asshole, I’d have shit my pants.

“What his name?”

“The fucker is called Larry,” I spit out, my stomach almost heaving. “He has a scar that runs down the left side of his face from his...”

“Eye,” Eli finishes, his voice hard. I notice from the corner of my eye as his security start closing in. As if they are aware that their boss is about to lose it.

“You know him?” I question, surprised.

“I know him very well, unfortunately,” he starts slowly, getting up on his feet in the blink of an eye, then turns to leave.

I jump to my feet, grabbing my phone. I glance down at it and notice a text from Noah.

NOAH: GET HERE FUCKING NOW! SHE WANTS TO TALK TO US!

Ah, fuck! I have to go!

“Wait!” I rush after Eli who’s now at the door, his security trailing him. “You know this guy! Tell me how I can get to him.”

“You said he’s tracking you and has the Phoenix Corps coming after you?” Eli questions, his stride long as he heads to the black SUVs parked at the edge of the parking lot, seeming to be incognito. Hell, even the way he’s dressed, it’s almost as if he doesn’t want to be seen.

“Well, from what I’ve gathered, these are recruits that he’s targeting. Telling them that they need to take us out for them to join the fucking Phoenix Corps.”

He doesn’t pause but I can sense the shift in him. It’s almost as if he’s even angrier than ever.

“Do you know where he is?” I question.

“Yes.”

“Then tell me where I can find and kill that asshole, goddamnit!” I can’t stop the anger and frustration from showing in my voice.

“I can’t believe the boy was right,” he says under his breath.

“What?” I question, confused.

“Leave Larry to me. I know where he is.”

“How will you deal with him?” I question, skeptical as he opens the back door, about to get in his car.

He doesn’t answer but I can see the look on his face.

“You know a whole lot about the Phoenix Corps, don’t you?” I question as my phone vibrates in my uninjured hand. I glance down at it and notice

five missed calls from Noah.

I'm running out of time....my girl needs me. I have to go.

"How do you...," I start but as I stare at him, I take in the custom Bentleys behind him, their rims, the way they are designed with something that looks sort of like a bird. A bird that looks like the one I've noticed before. A Phoenix.

"You're in the Phoenix Corps, aren't you?" I demand, shell shocked and stunned by this.

He doesn't react but I can see the truth all over his impassive hard face. For an unreadable man, it's fucking easy to read him right now.

"It's much more than you think, son. Stay the fuck away from Larry."

And with that, he gets in the car. It peels out of the lot without him fully shutting his door, leaving me reeling.

What the fuck?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Feeling marginally better after a thirty-minute shower where I shampooed and conditioned my hair, shaved my legs and rinsed all the dirt on my skin away, scrubbing like that'll take away the past few days away in the surprisingly spacious private suite bathroom.

I guess that's what \$2.5K per day will get, you.

I blow dried my hair, dressed up in fresh clothes instead of the fucking hospital gown they gave me. I even put on a little makeup, making myself look and appear put together and strong. That way, no one will know that I'm losing it. Dr. Summer actually thinks I do need professional help.

But more than that, I need to be strong. I'm going to ignore the fact that I signed that damn piece of paper. God knows, I've been pathetic and stupid all these months, what's one more decision in all of that?

Love really doesn't matter when the people around you take advantage of you.

Not anymore.

So, when I unlock my hospital room, I let all three of them in without looking at either one for longer than a split second.

They come in, one by one, their shoulders tense, expressions angry, their eyes hard and unyielding as they watch me like three completely different,

yet the same, dangerous predator.

Neither of them says a word and that's good. That's how I want it.

I can sense the heavy tension between them. They can hardly look at each other. That makes pain shoot across my chest but I still myself; I don't give a damn about whatever's going on between them. I have to look out for myself from now on.

"No one else will care for you as much as you," Marie said earlier. Somehow, I agree with her,

I'm the only one here for myself and I have to act accordingly.

I look at each one, starting with Noah. I take him in closely, studying in a way I didn't earlier. He's got bags under his eyes that should make him look haggard and homeless but instead, he looks like a fucking rock star – complete with the leather jacket and biker boots he has on. And as I look into his eyes, his almost always twinkling eyes that are shining with mischief and mayhem, I notice something that I feel in my own soul.

There's deep, intense, devastating heartbreak in his eyes.

And he lets me see that, not bothering to look away from my probing, soul searching. God, this boy has had my fucking heart since forever and he's hurting...and I know who did that to him. As the silence stretches between us, he blinks, and the emotion is gone. Instead, he reaches in his leather jacket and pulls out a small bottle of Jack, unscrews the cap and takes a long chug.

I shake my head then turn to look at Emmett. The previously dead, now miraculously resurrected back to life like a miracle. The boy who I unknowingly hurt a long time ago by falling in love with the wrong guy.

I swear, it could have been him...it really could have been Emmett, but I childishly thought that all roads led to Ace for so long that I lost my way. I thought that I belonged to the brooding, angry asshole that stands at the back, close to the door, silently tracking every move I make.

The fact that I'm hyperaware of him and can feel his intense stare? That will go away, even if it's the last thing I do.

Emmett holds my stare for a long, heavy minute. We both know that shit is about to go down from here on out, especially when Ace finds out what happened today, but the longer we keep quiet about it, the better. I think we both agree with about that because he nods slightly at me, as if he's down for whatever. But if there's one thing I know about these boys, they'll never abandon or let anyone hurt them without doing anything about it.

I know Noah and Emmett will protect Ace, no matter the hellish differences between them. And now, there's an even bigger secret between them. This time, it's been orchestrated by me.

I won't lie, that gives me a sense of power that I'm going to relish for as long as I can.

Finally, I look up and immediately, our gazes clash and hold. Within a hot second, I feel it. The pulsing of intense, powerful charge like electricity between us, drawing me to him like he just wrapped an invisible rope around my waist and he's slowly pulling me closer to his tall, brooding body, even though I haven't moved from where my feet are planted. Not physically at least.

But as I stare at him, I pull on my own armor, shutting him out in an instant. He blinks watching me, then takes a step forward as if he's confused by what just happened.

You did this to us, asshole.

As we stare at each other, an unreadable expression that I hate now on his face, he and I both know I'm going to fuck shit up like I promised him that night at the site where my brother died.

I'm going to break this Blue King. Bit by agonizing bit. Then burn all the roads that lead to him and fucking create my own.

"We're here, your majesty," Noah starts breaking the building tension in the room, but not as successfully as he thinks.

"That honor is reserved for his royal highness, Alexander King's queen," I start, my voice bitter, seething but strong. I'll take strong over breaking any day of the week. "I think you'll find that her name is Brittney."

I ignore Ace's dark, thunderous look, acting like he doesn't bother me.

"Damn," Noah whistles, taking a swig of his Jack. "This is the mood you're in?"

"I don't know, Noah. What kind of mood do you think I'm in?"

"Well, this goddess of war face you've got on. I mean, it definitely suits you and it's sexy as fuck..." he says.

A deep, animalistic growl erupts in the room, but I ignore it as I walk over to my hospital bed to take a seat.

"I guess that's all I have left, Noah," I start, feeling my insides shrink in me. My mother wasn't wrong. Death is knocking at my door. It feels like death in here and it's all because of me. "All I have left is my fight because apparently, no one fights for anyone that isn't their blood."

“Astraea...,” Emmett starts but I hold up my hand, stopping him.

“All you’ve done, from the time I came back to this wretched town to now, is treat me like a bimbo, worth only of lies, deception, secrets and heartbreak.” My voice catches at the end, but I don’t look away from either one of them. I forge on. “You’ve lied to me when you said you wouldn’t. You’ve kept information that matters to me when I had all the right in the world to know about it.”

Emmett has the decency to look away. But as I talk, Noah keeps on drinking and draining one bottle, reaching for another little one without missing a beat. Ace’s hard stare is burning a hole in my skull, but I don’t fucking care.

“All you have managed to do is break me piece by excruciating piece. You’ve broken my trust, my fucking soul and everything that I am,” I go on, keeping my voice clear, all trace of any emotion gone.

No pain, Astraea.

No fear, no anguish, but more importantly, no breaking.

Not yet anyway.

“You’ve constantly picked yourselves over me when I foolishly believed and trusted that you’ll always have my back,” a shiver races up and down my spine. “I guess your hate knows no bounds.”

“Astraea...,” Emmett starts again but again, I lift up my hand to silence him. I clear my throat for a second, looking down at my lap before looking back up. Time to get to business.

“I assume that you’re probably still dead to the powers that be, for reasons and secrets you keep to yourselves, all in the name of protecting me?” I question, looking at him. He hesitates for a bit and I arch my brow, watching him.

I dare you to lie to me now.

“Yes, but...”

“And I guess your fake death was only part of a bigger scheme that included using me to get something that belonged to my twin brother?” I cut him off, staring him down. “My blood?”

No pain, Astraea.

“Can you let me...,” he starts but I don’t let him. I’m not in the frame of mind to listen to their smooth, manipulative lies that I’ve been eating up for so long, I became this...broken individual who thinks suicide is the only way out.

The thought devastates me beyond words.

Not now.

“Yes or no?” I grit out, watching him. This boy – this strong, large, teddy bear of mine that I’ve loved for so long – he’s been keeping his secrets to himself for so long. I mean, heart fucking defects? With a complexity about them where one defect develops into another, and they never go away, making his heartbeats precious and not guaranteed from second to second? How could he do that to me?

“Baby Blue...,” Noah starts.

“Shut it, Noah. I’ll get to you,” I grit out, not looking away from Emmett whose eyes grow even harder as he tries to track where I’m going with this, trying to read me and figure me out.

Sorry, you’re shit out of luck this time around.

“Yes or fucking no?” I repeat.

“Yes,” he bites out, hating every second of being interrogated by a bitter, angry bitch like me. Well, I’m your creation.

“Have you been to my brother’s room yet since you got the key?” I question, watching him.

“Not yet,” he grits out the word like its being pulled out of him like a tooth as he looks at my dead eyes.

“Why not?” I question, not trusting him. Hell, I don’t trust anyone of them. Not anymore. Probably not ever.

“Astraea...,” he starts, my name sounding like a prayer on his lips. I almost cave but I keep my face stern and clear of every other emotion that won’t serve the purpose of allowing me to wallow in pity.

“Why the fuck not?” I question. “I mean, you got the key after quite a dramatic skit, didn’t you? And you obviously didn’t need my input or permission for anything that concerns my own blood. So, why haven’t you gone yet?” I question, hating the way my voice is growing hoarse with emotion.

“It’s not like that,” he starts.

“Right now, I don’t give a rat’s ass what it’s like, Emmett,” my voice catches, hating the way I’m being cruel and rough. I’ve never been like this to him before but fuck, he and I have a complicated future coming up.

“Give me that key,” I state, my voice hard, extending my hand out for the said key.

From this moment on, I'm taking charge. If there's anyone who's going to George's room, it'll be fucking me. Because that's what blood does. They fight for one another.

"Astraea, you don't understand..."

"God, I gave you so many chances to explain. So many chances to tell me what's going on. I wanted you to be direct with me, to let me know everything, but you didn't and now, I don't give a damn what you have to say. I just want you to give me the key," I seethe, feeling like I'm starting to drown again.

Emmett and I lock gazes. I can feel a pair of hard, frosty eyes trained on me but I don't give in to the shivers that he induces on my body nor do I care to look at either him or Noah. I just watch as this gorgeous god tentatively reach into his pocket and pulls out a lone key that I would recognize from anywhere.

Yeah, that's George's key alright. Fancy, classic shit.

Emmett places it in my open palm, with an inquisitive look in his eyes, obviously trying to figure me out. But I know he can't and the frustration is eating at him.

"Astraea..." he starts again but like before, I cut him off.

"Thank you. That'll be all," I say, dismissing him as I look away from him like he means nothing when in reality, my insides are screaming in agony. "You can go back to being dead and all that mess of yours."

I can feel the answering pain from him but also the suspicion, but I won't entertain it.

"Astraea, you don't have to do this..."

"You're right. I don't have to but understand this, I'm going to do it," I cut him off. "Please go wait for your boys outside."

Looking like I just slapped him hard across his gorgeous face and then stomped all over his heart, Emmett hardens his eyes and without hesitation, turns to leave without another word. Leaving with a huge part of my shattered soul with him.

"I guess it's my turn now, isn't it?" Noah starts, still drinking his Jack. I have no idea what number he's on but he's still coherent, his eyes are still sharp and clear, no haze of drunkenness. I guess that's what happens when you get used to alcohol at such a young age.

"Bingo, my so-called best friend who abandons me at every chance that he gets," I start, feeling the aches and pains that are between us.

“I could say the same about you,” he counters without missing a beat. “But you don’t care tonight do you, Wonder Woman?” he seethes, angrily taking a swig of his Jack like a pro.

“I don’t give a fuck, Blue Fairy. It’s a wonder that you can stay in one place for long enough to care what’s happening to me.”

“Yeah, well when your best friend goes about slitting her own wrist and then sucks liquid morphine like it’s soda, you kinda start paying close attention to the shit show that’s happening in front of you, all while battling this justified fear that that same girl is going to rip out your heart this time around. You know, when it hits you hard in the chest that the girl you’ve loved since forever, the girl you’d die for, always watching out for, is trying to leave you again.”

I’m silenced into shock with that one. I simply don’t have a comeback that can ease the angry redness in his face or the tense set of his shoulders as he takes another swig of his Jack. Noticing that I don’t have anything to say, he starts chuckling to himself, turning to leave.

“You didn’t think about that one, did you?” he mocks. “I guess it’s all ruins, rubbish and ashes for you now, isn’t?”

His words are scathing, so damn hurtful and so damn real, I feel them in the pit of my stomach.

“Tell me, is that liquid courage making you run your mouth or is it the fact that you’re an asshole who just got his fucking heart doused in gasoline then burned by the fire you saw in *her*?” I seethe, not caring that I’m hurting him because right now, I’m hurt as hell.

He stops, his hand pausing from taking a swig from his little concession stand bottle. There’s only one *her* for him and I. Only one *her* that can drive him to this point of reckless abandon where he doesn’t really care yet he cares so much that I can almost feel the fury boiling in him. But for some reason, I can’t take the truth he’s dishing out.

He stands there silently, hardly breathing. Neither am I. I can hear him sucking in a breath from here but before he can say anything, I rush to finish my tirade on him. I want to hurt him for some reason.

“I guess I’m not the only one who sees ruins, rubbish and fucking ashes,” The words spill out of me with an effortless acidic, resentful ease that scares the shit out of me.

Noah sighs again then looks at me over his shoulder. Our gazes connect and, for the first time since I’ve known him, I can’t read him.

My insides break all over again.

I look away at the same time he does, shutting the door with a loud bang behind him. Leaving me with a surprisingly calm King, watching me silently.

Feeling restless and hellish, I stand up and walk over to the window, but all I can see is my own reflection since it's dark out, making shivers of unease race down my spine.

I have a feeling that I'm back to that part of my life where I'm scared of the dark but I won't give the King of darkness the satisfaction of knowing that.

"That was impressive," he starts, his voice low, hard but without a trace of emotion as if he just shut himself down, like this was amusing to him.

"I'm glad you got your lifetime dose of entertainment," I fire back, my heart racing in my chest with everything I'm about to say. Then again, this situation was forced on me, backing me into a space where I have no choice but to lash out and fight for my own survival.

That's what this town does, though. It breaks you and molds those broken pieces into what it wants. Only, I won't be a pawn anymore. I'm going to be my own person.

Yet, there's the question of Ace's safety from my mother and Syrus Easton. And the way I see it, he doesn't love me. He chose her, so it's time for me to choose my damn self. Taking a deep breath, I pray for strength for the hell that's about to follow.

"I was just a little girl when I saw you for the first time," I start, my heart aching painfully in my chest, beating so wildly I feel like it's going to escape and run away. Which I wouldn't mind. I don't want to deal with this but there's this yearning in my gut to just get this over and done with.

"You were throwing around your football in your large yard. I remember we had just driven up to the estates with one large moving truck behind us, and for the life of me, I don't remember a single thing from our life before that, until I saw you from the car window, tossing around that damn ball, all by yourself."

Ace sucks in a deep breath, as if he wasn't expecting a walk down memory lane.

"I remember you glanced up and looked at our car, but I don't think you saw me or George, but there was this look that crossed your face when you noticed the moving truck behind our car."

I close my eyes, that bright sunny day coming back with a clarity as if it just happened yesterday. I can see the large mansions of the estates that made me feel so small.

“I remember I felt so intimidated looking up at the large estates when we first drove up. My mother was beside herself with excitement, clapping her hands with glee. I don’t think Richard was with us that day, but I do remember glancing at George the entire drive, noticing that he was annoyed. Maybe a bit sad too, like he wasn’t interested in the move or where we were,” I go on, my eyes blurring with tears but I won’t let them fall and silently, Ace lets me talk.

“He was in such a foul mood and you know, when George is mad, he just shuts down...I guess that’s why I thought you were all going to fit well together.” A sad smile graces my lips, but it just looks messy and crooked in the window’s reflection.

“I remember, all I could think of that day was, I needed to make my brother feel better. So, I knew for that to happen, I needed for him to make new friends because I wasn’t enough to get him out of that funk even if we were fused together. He was my soul, my heart and everything good in me but I think even then, I knew that I was messed up in the head a bit.”

“Astraea,” Ace growls in displeasure but I just continue, not wanting that emotion to settle and give me a false sense of love when he obviously doesn’t love me.

“George was always the outgoing one of the two of us. He was always the one who made me feel good so I made a wish that day, that Westbrook Blues would give my brother and I, something or perhaps, if it wasn’t too much to ask for, someone that would make it all better.”

I sniffle, quickly wiping those tears away.

“For the most part, that wish came true, you know,” I whisper, all the good times we had flashing in glimpses in my head but even I know, the good doesn’t outweigh the bad. Not in this town. “I saw Noah right after you, you know. He had just broken a window of their mansion and Christina was chasing him with a shoe.”

A genuine smile tugs my heart strings as I think of a little Noah in his yellow rain boots, trying to run away from the mess he had created, knowing damn well that when his mother caught him, he was going to get an ass spank with her shoe. I’m not sure if Christina caught him though, the little devil has always been fast on his feet.

“Then there was Emmett, standing alone on one of their large balconies looking out at the rest of the town. He looked so...sad,” I finish, my eyes closed with a sad smile on my face.

“That’s when it hit me. These boys all had a lot in common with my brother. So, if only I could get you all to be friends...”

I hear movement behind me, painfully aware of the tense, angry atmosphere in the room but there’s nothing I can do about that besides go through with this shit.

“Getting Noah was surprisingly easy. He was lurking in the shadows, spying on the new, strange neighbors. Emmett, well, he came over with his mother with a plate of these amazing brownies even my mother couldn’t get enough of, so he stayed.”

I can feel Ace’s large body behind me. I can feel the rise and fall of his hard chest at my back. He pushes away my hair, making shivers tingle from my cheek to my neck and then the rest of my body. As if he’s entitled to, he leans in softly, his voice hard and rough as he speaks.

“And me?” he starts. “How did I get weaved into this fucked up, complex, brotherhood or friendship, whatever you call it? Do I have you to thank for all the shit that has been going down all these years?”

My body hardens with anger as I turn around.

“You have some nerve to think you’re the victim in everything that happened here, when you and I both know you’re the one orchestrating everything.”

“Star...”

“Don’t!” I seethe, the word coming out harsh and brittle. “I told you never to call me that! Not now, not ever.”

I go to move away from him but he grabs me by the waist and pulls me back into his hard chest, my back to his front, both of us now staring into the dark of night, our reflections staring right back at us from the window.

“So, what am I then?” he seethes, his voice inducing dangerous shivers up and down my body. My heart starts thumping and as I feel the hardness of his voice, I can’t help but think that this is probably the first time I’ve ever felt a hint of danger while I’m with Ace. “I’m nothing to you now, is that it?”

There’s a hardness to his voice that I haven’t heard before. Almost as if it’s covering another emotion.

“Am I just the darkness in your life?”

“You’ve always been the darkness in my life! You bullied me for years, you broke me so many times and you went around acting like I don’t affect you, like I mean absolutely nothing to you!” I shout, turning around in his arms to face him and backing away until I’m plastered to the wall behind him as he follows me. “But more than that, you fucking lied to me, you asshole!”

“Star...” he starts.

“I gave you everything! I gave you my heart!” I shout, every part of me aching.

“I’ve never lied to you!” he growls.

My jaw drops in shock at his words.

“You never lied to me?” I can’t help the despair that pieces my chest or the inexplicable disappointment that I’m feeling deep within, expanding with the tension between us. “How dare you?”

Without even thinking about it, I’m pushing him back with all my strength. Anger and something close to bitterness churning in my gut as my heart thunders in my chest, I’m sure he can hear it. And all I want to do is make him fucking feel the fire that’s burning me from the inside!

“How dare you stand there and tell me, to my face that you didn’t lie?” I scream, not giving a damn if I’m screaming the roof of this entire hospital down or if anyone can hear me.

Right now, I. Just. Don’t. Care!

I keep pushing him but when he doesn’t even move an inch, I start punching his hard chest, putting power in my punches because I want him to hurt.

“You lied about my brother!”

Punch.

“You fucking lied about everything that was going on between you and the boys!”

A hard punch.

“You lied to me about the man who touched me! The man who raped me!”

I punch him close to twenty times as I say that, tears streaming down my face in a tortured torrent, hot and fast.

“And you fucking lied that I was yours!” I look him in the eyes as I say that, but all I see is a tortured darkness staring down at me.

That enrages me even more.

“You told me that I was yours! You told me that it’ll always be us against the fucking world, you motherfucker!” I scream, my voice breaking as I keep punching his chest but he just doesn’t move. He just lets me punch him.

“But I hate you most of all because now, I can’t see color. All I see around me is darkness and it’s all because of you!” my entire body is trembling with repressed sobs that I told myself I wasn’t going to allow to break free and render me weak. Sobs that make me seem pathetic and sad but in those very sobs, there is everything that I’m feeling but can’t seem to make stop.

“I hat...” but before I can finish, he snakes a hand around my waist pulling me into him. And with the other, he tilts my chin and then kisses me into silence. Tears, snot and all, he just kisses, a growl erupting in his chest as he does.

I start fighting again, punching his chest but he pulls me even closer until my arms are pressed between us, leaving hardly any space to inflict the hell I want to inflict on him.

“Don’t you dare say it,” he growls when he pulls away. “I told you that you’ll never say that. Not now, not ever and not to my fucking face.”

“Just let me go!” I seethe, not wanting to look him in the eyes. I stare at his bandaged hand instead. Worry pricks my insides as I notice it for the first time.

What happened to him? Where was he?

Wait, why the fuck do I care? He obviously doesn’t care about me!

“Never,” he growls, his fingers tugging my chin up again. “I’ll never fucking let you go.”

We stare at each other for what feels like an eternity. I don’t know what he sees in my eyes, but I still myself, making sure that he sees absolutely nothing in me. I’m not going to give him anymore of me when he hasn’t given me an inch of him.

“You’re nothing to me now. And I don’t see that changing anytime soon or later, so don’t hold your breath,” I spit out the words, hating how they make me feel like retching all over myself.

“Really?” he questions, a hard, fine pressed smile on his face. “I’d believe it if your chest wasn’t moving in sync with mine or the way you shiver when I so much as breathe in your direction. Baby, you’re mine even if you hate that little fact.”

It's one thing to give your all to someone you're in love with. But it's a whole other thing to sacrifice yourself and everything you don't have for someone who doesn't love you back. Someone who has chosen and claimed another person right in front of you.

And as if she's been summoned, his phone starts ringing. I don't even have to guess to know who it is. The boys are outside and even if Ace is the last person I want to see right now, I still know him enough to know that the only person who ever calls him is the bitch who drugged me that night four years ago.

"I wonder what your queen will say about that," I seethe. "I believe she's the one calling you, wondering where you are since it's past your bedtime and all."

Something flashes in his eyes as I say that, but he lets me go as if I just burned him. He doesn't immediately reach for his phone; he just stares at me.

"Being a bitch isn't in your repertoire, Star."

"I said don't call me that!" I counter but he goes on as if I didn't say a word.

"I sure as hell never pegged you for being a jealous, petty little thing," he says, looking me up and down from my combed out hair that I styled in anticipation of seeing him, my minimal makeup that hardly hides the circles under my eyes and the fresh clothes that seemed like armor before he touched me. When he did, it was almost game over. "Can't say I don't like this side of you."

"And I never thought I would fall in love with a liar who led my rapist to me, now did I?" I counter, folding my arms as if trying to ward off the pain and remembered memories that have been attacking me since the day I learned of *his* name.

Heavy, painful silence stretches between us and for a moment, I feel like crawling under a rock and hiding because of the devastation I see on his face. It almost feels real.

But he's a liar, Astraea. You can't be a fool more than twice.

"Is that what you think of me?" he questions softly after what feels like forever of tense silence where he just stares at me like I'm the one who broke him.

"You have left me out to dry. And I was all alone out there in the wilderness that you created with your betrayal and lies!" I seethe, hating

that I'm breaking along with him. "And to top it all off, now you're with her!" I shout.

Something catches my eye, so I glance up at the door. I can see Noah and someone dressed in green hospital scrubs who looks suspiciously like Marie, arguing.

"So, you tell me. What did you expect me to think?" I finish.

"I expect you to be mine!" he growls right back, shocking me into silence again. "I expect you not to be kissing my best friend when you fucking feel rejected or wounded. And I damn well expect you to not think the worst about us when push comes to shove."

"We're hanging over a cliff, you asshole, and you chose her!" I shout back, furiously wiping away the tears that are still falling down my cheeks like traitors. "Push came to shove, yes, many times if I recall but you went to her! You chose the girl that drugged me, the same girl whose father did..."

I trail off with a painful gasp, and turn away from him as sobs attack me all over again, tremors fighting to take me down. I bite my lower lip, trying to hold it in and suddenly I feel him too close to me but I shake my head, moving away. I can't bare it if he touches me right now, or worse still, if he kisses me. I don't know what I'll do.

"Baby...", his voice is wicked soft, but I can feel the danger underneath that one word as if he's holding it in for me. As if he's trying his hardest not to lose it right here, right now but we're so past the point of holding back. Well, at least for me.

"Don't," I whisper, hating the cruelty of his gentleness that confuses the hell out of me. "Please don't."

"What do you want from me then, Astraea?" he demands. "You say I left you out in the fucking wilderness to dry but I'm standing right there with you, damn you!"

For some reason, that brings back my anger like nobody's business. I spin around on my heel, tears and sobs all but forgotten as I point at him.

"Are you?" I question, feeling like I'm a scream away from losing my mind. "Because from where I'm standing it sure seems like you're enjoying your life with your queen. A fucking queen that you claimed. And then you come in here, expecting me to kiss you with a dopey smile on my face, and go along with what you say like I'm your pathetic clingy side chick who you can't shake off?"

He doesn't respond, his jaw ticking as his palms balled into tight fists with the other now bleeding, but I don't care.

"Is that what you think when you look at me?" I whisper my heart pounding. "Do you expect me to just give you everything that I am, including my sad, sorry excuse of a life that I tried to take because I couldn't handle the truth of you not loving me?"

"You love me!" he states like it's a command in the Bible, stunning me into silence like a mute. "And you fucking didn't want to die, I know that."

"Well do you also know that you're the reason for this?" I demand, ignoring everything else.

"You're the cause of your own heartbreak," he brushes it off, waving a dismissive hand as if he's unbothered by all this shit.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. If you had just fucking kept your promise, the same one you made to me the night we drove to George's crash site, we wouldn't be in this mess today!"

He could have slapped me across the face and it wouldn't hurt as much as his words and denial did.

"You should go, your queen is calling," I look away, wiping my tears, ignoring the heavy thumping of my burnt heart.

"Why can't you fucking see the bigger picture here?" he seethes, now pacing, the phone now ringing all over again. "Why can't you see what's really going on?"

"What bigger picture, huh? Tell me what's going on!" I shout, but just as quickly, he shuts his mouth, deciding right there and then to still keep his secrets.

"Unbelievable!" I throw my hands up. "You tell me you've never lied to me and when I ask you for the truth, almost begging you to tell me what's going on, you shut down on me like that!"

"Star..." he starts but I cut him off.

"I get it. All I'm worth to you is a warm body to kiss and fuck whenever you want. Give you the attention and affection you obviously crave from broken girls, then go about your merry way with your undamaged, untainted queen bitch beside you."

"Damn you, that's not how it is..."

"No, I see the bigger picture. I see it clearly now."

“You don’t see anything, and that’s your fucking problem,” he accuses, getting even angrier.

“Oh, trust me, with death knocking at my door and now my life is a completely different shit show than I thought it was. Without an identity or a family, you’re damn right I can see things with a sharper clarity than I did before.”

“Astraea, don’t you dare be a monster.”

“You created this monster!”

We stare at each other, breathing loud, hard and fast. Knowing that we’re both running out of time. That we’re too toxic for each other.

“What does that mean?” he questions, his voice dropping a few degrees until I can feel the chill from it.

“You know, when I saw you that day all those years ago, I couldn’t help but think to myself, you had something in you,” I look him directly in the eyes as I say that and almost immediately, I feel that pull again, drawing me to him. Begging me to soothe the hurt and forgive him like I’ve always done so many times before.

Not this time.

“There was something about you that I couldn’t put my finger on back then. I tried to figure it out as I was growing up but I should’ve been staying as far away from you as I could but like the fool that you and your boys see me as, I kept on coming back to you.”

He doesn’t say anything. He just watches me helplessly as I go in for the kill.

“And after all these years of tortured hell, I don’t think I have ever put a finger on what the hell is inside of you that beckons to me. But in exploring all your shit, in fucking caring for a bully who should have had my brother’s back, you led a monster to my door. Now you’re fucking that monster’s daughter.”

He goes to say something but I rush to finish, cutting him off.

“And the worst thing about it all is, you expect me to be the same person after everything that has happened to me!”

“I’m not asking you to be anything other than who you are. Still breathing,” he growls, watching me. “What happened to the sparkles that I used to see in your eyes, Star?”

“Sparkles?” I scoff, shaking my head. “Broken girls don’t sparkle, asshole, they burn! And as it so happens, they burn in hell.”

“Don’t stand there and act like you’re fucking burning to nothing by your damn self!” he grits out, the veins on his neck straining with barely contained fury. “We’re already burning in our own hell, Star.”

“A hell you took me to!” I point, my heart racing in my chest. “You were falling to your own demise, but you just had to take me along with you, damn you!”

It feels like the world just came to a standstill with that one name uttered in the room like it’s summoning a demon. I’ve never used his given name since...since that night we named each other.

“What did you just say?” he growls, stepping closer, rage making his blue eyes sharpen and gleam like crystals.

“You heard me,” I keep my head high, ignore every rebelling emotion in me as I continue. “I’m not your Star. There aren’t any stars in my eyes, just mirth, hate and a desolate anger I can’t shake. And you certainly aren’t my darkness to keep.”

“Astraea, damn you! You’re still my fucking Blue Star!”

“No, I’m not!” I shout and the door bursts open.

“Is everything alright in here?” Marie questions as she looks between the two of us but we can’t look away from each other. We can’t seem to savor the connection long enough, even if that connection is nothing but poison and death.

“Astraea?”

“Yes, everything is fine,” I say, shaking out of my stupor. “Alex here was just leaving.”

I can’t say this is my last time seeing him, because it’s not. God knows I’m going to haunt him and everything that he holds dear until I make him burn.

“Don’t do this,” he whispers instead, watching me.

I almost cave in to that voice but it’s the look in his eyes, the consistent ringing of his damn phone and the secrets and lies still on his tongue that I won’t stand for. Let alone everything else that he has led to my door. But I can’t help but say one more thing.

“You hate yourself so much that it’s rubbing off on me... so much that I’m beginning to hate myself with a cruelty that threatens my own life,” I whisper, looking him in the eyes.

“I guess you saw that and decided I was too much trouble. So, you moved on,” I say looking out the window but I glance over my shoulder at

him. “You don’t have a say in what I call you or what I do or who I become from now on.”

He seethes quietly, taking a few steps towards me but Marie blocks him as his eyes remain trained on me.

“Oh, and send my love to your girlfriend,” I smile as I turn to look at him one last time. “Let her know that I’m coming for her and her daddy.”

Alarm flashes in his eyes and then he starts charging for me, as if he wants to shake me out of my decision, but Noah and Emmett hold him back, dragging him out of the room with a stressed Marie following right behind.

“Astraea, don’t you dare!” Ace...I mean, Alex, shouts, struggling against the hold on him. “You stay away from Brittney or anyone related to her! I fucking mean it!”

Yeah, me too asshole. Me fucking too.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Anger is probably my oldest, most familiar companion. I think I was conceived in it, wrapped around me in Denise's womb as if the world knew already that my life was going to be one clusterfuck after the other.

In a way, anger has made me the man I am today—or the man that I'm not. It has bred the fire in me, the ire in me, the hate that's so strong, sometimes I can't even catch a grip of it myself.

Anger has been there right through it all, always waiting in the dark to grab me when I have fleeting moments of peace. Peace that I only experience when I'm with her.

"You hate yourself so much that it's rubbing off on me...so much that I'm beginning to hate myself with a cruelty that threatens my own life."

I can still hear those tortured words echoing around in my head. It's almost as if the world collapsed in on me tonight, falling from under my feet. I just stood there and watched helplessly as she savagely destroyed me in a way no one has ever been successful enough to do.

But then again, no one knows how to hurt me as much as she does. No one knows exactly where to flip the switch, controlling me until I'm almost pathetically panting at her feet, begging for something.

But fuck that shit, I won't beg her to see me. I won't beg her to fucking hold on. She will do it because she and I know, we are joined together by strings neither of us can salvage so she'll come back to me. She'll stop all this one-woman mission of anger and outbursts. This pouting, angry phase of hers will pass, soon enough.

"You're nothing to me now. And I don't see that changing anytime soon or later, so don't hold your breath."

Her scream in my face will feature in my nightmares for a long time, I already know that. Tonight, she proved that she can reach into the depths of my soul, twist me up inside and then with her grand move, shattering my insides by a simple flick of her wrist.

"Dude, what the fuck was that?" Noah demands, but I shake off his and Emmett's hold and turn away, making my way down the hall. I need to get the fuck out of this place right now! I can't be here.

Astraea was nothing more than a common girl who I was foolish enough to think I saw stars in her eyes—stars that would one day be my salvation.

But now as I walk away from that damn hospital room after she just tore me open, stuck a pitchfork in me to skewer my heart, I watched her shred that very heart with her bare hands.

"Alex."

I don't know why my name sounds like a mockery falling from her lips but it's more than that. Her deciding not to call me what she has stubbornly called me for years...now that's a cluster fuck. I hate how it makes me feel.

I hate the chilling shivers that my fucking birth name gave me.

My heart wasn't much but it was hers, and she stepped all over it—bitter rage blinding her from seeing that everything I do, everything I've ever done, it's always been for her.

But then again, when she demanded the truth, an explanation for all the secrets she could smell off of me, I shut down and closed off like a damn clam.

"You're the cause of all this shit!"

She's my home and she just kicked me to the curb. And to add insult to injury, her deciding that I was no longer anything to her, that was a kick from the curb and straight into the busy street where I'm nothing more than...unwanted garbage. Her roadkill, if we're being specific.

My phone keeps ringing and the urge to go out and kill something – Larry – attacks me with a viciousness I wasn't ready for tonight. I thought

when she called me here, she wanted to say something more...Star-like. But now, I have no idea who that was.

But I don't fucking care what she says. She's not a monster and she's not going to set a foot near fucking Larry. That asshole is mine to deal with, Eli and everyone else be damned!

I could feel the burning anger in her. I swear, it was a side of her that I had never seen but at least she's not in a fucking box being lowered six feet under. She's got fight in her even though it's the wrong kind of fight right now. The way she looked at me like she doesn't give a damn about me anymore, shutting me out from her like she can just deny me access.

That fucking hurt. It hurt more than it should!

Doesn't matter. I don't need her anyway, not now. I need to deal with this shit and when all is said and done, she'll be running into my arms again, begging for forgiveness of which I'll bend her over and fuck her so hard, she won't walk for days. That is of course, after reddening that ass for making me feel all this shit!

But tonight, tonight was too much. Even now, I couldn't even look her in the eyes without seeing...him.

"Man, wait up!" I hear behind me but I keep going, my knuckles itching with the need to pummel the hell out of something, someone...anyone. My fists don't have a preference as much as my fucking heart only sees to beat when she's around.

"King!" Noah shouts behind me but I keep going, needing out.

I would get out of this fucking town right now if I could make sure that it didn't endanger Star, but this town, it's suffocating me. It feels like the walls are closing in on me, preparing to crush me to death—but only enough to toss me to hell a bit alive but also a whole lot dead, just so I can feel the persistent ache of the deep, gaping hole in my chest, the size of her small, tiny fist.

"Dude, you can't seriously be walking away after all that shit you just did!" he shouts after me, his voice full of frustration. I'm almost at my car so I just ignore him.

"Fucking hell, asshole, you're just going to walk away like that? Walk away from her?" He shouts and I stop dead in my tracks.

"You're just going to be a coward like that?" Noah taunts, knowing damn well that this is what he wants. A rise out of me.

He's been looking for an outlet of his own. What with all the.... rage in him. Thing is with Noah, he kept his rage tightly wrapped and controlled, disguised as jokes and smiles but underneath all that shit, there's something there. Something Astraea knows just how to temper with. Like she did tonight.

Combine that with the shit show with that spy, Kim—the girl he obviously fell in love with like a fucking fool—but I doubt even he knows what it is that's bothering him. But I can guess.

“Fuck!” I explode as soon as I pass the front entrance of the hospital into the cold chilly air that does nothing to cool down my temper.

“Is this your version of being a better man?” Noah shouts behind me, anger coloring his voice as he follows me to my car. I don't want to fight him, but God knows, I don't think I can hold on to a fucking prayer right now.

“You're just going to let another guy have what you've claimed?” he shouts, this time letting out a malicious chuckle that gives me pause.

In that moment, the thin thread I was holding on to, just...snaps. The thin cloak of humanity that holds me together, that makes this life somewhat bearable on some days, doable on others, just falls away, leaving the monster beneath to come out.

“What the fuck?” I demand, turning around to face him. He wanted my attention, he's got it. “What the hell did you just say?”

“Oh, you didn't hear?” he laughs instead, knowing that he's got me where he wants me. Reminding me that he knows something that I don't.

“I don't have time for your fucking games, Noah,” I spit out, my fists clenched, itching to deck the living lights out of him. But the smirk on his face just widens.

“Oh, I'm sure you don't. Now that you've been kicked to the fucking curb,” he chuckles. “Did she invite you to the wedding?”

“What fucking wedding?” I growl, my heart pounding in my fucking chest, hating the repressed hunger and desperation in me that's clawing at my insides.

“Oh, little Astraea and big Em's of course. I'm sure your invite is you're your mommy by now or it got lost in the mail,” he waves his hand in the fucking air like it's a grand gesture of humility when he knows he's gutting what's left of my skewered insides, spilling them on to the sleet covered tar.

“You’re fucking lying,” the denial falls from my lips but even I can hear the echoes of devastation and destruction that’s in my own voice. But it’s Noah’s laugh that has me stepping closer to him, hating the shit that’s coming out of his fucking mouth. “It’s a lie.”

“I’m sorry, your highness, do you think I’m a liar like you are?” he taunts, a full smile on his face, as he reaches in his pocket, pulling out a joint. “Don’t mistake your issues for mine. I wasn’t the one rejected tonight because I was too much of an asshole who’s responsible for the rape of a little girl...”

I pretend to walk away from him, but just as quickly, I whirl around, my fist already raised and aimed at his nose in a powerful, forceful swing. Noah doesn’t see it coming, taking the punch exactly where I wanted to land it.

“You fucking asshole! You know nothing!” I shout at him, throwing another punch which he blocks as he throws a punch of his own, the joint all but abandoned on the ground.

“I fucking know that you’re a coward! Always have been, always will be!” he growls, punching my temple, then an uppercut that I block but not so successfully as he comes back and punches my gut.

“You think I led fucking Larry to her!” I shout, my voice hoarse and animalistic, it rattles my depth. “You think I gave that scumbag a fucking map to her house, pointed her to him and told him to ravage her?” I growl, attacking him with an uppercut of my own.

“I don’t give a damn what you and that sick asshole did. All I know is everything that happened to her is on your fucking head!” he shouts right back, his nose now bleeding. I can’t even feel anything right now.

“You don’t know shit!” I counter.

“How could I? I’m not a childish, spoiled little King, who’s desperate for Daddy dearest’s approval by being his lap dog. Doing what he wants, killing off friends,” he seethes. “But that didn’t give you a fucking right to hurt her!”

That makes me even angrier, but the fury in Noah’s eyes matches the darkness that’s consuming me. The hate growing in the pit of my stomach that I can’t seem to stop no matter what I do. We’ve never butted heads like this before, but we’ve never intentionally made each other hurt before either. This was new and right now, I didn’t fucking give a damn about friendships or the history we shared.

“You’re one to fucking talk!” I shout and we tussle, pushing away from each other. Watching him, we circle around each other like we’re in a fucking boxing ring, getting ready to have the other one knocked out. This might not be the Pit but this will do. I’m barely aware that I have a cut lip or probably a black eye and that my palm is bleeding all over again.

All I feel, all I’m aware of, all I hear, is the fucking sound of doom!

“You’ve been walking around all your life hoping that fucking asshole Dave will come back,” I mock, spitting out blood, satisfied when his eyes widen with shock, threatening murder at the mention of his father’s name. A name that he made all of us swear never to mention ever again.

Yeah well, we all break promises, don’t we?

I guess all the promises and rules are broken when nothing else matters. When everything that you once were all falls apart like it was nothing to begin with.

“*Daddy, come back!*” I mock Noah’s whimpers and cries that he used to have during the night when he thought we didn’t know. “*Don’t go! Don’t leave...*”

“Asshole!” Noah charges right at me. I welcome the hard slam of his body into mine and we go crushing into the hard, cold and slippery street. Without a pause, he starts raining down punch after punch down at me. I swear there are tears in his eyes now but I only laugh in mirth, not at all bothered by them or his pain, consumed by mine. Call me selfish but it’s been a fucking week.

“You.” A punch. “Don’t.” Punch. “Know.” Another hard punch to my temple. “What you’re talking about!” he shouts.

Flipping him over, we switch and now I’m the one serving up my best dish of heated, power packed punches. Feeling like a beast has been unleashed yet this feels different from all the times I’ve done this at the Pit. There’s something screaming at me to stop, to look at the person I’m punching but that voice is quickly drowned out by all the other noises. Instead, I center all my hate on my best friend, channeling everything that I’m feeling on him. Yet in my haze, I’m cognizant of the fact that I’m missing his face more times than I get a hit in.

Before I can do anything else or actually hit the motherfucker, I’m suddenly being dragged away from a hysterical laughing Noah who looks unbothered while spitting blood. I struggle against the hands that are

holding me back, knowing exactly who the fuck it is and I'll be damned if I want to be touched by him.

"Let go of me!" I seethe, not wanting to look at him.

"Assholes, fucking stop already!" Emmett growls behind me but I push away from him.

"Don't you fucking touch me!" I spit out and he lets me go.

"Is it true?" I demand, turning around to face him.

"King..." he starts, a cautious look in his eyes but the fucker isn't intimidated. Not for a second.

"Is it fucking true?" I growl, stepping closer to him. We've fought before but I thought we squished that with Spider's sister and all that bullshit that had a lot to do with our young age. But this, after everything else, this was too much.

"Yes," he says it so simply without an instant of hesitation. Without remorse.

"You motherfucking asshole," I'm breathing fast and hard. From the corner of my eye, I see Noah slowly getting up, rubbing his jaw but the smile on his face is back with a vengeance.

"Oh Alexander, don't be that way to the groom. We wouldn't want the bride to be pissed off at you or else you will be banned from the wedding for real."

I feel like I'm going to pass out, my heart is beating so damn hard in its cage, like I'm being sentenced to a life of pain and misery. Hell is much better than this reality.

"Noah, shut up," Emmett warns, his eyes still on me. "Alex, it's not what you fucking think."

"Nothing is ever what I fucking think these days, right?"

I think of the way Astraea looked at me tonight. The way she dismissed me. The way she tensed up when I touched her. Sure, her heart still went haywire when I was close to her, there was still electricity between us. But even in all that, there was a message there that I'm now getting.

But I'll be damned if I accept that crap.

"You're not marrying her!"

The words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them or think better of them but as I say them, they feel right.

"Please," Noah snorts picking up the joint he dropped before. He searches his pockets for a Zippo but doesn't have one. Maybe it's because

the act is so familiar and we've done it countless times or maybe it's because after everything, he's still my boy, I reach into my pocket and toss him the one Star and I share. He catches it with ease, looking me dead in the eyes.

"It's not going to happen as you command it to, your highness," he mocks.

"Are you done?" I question Noah as calmly as I can, ignoring Emmett's glare on me as best as I can because I swear, if I look at him—if I look him in the eye—I'll fuck him up so bad that I might kill him right here and now.

And that in itself, will be the end of everything. The fucking world even.

"Seriously? Is that all you have to fucking say for yourself?" Noah shouts, getting riled again. "You don't just fucking bring up that asshole to my face and expect this to be fucking done!"

"Well then get on with it! I have all night!" I shout back. "It's not my fault that you still call his name in your fucking sleep."

"Please, at least I can fucking sleep when I want to. What about you?" he narrows his eyes, puffing out rings of smoke right outside in the hospital parking lot like his lungs are in tiptop shape. "When was the last time you had a good night's rest without shouting and howling out Astraea's name?"

"I wasn't aware that you care so much about my beauty sleep, Noah," I mock, ignoring the rest of what he just said. I'm not going to acknowledge that shit. "It's rather touching."

"I'm sure it is. Tell me, do you get a bedtime story too before you sleep?" he taunts, passing me back my Zippo that I secure safely in my pocket. It's hers and mine, I won't lose it.

"Oh please, don't rub off your daddy issues onto me," I seethe, getting tired of his shit.

"Ah yes, that's right, you're now buddies and tight with Philip King now. Tell me, did he promise to play football with you after church on Sunday?" Noah taunts, his voice dry with heavy sarcasm as the chilly breeze of the night makes me shiver.

"Well at least I don't have to fucking beg him to come back and love me," I fire right back, with a smirk of my own to make him suffer. To make him feel what I'm feeling inside.

Empty.

Noah charges at me but before he can reach me, Emmett steps forward, effectively blocking him with his large gait. "Noah, for Christ's sake, stop!"

he demands. “What the hell has gotten into you both?” he shouts, looking from Noah to me and back, a look of disbelief on his face.

“Going at each other like fucking animals won’t solve shit! This is pathetic, even for you!” he growls, pushing Noah away. When he comes back for another go at me, Em puts him in a headlock.

“I said, stop it!”

“Hear ye, hear ye! Behold, the self-righteous have spoken,” Noah starts, shaking Emmett’s hold away.

“Noah!” Emmett warns.

“You keep so many secrets and have the nerve to come out here after I fucking thought you were dead, what the hell was that all about?”

I look at Noah, then glance at Emmett but even as I do, all I see is her. Crying, looking at Emmett as if he was her everything that night he came with the key. I’ve never been so jealous of a fucking look in my life than I was in that moment.

“Secrets?” Emmett echoes, his voice like a bellow in the empty parking lot. “He’s the one who’s been keeping legions of secrets and shit to himself, not me!” he shouts, pointing at me. “Hell, I wasn’t even aware that he and his fucking father were going to end my fucking life!”

“Oh yeah, like keeping a lifetime disease to yourself is nothing, right?” I say sarcastically, watching the asshole as he watches me back. “Well done on that by the way. Very theatrical and a wonderful way to get the girl. Making her feel sorry for you.”

“Your jealousy is as lousy as your temper, King,” he states, his shoulders straightening. Ready for anything. Emmett might be many things but a coward who slouches in the face of a fight is not one of them. He faced that shit head on.

“But he’s fucking right. You kept your fucking heart defects to your fucking self all these years, what were you expecting? That you would one day get better and no one will be the wiser?” Noah shouts, still agitated beside himself.

“I was fucking expecting to get better but that isn’t possible for me!” he shouts right back, silencing Noah who’s jaw just snapped shut in stunned silence.

“Who knew?” I demand, knowing there’s no way that Em didn’t tell a soul about his shit.

“George,” he answers, looking at me like it doesn’t surprise him that I suspected it. If there was ever anyone the boys and I confided in, more so the four years that Star wasn’t here, it was her twin brother. He kept shit together, and right now, I miss that asshole more than ever. I have no idea what the fuck I’m doing right now that he’s not here.

“Well, you can fucking get a new heart, then,” Noah demands with a perplexed look on his face.

“I can’t get a new heart without the risk of dying the moment they take out the one I was fucking born with since there are holes connected to each chamber, you asshole!”

Pain.

It filters in when you least expect it, lingering in your bones, reminding you with each breath you take that it’s there. That, so long as you’re fucking alive, you can’t escape it. Just like fucking heart defects.

“Don’t you think I want to be better? Don’t you fucking think that this has been chewing me the fuck up since...I don’t know, for fucking years!”

“Since when?” Noah presses.

“Since for as long as I can fucking remember!”

Well, damn.

“You think you’re the only one with issues? The only ones with an asshole father who—from what I hear—was proud of me right up to the point he learned of my...defects?”

Emmett is breathing fast and hard. We all were as we stare at each other like broken chords in a band, not knowing where to go from here or how the song is going to end. We just don’t know.

“I’m a defect! I’ve been that all my life. Is that what you want to fucking hear, Noah?” he seethes, looking from Noah to me but doesn’t dare linger on me for longer than a heated second. “I doubt I’m the only one in the world with them and I sure as hell not the only one with secrets here!” he growls out, turning to stare at me head on.

“Well then, trust tree right fucking now!” Noah cheers.

“Exactly, it’s happening right now!”

I snort, silently challenging them, then turn to make my way to my car. I can’t deal with either of their shit right now.

“You knew I was going to be murdered,” Emmett shouts behind me, making me pause. “You and your father planned that shit,” he accuses and I just smirk, snapping my neck from left to right, pretending to be bored with

this conversation when all I want to fucking do right now...is leave this retched place.

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” I smoothly state, my voice cold without even trying. It just is. “If I were you, I’d be thanking my fucking lucky stars...,” I pause for a second as my heart constricts like a tight fist has gripped it and it’s squeezing and twisting every which way, stringing me out until I’m bled dry of blood.

Star...

God, how can she mess up my life like that?

“You should be grateful to be alive,” I finish instead and then start walking towards my car.

“Wait!” Emmett shouts as he comes after me. “Where the fuck are you going? This isn’t over!”

“It is OVER!” I roar as I turn back to look at him, making him halt to an immediate stop with the animosity in my voice, but I’m not done.

“Everything is fucking over!” I shout, now walking towards him until we’re nose to nose, toe to fucking toe. “In case you haven’t fucking noticed, everything is over! We’re no longer friends, we’re not anything!” I shout in his face, looking deep into him bottomless eyes where everything I’m feeling is reflected back at me. “So, I don’t fucking owe you an explanation!”

Empty, cold darkness is what stares back at me.

“You gave me a role already in all this and I’m going to play it. I’m the one who planned your fucking murder, right? I’m the one who told you to pick your death place, this wretched hospital where I was going to lose her?” I seethe, hating the way the words make me feel. “To you, I’m one heartless killer, right? That’s probably what you told her about me the other night when they had you in your fucking hospital room then you fucking kissed her!”

I’m so mad right now, my vision is hazing at the edges. I swear, I can see red and all I want to do is wreak havoc on him. Make him fucking pay.

“King...”

“Wait, what does that mean?” Noah demands, still inhaling and exhaling his fucking joint.

“You fucking heard me! You both know it! We were never meant to be fucking friends in the first place and I sure as hell will never be friends with a guy who is actively trying to take what’s fucking mine away from me!”

I pound my fucking chest as I step back from him, my palm bleeding through the bandage, soaking it but that doesn't matter. Right now, I'm just aware of all of this shit.

Hating Emmett was never in the plans. Hell, if you'd asked me fucking seven months ago if everything would fall apart like this, I'd have never believed you. But here we are. I can't stop the hate for him as much as I can't stop the need to fucking protect everyone I care about from danger.

"What the hell man?" Noah demands, looking at me.

"No, he's right," Emmett says, as he watches me. His gaze unflinching. "We were never meant to be friends and we never were. Not for real anyway. Not without George or the one girl who brought us all together," he starts.

We stare at each other for a long minute.

This asshole. And to think I thought he would always have my back for the rest of our lives but here we fucking are. At odds with each other.

"I'm glad we're on the same fucking page then," I say, forcing my voice to be unbothered, emotionless. It's crazy how these assholes can bring the best and worst in me all at the same time. But that too is over.

In that moment, I think we all know the fucking truth. It's pretty hard to ignore it when it's right there, punching us in the gut with the cold wind blowing, and snow stuck to the ground.

Those four years without her were the worst years of our lives.

But now, she's back and we have done all we could to drive her away with lies, deception all in the name of keeping her safe. Funny enough, we still don't really have her. Actually, all the secrets have driven her over the edge to a point where she's felt like she doesn't need all this crap.

"She fucking slit her wrist!" I start, the words pouring out of me in a rush of emotion that I can't keep a lid on. "She wanted to give up!"

Emmett moves closer and without hesitation, he pulls me by my neck into him in an awkward man hug thing that really doesn't make any sense but for some reason, I can't stand on my fucking own right now.

"I know, bro," he murmurs quietly, his voice rough. "It's crazy."

Suddenly, Noah is behind me, then he throws his arms around both of us. "Hmm, this is nice. We haven't done this in a while."

"Not since..."

"George," I finish, and we all pull away. Yeah, we were fucking close, but not that close. These mofos were still my brothers, whether we fought

like it was the end of the world or not.

“It’s been sucky around here lately and we can’t trust Astraea to be by herself right now,” I start.

“Even if what she just said was more scathing than any insult I’ve ever received in my life, she still needs us,” Noah agrees, taking out another bottle of Jack.

“Dude, just how drunk are you?”

“Not drunk enough to deal with you asshats, apparently,” he shakes his head. “Everything’s coming at me, hitting me flat in my chest and I can’t breathe for shit. But what I fucking need right now, is the truth!” He looks at me, waiting.

“I also want the truth about this marriage bullshit that I thought you would stop once all this shit comes to a head!” I demand, watching Emmett like a hawk. “She’s mine!”

“Hmm, it didn’t look like that when she sent you packing just now,” Noah counters.

“Shut the fuck up.”

He raises his hands in surrender, taking a step back. “I’m just joking but you know it’s true.”

“Listen dude, this isn’t for me to say. Just know that for whatever reason this is happening, it’s all going to explain itself when the time is right.”

“Bullshit!” I seethe. “Just let it out! I know you’ve had googly eyes for her since we were fucking kids and this is your golden opportunity all because Daddy dearest, who by the way, hasn’t been here to claim the body of his dead son—kinda says a lot about you now, doesn’t it?” I mock, feeling like I’m worth nothing.

“Shit, it’s not what you fucking think!” he shouts at me.

“What do you expect me to think?” I demand, echoing the way Star shouted in my face with hurt and anger in her voice. “I fucking saved your miserable life and you think you can take her away from me?”

“Dude, this is about her!” he shouts. “Get out of your head for a second and think about her.”

“Think about her?” I snort. “Everything I do, I do it for her. Everything I care to even take on, it’s because of her. Every fucking time I force myself to care, it’s been for her and you have the audacity to tell me to think about her when she’s the center of my fucking existence?” I say, my voice dropping to a pained whisper.

“Damn, that’s fucking deep,” Noah whispers too, making me roll my eyes as I turn away to leave. There’s no reason why I should stay and get myself fucked in the ass by these assholes. Putting everything I am on the line for her when she made it clear that she wants nothing to do with me from now on.

“You know what, you can fucking keep her,” I toss over my shoulder.

“You don’t mean that,” Emmett shouts after me.

“Of course, I don’t!” I shout. “But I’m no one’s second best and you damn well be ready for shit to come your way,” I promise him

I’m going to fuck shit up for her as much as I can—all while I make this fucking town safe for her to breathe again. She’ll have no choice but to crawl back to me, begging for forgiveness.

Forgiveness that I don’t fucking have.

I turn to leave, this time I don’t bother turning back. There’s nothing to say anymore.

This is the end after all.

“You’re a coward!” Noah shouts behind me.

Yeah, a coward who would take a fucking bullet for your ass and won’t hold it against you.

I don’t need them. I don’t need anyone. As a matter of fact, this entire friendship was father’s idea—all in preparation for this very moment when everything is dismantled from its core.

The Blue Boys, or whatever the fuck Astraea called us, were no more. Not after all this shit.

“Alex, wait up,” Emmett calls after me but I keep on going, not turning back for shit. He jogs ahead and blocks me from going further.

“Get out of my way,” I demand but he ignores me.

“I know this is crappy but right now, you have to fucking trust me.”

I hold his stare, my heart pounding in my chest. Do I believe him or do I walk away now while I’m ahead?

“The truth is, we messed up,” Emmett starts. “We messed up by lying to her, keeping secrets from her and something tells me she’s on a mission to avenge.”

They have no idea how true and how scary that shit is. Astraea is about to step on landmines, thinking that she’s doing the right thing. Over my fucking rotting corpse will I allow her to get into harm’s way—worst still, into fucking Larry’s radar.

And for that, I need all the help I can possibly get, even if we're mad as hell at each other right now.

"Brittney is blackmailing me," I start, taking the bottle of Jack from Noah as I say that. Eyeing the bottle, I notice that it's already half empty. Noah is on his way to being an alcoholic and he doesn't even know it.

"Shit," Emmett breathes.

"I fucking knew it!" Noah exclaims, spreading his arms wide. "That bitch has to have something on you."

"Not me," I chug the Jack, the burn not doing much to ease the pain in my chest.

"She has something on Astraea?" Emmett questions, but my silence only confirms what they both know. "What is it?"

"She has an unlimited supply of images featuring Astraea." Even I can feel the bitterness and the rage coming back with a vengeance as I think of all the pictures she has shown me so far, threatening to make them go viral if I so much as put a foot wrong where it concerns her. And now, with her working with Dereck to drug Astraea, thinking I don't know about it—I have no fucking clue what she'll do.

As if she knows she's the subject of my hate, my phone starts ringing again but I ignore it.

"Fuck!"

"What kind of images?" Emmett questions, eyeing me. I stare at him and he curses, now pacing. Noah takes out another joint—the guy is a walking crime, just waiting to be busted. Literally.

"Images from four years ago," I spit out, hating the way I'm feeling so helpless and unprepared.

"From four years ago... what the fuck?!" Noah explodes.

"You mean she has images of Astraea when she was..."

"Yes," I cut him off. I have a hard enough time trying to wrap my head around the fact that it even happened to her. Of all the angels that I thought couldn't be touched, she was the one who I thought would be safe. But because of me, she wasn't and still isn't. And the fact that Larry did that to her, I'm going to kill that asshole. I'm going to find him and I will kill him.

"I got close to her to find out how she would have those images but it all fucking makes sense now. She's her father's child, after all," I finish, draining the rest of the bottle. "You got any more of these?"

“I’m out,” Noah says, puffing his joint, probably thinking that it’ll calm him down, but it won’t. He’s as shaken as ever.

“So, this Larry guy has a thing about taking images, doesn’t he?” Emmett spits out, knuckles cracking.

“Yeah, he does,” Which makes me wonder if he ever took images of me when I was nothing but a small boy.

“What I’m trying to figure out is, one, how you know this asshole and two, if you knew about these images, which you’ve known about for a fucking long time as it seems, why haven’t you destroyed them yet?” Noah starts, now pacing. If anyone sees us right now, they probably think we’re crazy assholes who are messed up in the head. They’ll probably be right about that.

“It’s much more complicated than that,” I start. No way am I going to tell them what happened to me. I don’t give a damn what they might have gotten from what Astraea alluded to the other day but it’s none of their fucking business.

“Brittney is a bitch but she’s smart. I’ve been trying for weeks to find out who her fucking father is but every time I ask, she shoots down that subject.”

“You think she’s on to us?” Emmett questions, his thinking cap obviously on now.

“She’s definitely on to us, after she showed up with Dereck here,” I start. “But her beef is with Astraea.”

“Over you!” Noah points out. “And let’s not forget that this same bitch is the same one that drugged Astraea, obviously setting her up for what she knew her father was going to do. God, I wish I could beat her up like a man,” Noah says, his face contorted in a frown.

“I know she’s been salivating for me.”

“Which is why you’re pretending to be with her,” Emmett says, connecting the dots.

“At least fucking tell me you have a plan,” Noah demands, red in face with anger, demanding retribution.

“I always do, mofo,” I seethe, “but it requires all of you to be on your best behavior. Don’t you dare act out of character or else she’ll know that we’re on to her.”

“Does Astraea know?” Emmett asks softly.

“No, and it stays that way” I warn him, looking him straight in the eyes. “She doesn’t need to know that there are pictures of her, naked, bleeding and abused on the fucking floor on her old home, for Brittney and Larry’s viewing pleasure.”

“But we have to consider that she’ll find out,” Noah points out.

“And I’d like to have that happen after we eliminate this Brittney problem,” I seethe, my fists clenched.

“And the Phoenix Corps, the Larry problem?” Emmett starts. “How do we deal with trained assassins who want to take us out?”

“I might have a contact in the Phoenix Corps,” I start, breathing a little easier knowing that my brothers now know some of my plan. Not all of it. Never all of it. That’s not how you win a war.

“Spider?” Noah snorts. “Yeah, we already know that.”

“Not Spider,” I start. “Someone who I think has more juice in that fucking organization than I thought.”

I think of Eli and the way he carries himself, the way he is, the way he responded to my description of Larry, the mention of the Phoenix Corps; it’s as if he knows a lot more than I realize. I’d like to think that the guy cares for me so him telling me to stay away from Larry, there has to be something going on there already.

“So how good is this contact of yours?” Emmett questions, obviously skeptical.

“Good enough to get me results,” I state, hoping against hope that I’m correct. There’s so much riding on this.

“Which brings us to fucking George,” Noah starts, a bewildered expression on his face. “How could you keep me in the dark about this?” You can’t mistake the hurt in his voice even if you wanted to. This is killing Noah but it’s hurting all of us, if we’re being honest.

“It was for your own good,” Emmett answers.

Noah and George were tight, like fuck the same bitch kind of tight. So it made no sense to tell him that we had suspicions that George might be alive, his hope would have been crushed if the theory turned out to be false and George was dead for real. But also, to keep his fucking mouth shut when he was around Star.

“My own good?” Noah gasps, then he starts laughing, sarcastically. “You think keeping secrets that big is for anyone’s good other than yourselves?”

I have nothing to say to that, so I keep my mouth shut.

“We just got our asses handed to us and I don’t see her forgiving anyone of us in the near future!” he points to the hospital building. “She’s up there thirsting for blood and we’re going to ignore the fact that this Larry asshole might be...”

“He’s not!” I grit out, cutting him off before he can say it.

“How do you know that?” Noah taunts. “It’s not the first time that a fucking sperm donor has assaulted and abused his own offspring!”

“Astraea is not Larry’s offspring!” I shout, anger pulsing in my veins, throbbing at my pulse points as my stomach rolls about to make me sick.

“Then explain the similarities in their fucking features!” he shouts. “I know you saw them! I know it’s those fucking dark eyes! You saw that shit!”

“Dude, calm down,” Emmett interjects. “There’s no way to know for sure.”

“Oh really?” Noah snorts. “How about we start by the fact that we all know that Richard isn’t her father? We all know George knew that shit. We also know that they once were triplets but were separated at birth with the other girl who we have no idea where she is.”

“Maybe George left to look for her.”

“Or maybe she’s been right in front of us all these months since the new school year started and Astraea came back,” Noah points out, making us all pause.

“What are you saying?” I start, stepping closer to him, the look in my eyes hard.

“I know you’re probably thinking it!” he seethes, not backing away. “She told us that he’s her father. We know that he’s also that bitch Brittney’s father. So what are the fucking odds that either Kim or fucking bitch face are the third triplet?”

I’m stunned into silence. I reel back, shaking my head as I think it over but truth is, I’m too messed up in the head to think of anything that makes sense right now.

“That’s fucked up,” Emmett breathes, shaking his head in obvious denial.

“What isn’t fucked up about this?” Noah points out. “You remember how George got so fixated on Brittney, hating her guts more than anything.”

“Maybe he just started feeling that she had something to do with what had happened to Astraea years before!” I growl, not wanting to think of the

possibilities.

“Oh, fucking face the music, King!” Noah shouts. “There’s a reason why Brittney did that.”

“Yes, for her fucking father!”

“Or maybe she knew that she was the third triplet and for that, she hated George and Astraea for being picked without her!”

“But we all know who Brittney’s mother is! It’s definitely not Amanda,” Emmett points out and I wave my hand at Noah.

“Exactly,” I nod.

“So, then it’s Kim...,” Noah starts but I cut him off.

“Oh, the girl you vetted and told us she was fucking clean?” I shake my head in disbelief.

“I made an honest mistake!” Noah defends, getting into my face again. “Everything about her was clean. No blaring alarms, nothing that seemed out of place. She said the father was out of the picture.”

“Well, did you meet the mother?” Emmett questions and Noah clams up as if that’s a secret he can’t exactly share.

“You see. There’s no way that either of these two...sisters, by the looks of it, are Astraea and George’s long lost triplet,” I state, feeling some sense of urgency to deny Astraea a connection with fucking Larry or his offspring because that...I don’t know how we’ll ever get past that if it’s true.

“But we can’t rule out the fact that they might all be half siblings by the same monster!” Noah shouts. “I’m sorry but I’m not trying to get blindsided all over again.”

“I get that but calm the hell down,” Emmett says. “Let’s all take a deep breath and get our heads together about this.”

Silence falls over us for a long minute. And the next thing, Noah is passing the joint to me but I pass along.

“Seriously?” he questions seriously, looking at me like I’ve just grown two heads.

“I can’t smoke one without her,” I grit out, thinking back to one of the many promises we made to each other at our spot. I don’t care how we’re both feeling right now, I won’t break this one even though in her fucking mind, it’s over. But I know better, in her fucking heart—my heart—it’s so not over. Not by a long shot.

“Well, damn,” he whistles. “Em?”

“I’m good. Saw a new doctor on my death day,” he starts, now looking at me. “Told me that he was a substitute of the doctor who was supposed to kill me in my operation.”

“So...wait, you had the operation done?” Noah demands.

“No, you idiot. I would have been fucking ‘recovering’ by now.”

“Then what the hell were you doing all those hours? Besides sneaking in your Dad’s house to get that damn key, which I knew Astraea was going to demand as soon as she got her fight back,” Noah questions.

“Had a talk with the doctor. He examined me. I guess I have you to thank,” Em says, looking at me. I just nod my head in acknowledgement. Whatever he discussed with Eli’s doctor is for his own good. After all, he did keep the secret of his heart condition to himself all these years.

“I don’t know about giving that key to Astraea though,” he says, jaw clenched.

“Dude, you and I both know you didn’t have a choice in that matter. Hell, you don’t stand a chance when she’s mad like that and this time, she was beyond livid.”

“She has every right to get that key. She has to be the first one that gets into that room,” I state, and they all nod in agreement.

“What do you think is in there?” Noah questions as we walk towards my car, the cold air now making me feel all the aches and pains from where Noah punched me.

“Whatever is it, I have a feeling that it’s going to change a lot.” I say.
If not everything...

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Over the next few days, I stay at the hospital to recover as best as I can. I don't cry. I don't complain even when the physical pain threatens to overwhelm the uproar and chaos in my heart that I can't escape in the silence that surrounds me. Forget the mayhem in my soul. That's nothing compared to the steely calm resolve in my mind that I have forced myself into.

I don't complain when Marie comes in to draw my blood, to test the level of opioids in my system or something.

I don't complain when the doctors instruct me that I need to eat and take my health seriously. I smile woodenly and nod my head instead, pretending that I'm sane and alright.

Amanda is here every single day, acting as a guard dog, watching each person that comes and goes—not that anyone has bothered to show up after the way I burst the other night. Apart from Noah of course, who is foolishly always here.

He doesn't say anything. He doesn't address me at times but he's always here. Last night and today, I finally let him in the room, watching him seating quietly in the corner as he drinks the day away. I wondered about

school and what might be going on, but then I remembered, we were on Winter break now which gave Noah the license to be as reckless as ever.

With each visit, he looked worse for wear, his breath smelling like alcohol so much so that if we cut even a little bit off his skin, Jack Daniels will come gushing out instead of blood.

But even though he looked rough, like death warmed over, he was still gorgeous and making the nurses like him with his easy charm. I guess that was his way of making sure that they don't bust him for drinking in here, never mind the fact that he's underage. His smile was still wide, he could flirt like nothing else in the world but when we would be alone, he stared at me for what felt like hours on end. His tired eyes take me in with a haunted gaze that I know all too well

Emmett doesn't bother showing up, until one afternoon when he knew no one would be around. I guess he was waiting for his turn.

"Are you going to stand around, looking like a stalker or are you going to come in here and tell me why the hell you're here?" I call from my set at the window.

"You knew I was there?" he questions, coming in, shutting the door behind him.

"Yeah, just like you knew I would be coming to you that night, after a visit from your father," I say after a while, looking out the window.

"I can't say you aren't predictable in that sense," he starts, his deep voice drawing nearer. "I knew you would come looking for me right after my father spilled the beans."

"Then that means you knew that he was going to pay me a little visit and gang up on me with my mother," I say, not wanting to look at him just yet.

"I overheard him on the phone yes. So, I quickly called up King, told him that we needed to draw my father out."

"And the hospital was your setting and I was the bait," I chuckle, shaking my head. Then I look down at my bandaged wrist. "Great planning as always, Emmett, but I do have one question."

"Raea, we never meant to hurt you..." he starts.

"I have a question," I cut him off, shutting my eyes.

"Okay," he says with a sigh after a long minute of silence. I think he knows what's coming. He knows what I want to ask him.

"Your father showed me a marriage license that already had your signature on it," I start, then turn around in my chair to look at him. "Was it

real or forged?”

“Raea...,” he starts, hesitating. I look up at him, silently watching him.

“It was as real as my fucking heart defects,” he answers then, his voice soft and so damn smoky. He was the whole package, Emmett. Sexy, intelligent as hell, caring, silent and broody. And just as much a liar.

“Ahh, the heart defects,” I say, sadness seeping into my bones all over again. “The other huge part of your life that you never, not once, mentioned to me or your friends.”

“George knew,” he says, watching me, his eyes sift.

“I figured as much,” I smile. My brother, the keeper of all secrets. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“I wanted to, but I...” he cuts himself off, looking away, then he kneels down, grabs y hand and places it over his unsteadily beating heart. I gasp, tears welling in my eyes. “You feel that?”

I nod, the tears streaming down my cheeks, but he reaches up to wipe them away.

“How could I tell you that I was sick?” he starts. “How could I begin phrasing it to you that there was a chance, with each day that I wake up, that I would be dead by the end of the day if I so much as make a wrong move?”

“Don’t...”

“It’s true,” he says, his eyes soft like liquid emerald, watching me with so many emotions that I don’t want too place. It’ll hurt a lot if I do. “I couldn’t live with myself if you looked at me like I was broken, or a ticking time bomb. My introduction to you was already messed up, I couldn’t string a single sentence together, let alone tell you my issues.”

“That didn’t matter at all!” I cry, cupping his rough cheek that hasn’t been shaved in while. “You know that it doesn’t matter!”

“I know but I wasn’t going to be responsible for wiping that smile this beautiful face,” he smiles but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “We’ve done crazy, stupid things lately, and I know you are nowhere to forgive us but, I’m down for you Astraea.”

“God, I don’t know if I deserve that,” I laugh, then look at him seriously. “One more question.”

“Don’t ask or you’ll be haunted for the rest of your life,” he warns in that low voice of his that makes me feel...things I’m sure I have no business feeling in my state.

“Emmett, I have to know.”

“What you need to know is, I silently gave you the most precious thing to me when we were kids,” he whispers.

“Then what happened?” I ask, scooting closer to him, getting slightly addicted to the cadence of his voice and the way he’s looking at me. I was so blind for years, I couldn’t see what’s in his eyes right now. “What did you give me?”

“My heart,” he answers as simply as if he’s talking about something else. “But with each day that I watched you draw closer to King.”

“Emmett...”

“I watched you both from the shadows, drawing closer to each other, then painted it as hate, pranks and bullying, but that wasn’t it. I think I died a little inside each day and it had nothing to do with my heart defects and everything to do with you.”

I can’t take what he’s saying. A sob moves through my body and this time, it’s his turn to cup my face in his palms.

“Your heart never beat for me and even now with all this pain, confusion and hate, your heart still doesn’t beat for me,” he continues, his voice deepener with each word.

“That’s not true!” I rush to deny. “You said you gave me your heart and...”

“You feel sad for me. I hurt you, I lied to you but buried under all that anger, you hurt for me,” he says, “And I think that’s why you signed that piece of paper.”

“No, my mother had us at check mate and I...”

“Sacrificed yourself all in the name of revenge,” he cuts me off, looking me straight in the eyes. Seeing me for the fraud I truly am.

Love was like a seesaw. When one was up and fucking high, there was another that was low, in the pits of it, suffering somehow.

“Emmett, I...” I start but as if he knows exactly what I want to say, he delivers the most devastating blow to my fractured soul.

“Astraea, some hearts beat normally, others stutter like a curse. But mine, it’s been cursed right from the start. I guess that’s why it rot and shattered in your hands,” he says, his voice breaking at the end, along with every part of me I was scrambling to rebuild.

Oh God. I whimper, every inch in me hurting to a point of pain.

“How can you say that?” I gasp, my heart hurting. I can see the pain in his eyes flashing right back at me.

“I’m not saying this to hurt you or to blame you, but to release you from any burden that you might be carrying because of me.” he says, wiping my tears with his thumbs. “I’ll never force you into anything. I’ll never break you, but I will always protect you. Even if that means I have to make a deal with the devil just to keep you safe.”

Without another word, he presses a kiss to my forehead, lingering there for a second. I don’t know what happens when I feel his hot breath on my skin. My heart starts pounding slowly, every inch of me aware of his hard body.

We’re eye to eye. I can breathe in his clean, masculine scent in my lungs. He smells so good and I’m...I’m hurting so bad.

“Emmett...,” I start, my voice breathless.

“Astraea, don’t ask me to...”

But before he can finish, I cut him off with a kiss. It’s tentative at first, explorative, soft and so damn good. I can feel the butterflies in my stomach—something I’ve never felt with Ace before. This is...innocent. But even then, I can taste the heartbreak.

Pulling back, I gasp, the realization of what I’ve just done crushing into me.

“Emmett...,” I whimper, noticing that I just crushed his soul.

“Don’t beat yourself up for trying to replace him with a mere, defective substitute.”

“No, that’s not it...”

“It doesn’t matter,” he smiles but it’s not there. “You wanted a pair of willing lips to kiss, I’m your guy. Hell, we’re married now so I guess every inch of me is yours.”

The sarcasm in that statement breaks my heart and I start crying all over again. He watches me for a second, not saying a word. I want to say something but I don’t even know what I did. All I know is, that kiss felt a lot like a mistake that I’ll never be able to take back because I’m slowly destroying this guy who has done nothing but love me. He presses another kiss to my forehead, then he leaves as silently as he came. Leaving me in a river of tears that I can’t control, with no one to blame for that sincere bout of honesty, but myself.



“You love him, don’t you?”

Startled, I look up, my eyes red rimmed with tears, a sob still stuck in my chest, and see Dr. Summer standing there, her arms folded, leaning on the doorway.

“You heard?” I sniffle, wiping the remainder of my never-ending tears. “I didn’t peg you for the eavesdropping type.”

“I only saw that kiss, but I heard the tail end of that heart wrenching conversation.”

“Are you judging me now?”

“Please, I’m in no place to judge you or anyone else,” she says softly. “But I do have to point out one thing, that kind of passion is rare.”

“Guys like him are rare,” I say, my voice filled with misery and sadness.

“I guess that’s why you are drawn to them,” she says, getting into the room. Today she’s wearing suede boots, Manolo Bhalnik if I’m not mistaken. “The Blue Boys,”

“You say that like you’re not impressed by them,” I observe, watching her and she smiles.

“Not really, it’s just, I’ve heard a lot about these Blue Boys.”

“And let me guess, some girl came in to see you to tell you all about how they terrorize the town, burning and looting?” I question, sarcastically.

“Quite the opposite actually,” she says, pulling up another chair, bringing it to the window. “They have a dangerous, bad boy appeal to them yes, but I met them myself and good Lord, are they magnetic.”

“How old are you again?” I question, trying to suppress my smile.

“Old enough to know, Astraea,” she says, nodding her head. “Old enough.”

“Damn, I love it when a woman knows she’s got the stuff,” a smoky, playful voice says from the doorway and in comes Noah, still looking haggard but he’s got a dopey smile on his face like he’s high. Knowing him, he might be high right now.

“Ahh, the playboy Blue Boy,” Dr. Summer greets, studying Noah.

“It’s good to see you, Doc,” Noah says, then he bends over, planting a kiss on my cheek, murmuring a hello but he doesn’t look me in the eyes. At this point, there’s an iceberg between us and I’m not sure what we’re going to do about it, but for now, he’s here.

“What happened? You walked into a pole. Again?” I question, noticing the light purple bruise on his eye, then I look down to his swollen knuckles. My mind races with possibilities of who he might have been in a fight with.

“The pole is worse,” he says with a smirk, watching me. “I can’t say he didn’t deserve it because you and I both know he did.”

We stare at each other for a while, not saying a single thing. It’s obvious he fought with Alex and I shouldn’t care but God, I do. I care a lot.

“Have you given some thought to what I said before?” she questions, watching us.

“Hmm, what did you say again?” he questions, tapping his chin, pretending to think it over. “Was it the part you told King to stay away from Astraea or was it when you told me that I broke my best friend’s spirit?”

“What?” I frown, looking between them.

“All of the above, you’re Noah Montreal, aren’t you?” Dr. Summer questions.

“That’s what they say,” Noah says, “Am I interrupting your couch talk, Baby Blue?”

“Noah...” I start but Dr. Summer cuts me off.

“Well, not really Noah but I’m glad you’re here, will you join us?” she questions him, and I frown.

“Why is that?” I question. “Please don’t tell me you want to fuck Noah, because that would just be disgusting.”

“Excuse me, but I’m a fucking catch,” Noah interjects, looking offended. “I’m magic, recognize.”

“As much as you’re gorgeous. Noah, I’m not a cougar,” Dr. Summer says. “Besides, I’m sure a guy like you knows that underage drinking is illegal.”

“Yup, but I’m sure it will be our own little secret, right Summer?” he says, pulling a chair beside me. I’m shocked that there are this many chairs in here. What were they thinking I’d do? Hold a board meeting?

“Well, that depends,” Dr. Summer musses.

“On what?” Noah questions, as he messes my hair, playing with it. A nervous tendency. He’s unfocused and on the verge of being an alcoholic right now, I can smell rum on his breath.

“On whether or not you’re help me understand her,” she says pointing at me.

“Uh, I’m right here. You can ask me anything, no need to ask a drunk playboy.”

Yeah, that’s the thing Astraea,” she starts. “We’ve been talking for a while and one of the things I picked up about you is, you have a major communication breakdown.”

“Hallelujah to that, Doc!” Noah says.

“Well, obviously you don’t know anything because I’m an excellent communicator.” I deny, feeling attacked.

“Uh, you don’t,” Noah says. “Actually, your communication skills are almost nonexistent. Half the shit we went through the last four years could have been avoided had you told us what was going on with you.”

“Really?” I demand, appalled by what I’m hearing. “So, you are saying, I should have been the one to look for you when I was raped?”

“That’s not...”

“You’re saying I should have been the one doing all the research! I should have been the one to look deeper, scatter the lies and the buried hatchets just to find you, when I was hurt, scared and alone? After all these years, I get why you had to leave. I understand why you took some time away from this place but when you left, you could have at least called someone, called me, just to let me know that you’re doing well or at the very least, so I could hear your voice.”

“I wasn’t alright, okay!” I explode, getting up, too agitated to sit down. I’m feeling too much and nothing at the same time, I don’t know what it means. “Those four years, have to be the four that I won’t miss. They were agonizing, slow and sad! How could you possibly understand that?”

“See, that’s all shit you’ve never talked about!” Noah points. “You haven’t so much as mentioned what happened to you in London. You just came back and picked up the broken pieces only to later shatter them because you suck at communicating!”

“But I’m not the one who lied!” I yell back. I won’t let him shift the blame on me. “From the day I came back, how many secrets and lies have you three been keeping from me?”

“Astraea...”

“Right,” I scoff, shaking my head sadly. “And you have the guts to stand there, accusing me of being a communication klutz.”

“Yeah but your problem Baby Blue is, you like to see faults in other people, demanding that we be truthful with you but when the truth is aired

out to you, you go and do this!” he seethes, grabbing my bandaged wrist.

Embarrassed, I roughly snatch my hand away from him, avoiding his gaze.

“Face it, Astraea, you can’t face the truth! You can’t stomach it, so I’ll say, you’re about as bad as the rest of us.”

“So, your reason for lying is, I couldn’t handle it if you told me?” I say after a while of heavy silence. “How dumb do you think I am?”

“No one is saying you’re dumb...”

“Please leave,” I cut him off, turning away from him.

“You can’t be serious right now,” he blows a breath. “You’re kicking me out for being honest?”

“No, because I can’t take your honesty right now,” I mumble, looking at the floor, finding it interesting all of a sudden.

“Wow,” Noah says, then he laughs. “I guess Doc knew what she was doing right from the start, huh?”

With his fingers in my hair, he plants a kiss at the crown of my head then he leaves.

“Why is this happening to me?” I whisper under my breath.

“Because nothing makes sense anymore for you,” Dr. Summer answers, looking as self-assured as ever. “Because everyone in your life realizes that you’re different and you’ll never be the same again.”

I deadpan as I look at her.

“You caused that,” I accuse. Noah was right, she did know what she was doing.

“Actually, I wanted to see how you interact with the boys and I’m finding that you’re different with each one, which is why they all love you.”

I snort, then I look at her. She’s completely serious. A stilted chuckle escapes my lips.

“You can’t say that, you haven’t even met the big, bad wolf,” I say sarcastically.

“The one you’re in love with. The one whose lies hurt worse than a heart attack, his betrayal ripples through you, you can’t sleep at night?”

Not knowing what to say to that, I remain mute, standing there looking like a lost puppy.

“You saw him.” It’s a statement. Everyone that has encountered Alex...I mean, Alex, always have a tell.

“Yes,” she says simply. “I was going to lose my head that night.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” I say, watching her.

“He’s something alright.”

“I’m sure he is.” I grit out, rolling my eyes.

“He’s the reason you’re so damn angry, isn’t he?”

“Please, you’re giving him too much credit, he doesn’t affect me as much,” I say, looking away.

“Okay, how about I tell you what I think, then you can correct me as we go,” she suggests, crossing her legs at the knee, her designer jeans doing well to match her shoes. The woman can dress.

“I’m sure you were going to do that anyway,” I start then wave at the floor in front of her.

“You know me so well,” she smiles. “Firstly, there are a lot of rumors about how all of you came to be, but I think I’ve stumbled across the answer. These guys, the Blue Boys, including your brother, all came together because of you. You literally made them, because you have a connection with all of them that they’re trying to make for themselves without you, but they realize it’s impossible.”

“Again, too much credit,” I snort. “They can survive without me.”

“Of course,” Dr. Summer says. “I can survive without my shoe collection. I can survive without my husband or my fur baby, but I can’t live without them. There’s a clear difference there.”

“Human beings can adjust to almost anything. We can adjust to darkness. We can adjust to pain. We can adjust to different diets even—By the way, I’ve got your meal plan prepared, your doctor just needs to approve—but the point is, we can adjust to survive. But in cases like yours, where you still have so much love to give, so much life in you, you need to live!”

I want to do that. I want to live my life as best as I can, but how do I do that? How do I live when my boys are out there, in pain, and here I am, mad as hell at them and not likely to forgive anyone of them anytime soon.

“They lied to me.” I whisper, feeling lost all over again. “I know you said I have communication problems and all but, they lied and I feel like a fool because of it.”

“Because they also have communication problems,” she says it so simply like it’s obvious. “A tight knit group like yours is hard to penetrate. Everyone out there wants in. They want to be you. You’re all formidable, wealthy, closer than anything I’ve encountered but what they don’t realize is, groups like yours are either brought together by either mundane,

irreverent mutual likeness to earthly material things. In which case, those groups tend to never evolve. Or you have your own ties, cemented in trials, trauma, personal issues and blood.”

“Take your pick,” I say but I understand what she’s saying.

“You and I both know that your connection to those boys isn’t some High School Musical, dance routine, it’s much, much more complex than that. Which leads me to my next point, could it be that you’re attracted to issues because it means they might understand yours without judgement?”

“What?” I frown, looking at her like she’s just lost her mind.

“Here me out,” she starts, waving her hands. “One of your biggest dilemmas right now is trying to see who you are without the boys, without him and so far, you’re off to a pretty shaky start.”

“I know that already,” I look away, feeling annoyed.

“You got in the habit of collecting red flags for so long, and now that you’re realizing it, you don’t know what to do with all that anger.”

“I don’t collect red flags and I’m not angry!” I deny.

“You sure about that?”

“Yes!”

“Okay then, let’s walk through this. You feel like a fool because of...”

“Don’t you dare say his name!” I seethe.

“Fine, let’s call him, him.”

“What about...him?”

“Well, he’s got danger and regrets oozing off of him. He does nothing without you reacting to his movements and it’s mutual. You react to each other in a way I haven’t seen in my life. Like, when a tornado meets a volcano, violently reacting to each other. But tell me this, are you fatally attracted to him because you’re a red flag yourself?”

“Excuse me?” I gasp, my eyes widening with shock. “I’m not a red flag!”

“That stutter at the end suggests that you’re not sure about that yourself,” she says, standing up now. “I’ll leave you with that to think about. Meet up with me when you’re ready to forgive yourself.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Today I'm being discharged from this damn psychiatric hold that has left me feeling like I'm crazy and out of my mind. I'm going home and my emotions are all over the place. Not because I'm going back to that large mansion, but because of what week this is.

My damn birthday week.

And I've never been so alone in my entire life. Well, with the exception of the four years in London. That was the worst, but somehow, with the truth out and all the cards on the damn table, you'd expect that I'd have some modicum of peace and maybe solitude knowing that I'm not alone. That I'm supported by people who once claimed to love me and care for me.

But the reality is, I'm the only one who's ever going to fight for myself. No one else.

Still, as I pack my shit, I can't help the overload of emotions that are swirling inside me, threatening to send me back into a coma or worst, a panic attack. Ignoring the pounding of my heart, I reach for my shirts. As I move them, something drops to the floor with a little clang. I drop down and notice it's the key that I took from Emmett.

My palms grow sweaty as I pick it up, my heart pounding in my chest.

I think about George every time I look at this damn key. What am I going to find in his room? Is he still alive? Could he be in that damn room?

I hear a knock behind me and I freeze. I don't really expect any visitors these days, but I can't stop the leaping of my heart that it might be *him*. But even as I think that with my heart in my throat, I know that if it was him, he wouldn't knock. He would walk right in here like he owns the place.

I whirl around so fast, holding my damn breath. But as soon as I see who's standing on my open doorway, everything around me stills as if someone has just frozen me to death.

My breath escapes me in a stutter, my heart literally stops beating.

"Can I come in?" she asks, her voice low, uncertain, breathy and so out of character. She's even shaking a bit and all I can do is just stare at her as fear locks me in place.

Now as I look at her, I can see glimpses of him. Just as I suspect Ace can see glimpses of Kim's father in me. A man who might be my...

Oh God.

"What are you doing here?" I seethe on a gasp, my words sounding strangled and forced, watching Kim with so much venom in me, I can't even move or speak right.

"I came to see you," she says after a while of us just staring at each other in tense silence.

I'm still so mad at myself that I never saw it coming and it makes me sick to the stomach that this girl, the one person I thought I could count on, catch my fucking breath when I was with her because I knew she would carry my burdens. The one girl who I thought was genuinely placed in my life to make it better because Heaven knew, I desperately needed a friend. I needed someone to understand me, someone who was always going to be there for me. And for a long time, Kim was that girl. My girl.

But my life wouldn't be complete without a clusterfuck of epic proportions. She just had to turn out to be a damn spy, didn't she?

A spy for none other than the man who raped, molested and, dare I say, destroyed me when I was nothing but thirteen years old.

Kim is of his lineage, his child and... I might just be of his lineage too.

My stomach drops in protest as we stare at each other. I can't be, can I?

"How did you get in here?" I demand, watching her with caution.

"You're not supposed to be in here," I continue, unable to stop the anger from entering my voice or the trembling fear.

As she stares at me, taking a step into the room, I can't help but take a step back and watch as her face falls, her eyes welling up with unshed tears when she notices that I'm trying to get away from her.

But I can't help myself, it's as if she'll transform into the man of my nightmares—the man that chased me down a flight of stairs, tackled and then pinned me down to the hardwood floor, proceeding to rip off my clothes. All in the name of making *him* pay.

"Astraea...", she starts, but I cut her off again.

"I said, how did you get in here?" And where the hell is Noah?

"I snuck in when I saw Noah leave, probably to go stock up on his favorite Jack Daniels," she says, worry coloring her voice and that alone, makes me angry.

"Don't talk about him as if you know him, as if you care about him," I bark, my resolve coming back in spades.

"But I do care about him," she cries, her voice breaking.

"Really?" I snort, folding my arms and jutting my hip out, putting on my best game face. "Could have fooled me with all your skilled acting. Bravo by the way, that was outstanding even for you. Never thought you'd have the guts to hurt me and mine!"

I make sure to put the emphasis on the word and watch with satisfaction as she looks devastated. I want her to know that Noah is mine and she's no longer included in my circle. Yeah, I'm angry—no, I'm furious—at Noah and Emmett, but they're still mine. The same can't be said about Kim Possible here and Alex.

"Raea, I know you're mad, but I can explain," she starts, but I turn away from her, giving her the cold shoulder.

"Please leave, and don't let the door hit you on your way out," I start packing my stuff with angry, wooden, jerky movements, knowing that she's still right there and hasn't left. A part of me wants to see what she's going to do. A part of me wants so desperately to hear what she has to say, what her defense on all this is. But for the life of me, I can't get past the fact that she's his daughter! And let her in!

How do you get past that?

"Raea please, can you just...give me a minute?"

It's the breaking in her voice that makes me pause. The way she's obviously fighting tears like I'm fighting so hard not to blame her for her father's sins, but right now it's close to impossible. I slowly turn around,

clutching George's key in my hand like it's my lifeline. As our gazes connect and I see her furiously wiping her tears away.

"Your minute started six seconds ago, get on with it," I softly say, watching her helplessly.

"Sorry," she starts, then she glances down at her fingers, playing with them. "Did you know they have the entire place surrounded?" she whispers, and I roll my eyes.

"Stalling? Seriously?" If I wasn't mad, if this was another day where Kim and I are having fun, trying to be normal teenagers, I would have been thoroughly amused by her nervousness. The Kim I know is never nervous and she sure as hell doesn't beat around the bush like this. She serves it straight. Or, that's what I used to know about her.

How much of that was all a lie?

"I'm sorry, I didn't think it would all come down to this," she says, her eyes now trained steadily on me, but I have nothing to say to that.

"How are you feeling?" she questions as her gaze drops down to my bandaged wrist that lays at my side. I pull that hand back, hiding it as shame fills my insides until pressure weighs down on my chest. Every time I glance at that wrist, I'm reminded of the lowest point in my life, a point where I'm dangerously close to reaching with each hour I spend alone in the silence, reflecting on all my shit. But God knows, I'm trying to shovel my way out of this pit of hell.

"I'm good," I whisper, forcing myself to hold her gaze and not look away even when the compulsion is so damn strong.

"Just good?"

"I'm not bad and I'm definitely not great but I'm good. Just good."

"I guess that's all I need from you right now," she says softly, raising her head to hold my gaze. "This life would be worthless without you."

Silence stretches between us for a long, drawn out second.

"Raea, we need to talk," she starts after a while, stepping into the room further, but the door is left open and for that, I'm grateful.

"Talk?" I question. Out of nowhere, a sad, humorless chuckle leaves me as pain clogs my throat, making the sound come out as scratchy, bitter and just plain pathetic.

Pathetic like I am.

Giving pieces of myself to people, that in the end, were just... carelessly cast away to the wolves. Betraying me at every turn but the thing is, I never

counted on this girl to hurt me the way she did.

“What can you possibly talk to me about now?” I demand, watching her with narrowed eyes. “You had so many opportunities to ‘talk’ to me when you were pretending to be my friend,” I say sarcastically. “Why didn’t you do that then?” My body is growing hot, my blood boiling with sweet, sweet agonizing anger that’s growing in me.

Marie might be right. I think I have the wrong kind of anger in me but whatever, I’m going to hold on to it.

“Because I fucked up, Raea!” she cries out, stepping closer to me and I unconsciously take one back. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. You were never meant to be here, and I hate seeing you in here. I hate that they’re calling you suicidal when you have so much life in you. I hate this situation.”

“You hate the situation you put me in?” I gasp. “That’s new. Is that what spies say nowadays to compensate their victims for messing up their lives?”

“You’re not a victim!” she yells, her chest heaving up and down so fast, I bet her heart is pounding just like mine.

“Really?”

“Yes,” she insists with a conviction that has me confused. “I have seen a lot in my life, Astraea. I have come across different people but none of them are as strong as you. Do us both a favor and stop seeing yourself as a victim. You’re a fucking survivor, so own that shit!”

I’m stunned into silence with that. I don’t even know where to go from here or what to think simply because in that speech, I felt my Kim. The Kim that was real—brazen, sassy and so fucking honest with me. The Kim that I saw the other day when the roof came crashing down on me, I have no fucking clue who that was. But apparently, she’s been that person this entire time.

“Wow, that almost had me believing,” I snort, forcing out a laugh that’s nothing but awkward and cringeworthy. I don’t know how to act anymore. “You certainly can make a believer out of anyone. Tell me, was that part of your special training?”

“I wasn’t trained for anything,” she grits out.

“Somehow, I doubt that. Does Daddy dearest know that you’re here?” I mock, watching her with what feels like a sick, twisted and painful satisfaction as she flinches at that. I feel like retching right now, hating myself for bringing him up when I’m painfully aware of the circumstances

surrounding Kim's existence here on earth. I'm aware that she once said she hates her father but it makes it even more hurtful that she still chose to work for him after everything she claimed he did.

"Oh, maybe daddy sent you, didn't he? You know, to check if I'm still alive and shit." The way she reacts to that one word, as if I've physically slapped her. But I'm not done.

"Astraea...", she starts but I'm too far gone to care so I cut her off, making sure to grab on to the anger churning in me, not the sympathy that's trying to seep in.

"The day we met, did you already know my story?" I ask, frowning as I think back to my first day at Westbrook Blues High. I remember the confidence she oozed as she talked to me. The way she was direct and that makes me pause. "Did you already know what your sick, twisted asshole of a father did to me?!" I shout, but she remains silent, tears streaming silently down her beautiful face. So, I keep going.

"Did you already know that I had lost my brother?" I cock my head to the left. "Were you already aware that I had lost four years of my life, had tried to commit suicide, was already an addict by the age of sixteen, and that my father wasn't actually my father?"

I'm realizing now as I look at her that there's a huge possibility that this girl might have known my entire life story before I even knew it myself. I mean, she targeted me, for Christ's sake!

"Raea, it wasn't like that..."

"Were you just pretending this whole time? Telling me all the rumors at school and what people were saying about me and my supposed family? Let's not forget all that shit about the Blue Boys, when in actual fact, you were fishing for information! And the fact that you also knew that it was your father, your own DNA that took George away from me!"

I pound my chest as I say that, feeling the absence of my brother more acute since it's our fucking birthday week. We'll be eighteen and he isn't here! I stare at her silently breaking and shattering into millions of pieces as all the agonizing memories from before flood my mind, threatening to drown me.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Answer me!" I shout, barely aware that tears are running down my face.

"Raea, let me explain," she starts but I'm shaking my head already.

"You can't even deny it, can you? You shameful bitch!"

“I had no choice!” She shouts back, as she steps closer to me but I stay rooted. “You have to understand that I didn’t have a fucking choice in the matter, Astraea.”

“How convenient that you didn’t have a choice. Is that your excuse for breaking my soul the way you did?” I shout at her, my palms balled into fists that I wish I could pummel into her but I can’t move from my frozen spot. This hurts more because I fucking love this girl still. I hate that I can’t make it stop, that I can’t not care about what she did. You’d think I’d be used to being hurt and lied to by now, but never from her. I never counted on her to hurt me.

“It’s not an excuse, Raea. I, honest to God, didn’t have a choice in the matter!” she shouts. “You think I enjoyed myself? Pretending to fit in a crowd that wasn’t for me? You think I liked disappearing for hours just to shadow you? I didn’t have a choice!”

“Newsflash bitch, everyone has to make a damn choice! Everyone makes a decision in life whether to screw up someone’s life or not and you chose to screw up mine with a fucking smile on your face!” I shout, furiously wiping away the tears that keep falling. “Just like you fucking chose your blood over me!” I snort watching her as she cries her crocodile tears as if they’ll move me. But the truth is, they’re breaking me as much as I’m already broken inside.

“This wasn’t just about you, Astraea, damn you!” she bursts. “You think every decision in life is made specifically to cater to you and your needs because you’re some spoiled little girl with issues? Well newsflash, Astraea, the world doesn’t revolve around you! And I’ll be damned if I sacrificed my baby sisters over some messed up in the head bitch that I hadn’t met in my life.”

My jaw drops open. Of all the things that I was expecting to hear from her, this wasn’t it.

“I have little sisters to consider! I’m the only one who looks out for them. The only one who takes care of them, feed them, make sure they eat, that they bathe before bed and brush their damn teeth because they’re stubborn as fuck.” She’s breathing hard, eyes wide, watching me. “I’m the one who makes sure that they don’t steal shit from shops like I did, or cause trouble at school because I don’t fucking want them to end up in Juvie like I fucking did, missing six fucking months of their lives where I came back and they were almost match stick skinny!”

The tears are all but dried up now as she shouts at me, her voice breaking, her chest heaving fast and hard matching mine. But the trauma in those words, now that...it gets to me.

"I'm all they have. I can't count on my mother when any day she can wake up drunk and out of her mind, unaware of how many children she has, let alone all the responsibilities that come with raising young kids."

From the corner of my eye, I think I see someone at the door but when I look up, there's no one. Was Noah standing there?

"And I sure as hell wasn't going to let that asshole Larry get anywhere close to them, let alone take them away from me just because I refused to attend some high class, rich school to shadow a rich bitch around!" she points at me as she says that. "It was either follow you around and report like a damn parrot or have him take my sisters away. And trust me, he has the means and the connections to do so. So, fuck me sideways if I chose my sisters over you who I hadn't met!"

"Oh, I guess no one can fault you for being fucking honest," I murmur after a strained silence between us.

"You obviously wanted me to lay it all out there, so here it is," she says, watching me without wavering or looking away. She doesn't so much as look away or fidget.

"What about my brother?" I question, shaking my head at her. At myself. At the situation. "Who was going to fight for him, when the odds and everyone I loved were against me? All of you working for your own agenda," I say, my breaths coming in fast and hard, the pounding of my heart against my chest the only painful reminder that this is in fact real and not a fucking nightmare.

"I'm sorry that you lost George, Astraea! I'm so sorry for everything that you've gone through, but you have to understand. I had no idea what was actually happening until the party at King's mansion. That's when I started piecing everything together."

"So why the fuck didn't you say anything then?" I demand.

"I wasn't sure I could! I mean, I saw Spider there. I noticed the way you guys were so close, and I fucking thought that he was sent to see if I'm doing my damn job, keeping my promise so that he'd go reporting back to Larry."

"So, you knew Spider even then?"

“Well, yes. Only because I had seen him at the damn Phoenix Corps meetings for new recruits.”

I frown at that. I still don't fucking understand what the hell that organization is all about but apparently, it's bad news all over.

“But you have to fucking understand, I care about you, Raea. I love you and by the looks of things, I think I'm the only one here for you,” she says stubbornly as she wipes away her tears and I chuckle.

“Here for me, huh?” I chuckle. “So let me get this straight, you have been found out that you're nothing more than a conniving, lying bitch who was never my friend to begin with, and you have the nerve to come here and say you're the only one here for me and that you love me?” I gasp, spreading my arms out. “How fucking rich is that?”

“I know it sounds crazy but look around. Where are the boys that claim they'd die for you?” She asks the question so casually but it's fucking loaded, the bullets piercing my fucking heart.

“The only reason why you don't see them around is because this spoiled rich bitch desires it to be so!” I seethe, pointing at myself. “You don't see them because I don't fucking want them here.”

“And why is that?” she questions so softly, so simply, yet so damn deadly. “Why don't you want your boys here, Astraea?”

I know exactly what she's trying to do. I know that she wants me to be aware of the harsh reality of the boys' betrayal, but trust me, no one is more aware of their never-ending lies than I am.

“Because they're lying assholes with secrets that destroy my damn soul,” I answer just as calmly. “Like you.”

“Goddamnit Astraea, I'm trying to help you here!” she cries.

“Well, sorry to have to disappoint you but I don't fucking need you!” I seethe. “And, I sure as hell, don't need anyone.”

I hate the way my voice breaks at the end. I hate the way everything hurts. I hate that I can't make it stop and I hate that right now, I hate...her. I hate me.

“You don't mean that,” she says with a gasp and I laugh again. The sound coming out a bit maniacal, angry and just a bit dry. Not at all humorous, I can't even recognize myself right now. I'm losing it and she can see it. She can see me breaking.

“I guess you wouldn't know the truth even when it slaps you in the face, right?” I say, taking her in from her tacky white Vans, to her black skinny

jeans and her jacket. Her hair is a disheveled mess, the blonde roots now showing again.

“You’re a blonde huh? Just like your sister,” I say.

Her sister Brittney who right now is winning and I’m drowning.

“That bitch is not my sister!” Kim seethes, her shoulders straightening, anger lighting her eyes that matches the same ire in me. “And if she’s my sister, then you must be wondering, is she your sister too.”

“Kim...”

“I know you’re questioning it. I know you’re wondering if that bitch who’s probably fucked King by now, the same one who roofied your drink at that party, is your half-sister,” she continues, going in for the kill. “If that’s true, then it’ll mean something else. Something I think your mind has been blocking you from thinking about.”

“I’m warning you, if you don’t shut your mouth right now,” I seethe but I’m so cold. My feet are cold. My hands are cold. My heart is cold.

“You had a flashback of him didn’t you?” she taunts. “You saw him on that iPad. You saw your own eyes staring back at you.”

“No...”

“Could it be that he is your father?”

My knees buckle, but before I can fall, I grab on to the railing of the bed beside me, clutching George’s key in the other hand.

“You can’t do this to me,” I whisper, my brow dotted with sweat. “How can you be so mean.”

“I’m fucking mean Astraea, but I’ll tell you the truth that you don’t want to face yourself,” she says after a while, watching me try to catch my breathe.

“You’re a mean, awful person,” I accuse and she shakes her head.

“And you’re a mean, awful person to yourself, Raea!” she counters.

“How can you do this to yourself? Don’t you know that you’re a fucking Phoenix? Rise from the damn ashes.”

I don’t say a word but as her words sink into me, I want to hold on to them. I want to believe them.

“That’s a lovely speech,” I start, my voice shaky. “I think you should give yourself that pep-talk once in a while. Clearly, you need it more.”

I’ve never been a vindictive bitch like this before and honestly, I hate the words that are coming out of my mouth. But I want to hurt her. I want her to hurt like I am.

“At least I don’t lie to myself,” she chuckles. “I don’t fucking hide.”

“You hide every single day, Kimmy,” I start, righting myself. “I see you hiding behind that petty sass, but you’re scared. Scared to face yourself. Scared of your mother.”

“Now you’re just trying to hurt me,” she says, tears glistening in her eyes.

“Is it working?” I mock. “Does it hurt as much as it’s twisting me up inside? Are you hurt as much as you just destroyed me?”

“I’m trying to help you here,” she defends.

“By telling me that the man who raped me could be my fucking biological father!” I yell, but it comes out pathetic, hoarse and small.

“You and I both know that’s why you did it,” she whispers, glancing at my bandaged hand.

I hide the injured hand behind me, but I don’t feel it. I’m numb all over.

“I think you should leave now,” I say, feeling tired and spent but deep down, I know that she’s right about everything.

“Raea...,” she starts but I cut her off.

“I’m glad you see the trash that I see in the room,” I mock. “The stench is so overpowering I think it’s time to take the trash out.”

“So that’s how it is?” she nods her head at me, eyes narrowed, her tiny fists clenched. “You’re just going to be mean?”

“I have no choice but to be a bitch, Kim!” I cry. “You come in here and load all that on top of my head, forcing me to face shit that I don’t want to acknowledge. Can’t you see I’m suffocating?”

“I won’t lie, I know this is hard. I know you deserve all the right to lash out, but you’re not hopeless, you’re not a fucking mistake. Stop giving up on yourself just because you think everyone else did.”

“Kim...,” a cry bubbles in my chest. “I’m sorry about everything I said.”

“I deserved some of it,” she says, with a small smile on her face. “I’m sorry for pushing you like that.”

“Yeah well, it’s now a loop in my head.” I chuckle softly, tears streaming down my cheeks. “But, I do need you to leave.”

“But Astraea...,”

“I just need space and lots of time is all.”

“You need space because I hurt you or because you hurt yourself?” It’s a blunt, straightforward question that has me reeling back.

“Did they tell you that someone put liquid morphine in my I.V.?” I start and she just stands there. She doesn’t react like I wanted her to. “Did they tell you that like a savage, starved dog, I ripped that bag apart and drank some of it before they stopped me but not before I made the decision to end it all?”

She doesn’t say a word, she just watches me without any emotion in her eyes.

No pity.

No sympathy.

No sadness.

Just plain old listening as if she knows exactly what I’m going through.

“Did they tell you how fucked up I am now?” I demand, pissed off that even now, she gets me.

“You’re hurt, you’re down right now, and you feel betrayed—and rightfully so. I get it. Trust me, I do. But Raea, I’m here because despite everything, you are my best friend. I care about you enough to defy all odds, just to be here with you. Knowing damn well that Larry might know that I’m here.”

That makes me pause.

“Why is that?” I start, confused now. “Why are you here?”

“To warn you,” she starts but before she can say anything else, she looks around, then starts walking around the room, checking corners, lifting the pillow off the luxurious bed.

“What are you looking for?” I question, watching her like she’s just lost her mind.

“Astraea, listen to me. You’re not safe. Don’t trust anyone.”

“Why?” I demand, my heart starting to pound all over again. “What’s going on?”

“I know it’s a lot to ask of you right now, but I’ve put a lot on the line here to warn you. I’m not my father but I swear, you have his...”

“If you say it, I won’t be held responsible for you walking out of here limping and with clamps of your blonde hair missing,” I seethe, stepping closer to her. She sighs, watching me.

“I’m sorry but I know you’re questioning it. So am I and it’s been killing me. I haven’t been sleeping or eating. I look over my shoulder all the time. I have paranoia and anxiety that anytime, something will happen and I’ll lose my sisters.”

“I’m not your sister!”

“We don’t know that, and I don’t give a damn whether or not Larry is your biological father! I think you don’t even want to know yourself or you would have confronted that she-devil you call your mother.”

She’s right, as usual. I have so many questions but then again, there’s something about not knowing some secrets that keeps a soul safe and I’ve falsely told myself that I don’t want to know. I’m too broken to add that but I can’t ignore the way everyone around me is pointing it out.

“This is so damn messed up,” I breathe out, my anger and fear mixing into a potent poison that’s spreading in my system. “Just go, Kim.”

“Shit Raea, you have you understand something, he’s coming! And he’s coming for all of you!”

The way she says that has me frozen on the spot. My breath comes in fast and hard, my heart stuttering in my chest like its dancing to a broken record. The ground quakes and quivers under my feet as those deadly words soak into my consciousness.

“What?”

“He’s coming...,” she starts to explain but is interrupted.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

The harsh, sharp voice comes from the open doorway. Snapping my head up, with my heart in my throat, I let out a breath of relief when I notice that it’s not Amanda who’s standing there, but it’s Christina watching Kim and I with an analyzing eye.

“Who are you?” she demands, looking at Kim with an impassive, unimpressed look on her face as she takes in Kim from her shoes to her messy hair. But as I look at Kim, I can’t help but notice the shattered expression on her face as she comes face to face with the mother of the boy whose heart she broke.

“No one,” she stutters. “I’m no one.”

Christina frowns, cocking her head to the left, still studying Kim as if there was something about her that she couldn’t quite figure out.

“Even a no one is someone,” she says slowly, making Kim fidget. I’ve seen Christina in many phases of her life. I’ve seen her happy. I’ve seen her as the elegant actress she used to be. I’ve seen her as a billionaire spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on shopping alone. I’ve seen her gentler side, tending to her roses. I’ve seen her angry. I’ve seen her argue her way out of any situation.

But the one I can hands-down say is her absolute scariest and downright untamable and intimidating self, is when it has something to do with Noah. She's a Momma bear that no one can handle. And I do mean, no one.

I don't know what she's sensing but there's this look on her face right now that makes Kim look at me, pleading to get out of here.

"Actually, she was just leaving," I rush to say, not wanting a blood fight on my hands.

As if the world was playing tricks on me, my mother walks in.

"What's going on in here?" she demands. "Astraea why are you not packed yet? And haven't I made it clear that you're not allowed visitors?"

"I heard that, mother. She was just leaving," I rush to say, noticing the hard look now in Kim's eyes. I know she was about to give my mother a scathing read but it's not a fight she wants right now.

"Well then, hurry up about it," Amanda says, looking at Kim, waving her out the door. "You're disturbing my daughter,"

"Amanda, you're doing too much," Christina chides.

"I don't think so," she counters absentmindedly glancing down at her ringing phone.

"Astraea..." Kim starts but I cut her off before she can say anymore of her shit.

"You need to leave, now," I rush to say, trying my best to ignore the dread in her eyes or the sense of doom that I can sense creeping in my bones like a cold shiver that I can't get rid of no matter what I do.

"Young lady, I said leave before I call security. You've clearly upset my daughter. You're not wanted here," Amanda warns, unaware that Kim and I are locked in a staring battle.

"Amanda!" Christina gasps, but we ignore her.

"Remember what I said. I'm the only one who's truly here for you," Kim says. "I'm down for whatever." And with that, she leaves without looking at Christina but locking gazes with Amanda.

What the fuck?

As soon as Kim is gone, my knees weaken so much so that all I can do is sink down to the floor, the gravity and weight of her words weighing down on me.

I feel like I'm about to have a panic attack.

He's coming...

I know only of one person that we might have in common.

Larry.

“Is everything alright?” Christina questions, watching me then looks after Kim as she hurries down the hall, as silently as she came.

“I’m not really sure,” I mumble, my heart still racing, my palms sweaty and clammy.

“Who was that? She’s beautiful but kind of seems to be going through something.”

I snort then, a sad smile on my face. She has no idea.

“Everyone is going through a lot right now,” I say the words with a roughness that I wasn’t aiming for. And I realize how true that is. Everyone, Noah, Emmett, Kim, and even Ivy, are going through shit right now.

Then there’s *him* and I...

Is there even an ‘us’ now? After everything?

“Anyway, what are you doing here?” I question her, shaking that thought away.

“Oh Astraea!” she rushes over to me and pulls me into a warm hug. “I didn’t know that you were going through all this!”

“Yeah well. . .” I mumble in her bosom, the sound drowning out as she hugs me even tighter.

“No one told me! You didn’t call me!” she goes on, her hysteria coming on full force. I try to pull back so I can calm her down, but she just squeezes even harder.

“I had to get back to my old days of tracking Noah’s phone and noticed that he was here. Actually, all his movements are centered around here and this other location in the Valley.”

A location in the Valley?

Is Noah seeing Kim?

“Christina, I’m alright.”

“No, you’re not!” she exclaims, pulling back, now holding me by my upper arms as she looks me over, tears welling in her eyes. “Look at you! You look like you were dragged through hell by the roots of your hair that desperately needs a magical touch from a hair stylist.”

“Gee, thanks. I’m glad I look like how I feel somewhat.” I murmur sarcastically, looking away as she looks down at the bandage wrapped around my wrist. At her probing gaze, I pull away, shaking her hold away as I notice the sympathy in her eyes.

“So, you thought to look for Noah at the hospital? That’s smart.” I say, turning away from her as I change the subject.

“Actually, I went over to your house to look for you,” she says quietly. I turn back to look at her.

“Really?”

“Yeah and that’s when I found your mother.”

I pause. There’s something about the way she said that last word, which matches the cloudy look in her eyes.

“You found my mother?” I question, stepping closer to her. “What does that mean?”

“Astraea, honey. . .” she starts, her voice now a soft tone as if she’s about to break some news but before she can, my mother waltz into the room with a smile on her face.

“Well, are you done?” she questions, shooting Christina a look that I can’t translate.

What’s going on here?

“Yes. I’m done.” I say slowly, trying to read the both of them but I’m getting nothing. Maybe I’m over thinking things, or my hallucinations are back.

“I heard they put you back on the tempering program that your doctor in London put you on.” My mother starts, a hard look on her face.

“Yes. I...” I stop, my heart thundering. The word addict floating in my head over and over. I’m turning eighteen at the end of the week and already, I don’t know who my father is.

I lost a sibling I never knew I had.

I grew up in an orphanage for the first two years of my life.

The twin brother who I thought was dead is probably not.

I’m suicidal.

Broken hearted.

Savagely betrayed.

Looked over.

Lied to.

And now, I’m a recovering drug addict.

Life couldn’t be any better than this.

“They thought after everything, my strong hallucinations, hypothermia and all that fun stuff, it’s best that I don’t get off xannies cold turkey. I have to go to therapy here and take one pill in two days.”

“Well then. I’ll make sure you stick to that directive, young lady.” My mother’s sharp tone cuts in the room, her displeasure evident in the hard set of her shoulders.

“I’m sure you will.” I grit out, hating the condescending way she’s talking to me.

“You’re damn right. It looks like you’re not so independent after all, doesn’t it?” she says so softly. A hard look in her eyes.

“Amanda. Seriously?” Christina chides. My mother only rolls her eyes then grabs the packed duffel.

“I’m going to sign the papers,” she announces then she leaves without another word.

“Ready to go?” Christina questions, her gaze soft and I’m grateful that she doesn’t ask what just happened with Kim or make me feel like shit because of the way my mother just treated me.

But maybe Christina doesn’t know what to do with the information she just received. I’m an addict after all. I wonder if she’s watching over Noah. I wonder if she already knows that her son has been drinking a lot these days and is drunk by the time happy hour starts for most people.

Maybe she can smell the weed on him but then again, she hasn’t been home and I doubt Noah would let Christina anywhere near home when he’s like that.

“Yeah, I’m ready to get the hell out of here.”

I glance around the room, trying to suppress some shit that happened in here but it doesn’t work.

If I never see another hospital ever again, I’d die a happy woman. Should have known that wishes and hopes are for the girls who were brought up believing in happily ever afters, fairytales and godmothers.

I simply wasn’t that girl.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Unknown

STRANGER: IT'S DONE. THEY GOT IT.

UNKNOWN: GOOD.

STRANGER: BUT SHE WAS SUPPOSED TO DIE! SOMEHOW, SHE'S STILL ALIVE!

UNKNOWN: DON'T GET PISSY AT ME LIKE A LITTLE BITCH BABY ON HER FUCKING TIME OF THE MONTH. SHE'LL DIE SOON ENOUGH. WE CAN'T AFFORD TO KEEP HIS LEGACY ALIVE. BUT FOR RIGHT NOW, SHE SERVES AS A CARROT TO DANGLE IN FRONT OF A VERY HUNGRY DONKEY.

STRANGER: DOES HE KNOW?

UNKNOWN: WHAT? THAT HE HAS CHILDREN OUT THERE, ONE OF WHICH WAS KILLED BY SOME PSYCHO—WHO IS YOU BY THE WAY—WITH A GRUDGE WHO UNKNOWINGLY DID ME A FAVOR? HA! NO, HE DOESN'T KNOW AND I PREFER IT TO STAY LIKE THAT.

STRANGER: WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF HE FINDS OUT?

UNKNOWN: HE WON'T FIND OUT! HE WILL NEVER KNOW, YOU GOT THAT?

STRANGER: ...

UNKNOWN: AS FAR AS HE KNOWS, THAT BITCH FUCKED HIM OVER AND DITCHED HIM EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO. SHE DISAPPEARED OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH. ONLY, SHE RAN WITH HIS SEED INSIDE OF HER.

STRANGER: DID YOU KNOW THIS WOMAN?

UNKNOWN: I STILL KNOW HER. SHE HATES MY GUTS BUT I'M COMING FOR HER TOO, FOR SCREWING ME OVER.

STRANGER: SO, SHE WAS PREGNANT WITH TWINS?

UNKNOWN: NAH, SHE HAD TRIPLETS. IT WAS IN HER GENES TO BIRTH TWINS OR TRIPLETS.

STRANGER: WHAT?

UNKNOWN: YEAH, BUT I'M PRETTY SURE ONE OF THOSE KIDS WASN'T THE PHOENIX'S. WHY?

STRANGER: NOTHING...

UNKNOWN: YOU SLEPT WITH HER AROUND THAT SAME TIME DIDN'T YOU?

STRANGER: ...

UNKNOWN: DOESN'T MATTER, WE HAVE TO KILL OFF THE LAST GIRL SOON. YOU'LL GET YOUR REVENGE. THAT WAS OUR DEAL, AFTER ALL.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



A year ago. . .

“Man, I’m telling you, it’s definitely someone we know!” Noah starts, pacing from one end of the still unfinished Brooke house to the other. “And I bet my never-ending bank accounts that this asshat—whoever he is—is only trying to mess with us. You know, rile us up so we start getting nervous and shit. I bet his one and only wacky strategy to send us all these threats in the hopes that we tuck tail and run, making us look like fools who don’t live up to our own rep in this town. I mean, these are just silly childish pranks.”

“Really? You believe that?” Emmett questions, his tone sarcastic.

“You’re damn right I believe it. He’s probably a jealous little bitch that didn’t make first string football. Hell, I bet he’s pissed as hell that he can’t get any ass and we get to pick every single day,” he says, eyes wide.

“Seriously? Is that all you think of?” I demand, getting annoyed at him and his shit. But more so at this situation that I can’t wrap my head around.

“Yes! At my age, that’s all I should care about! Getting ass. Getting my dick sucked, playing all the damn sports I want to play without getting fucking threats and pictures of the girl that left me!” he explodes, silencing everyone in the room.

He breathes hard, his jaw clenched, staring right back at me. “I sure as hell should be behaving my age but I haven’t been allowed that harmless reprieve, have I?”

“No one begged to be born into the families we were born into, but here we fucking are, Noah! Grow the fuck up and take this shit seriously.” I start, my voice hard, like the one I use on the field during a match and at practice. I can’t deny that I have leadership qualities and being selected for captain is in the works but I’ve never been this hard unless the topic of Astraea comes up. But I would be a liar if I said my hardness had nothing to do with the father that raised me.

Noah pouts, dropping onto the couch.

“Still, I’m fucking right and you know it. This isn’t what we think it is.” Noah says, waving the latest threat around with one hand and with the other, a beer. “And I hate that you’re making a bigger deal out of it. Inadvertently giving this fool what he wants—to rattle us.”

“Okay, Noah. Why do you say that?” George questions, frustration written all over his face, as he runs a hand through his hair.

“Look at this,” he starts, glancing down at the picture in his hand, then at the rest of us. “The image is a bit grainy, obviously the quality is messed up which begs the authenticity of the picture itself. It might not be her.”

“Oh please, stop making excuses just because you don’t want to acknowledge your fear! That’s a candid shot of my sister!” George’s rises, his voice filled with anger and frustration as he looks at Noah. “My sister who hasn’t been here with me for three years, going on four now and you think it’s just some stupid amateur, who photoshopped that just to ‘rattle’ us?”

“I’m just saying, the quality of the image is shitty at best. We can’t jump to conclusions after a few letters with serious grammar issues, keyed in cars, slashed tires, a dead rodent we found in Ace’s locker, and now a picture of Astraea who’s all the way clear across the damn world?” he shakes his head. “I don’t know man, for me, all signs lead to some local asshole and I doubt they know that Astraea is in London. I mean, look at this picture.” Noah waves it around but George slaps it to the floor.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he explodes, “It’s not like Astraea just stood there and had a professional, makeup commercial photoshoot session with this asshole to get a fucking clear, detailed image so they could

mail it to us with a fucking post card of The Buckingham Palace on the fucking back!"

"Dude...", Noah starts but George cuts him off in anger.

"That, Noah, is a fucking surveillance image you idiot! My sister is obviously being followed!" George seethes. "And you damn well can't tell me that it might not be her. I know my sister!"

Silence follows soon after that outburst. Truth is, George's saying everything that I want to say but can't express without letting it known that I'm terribly affected and messed up by anything that has to do with Astraea.

I know Noah and Emmett haven't seen Astraea in years. They don't know how she looks like now. They don't know that she decided to let her hair grow so long it reaches her waist, framing her face beautifully. They don't know that her once huge dark eyes that had twinkles like stars in them, are now darker, harder and sadder than ever. They don't know that her face sullen, her body frail, as if she's not eating at all.

They just don't know how much she's changed. How much she seems like she isn't mine...

"I never said..." Noah starts but George isn't here for it.

"I know the fucking shape of her shadow! I know the way her nose looks like a little button from a profile view. I know the way she stands, the way she spreads her arms out wide when it's raining. I know when she's about to smile. And I sure as hell know that haunted look on her face right now!" he shouts, pointing at the image that came with the latest threat that was in my locker. "I see that very look in my fucking dreams. I see her with tears streaming down her face and lately, I've seen her swimming in a pool of blood."

I flinch, my heart pounding as I clench my fists.

A pool of blood.

That's what I see when I do sleep some nights. I see her lying on a cold floor. Cold and motionless. In a pool of blood.

"Dude, stop." Noah grits out, his face now pale. As white as a ghost. "I don't want to see that image in my head."

"And I don't want that to be a reality. Especially not if there's an opportunity to find out what the hell is going on." George starts after a while, taking in deep breaths to calm himself down. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to blow your damn head off. It's been a rough couple of weeks."

“I’ll say.” Noah says, blowing a breath as he stares at George. “I’m pissed off too, but we’re here to solve this shit.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Emmett growls at Noah then turns to look at George, a solemn look on his face. “What do you need brother?” Emmett questions.

Noah nods at George. We’re all waiting. Like one well-oiled machine, we know what we can do when we unite, when we are aware of a common threat. We know that we’re so damn lethal by ourselves but when we’re one —when we’re *her* Blue Boys—there’s literally nothing on earth that we can’t fucking deal with. These escalating threats that now include Star, included.

“First of all, let’s not take these fucking threats at face value and dismiss them. From this moment on, we’re literally moving targets.”

“Whose targets though?” Emmett questions.

“I’m not sure who but whoever he is, but make no mistake, we’re in no position to undermine him. That someone is out there right now, and he knows about Astraea and where she is. He knows that she’s our weakness.” I say, my voice low.

“Even if she left.” Noah murmurs angrily.

“We don’t know why she left.” George starts, but even his voice is hard. We all know that he’s questioning why his twin just up and left.

“Yeah but she owes us all an explanation, George,” Noah starts getting angry. “She isn’t just your twin but she’s my best friend too. But the ugly truth is, she left!”

“Noah...” I start but he’s beside himself with anger.

“No, don’t act like it doesn’t bother you. Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you sneak into to her room and sit there for hours.” Noah growls, pointing at me.

“You what?” Emmett frowns and George turns to look at me. I remain expressionless and blank like I don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about.

“What I do or how I do it is none of your business. She might come back you know.” I rush to explain, knowing that they’re all scrutinizing my words and facial expression.

“And you know that how?” Noah presses, eyes narrowing. “Did you talk to her or something?”

I glance at George, not knowing what to say to that. Noah and Emmett know that Astraea just up and left to go to London after that damn robbery, but they don't know that she's in a mental institution right now. They don't know that she tried to kill herself.

It's all fucked up but up until I followed George to London over a year ago, I didn't know myself.

"Calm down, dude." Emmett says, as he takes the beer Noah's been drinking away from him. The guy is obviously a breath away from being completely tanked. I bet he was already before he got here. With Noah, you never know what's going on with his whisky brain or his dick which is constantly soaked for that matter. But when it comes to Astraea, he's dedicated to resenting her for leaving, just like the rest of us.

"I don't have to talk to her to know that it's been three years since that whole incident. She's probably over it by now and will be coming home soon," I explain. It's a lame explanation and they don't believe me of course but talking about Astraea and why she left is an even bigger, sore topic with us. "Aren't you the one that said we need to give her time and space?"

"Not for three years, goddamnit King, not for three fucking years!" he seethes. "It doesn't take anyone that long to get over a fucking burglary." Noah angrily says.

"You don't know that! She was in that fucking house when it was robbed. She was beaten up by the burglar and definitely has traumas about that," Emmett defends, stepping forward.

"Okay, I get that. But couldn't she have faced her issues, these so-called traumas right here?" Noah counters sarcastically, shaking his head as he gets up. "It does take three years to heal from bruises!"

"Noah..." George starts.

"I know, I know," Noah says throwing his hands in the air like he's about to surrender but I know better. He wants all the smoke today. "I know it was hard for her and I'm fucking angry at myself that I wasn't there to protect her from that mess. But she could have stayed here and dealt with it. She could have been right here, with us!"

"Maybe she needed some space." George counters, looking down at his hands with frustration written all over his face.

"Space from what?" I start, bitterness that I've been repressing for years coming back, demanding to be felt. How could she go away, then try to kill

herself, over a damn burglary? “She needed space from crime?” I scoff, knowing Noah’s right.

“Maybe,” Emmett starts, then he stares at me. “Or maybe she needed space from someone.”

I pause, frowning at him.

From who?

I look up at my best friends and they stare back at me with angry looks on their faces and I get the silent message. “You think she needed some space from me?”

But if that’s right, why doesn’t it sit well with me? Why do I constantly think of that night I found her on the floor of her house, bleeding? Why do I wake up with cold sweat covering my entire body, feeling this inexplicable sense that I missed something that night I found her? That I failed to see something important?

“It’s not completely out of the question!” Noah seethes. “If it wasn’t because of you, we would have been at that party with Astraea. We could have taken her home and made sure she was safe because God knows Richard and Amanda are never home to make sure their kids are safe. If it wasn’t for you...”

“If it wasn’t for me, what?” I growl.

“If you would have just swallowed your pride and tried to accept that she didn’t want you when you tried to kiss her at that fucking party, you wouldn’t have acted out and made us take you camping just to calm your volcanic ass down, on the same night Astraea was hurt!” Noah shouts.

I stand there, with no choice but to take it all. It’s obvious to see that they blame me for what happened to her. I blame myself too. I can’t even be angry with them.

“That doesn’t mean I made the decision for her to leave, does it?” I question, my voice low and soft as if I’m unbothered by this whole conversation.

“Yeah but you made it all too easy for her to choose to leave,” Emmett says softly, watching me.

“How is that?” I demand, getting riled up now.

“Well, you did bully her,” George growls turning to face me head on. “You think I don’t know that you made her life a living nightmare?”

“You have no idea what was happening between me and your sister.” I start, already feeling like I’d fight her fucking twin turbo if I have to, just to

keep whatever she and I have between us. And that makes me pause.

Why would I fight my best friend for a girl that left to deal with her head issues?

Because there's more to this than meets the eye, you dickhead!

"You know what, at one point I would have said that you're wrong but from what I know now, I think you're damn right. I don't know what was going on between you and her." George says carefully, studying me. I know what he's thinking of.

I know he's back in that stark white hospital bathroom in London. Watching helplessly at a pale little girl is being pumped of pills from her stomach, her hand holding on tightly to mine as she fought for her life. I remember the way my best friend was so damn devastated as tears streamed down his face.

I remember everything and it makes me see red all over again.

Fuck!

"Yeah, but how is?" Noah questions.

"Well, Astraea is now attending a small private school in London," George starts, surprising us.

"Wait, what?" I grit out.

"Shit, I didn't tell you?" George starts, face palming himself, looking up at our bewildered expressions. "My bad."

"When?" Emmett questions.

"She started going to school like at the beginning of the school year." George starts. "Of course, she's never liked how strict British education is."

"What happened to the private tutors?" Noah questions, looking confused.

"If I'm to hazard a guess with the knowledge I have on who exactly Astraea Fields is, I'd think she grew tired of people telling her what to do with her life, so she decided to go out into the public," George shrugs, making the corners of my lips twitch.

"Which is how they got her picture, whoever the fuck they are." Noah says.

George looks at me for a second. Astraea might be many things but taking this kind of step, one to go back to school, where she's surrounded by people, that was huge.

There's a tight tugging in my chest and for a moment, I actually want to smile. My girl is getting her power back and allowing herself to engage

with the world again.

“I thought she didn’t want to be around people for now?” Noah questions. “This means I can go see her.”

“Whoa, hold your horses, cowboy.” George starts. “She doesn’t want visitors right now.”

I frown, my jaw locking as I grind my teeth.

“She doesn’t want random visitors or she doesn’t want to see us?” I demand, knowing the answer in the pit of my stomach.

“King...” George starts obviously trying to pacify me. He knows that I want to see her again. He knows just how desperate I am to be near her, to hear her say my name. The name only she calls me by.

“Answer the question, George,” Noah chimes in.

“We all have to take a moment and calm down,” Emmett starts.

“Dwelling on the past won’t solve this shit. What we need right now, is the truth,” he says after a bit of tense silence. “We can’t go around making speculations. We need to get ahead of this shit.”

“Oh, shut up asshole, what do you know about truth? Don’t think we haven’t noticed your disappearing acts. Where do you go off to, huh?” Noah says, now looking at Emmett.

And he’s right. Emmett does disappear for days on end. Where he goes off to, no one knows.

“Where I go off to, is none of your damn business,” Emmett seethes.

“Noah calm the fuck down, that’s not the purposes of this shit. We all have secrets, yourself included.” George says, pointing at him.

Yeah, we might all have secrets, but George knows them all. Which begs the question, what are his secrets?

The Blue Boys, for all intents and purposes, are all tight as thieves with each other. We spend most of our time together. We’ve known each other since we were fucking kids, brought together by the girl who ran out on us. We were assholes but that didn’t stop all the girls at school and around town from wanting us—doing insane shit just to get in our parties, our friendship circle or anything that we were so much as associated with. It was exhausting constantly evading them, never satisfied.

“Huh, looks like the Blue tooth fairy with his favorite yellow rainboots, also has secrets of his own.” Emmett taunts, a smile on his face.

“Yeah, but I’m not banging this girl in secret and keeping her name private from everyone, am I?” Noah starts softly, cocking his head slightly

to the left, watching George.

“Noah.” George grits out in warning.

“What’s going on?” Emmett questions but I just watch George.

“Who are we talking about?” I demand, my alarms going off as I think of the way George has been sniffing around Brittney. Not that I want to bang that bitch myself, I wouldn’t touch her with a ten-foot pole even if my life depended on it. There’s just something unnerving about that girl.

“Who is it, George my dear boy?” Noah taunts, with a smile on his face. “You’ve kept her to yourself for a week now, sneaking off to go see her.”

“You better shut your damn mouth.” George warns him, his face growing red. Anger or blushing? I have no idea. I’ve never seen George this coy before, especially when I know he and Noah are wild fuckboys.

“Is it Brittney Pace?” I demand, hating the suspense and waiting around. I’m just going to ask. “Is it that bitch?”

“Dude, no. It’s not her!” George starts, looking at me, a serious look on his face that immediately puts me at ease.

“It better not be! There’s something off about that one. The way she talks about Astraea...” I cut off, knowing that he gets it.

“I agree. I’m just. . . I can’t shake off this feeling of what happened three years ago. I know she knows what happened the night of the burglary. She was at that party with my sister.”

“Yeah but you just admitted. There is a ‘her’ after all?” Emmett taunts, eyebrows wiggling.

“Em, cut it out. I fuck girls all the time, why is this time such a freaking big deal?” George starts, waving it off with obvious frustration.

“Oh, you know, because you never actually fuck them. . . and you certainly don’t go out to see them. They come to you. And you’ve been gone a lot.” Emmett points out like he’s reciting a fucking grocery list.

“And if I’m in a fucking study group? You know we have that Physics project coming up right?” George says, his face getting red.

“Oh yeah? Who’s your study partner then?” I tease, fist bumping Noah. It’s not every day that we get to mess with George, so when an opportunity comes along to make him blush like this, you best believe we’re taking it!

“Can we just focus on this shit? Please!” George starts, obviously agitated.

“Okay fine. Don’t think I’ll let this rest though. You’re being a shady motherfucker. You can be an asshole but somehow, I can’t out my finger on

it, this is a bit extreme.” I say, watching him seriously.

“I’m not being shady.” George counters, looking away.

“Yes, you are.” Noah accuses.

“Yup.” Emmett echoes as we all stare at George.

We’re not wrong. I know, receiving a threat with the picture of your twin sister and nothing else in the damn envelope is a message that can only be translated as deadly, but the way George is acting right now, there’s more going on with him than he wants us to know.

“What’s going on with you?” I question, feeling wary all of a sudden as dread settles in the pit of my stomach.

“Shit,” George whispers under his breath, a stricken look on his face. Yeah, something is going on.

“Whatever it is, we can fix it,” I continue, pushing away the unease as I stare at my best friend.

“Well, unless you committed murder, or raped someone or. . .” Noah teases, but there’s a hint of seriousness to that.

“I’m not a criminal,” George denies, rolling his eyes with a faint smile on his face.

“Then, what has your panties in a twist?” Emmett question seriously, stepping closer.

We all look at George, waiting silently for him to open up. I can’t shake this feeling that’s telling me that George is going through some shit we don’t know. For so long, he’s taken the role of the responsible one, the one who keep this damn group together. I guess its part of the promise he made to his twin sister, a sister that he’ll no doubt kill for. Me included.

If he ever found out about the graphic, steamy, thoughts and dreams I have of that same girl. She makes me hard just by thinking of her lips, her beautiful face stares in my goods dreams and that’s not information I would voluntarily give up to my best friend.

“Is this about Astraea?” I question, my heart pounding all over again. George glances at me, a look in his eyes I’ve never seen before. Then he takes a deep breath, now looking at Noah and Emmett.

“I’m going after a lead.” George starts, taking a seat now as if he’s feeling dejected.

“What kind of lead?” Emmett questions, now sitting across from him. Noah glances at me, then he leaves the room, going to the back where we

have the half-done kitchen area that isn't done yet, but it's coming along well.

I take a seat on the couch as Noah comes back with beers.

"You're going to be an alcoholic." George snots but takes one of the beers being offered to him. "You promised to stop drinking."

"I never said I'd stop drinking altogether. I said I promise to stop drinking so much," Noah counters.

"You're a shithead. I'm not always going to be there to keep you in line," George murmurs, looking at him directly, a message passing between them.

But it's the words he just uttered that make us all pause. I frown, looking at him.

"What kind of shit are you dealing with, man?" Emmett questions, watching George seriously.

"I mean, if it's drugs, you have to hook me up!" Noah exclaims, a big smile on his face.

"Noah, we don't do drugs," I roll my eyes.

"Well, not the hard shit of course, but who said we can't smoke joints and shit," he shrugs. "I wanna be as high as a kite."

"Get ready to get high right now, if you don't shut up," Emmett threatens lightly, nudging Noah, making him spill his beer all over his lap.

"Dude." Noah says, grabbing a napkin that I pass on to him.

"Seriously Noah, shut up," Emmett says, then points in George's direction who is suddenly so damn still.

"I'm sorry man. What were you saying?" Noah says, his voice uncertain and low.

"I found a lead on where Astraea and I were born," George starts after a long pause.

"George," I start, my agitation coming back.

"For fuck's sake! Not this shit again." Noah starts, then drinks his beer as if to calm himself down. "You've been searching for years."

"Don't you think I know that?" George seethes, frustration written all over his face.

"So, what makes this time different?" Emmett questions softly.

"Isn't it obvious?" George spreads his arms out wide, making sure to flex his gains in the process.

"Show off," Noah murmurs.

“The difference between then and now is I’m fucking grown,” George starts. “I was too young to have known exactly what to do or where to look all these past years.”

“What makes you think now you’re old enough now or that you actually have something?” Noah questions. It’s a bit rough yes, but we’ve seen what disappointment does to George, repeating that shit isn’t fun.

“I do have something.” George answers softly as if he’s speaking to a bunch of angry kids, looking at Emmett.

“Did you get a P.I?” Em asks softly, unlike Noah who’s quietly stewing.

“In a way,” George starts. “I’ve been trying to find out where my mother and fucking Richard met. It’s been hard but I got it finally. They met in Phoenix, Arizona.”

“Phoenix. . .why have I been hearing that word for a long time but don’t understand what it means,” Noah questions, interest flickering in his eyes.

“The Phoenix Corps.” I start, feeling unsettled as I stare at George.

“What does that have to do with the city of Phoenix?”

“Nothing or maybe it’s something,” he says softly. “It’s a huge stretch though to think they’re connected.”

“And not so original.” Noah chimes in, rolling his eyes.

“True, but we don’t even know what they’re about. This Phoenix Corps group might be a group of mercenaries or even a group of good doers that named their knitting group, The Phoenix Corps,” Emmett points out.

“Nah, the name is too sinister for some old ladies to name their knitting group,” Noah says, chuckling.

“Okay, but we agree that they can be anything or anyone, right? Are they a measly MC gang trying to recruit us into their gang because they know which families we come from? Or are they part of a mafia outfit that needs a buy in from one, if not all, of the Blue families?” Emmett says, looking George.

“It all comes back to our fucking families, doesn’t it?” I growl, looking away as I drink my beer.

“Unfortunately for our last names and the blood that flows in our veins, we’re targets.” George agrees.

“That’s why we’re getting these threats!” Noah exclaims.

“Yes, but back to this Phoenix thing...” Emmett starts.

“I’m lost,” Noah starts. “Which Phoenix are we now talking about? Phoenix, Arizona or Phoenix Corps?”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes.

“What? I can’t keep up with all this mess.” Noah shrugs.

“We’re talking about both my little special needs student,” Emmett says, petting Noah’s head and we all burst out laughing.

“Stop it!” Noah shouts as we laugh even more.

“But seriously dude, we’re trying to see the connection between the two. It isn’t a coincidence after all,” George says, trying to hold on in laugh.

“Okay but Em is right.” Noah says. “We don’t know anything about this Phoenix Corps while the other is a city.”

“I know that, which is why I think we need someone on the inside,” George starts, looking uncertain all of a sudden. It doesn’t take long to understand what he means.

“Absolutely not!” I start, getting up on my feet, staring down at my best friend like he just lost his fucking mind. “There’s no freaking way you’re going to join some fucking gang that we know nothing about and I swear to God, if that’s where you’ve been disappearing off to at night, sneaking into some damn secret meetings, I’ll rearrange that face and tell Astraea all about this shit.”

“You keep Astraea out of this!” George says, getting up too. “She’ll never find out about any of this!”

“Are you sure about that?” I huff, getting pissed. “You think with all her nosy skills she won’t figure out that her won brother is now in the mafia?”

“But we said it wasn’t a mafia gang,” George says, looking away.

“Uh, we said we don’t know what they’re about.” Emmett chimes in, getting up as well. “And you bet I’ll be helping King to set you straight.”

“You don’t get it,” George starts, now paving. “I can’t shake this feeling of doom and I know you feel it too. These threats and all, they just don’t happen and I know what you’re thinking. Nah, trust me, this is bigger than us.”

“So how is finding who your real father is going to solve all this shit?” I question, folding my arms as I stare at him.

“It might, it might not but something tells me that us moving here wasn’t a coincidence. Somehow everything is connected.”

“Is this about the whole Blue Gen thing?” Noah starts, “We all know that the Fields have been added to the realm of power.”

“Yeah but why now?” Emmett says and well turn to look at him. “I mean, that’s a question we should be asking ourselves. For so long, this

town has had three families with power. The Kings, the Montreals and the Eastons. So why should they be four now?"

"Exactly!" George exclaims. "Something is going on here and we need a game plan. I don't give a damn about the Blue Gen, that's your shit, but I do care about what's going because somehow, all three families have shit in common."

"What's that?" Noah questions.

"Sons." I murmur, feeling tense, that feeling of dread coming back again.

"Yes, and we're all the same age. More or less and with you and your stunt of missing an entire semester of school that time, you're in our class." George says, pointing at me.

"Sue me," I shrug, not regretting my decision in the slightest. Being held back made sure I'd keep an eye in Astraea, it gave us more time together and I'll be damned if I have to answer to anyone about that. "But the question still remains, are you in a gang or not?"

"That's what I want to know," Noah says, chugging his beer.

"No, I'm not, but I still think we need someone on the inside." George says.

"And you want that someone on the inside to be you, don't you?" I accuse and he remains strangely silent. "I'm telling her."

"No, you won't!" he growls. "Astraea has too much going on as is and I will never jeopardize her safety or her wellbeing for all this shit. Not about Richard or the Phoenix anything."

"Dude, you can't. . ." I start, knowing that keeping secrets or lying to Star is a bad idea. She needs to know that she's being followed. At the very least, she can come home where I'll be there to keep her safe.

"No!" George growls getting in my face. "You and I both know that she's going through a lot right now. Telling her that she's got a stalker or whatever shit is going on down here, is none of her freaking business." George grits out, staring me down.

"That's a bad idea dude." Noah points out. "Does she know about Richard."

"No, she doesn't." George seethes, turning to look at each of us, delivery a threat and a promise at the same time. "And she won't find out even if she comes back here."

"George. . ." Emmett starts but he's cut off.

“And she doesn’t know about the threats or about Phoenix or the fact that we were born as freaking triplets,” he growls stopping everything with that last statement

“What the fuck?” we all explode, staring at George like he just grew three heads with extra eyes and horns. He sighs, looking down at his hands.

“When I was searching the internet, I realized that back then, they used to announce the birth of newborns in the paper. So, I did some digging, using our birthday and I found this,” he turns around and grabs a printout of newspaper subheading, then passes it to me.

FRATENAL TRIPLETS, TWO GIRLS AND A BOY, FOUND IN PUBLIC RESTROOM AFTER BEING ABANDONED FOR HOURS.

“Jesus.” Em breathes out, as he reads the rest of the story over my shoulder, but I’m stuck on the headline.

Triplets. . .

Two girls. . .

Abandoned. . .

“Holy shit!” Noah exclaims, but I’m frozen in place.

There isn’t a picture or anything to confirm that it’s actually George and his. . .two sisters, but this. . .

“How do you know this is real?” I start. “And how do you even know they’re talking about you?”

“The day they were born so happens to be my birthday,” George starts.

“That doesn’t prove anything.” I counter. “There are a lot of people that can be born on the same day and don’t act like you’re the first to have a twin.”

“I shared a womb with two girls, King. I know it in my gut.”

“Dude...” Noah starts with a sigh.

“No, listen,” George interjects. “Every newspaper in that region covered that story.” George grits out. “But they failed to mention what happened to the triplets after they were taken to a local hospital.”

“So, wait, does that mean Amanda isn’t your mother?” I question, feeling a lot of emotions that I can’t pin down right now.

“Oh, she is.” George lets out a hard chuckle. “One glance at her and you’ll know that she’s my mother.”

“But this says abandoned. . .” Noah says, taking the newspaper clipping from me.

“She was running.” George starts, grabbing his beer and chugging away until half the contents is gone. “My mother was running and she left us in a public bathroom so she could come back later.”

What the hell?

“You talked to her?” Emmett questions.

“Confronted her a few days ago,” he says, nodding his head. “But even then, she never admitted the full truth. She just said someone she grew up with rescued us from the hospital, and left us. . .”

“Where?” I question, my voice low. I can’t believe I’m hearing this shit.

A sense of dread pools in my lower stomach. I’ve never seen George in this much pain—only once. The night he found his twin overdosed and in the middle of a seizure.

“At an orphanage,” he finishes, looking away.

Dead silence falls over the large room in the Brooke house. We just stand there helplessly as the news soaks in our bones like an electric shock.

“She said?” I question, trying to make sense of it.

“My mother may be a lot of things but when she’s confronted, she hardly lies.” George explains.

“But, how did you and Astraea. . .” Noah starts, looking uncertain and confused like the rest of us.

“Become two instead of three?” George finishes for him. “That’s the part where she clammed up.”

“And that’s what you want to find out.” I finish, tracing the way he thinks clearly. “You’re thinking that if you find your biological father, you’ll find your lost sister.”

“Yes.” George says, turning to look at us now.

“Dude, this is insane.” Emmett says, taking a seat, running a hand through his hair. “There’s no guarantee that your plan will work.”

“Plan?” Noah shouts. “What plan is that? To join an underground gang just so you can find your sperm donor? What ever happened to just hiring a P.I that can actually go to Phoenix, Arizona?”

“I know that it’s crazy, but I trust my gut on this. These threats are coming from the Phoenix Corps and the moment they started following my sister, they made it my business.”

“Which is why we need someone to infiltrate their damn organization.” I say, locking eyes with George. In that moment, I understand him perfectly.

“Have you both lost your minds?” Noah questions but I know he’s seeing the light. “You both can’t join some gang or whoever they are.”

“So, we need someone who might have knowledge of them and will be willing to infiltrate them.” Emmett starts.

“It has to be someone we trust implicitly.” George says.

“Then we might as well rule this entire thing out. The only people we trust are either in this very room right now, dead or. . .”

“Spider.” We all say at the same time.

“He’s just the guy!” Noah says, “I mean, he’s back from military school and well, I don’t think he’ll turn down a gig like this.”

“Good, I’ll call him tonight.” George says.

“Okay but...you do know that if we do this, a million things can go wrong,” Em points out and we all stare at each other, a heavy silence falling over us.

“It’s a risk I’m going to have to take,” George says. “If Spider says no, then...”

“You’re willing to do the thing yourself.” I finish for him, knowing that he’s got his mind set on this already and nothing I say now or later will change his mind.

“I don’t know man, this is a bad idea,” Noah starts, pacing from one end of the lounge to the other. “I mean, what if...”

“There’s going to be a lot of ‘what if’s’ Noah, but I think George’s has to do this.” Emmett says, nodding to George.

“Yeah, doesn’t mean I like this.” Noah counters.

“I know it’s crazy,” George starts, a resigned look on his face, making him look three times his actual age. “I have a responsibility to both my sisters. One that I failed to keep safe right from the start, and the one that I swear I’ll never allow predators to touch ever again.”

“Damn,” Noah breathes out. “But I still think this is messed up. So, how are we going to get info on the Phoenix Corps?”

“Well, remember Dereck Myers?” George starts and a shrug.

“Who’s he?” I question, my mind blank but the name has a familiar ring to it.

“Seriously?” Emmett snorts, “He’s the kid you’ve embarrassed countless of times.”

“Err, still doesn’t ring a bell.” I say, cracking my neck from left to right.

“The one you booted off the football team.” Noah points out laughing.
“But I don’t blame you, dude couldn’t even throw to save his life.”

“I think you’ll remember him by how he used to bother me about Astraea.” George says, folding his arms as he gives me a pointed look.

It doesn’t take long to remember the bastard. Dereck Myers, the asshole who thought he had a shot with my girl. The way he used to preach to anyone who would listen that he and my girl had a thing between them. I grit my teeth just thinking of the rumors he used to spread, driving me insane with the need to end him.

So, I did.

“Yo, calm down, King,” George says, passing me a beer. “You’ve got smoke coming out your ears.”

“Haha, very funny.” I growl. “What does that douche have to do with the Phoenix Corps?”

“I heard him talking about it,” George starts. “It seems like he’s got a huge grudge against all of us.”

“If he does, how is he going to lead you to the Phoenix Corps?” Emmett questions.

“Easy. He has a thing for my sister, so I’m going to use that as an advantage.” George says, his arms stretched out wide.

“Astraea is going to be hella pissed.” Noah warns.

“Like I said, she’s not going to know.” George seethes. “Besides, it’s not really me that he hates. He hates King.”

“So?” I say, sarcastically rolling my eyes. I don’t know why people think I give a damn what they think of me.

“So, it’s easy to get in his circle,” George points out. “Especially if we break up, publicly.”

“What?” I question.

“You’re really losing it up there, aren’t you?” Noah says, shaking his head with a growing smile on his face. “But if its dramatic, exaggerated and Shakespearean, I’m so in!”

“Of course, you’re in,” Emmett says, rolling his eyes. “What’s the plan anyway?”

“It’s pretty simple really. The Blue Boys need to break up publicly, but it has to be three against one.” George starts.

“So, King, Em and I beef with you publicly?” Noah questions.

“Yes!” George says, glancing at me. “I mean, throwing in threats here and there can really help. I’m sure Myers will swoop in and make nice with anyone he thinks hates King, so that’s an advantage.”

“Why is King the only they hate?” Noah demands grumpily. “I also want them to hate me.”

“Dude please, you know you’re a colorful peacock in this town.” Emmett says, ruffling his hair.

“It took me hours to do my damn hair!” Noah screeches and they start rough housing.

George glances at me then walks towards the back wall of the lounge, silently waiting for me to follow. When I do, I stand there beside him, watching Em hold back Noah who’s doing his best to take down Emmett to no avail.

“I know you think this is all fucked up and it’s going to blow up in my face,” George starts and I grunt.

“It will blow up in all our faces.” I say quietly. “But I know you made up your mind.”

“I did and I’m not asking for permission...”

“But I’ve got your back, regardless.” I cut him off. We don’t look at each other, there’s no need for that eye contact shit. We know each other.

“You do know she’ll be mad when she finds out. Hell, this is going to hurt her.”

“No,” he breathes, closing his eyes. “It’s going to devastate her.”

I try my best to ignore the tugging in my chest, the way my fists clench with that description.

“I know you hate it when my sister is in pain.” George starts.

“Dude, your sister and I...”

“You were right before,” he cuts me off. “I have no idea what you have between the two of you but I do know that you both have a deep connection that I’ll never understand. I remember how easily you always seemed to find her when she bailed on tough situations she couldn’t face. And don’t think I don’t know of the times you used to wipe her tears away, then raised hell on the bastards that bullied her at school when I was at baseball camp.”

“How?”

“I’ve watched you two,” he confesses, and I growl. “Yeah, yeah you like to be private with her and she’s tight lipped about you, but it’s hard not to notice when my sister and my best friend feel.”

“Feel what?” I grit out, feeling uncomfortable with this conversation. I don’t talk about what I feel with anyone because I don’t feel a thing but Astraea and I? That’s sacred, confusing as hell shit that I can’t make sense of.

“I think in time, you’ll both know.”

“Yeah, I hope it won’t be too late.” I say.

“Why do you say that?” George questions, his voice low.

“She left!” There are so many complicated emotions that blooms and pierces my chest when I think of Astraea. I can’t get over the pain that ravages my heart when I feel her absence.

“That would be the candid truth, now wouldn’t it?” he says silently. “My beautiful sister left without an explanation.”

“She still hasn’t talked to you?”

“She avoids the topic like the plague and no one will talk about it.” George grits out. “Which makes me think that there’s more going on and it’s up to me to get to the bottom of this.”

“No matter what?” I question seriously, wondering how far my best friend will take this shit.

“Until the truth is revealed,” he answers with the same somber tone. “It’s going to get messy but King, you have to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?” I think I know where this is going. My chest puffs up, my back straightens.

“You’ll keep Astraea safe. Every inch of her, physically, mentally, emotionally,” George says, turning to look at me head on. Our eyes locked on each other, a vow being made. “You won’t tell her about what I’m doing.”

I shake my head. “Don’t take her for granted George, she’s clever and knows where to get her answers.”

“That’s true but, you have to promise me that you’ll be there when the truth unravels. You have to be there when she breaks but most if all, you have to be there when it seems like she fucking broke you and you both hate each other, you have to be there!”

“George...”

“Promise me, damn it.”

I sigh, knowing that there’s no way I’m going to get out of this.

“I know she hurt you and I know you have nightmares about her.”

“How...?”

“But I do know you feel strongly for her and you’ll do anything and everything possible to keep her safe.”

“Yes.” The word falls from my tongue like a command. And with that, he nods, stares me in the eyes for a long, tense second then he turns.

“Noah please, try picking on someone your own age,” he hollers now laughing his gait relaxed and carefree again. That’s when I realize that I’ve just been tasked with a burden that I’ve been carrying since the day I met her but never really realized.

Astraea is mine. Which means all her demons, all her fears and shit, that’s mine to fight off.

But, I just don’t know if I can help her heart though. She has the power to rip out mine and no one can save either of us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“So, you’re going to mop around all night long?” Christina questions, peering down at me where I’m sprawled on the floor of my room. She sits at the edge of my bed, looking down at me like I’ve lost it completely.

“I’m not mopping,” I murmur, knowing that I sound like I’m mopping.

“It’s been two days since you got discharge from the hospital and each night, I check on you, you’re just staring at those stars,” she says with a sigh.

“They’re interesting.” I mumble sarcastically, ignoring her inquisitive gaze.

I won’t tell her that these stars are all I can cling onto right now. I can’t seem to be able to make any definite decision in my life at the moment so staying right here, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars that remind me of *him*, is all I can manage right now.

“You could try going outside to gaze up at real stars you know,” she says softly, and I snort.

“Nothing is real anymore.”

“That’s not true, Astraea,” she chides, a soft, sweet smile on her face. “You are real, your emotions that you’re trying your hardest not to feel, are also real.”

“Gee, have you been talking to that psychiatrist or is she a psychologist, whoever the hell she is?”

“Oh, you never told me that you’re getting professional help,” Christina exclaims, joy brightening her face. “That’s wonderful.”

“Calm down, I’m not going to see her,” I mumble.

“But…” her smile falls, as she stares down at me in confusion.

“You don’t have to look like someone turned off the lights in your building.” I murmur, “I only gave her my verbal consent that I’d get help because I wanted to get the hell out of that hospital. Doesn’t mean I’m actually going to do it.”

“Astraea, there’s nothing wrong with seeking help you know,” she says softly.

Yeah, I know. I spent four years of my life supposedly getting help but here I am today, burdened with more issues than I realized I had before.

“Seriously Astraea, are going to lie there for the rest of your life?” she questions, getting flustered.

“If that’s what it takes to ignore the fact that my life is shit and fake, then that’s what I’ll do.” I mumble, looking away from her and stare at the closet door.

“And how’s that working out for you?” Christina questions. I can feel her inquisitive gaze on me.

“Uh, so far so good.”

Lies.

“So, everything is going well?” she questions, sarcastically.

“Just peachy.”

The silence is peachy.

The insomnia is peachy.

My mother watching me like a hawk when she gives me a pill each day as instructed by the good doctors as part of my tempering regiment, then goes on ignoring and avoiding me yet again is also peachy.

I’m fucking peachy!

“Really?” Christina questions. “Then why are you frowning? Feeling constipated?”

“Nah, that was yesterday. I’m good today.” I smile, thinking of Noah who’s been blowing up my phone for days but like I’m doing to Emmett, I’ve just ignored the calls and texts.

“And you like being here, closed up in your room, alone?”

No. The silence is eating at my insides, like insides are being doused in acid that'll eat me from within and I can't do a thing about it.

"Yes." I mumble with a sigh. "Don't you know that silence is good for the mind and soul? At least that's what they say on all those mental wellbeing shit videos on YouTube."

Christina snorts. "You've never been a good liar, unlike my son," she says with a sigh. Yup, Noah was a damn liar that's for sure. "A son I haven't seen in a few days."

"He hasn't been home?" I question, now glancing at her.

"No, he hasn't. And if he does come home, then he's mastered the art of avoiding me quite spectacularly," she answers, a weary look entering her eyes. "But I doubt that."

"Why?" I question, dread sinking into me.

"I don't know. I can't shake this feeling that something is up. I know it has everything to do with you and those boys and whatever secrets you lot are keeping."

"Christina..." I start. "I think you should call him."

I doubt this is something I can even start to talk about without feeling the aftershocks of my world collapsing all around me. No matter what happens now, I know life will never be the same after what happened in that damn hospital.

"I know. I have called but it goes straight to voicemail. When I text, I get one worded responses back," she starts and it's only then that I realize that Christina is truly shaken. "My son has a big heart, so kind and caring but I'm scared that it's being broken and getting hardened each day."

I remain silent, not saying a thing. The truth is, she's right. Noah, just like me, will never be the same guy that she once knew before. Betrayal does that to a person. It makes your insides rot and shatter and most times, there's nothing we can do about it.

"I just wish I knew what's going on so I can help," she sighs, frown lines forming where her skin was once flawless but I just remain quiet.

What can I say anyway? That, *Christina, I'm so sorry but I think your son, as well as the rest of the boys, are all in trouble. And there's really nothing you and I can do about it because they are all sneaky bastards that have so many secrets like it's their sworn profession. Hell, those boys would lie about their names if possible.*

I know I can't tell her that, not without it reiterating just how fucked up everything is. I don't need that reminder right now.

"Noah will be fine. He's too cunning to ever find himself stuck in trouble." I try to reassure, not believing a damn word I'm saying myself.

"Please, Noah is the definition of trouble. He's conniving and smart, yes but when he opens that big mouth of his..."

I laugh even though I don't want to. "Oh, come on Christina, you know Noah can talk his way out of hell if that ever happened. Hell, he might invite the devil for dinner at your house and still charm the disapproval out of you when you get mad and you know it." I laugh, imagining the look on his face when he's about to be petty.

An ache moves through my chest. I miss him, I miss him so much. Even though I know he's almost innocent in all of this, I can't help but be mad at him too.

"Well, that's true. I wonder where he gets that from," she says with a motherly smile on her face as she gets up. "Well, I just came to check in on you, make sure that you're alright."

"Are you heading out of town?" I question, only now noticing that she's dressed in what she once told me was her business travelling gear.

Comfortable, but expensive, black suit pants, an emerald Saks silk shirt to match her green eyes, with her Louboutin pumps. She has a set of diamond earrings and a necklace to match, her rose gold Rolex on her wrist — a gift from Noah and Craig from so many years ago that she usually doesn't wear at all in fear of losing or damaging it. Right now, she looks every bit a Westbrook Blues estates woman. Distinguished, classy, wealthy, smart and beautiful. But the kindness in her eyes, that's one of a kind and so damn refreshing.

"Yeah, I have to deal with something with. . .Dave," she sighs, frowning as she looks away, unable to hold my gaze.

"Dave?" I sit up as soon as I hear that asshole's name. Noah's father wasn't exactly my favorite person in the world. But then again, all the boys' fathers were pricks of various degrees. I wonder if that's what was bothering George all this time, the fact that Richard wasn't our biological father.

"Yes, he's been a royal pain in the ass all year," she says, looking out my window.

“What does he want?” I question, moving to the edge of the bed, the dread in her voice making me tense up with anger. Whatever it is, I know it has everything do with Noah.

“It’s a long story,” she snorts, and I know she’s trying to divert from the topic.

“I’ve got all day as you can see.” I say sarcastically rolling my eyes at myself. I look and feel pathetic but I’m not letting this Dave thing go. The guy is a douche and I hate him.

“I see that yes,” she sighs, then looks at me seriously. “Well, since Dave left after the death of my firstborn baby boy, he’s spiraled out of control of his own life.”

“So, what does that have to do with you?”

What does this have to do with Noah?

“You see, according to the will that Dave’s father left, there were some stipulations put in place that he just realized,” she starts. “When Dave left, he unknowingly abdicated all the power, shares, money and property that were to go to him once his father passed—of which the old man passed away a three days ago.”

“Oh God, does Noah know?”

“I called and left a dozen messages but all he had to say was ‘good riddance’ as if that’s enough.”

“I mean, I don’t blame him. Noah never knew his grandfather from his father’s side.”

“Well, they were actually close when he was younger,” Christina sighs, shocking me into silence. I gap, staring at her.

“Shocked you, huh?” she smiles. “See, Craig and Noah were always close to their grandfathers right from the start but when Dave left...”

“Everything changed.” I finish, still shocked by this revelation. It’s so many layers to Noah that he never talks about.

“Yeah,” Christina murmurs, seeming like she’s faraway, deep in thought. “But back to Dave and why I’m travelling; the will said, all the family inheritance and wealth amassed would be passed down from one older Montreal to the other. The estates, the conglomerates, all the businesses, they all go to the heirs. The Montreals have so much wealth but so little heirs to continue on the legacy. And since Dave left, he unknowingly left everything behind. It’s now entitled to the next heir in line.”

“The one next in line is Noah.” I say, seeing where this is going.

She starts laughing, bitterly, her eyes hard as she starts pacing in my bedroom. I guess that nervous trait runs in the family.

“Yes, when Dave left, everything automatically went to Noah and since he’s reaching out to me of all people, harassing me with endless calls, I guess he’s hung out, dry and broke, trying to get back into the mix of things with his father’s will.”

“He wants to talk to Noah?” I question, already knowing the answer.

“Yes, but I’ll never let that happen,” she says, straightening her shoulders, a steely resolve falling over her like it’s her battle armor. “You have no idea how hard it was to get over that bastard leaving, how I had to explain to my grieving son that his father had to go away for a very long trip. That asshole doesn’t know that his one remaining son would ask about him every few days until one day, he just stopped asking... like when a grandfather clock just grows silent, the ticking is gone. The responsiveness is gone.”

“And the caring is gone...” I say, knowing exactly what she means.

“Yes,” she says, a sad look on her face. “Now, just the mere mention of Dave drives that boy to a kind of fury that breaks my heart...” she pauses, swallowing hard. “I’ll be damned if I let that bastard hurt my son.”

“So, you’re going to make sure Dave never contacts Noah?” I question, already knowing the answer to that. A cold chill goes down my spine as I notice the fierce look on her face.

“Damn right, I will,” she grits out.

A sharp pang moves across my chest at the vehemence in her words. Yeah, this is how a mother should be like. Defending, protecting and loving their child unconditionally. Christina is everything that Amanda isn’t and that makes me so sad again.

“My son doesn’t deserve to have his heart broken. I’ll war anyone who dares to mess with him.”

Oh God. Noah’s heart is beyond broken at the moment and you’ve already met the culprit, Christina.

“So, what are you going to do?” I question, getting up from the floor.

“I’m not sure to be honest. If it’s money he wants, I’ll give it to him from what I personally have. Hopefully he goes away after that. But Astraea,” she turns around and walks over to me. She reaches for both my hands, a stricken look on her face.

“Baby girl, you’re the only one that boy has ever really opened up to.”

“Christina...”

“I know, you don’t want to hear this right now, but I can’t stand around and watch you allow the darkness to destroy you. I won’t allow you to let the lies ruin you and your ability to love and forgive.”

The thing about the truth when you’re stuck in the dark is that, it guts you, making you bleed painfully, aware of the lies and the coldness around you. You start fumbling in the dark, desperately trying to stop the gushing, but you know deep inside that no matter what you do, the pain will never go away.

“Christina, I respect you so much to tell you that you don’t know what I’m going through,” I grit out, my heart thundering in my chest. My skin is crawling and I feel like running away. I don’t want to talk about this.

“I honestly don’t know how it feels to go through what you’re going through,” she starts. “I’m realizing now after all my years on this earth, that heart ache is not the same for everyone. We give it the same name, trying to make others understand what we’re going through but the truth is, there’s no describing that pain.”

“Christina...” I start but she cuts me off.

“It’s a type of pain that renders you immobile. You prefer the numb feeling when you’re by yourself, but when you sink into your head, you can’t escape that darkness.”

“Please don’t,” I shudder, my lips trembling.

“I’m sorry, baby girl it’s just...I see your mother when I look at you.”

When she says that, I snap my head up, my body tensing. People see different things when they look at me, depending on what they want to feel. I’ve seen the way the nurses were looking at me when I was in the hospital, like was a pathetic little spoiled bitch that probably deserves what I got just because of where I live. Then now, the way Christina is looking at me...pity and sadness radiating off of her as she looks at me. Anger flares in me but I temper it down.

“Noah has friends already.” I say, looking away from her but she lets go of my left hand and tugs my chin so softly as if she’s afraid I might break.

“Yes, he’s got the boys but there are parts of him that I know only you can reach. Just like when you came back, he...settled down. He was better, more...alive and present than he was four years before that,” she rushes to explain, and all of a sudden, I’m breathless, not knowing what to say to that.

“I know you’re mad at him but don’t abandon him now. I’m begging you not to ignore him, even when he deserves it. I know it’s too much to ask of you and frankly, you deserve so much better, my love but...”

“Yes.” The word flies out of my mouth before she can plead further. There are tears in her eyes that twist my heart in a way that I can’t handle it so I do the best thing I can to assure a mother in distress.

“Noah will never be alone,” I reassure her, not knowing how that’s going to be possible, seeing as I’m a mess and Noah is...well, he’s a nightmare and together we don’t mix well right now.

But one thing I know for sure is, I’m ready for anything. I’m not ready to go down to my brother’s room and open that door even though anxiety and curiosity is eating at me like nothing else in this world.

I’m not ready to rip off those band aids.

I’m just not ready for everything to blow up in my face—even though I know it will, eventually. But here I am, saint Astraea to the rescue. Promising to always be there for a lying, broken hearted, drunk with abandonment and daddy issues, who’s hurting more than anyone realizes right now.

Kim...

Me...

“I’ll always be there for him,” I say, trying to convince both her and I of the lies coming out of my mouth.

“Oh, thank you so much.” Christina pulls me into a bear hug, crushing me into her softness until I can hardly breathe but I hang on to her just as fiercely. I need this hug as much as she does.

She pulls back after a full minute, then frames my face in her hands.

“Keep fighting Astraea,” she whispers. “You’ve got it in you to rise up from the ashes like a Phoenix.” She glances down at my bandaged wrist, unconsciously, I pull my hand behind me, away from her.

A wave of embarrassment hits me but before I can retreat into myself, she hugs me again and whispers sweet words that I can’t make it because my heart is beating so fast and so damn loud, everything else seems to drown in the background but before I can ask her to repeat it all, she’s gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Once Christina is gone, the silence swiftly sets back in and my heart starts beating even harder. I glance around, paranoia and anxiety clawing at my insides. Again.

The walls feel like they're closing in on me. My vision becomes blurring and I feel too hot and cold at the same time.

Get a damn grip of yourself, Astraea.

And I see them. The half full bottle of Xanax pills that I was prescribed to get back on my tempering program. I know I already took the one I was supposed to take for today, but as I stare at them, I can't help but take a step closer to my dresser.

No, don't do it.

But, I just need one. Just one will help settle me.

I shake my head, trying to clear the haze away, but it only gets worse. My body starts trembling and I start gasping for breath, pain radiating all over my body.

I take another step closer then reach for the drawer below my nightstand, knowing that I shouldn't open it, but before I can grasp the little handle, my phone starts ringing. I glance at it and notice that it's my mother calling and that brings me right back to the present.

Suddenly, I'm no longer numb or in a haze. My vision is clear and sharp as my phone continues to ring but I just stand there, not making a move to answer the damn thing.

My mother has avoided me for two days now, only bothering to come up to my room twice to give me the damn pill, so her calling me when I know she's in the damn house is the worst thing ever. Only Amanda can make me feel like an invalid. She's the only person that can make me feel like I'm not worth her time yet in the same breath, still demand of me like I owe her my life.

I know I need to talk to her. I know she holds the answers that only she can answer because she freaking gave birth to three kids at once! But somehow, when she's around, her sharp gaze on me, I get so tongue tied, I don't even know what to do with myself. But then again, avoidance has been my best friend for a while so, there's that.

I glance at the ringing phone again, my breathing is labored again but I ignore it. I look around my room then rush for my closet, yanking the door open. I've been dragging my feet about this but it's time now.

I slide open one of the wardrobe doors, then reach up for the small box I stuffed in here two nights ago when I came back from the hospital.

Opening the box, I move around the scraps of paper and little notes that I used to scribble on when I was younger and reach for the key that I took from Emmett. Dread moves through my system as fear sets in, but I don't dwell on it for long. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to do it right now!

I wonder if this damn key is worth all the hustle and trouble the boys went through just to get it. Hell, they worked double time, going so far as to fake a death just to get it. Talk about being theatrical. Shakespeare would be proud.

I drop the box, not caring about the mess I'm leaving behind, then I rush around my closet, pulling open drawers of clothes. I put on a pair of faded boyfriend jeans and a crewneck sweater, then my jacket. I drop to the floor and put on my Vans and then grab a jacket. I have no idea what I'm going to find in George's room, but I have to be ready for whatever.

Keep fighting, Astraea.

Yeah, I'm going to do just that.

I walk over to my bedroom door, feeling rushed and out of time for some reason that I can't explain. All I know is, I have to get to George's room right now! I reach for the knob and twist it softly, making sure that I don't

make a sound. I don't want to alert the powers that be in this damn mansion that I'm on the move. I glance from left to right, checking for my mother's minions but it's empty. I take a deep breath and sneak out of my room, and jog down the hall towards the stairs. I have to be quick and precise.

I look over my shoulder as I go down the stairs, but no one is there. Maybe I; being overly dramatic but I don't know, I feel like even right now, I'm being watched. Reaching the second floor, I look around for the maids but there's no one. Taking a deep breath, I jog-walk towards the double doors at the end of the hall, standing there as intimidating and mysterious as the day I first came back to Westbrook Blues.

"George, what the hell are you making me do?" I whisper under my breath as I reach the door. I glance down at the key, then at the door.

Should I do this? What will I find behind this door?

God.

Fear attacks my bones until I'm paralyzed to the spot, like a deer I headlights. For a moment, all I can do is just stare at the key in my palm, then back at the double doors.

Do I really want to know what's going on? Doubt, dread and all those fun, annoying emotions grab me by the throat and squeeze.

"George might be alive. . ."

"We don't know that for sure."

But George might be alive! I have to find out. I have to get this over and done with and then deal whatever comes next. I can't go on living lie this. Constantly in denial, wondering what might or might not be. It's exhausting living a lie.

Okay, now to open this damn door.

Breathe, Astraea.

Finding out the truth and what's going on, that's all that matters right now. Everything else that isn't aligned with that plan, is bullshit and doesn't have room in my head for me to get obsessed over right now.

Taking a deep breath, I clutch the key in my grasp, but before I can insert it in the lock, a throat clears behind me and I tense up.

A sense of déjà vu hits me as I slowly turn around, knowing who I'll find behind me. Always watching, observing and knowing where everyone is at all times just to report back to the she-devil herself. And now he's back again, about to block me from getting behind this door.

“Trumbull, I’m going in there no matter what you say.” I assert before he can say anything. My entire body is tense, ready for a fight if he chooses to go down that road, watching him with a hard gleam in my eyes. I don’t give a damn if this old prick is reporting to my whereabouts to my mother and I don’t give a damn that he was probably sent to guard this door, monitoring who comes to George’s room. I’m getting in there come hell or high waters.

But all he does is watch me back with his tired eyes then he opens his mouth, “Miss, can I help you there?”

“You can help me by getting the fuck away from me.” I warn. “You’re not stopping me from getting in there.”

He watches me, then glances down at the key in my hand. Then as slowly as ever, he looks up and stares at me. I swear I notice something in his eyes the second he looks up at me, a faint recollection of something familiar.

It’s as if he wants to say something.

“Can I help you there, Miss?” He questions again, this time, his words are slow, like he’s talking to a child. But before I can get pissed off, I frown at him. It’s as if he means something else completely different.

Something about those words, something about the way he stands as he watches me, echoing something Trumbull would say when George and I were playing hide and seek.

“Can I help you there, Miss?”

“I’m looking for George. For you know where he’s hiding?” I would whisper.

And he would point out where I might find the little idiot.

I gasp as shock washes over me and I take a step closer to him, a bemused look probably on my face.

“Trumbull! I’m looking for George, where might I find him,” I gasp out, my heart bearing wildly out of control in my chest.

It can’t be...

I know it feels weird saying that, my heart twists and everything hurts with those words. I can’t ignore the pain but as I look at him, I can’t help but feel a glimmer of hope igniting in my soul as his eyes twinkle with an answering response of mischief and shared secrets.

“You’ll find him this way.” He says as he turns to lead me back to where we came from. I remain standing there, as if glued to the spot, watching him go.

God, Trumbull was the key this whole time!

Holy fuck!

“Are you coming, Miss Astraea?” he questions, watching me, eyebrow raised, his stance as poised as ever but I’m stunned into silence, frozen on the spot where I stand. “We don’t have much time,” he calls, jarring me back to the present. I gasp then I run after him, my heart beating a never ending staccato.

This can’t be real!

I had help under my nose all along!

“Wait for me!” I whisper, unable to hold my excitement. “For an old geezer you do walk fast.”

Trumbull chuckles but keeps going, discreetly checking for people that might be around, but he doesn’t stop.

“You were the one all along! Why didn’t you say anything?” I question as we go down the stairs, then past the kitchen towards the west wing.

“Shocked you, didn’t I?” he says in that haughty voice of his. “Can’t believe you forgot.”

“A lot has been going on and I...” I cut off, pain blooming in my chest all over again. It’s become impossible to go on with my life without feeling the burns of the lies and secrets that blew up in my face from the day I came back to Westbrook Blues.

“Are you alright, dear?” Trumbull questions and I shake my head to clear the haze away.

“Yeah, just shocked is all,” I murmur. “But, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I tried, the day you ventured to Master George’s room,” he says as quietly as possible and I pause, thinking back to that creepy day.

“That one time?” I gasp, incredulously, glaring at the back of his head, but he keeps going, ignoring me. “You can’t be serious! You never actually said anything that day!”

“My apologies, Miss Astraea but I was under strict instructions from Master George to only approach you when you actively started to look for answers around his room,” he says over his shoulder.

“Wait, so he is alive?!” I question, holding my breath as I stop walking in the middle of the rose garden, my eyes widening as I look at him. Everything in me stops, my heart stops beating, my body tenses up and I feel like I’m about to be thrown off a damn cliff and I’m not sure what’s at the bottom. A bottomless abyss or a rocky waterfall that will end my life.

Whatever Trumbull tells me will determine how everything will go from here on out.

But as Trumbull meets my gaze, the dark, expressionless look in them deflates any and all the hope that was growing in me.

It all just. . .dies down again.

“I’m sorry, Miss but I don’t know the answer to that,” he says so softly, like a sad song that screeches at the end, scraping away any chance of happiness and hope. “All I know is, I have to give you something, the rest is up to you.”

“What did my brother say to you?” I demand, my voice hoarse with disappointment that Trumbull doesn’t have the one answer I desperately need.

“He said you’d be back soon and that you’re going to go through a lot,” he starts, watching me with pity in his old, worldly eyes.

“Gee, that’s nice of my brother to be so perceptive.” I mumble.

“Yes, but he also had the utmost confidence in the fact that you’ll figure everything out, .”when you were ready to face it all, that is,” he says, stunning me once more into silence then he turns around and continues to walk towards the pool house.

“But, why would he say that?” I whisper, confusion setting in.

“Because your brother believed you can’t be forced into anything,” Trumbull says, glancing at me. I wasn’t aware that he heard me. “He said that it wasn’t in your best interest to force you to do anything and that you had to make up your own mind about everything.”

What the hell?

My brother kept secrets from me, that much I figured from the moment the boys told me about their staged fight at school. But there’s still a lot that doesn’t make sense.

“We need to hurry, your mother will be back any second now.” Trumbull says, prompting us to walk even faster.

It’s late, around seven in the evening. The estate looks beautiful with a starless sky, the lights around the property are dimmed to a soft glow but as we get closer to the pool house, the blue glow from the swimming pool casts a soft light on the small house. I wonder what Trumbull wants to show me here. The old house never had a pool house, this is a new and I’ve never been in here since coming back.

Trumbull silently slides opens the glass patio doors of the pool house, then glances over his shoulder at me to follow him in.

“How long have you been hiding this secret?” I question him. “It is a secret right? My mother and Richard don’t know about this, do they?”

“Yes, it is a secret. Master George made sure that you would be the only one that should get this.”

“Not even the boys?”

“He said you were the only who would get it.”

“What’s that?” I question, confused all over again.

“I guess that’s up to you to find out,” he says with a small smile on his face.

“So, when exactly did my brother hatch this elaborate plan of his with you?” I demand.

“Before everything went to shit,” he answers as we move through the perfectly decorated, untouched rooms. This one’s just as big and as luxuriously spacious as the one Noah’s family has on their estate.

“Oh, you curse too.” I chuckle, unable to stop myself. Trumbull always looked like he has a stick up his ass and that he’s too good and a proper gentleman to ever bring himself down to the level of us mere, cursing commoners. But then, I remember when I was younger, Trumbull was fun to hang out with. George and I used to prank him, pelting him with water balloons during summer when we had nothing to do other than be mischievous.

“Working here has altered my diction by a large margin. My mother might just be turning in her grave with each word,” he says with a shudder, making me smile.

“Hmm, and a sense of humor. Yup, she is turning in her grave.” I mumble as I watch him, rummage around the cupboards in the kitchenette area.

“I had a life before you knew me,” he mumbles. “Now where is it?”

“You forgot where your hiding spot is?” I taut, folding my arms.

“Well, the plan was, you’d connect the dots a lot sooner than this, As it stands, you’re a few months behind on the time lag Master George predicted,” he says as he opens one of the cabinets, then reaches in for a small wooden box. A box I recognize almost immediately.

“Well, he never could tell time correctly.” I gasp, my eyes glued on the box, my eyes widening. “That’s...”

“The actual key to Master George’s room,” Trumbull answers, bringing the box to me.

When we were younger and George started getting into creative building, woodwork and all that shit he used to ticker with, he used to carve up what I thought was useless shit from wood.

George used to lose small things like his house keys or his super-bowl ticket stubs that he insisted on keeping from himself. So, one day I snidely suggested that he put his rough, obviously amateur skills to good use and make himself a damn box to keep his shit in. I mean, I was tired of bailing him out of trouble each time he lost his house keys.

That was five years ago, but he only started making one when he visited me in London. We would be in my room and he’d be working on it and I just shook my head, still taunting him. I remember the specific design that he and Emmett worked on for months. I remember how agitated he’d get that it wasn’t coming out the way he’d hoped and I would tell him to go get a professional and he’d roll his eyes and ignore me.

A twinge of pain moves through me. I miss him. I miss my brother so much, I can’t bare it.

“But,” I start, glancing down at the other key in my hand. “Why did he leave this key for the boys to find? Why would he leave it in a place that was highly unlikely?”

At this point, I’m so damn confused, I feel like I’m the one losing it. Why would George leave this with Trumbull, then leave a dummy key in Syrus Easton’s house? What’s with that?

“I’m not sure Miss, but I’m sure there is a reason for that too,” Trumbull says, extending the box to me. “But I have to say, the last few weeks that I saw him, he was...”

“He was what?”

“A seemed a bit rushed, out of control and stressed,” Trumbull answers, a frown on his face. “Master George was always careful and levelheaded with everything but the last days, he seemed hurried, a lot preoccupied and not as stable as he usually was. It was as if something was intensely troubling the young fellow.”

Oh God, please don’t tell me he was like I am now. An addict...

“Troubling him how?”

“I can’t explain it or put my finger on it but, he would argue a lot with Master Fields.”

“Richard?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Do you remember what they fought about?” I demand, my heart thundering in my chest.

“I can’t say I heard actual words but there was some serious scuffle between the two. Madam Fields would intervene all the time though.”

Amanda?

Somehow, it’s hard for me to see my mother stepping up to defend anyone other than herself, especially against her husband.

“The last months before you arrived were rather tense and heated around here. Overnight, Master George seemed to...age in a way that I thought a young man still in high school shouldn’t be aging. It was like a weight of responsibility fell over him.”

I’m stunned yet again, my mind racing a hundred miles a second, I feel like I’m overloading. But something tells me that this is just the beginning. The information I’m learning from Trumbull is more than I’ve learned in all the time I’ve been in Westbrook Blues.

“Did my brother spend a lot of time with the boys in those few months?” I question, a sense of urgency falling over me. I know George told me that his friendship with the Blue Boys was rocky, but I also know that was a sham, throwing the hounds off the trail. But I still want to know.

“Miss, the Blue Boys, as you called them, have all been in a state of hurried frenzy in the past few months, dare I say a year,” he starts. “From my point of view, it looked like they had a lot going on. Like there was a lot they were preparing for and from the glimpses of conversation I caught here and there, the clear plan was to protect you at all costs.”

I’ve heard that one before. I’m not buying it.

“Why would they say that?” I question, glancing down at the box in my hands, the key in the other. Flashes of George come to mind, as well as the rest of the boys, lingering on one breathtaking face in particular.

“If I’m to hazard a guess, I think it has everything to do with the shift of power in Westbrook Blues.”

“Shift of power?” I frown, watching him.

“The Blue Generation.” He answers solemnly and with that, he leaves. What the hell?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



“You should slow down on those,” Spider says, watching me with his hawk eyes like I’m going to get sick all over his fancy pair of the latest Nikes.

I ignore him and grab another beer bottle, my seventh—wait—it’s the eighth one night, who cares though? It really doesn’t matter how many of these tasteless, cheap beers I chug down my damn throat like its water, I can’t get my fucking heart to stop feeling as much as I can’t get Spider to bugger off.

“Don’t you have some shit to do?” I mumble, chugging down half the damn beer, then I bump, looking at him, but he ignores that jab.

“It’s been two days,” he says, a frown on his face.

“Ah, you’re working on your counting and the days of the week!” I chuckle, “I’m so proud of you that you’re revisiting first grade all over again. It’ll do you a lot of good.”

“That was dry,” he deadpans, shaking his head.

“I thought that was funny as hell,” I raise my bottle in the air as if making a toast. “Our tough, mean mug brother, Spider, is now a man!” Some of his friends snicker at that and Spider growls, shutting them up.

“Seriously?” Spider says, folding his arms, “You’re not going to check on her?” he questions, I shoot him a look. Flames from the fire reflecting in his eyes.

Music is thumping so loud, I can feel the vibrations through my body even though Spider and I are at the back deck of his home, secluded from the rest of the party. I can hear girls squealing in delight to get attention from the drunk assholes that are chuckling, amused at the sexual show in front of them but I’m not interested at all.

We’re at Spider’s house party where the roughest crowd is mixed with the finer, stick up their asses crowd.

When it comes to Spider, he was what many may call, neutral territory. He hosted parties where the crowd from the Valley and the Blues mixes together. Of course, there’s always tension, there’re those that like to show off how much money they have, but when you’ve got nothing, you don’t give a damn about some trust fund prick. But even the trust fund babies with silver spoons in their mouths are always looking for something real, a thrill that brings them close to the edge, so, they all come here. But when you come here, if you don’t want to get banned and pranked to death for the rest of your life, you’ll abide by one simple rule. No fighting.

And I guess when I dragged myself out here after nearly beating some fool to death last night, I knew I wanted to calm the hell down and drink. But I miscalculated how much Spider would leave me the fuck alone to lick on my damn wounds.

“King,” Spider calls, pulling me out of my funky thoughts.

“I don’t give a fuck,” I grit out, knowing damn well that the little blue dot on the app I installed on my phone months ago when Star came back to Westbrook Blues indicates that she’s right where she want to be. Somewhere closed off, and away from me, tucked into her stone tower.

Protected by her mother who doesn’t want me anywhere near her daughter, a witch if you ask me.

“I find that hard to believe,” Spider says watching me.

“You better dig deep into your soft feelings and believe it.” I drink my beer, looking away from him. Silence stretches between us for a few seconds but I know the bastard isn’t going anywhere.

“I think you need to call her,” he starts.

And here we go. I sigh.

“Why the fuck should I do that?” I grunt. *Why should I call her when I know she won’t answer her damn phone?*

“You know, to check if she’s alright. That she’s still breathing and all,” he says worriedly but what he doesn’t know is that little blue dot on my phone, also tells me that her heartbeat has been going steady since the last time I saw her. She’s doing fine, breathing just as fine. Without me.

“Bugger off, Spider.” I murmur as I chug down the rest of my beer. That one’s done, but for some fucked up reason, I feel worse. I can see her beautiful face in my head. I’m still thinking of everything that has gone wrong since a year ago. Yup, time for the hard stuff then.

“Got any whiskey here?” I question him but he only stares back at me with this blank look. “You know, some Old Crow, Jack, hell, I’ll take Eagle Rare.” Anything really, as long as I can make it all stop!

“I’m surprised you know all those brands,” he says, cocking an eyebrow.

“I do read the shit you send me.” I grumble, looking around the deck. I need a damn drink.

“That’s also another thing we need to talk about, The Pit.”

“Fuck off, Spider. If you’re not going to pass me a damn drink then go away,” I grit out. “I don’t want to talk.”

“So, what are you going to do? Sit there, drink your ass silly and pretend like shit isn’t about to fucking blow up as we speak?” he demands, leaning into the backrest of his chair across from me.

“If you haven’t noticed already, shit has already blown up to hell and back.” I growl. “You’re fucking wise, Spider. Catch the hell up with current events.”

I notice a number of girls dancing seductively nearby, their moves clearly orchestrated in a way to attract attention. Mine and Spider’s attention of course, but my dick hardly twitches. It’s almost like it doesn’t work anymore. Yet when Star so much as breathes in my direction, I feel like I just swallowed five pills of Viagra.

“But as I stare, trying to force myself to feel something, I catch a glimpse of blonde hair and I tense up immediately.

“Shit.”

“Spotted her, huh?” Spider says, his voice hard and angry.

“You knew she was here all along and didn’t tell me?” I demand.

“Well, she’s your queen now apparently, thought you knew where your queen was at all times.”

“She’s not my fucking queen. That bitch is nothing to me!” I growl, noticing that she’s looking around as if searching for something...or someone. “When did she get here?”

“Three minutes ago to be exact,” Spider spits out. “Apparently, she’s been looking for you all over town. You ghosting her?”

“After what she did to my girl, I can’t fucking stand to look at her without feeling this need to snap her neck.”

“Yeah, but you can’t do that,” Spider warns, his voice low and cautious.

“I fucking know that, which is why I need her to stay the fuck away from me.”

“Something tells me you’re shit out of luck,” Spider *tsks*. “Someone told her that you’re here, it’s just a matter of time.”

“Buy me a few more minutes. I fucking know I don’t want to wear orange for her.” I growl. I know who I’ll be wearing orange for in the future, that is, if I get fucking caught.

“You’re playing with fire, King.”

“I’d walk through fire for the girl that set us on the path of pain and destruction any day of the fucking week,” I murmur. “So, I don’t give a damn if I’m playing with fire that I’ll soon snuff out.”

Threats or not, Brittney Pace, her fucking father and everything she is, will soon go down. I can fucking raise my glass to that oath.

“Well then,” Spider breathes, a tight smile on his face as he signals one of his friends who nods and walks into the house, right up to Brittney and gives her his fucking charming smile, seducing her nut brain to think that I’m somewhere in the house, looking for her. “Let’s see if she bites.”

“I bet she won’t. I bet you five minutes that she’ll be back and chew your head off for sending her on a wild chase.” A voice says from behind me, and then it breaks into a loud, hyena laugh.

“I ain’t betting with plain words, young cub,” Spider says with a smile.

“I’ve got a Franklin on it.” Noah says, dropping the clean, crisp note on the patio table as well as a large bottle of his poison of choice, Jack Daniels.

“The Jack is a good wager but one bill? Just how cheap can you get?” Spider taunts, with a light chuckle.

“Well, that’s all I’m willing to bet on that brainless bitch,” Noah grunts then he glances at me, a faux look of embarrassment on his face, looking to see if I care at all about his insults. “Oh, I’m sorry, I meant to say I can’t spare a penny on the new Mrs. King,” Noah says with a tight smile on his

face as he plops down on the seat beside mine, looking like he owns the place.

“I’m not married to her,” I grit out, hating that we’re even talking about her. Actually, I’m pissed off that we’re even talking at all.

“Err, try telling her that.” Noah says, ignoring me as he twists off the cap. “Where have you been, asshole? You look like shit,” he says, eyeing the almost fading black eye that he gave me the other night.

“And you look like a freaking model as always,” I mock, noticing the fading bruise on his temple.

“Aww, thanks dude. That means a lot to me,” Noah says, clutching his chest and wiping a tear away. Spider chuckles while I send Noah a good, old fashioned middle finger. “But seriously, where were you?”

“I should be asking you that.” I groan, thinking of the texts Christina sent me. “I’d hate to tell your mother that I’m not your keeper.”

“Why? Afraid she’ll finally see you as a selfish prick?”

“Nah, I think she knows about your stellar traits already. No need to snitch on yourself,” I counter, grabbing the bottle from him before he can drink.

“Whoa,” Noah whistles. “Just how drunk are you?”

“I’m surprised he isn’t slurring his words,” Spider points out, a frown now on his face. “He doesn’t drink this much.”

“He never drinks more than two beers.” Noah says, now studying me with a serious look on his face. “I think this will end badly.”

“You think?” Spider spits, rolling his eyes. “He needs to wake the fuck up and smell the damn roses. You can’t drown...”

“Your sorrows in a bottle,” Noah finishes sarcastically. “Yeah, I think he’s getting that, since he isn’t even buzzed.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not fucking here.” I growl, annoyed with both of them. “And while you’re at it, can you both fuck off somewhere and leave me be.”

“Pissed off, are we?” Noah chuckles. “What happened, your highness, are all the lies and secrets now catching up to you?”

“Noah...” I growl.

“Have you done the calculations and realized that no matter what you do from this point on, she’ll never forgive you for lying to her about George or claiming that bitch who hurt in front of her?”

“I said fucking shut up!”

“Sorry, I’m just stating facts,” he chuckles, shooting a wink to some girls that are dancing seductively at the edge of the patio, where Spider’s guys are standing there as if everything is harmless but everyone know, the patio is off bounds. “You made your bed, now it’s time for you to lay in it.”

“You get ready for me to lay some hate on your pretty boy face right now, if you don’t shut your damn mouth.” I warn, turning to look at him head on.

“Okay ladies, why don’t you calm your tits.” Spider says, frowning at both of us. “I knew y’all were going through it, but openly feuding like this? What the fuck?”

“Why don’t you ask the all-knowing over here?” Noah spits out, taking the bottle from me, chugging away like a pro. “Everything is fucked up because of me.”

“Yeah, blame it all on me,” I grit out then get up on my feet. “I’m fucking done here.”

“Whoa, whoa, you’re so not going anywhere,” Noah says, getting up on his feet as well.

“Get out of my way.”

“Nah, both of us are too fucked up to get behind the wheel ad frankly, I’m fucking here because you called.”

I frown, squinting my eyes at him.

“I didn’t fucking call you,” I murmur, my mind racing. “No offense, if I was to do a drunk dial, it wouldn’t be to you.”

“Yeah, too bad she won’t even answer that damn call even if you dialed her number as sober as a military priest,” Noah taunts, then pushes me so I can sit back down.

“I called you,” Spider starts and we both snap to look at him. “As a matter of fact, I called all three of you.”

“All three of...”

Suddenly, a hush falls over the crowd. I swear, the music stutters to a stop, and then just as quickly, the whispers start from one person, getting as the everyone stares at us.

“I can hear the music from all the way up the damn mountains,” Emmett interrupts, plopping down to sit beside Spider, a six pack in his hands.

“Ah, the walking dead,” Noah greets, fist bumping Emmett a little harder than necessary.

Yeah, Noah is still a lot bitter about the shit we pulled over him but something tells me—with the frantic calls from Christina—that he's got other shit he's running from too.

"Ouch," Emmett groans, shaking his hand. "I thought you stopped being petty."

"What do you mean, baby?" Noah hoots, "Pettiness with my hotness is in the building!"

The entire party hollers back, like it's a war cry, everyone responding to Noah's cry.

"Still got it," he says, a big smile on his face. Looking like he's easy going, carefree, without a problem in the world. But if you look a little closer, you'll notice the sadness there.

"You summoned me here, your grace?" Emmett starts, grabbing a beer and passing it on to Spider, then one for himself.

"Stop calling me that and I didn't call you here!" I grit out, starting to feel like a migraine is coming on.

"Okay, calm your tits," Emmett says, clearly ignoring all the sudden attention he's brought to himself. I glance to the left and I can see people pointing, taking pictures that I know will soon go viral, trending on Twitter and Instagram. If they're shocked at seeing Emmett now, then it means he hadn't made his 'I'm fucking alive' debut these past two days.

I guess he was AWOL like the rest of us.

"You'd think with all the attention you've got on yourself, you'd at least stop frowning and smile." Noah starts. "Maybe they'll do a documentary on you. I think they'll name it; *'Surviving Death Like A Professional Con.'* It's got a nice ring to it too, don't you think?"

"Noah..." Emmett grits out in warning, his face hard.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," Noah breathes. "It's just been a fucked up couple of weeks and I still can't wrap my head around it all."

"Then what I'm about to say is going to send you straight to a mental institution," Spider starts, leaning forward, a look of doom on his face.

I tense up, unconsciously leaning forward as I stare at him.

"What's going on?"

"You're not going to like this," he starts.

"Just spit it out." Noah impatiently says, tapping his foot, looking all jittery. But before Spider can say anything, I hear a loud squeal behind me.

“Alex, darling!” she calls and I tense up, my insides shriveling up to the point of pain as my fists clench. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Emmett growls. “She’s here too?”

“Where are we with the pictures?” I rush to say before Brittney gets here.

“Erased but there’s a possibility that she might have them stored somewhere else, like on someone’s else’s cloud,” Spider informs. We both know who’s cloud will have images of Astraea.

“Can you find it?” Emmett questions.

“Already working on it,” he says, a somber look on his face.

“We need to deal with this bitch,” Noah starts. “And now is the best time to do it. I can call up the guys, they’ll bring it within the hour.”

“No, it has to be precise and at the right time,” I grit out. My asshole of a father was right about one thing. It’s all about timing.

“So what? We tolerate her for now?” Emmett demands, not happy about this shit.

“For now.” I nod, thinking of Astraea. Fuck, I miss her with an intensity that alcohol and adrenaline rush can’t fix. But I can’t go to her unless I fix this mess or if she comes to me. Either way, I’m going to park my ass here and ignore the rest of the world.

“Alex!” she calls again. “Baby, I’ve been searching for you all over this raggedy house.”

“Pay up, Spider.” Noah scoffs, ignoring Brittney’s nasal, irritating voice.

“I don’t know man,” Spider starts, “I think you should get ready to pay with your life because the reason I called y’all to get your sour asses out here is, her daddy is in town.”

Yeah, things can certainly get worse the more you drink, but then again, nothing ever goes the way I want it to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



A cold kind of curiosity seeps into my bones as I slowly walk down the hallway of the second floor, my brother's bedroom doors looming ahead of me. I've done this before, but somehow, this walk is different.

Why do I feel like I'm about to walk into my slaughter? Why does this make my heart pound? If anything, I should be charging in there with a war cry on my lips, a sharp machete in my hand, ready to attack and devour but right now, I'm feeling so damn small and out of my depths, I don't even know what to think about all of this.

George, what the fuck were you doing here? What kind of game are you playing?

What I can't stop thinking of is why he'd go through all this trouble of hiding keys everywhere, yet it feels like there are scattered secrets that are locked and only he can unlock the truth.

I feel like screaming in frustration but I know if I don't compose myself right now and calm the hell down, I run the risk of sabotaging myself and getting unnecessary attention from my mother, who I'm grateful for once in my life, that she's ignoring me.

As I get closer to George's room, a deep sense of curiosity takes root in me and no matter how much I want to tell myself to relax and not expect

much, that this is just a wicked mind game that will end in nothing—I can't stop myself from placing one foot in front of the other, walking towards the double doors.

The loud vibrating of my phone makes me jump ten feet into the air, making my heart pound like I'm an amateur thief about to get caught.

“What the hell?” I whisper, fishing out my phone from my pocket. I notice it's a number I don't have in my phone and out of habit, I choose to ignore it, and stuff it back in my pocket. I don't answer calls from numbers that I don't have saved or that are on private.

Taking a deep breath, I decide not to hover and just rip off the band-aid. I have no idea where Trumbull disappeared off to, or if the old man is leading me into a trap, but I do know my brother. Architecture and creativity was his thing. He liked to invent shit, to create and make up adventures that he forced me to take part in. I guess he took the Indiana Jones movies a little too seriously and I all but indulged him when I wanted to be close to him—and the boys.

George liked treasure hunt games, actually lived for that shit, and the thing is, he actually took those damn games way too seriously, going so far as to dig up a damn hole in the ground to hide something mundane for us to find.

Then there were the clues...

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

“What clues did you leave this time, twin turbo?” I whisper under my breath, then with a burst of courage that I'm not really feeling, I place the key in the key-hole, then twist twice. The dials move, clicking unlocked with a faint echo that moves through the hallway.

I look over my shoulder, afraid that someone might see me or worse, my mother might be back from wherever the hell she was today.

I quickly open the door and sneak in, clicking the door shut behind me, then as an extra step of caution, I lock the door. My heart is pounding in my chest, threatening to crack my ribs. Sweat dots on my brow and my entire body is shaking. I slowly turn around, feeling like I'm hanging on by a thin, thin thread that's about to snap.

His scent hits me first and I gasp, releasing a breath I didn't know I was holding.

“Fuck.” I exhale, wiping the sweat off my brow.

I don’t know what I was expecting to find but a strange mix of disappointment that my brother isn’t in here and the relief that he actually isn’t, stirs in the pit of my stomach making me feel faint.

Breathe, Astraea.

Everything feels like George, it smells like him too. And as I look around, I swear I can feel a breeze moving in the room as if he’s in here. I know it’s crazy of me to think that—since there’s a possibility that he might be alive—but I still feel his presence and that makes me calm down some.

“Okay, guide me, twin turbo. What am I looking for?” I whisper to myself.

I look around his messy room and pause.

George was messy, sure. It’s not unusual to see clothes strewn about the room but this is extreme. Almost everything is in disarray, as if a tornado hit his room.

Furniture is askew, his bed is unmade and it looks like it was recently moved. Chests of drawers are open, clothes and papers are all over the place and it hits me. Someone was in here and that person was looking for something, desperately.

The entire room looks like it’s been ransacked. I take a tentative step towards his bed, noticing that even though someone was in here, it was a while ago as dust has settled on every surface.

Who was in here and what were they looking for?

I slowly walk towards the seating area where a deck of cards are strewn on the round table, as if he was in the middle of a poker game. A faint smile graces my lips as I think of all the times Ace... I mean, *him*, would wipe the boys clean of their money without even trying.

But instead of money—which was mundane and pointless for them even back then—they played for higher stakes. Who gets first dibs on some stupid, idiotic thing like leading the football team out of the tunnel at college championship games. How they managed to do that was beyond me, but money does talk.

But knowing *him*, he might have been cheating for all I know. The smile fades away as pain shoots through my chest...again. God, when is this pain going to stop? He isn’t mine to pine over like a fool.

Shaking my head, trying to shake the sadness away, I walk over to the large workstation table at the back of the room. I’ve never seen this desk

before, it looks like a professional architecture's desk. It's big and wide with a number of unfinished and completed drawings and plans strewn all over.

But that's not what catches my attention. In an order that looks and feels familiar, I notice twelve 3D models of some kind of buildings or are they home, lined up at the edge of the table.

Bending to eye-level with the first house, I study the pink house which looks strangely like the estate at the beginning of the hills, the one close to the gates. Then it hits me!

"What the hell?" I gasp as I realize that all twelve models are exact replicas of the twelve estates that comprise the Westbrook Blues Estates. There's Emmett's estate, Noah's, even the King's estate is there.

For someone who doesn't know the structure and design of the Blue Boys' mansions, it would be easy not to recognize that these models are for the estates

Which is why when I finally notice our house, I quickly realize that it's not the new home that stands here now, but it's the old one. The one that Ace burned down four years ago. This one has red question marks all over it and numbers as if George was designing it to determine how the old house used to be. Why would he do that? I know he helped design the new mansion, so why would he add the old mansion to this model?

As I study it, I notice a faint letter scribbled at the front of the house, where the entrance once was. It looks like an "A".

"What does that mean?" I whisper to myself.

I step closer when something blue catches my eye. I reach under the model of our old house, reaching for the blue thing. It's a blue paper and as I grab it, something about it looks familiar.

Pulling it out with an urgency that hits me square in my chest, I notice that this paper looks like an exact replica of the journal that I got two years ago, the journal that I confronted George about, but he denied ever sending me along with the pendant that I stopped wearing recently. Well, to be fair, I asked him about the pendant, not the journal—seeing as I got the packages two days apart. As if the journal was an afterthought.

But now as I stare down at the note, there's nothing. It's blank.

I frown.

Then I study the paper again, feeling it between my fingers. The material feels familiar.

I hold up the paper to the light, as if to study it and I gasp!
There's something written there!

I hold it up to the light again, my heart beating loudly in my chest. I see my name scrawled at the back in a messy, boyish font that I'd recognize anywhere because it looks like a duck wrote the note.

Lucy
there are no monsters under your bed.
But there are under mine...

What the fuck?

I read the note again, and again for almost fifty times but can't find the meaning to that. So, George managed to leave me a note written on a paper that can only make the writing visible when you shine a light on it and now I can't understand what he means. How brilliant.

I search my memories of when I had nightmares. I remember George would check under my bed just to sooth me, but I don't think he ever said anything about there being monsters under his bed. I sigh, my arms flapping down at my thighs, frustration sinking into me.

I feel like I'm in a game where the rules don't even apply. And if I'm honest, I've been in this game since before coming back to Westbrook.

I walk over to his bed, feeling tired already and that's when it hits me!

But there are under mine...

Of fucking course. I rush the rest of the way to his bed then drop down to check under his bed but as soon as I check the entire length of his King-sized bed, disappointment creeps into my soul again. There's nothing there. Not another note, hell, not even a lone sock.

"What the hell?" I whisper, feeling angry. "This can't be it."

I've always hated these games.

Hated playing them with George but I indulged him—just like he indulged me with the shit I liked. The guy tried out ballet with me just because I was too terrified to go to that class by myself and every other girl was trying it out. And when I was too nervous to do a single thing, not even a twirl, he held my hand and followed Ms. Belle's instructions like a pro, making all the girls in the class adore him, with stars in their eyes. And all

he did was wink and tell me that it's fucking easy and he'd help me through it.

"Smart ass." I whisper as tears start falling down my cheeks. I miss him with an intensity that's bordering on obsessive right now. And the fact that he might be...

No, get the facts first. Play this game that he's laid out for you.

I get off my knees and start rummaging around his room, making a bigger mess than what I found before, trying to make as little noise as possible. I start with his closet. I slide open his wardrobe doors and the clothes come falling out.

It looks like whoever was in here, also searched through George's closet then stuffed the clothes back in carelessly. Ignoring that mess, I reach up to the top shelf hoping to find something, anything at all. Maybe there'll be another carved box or some mysterious shit like that but there's nothing.

I check the drawers where his socks are and I notice a whole lot of them are missing.

Huh?

I open another drawer, this one has his boxer briefs but a lot of them are also missing.

I rummage around the heap of clothes, searching for my brother's socks but they're not there. That's fucking odd. Could the intruder have stolen my brother's underwear and socks?

I walk over to his shoe collection that stands untouched, neatly organized. George was a sneaker-head—just like Spider—I remember it used to drive me crazy the way he would criticize how I used to crease my own sneakers. Like seriously, it's just a pair of shoes that can get you from one place to the other but for my brother it was more than that. Being in his room has me in my feelings and nostalgic.

But as I run my eyes down the length of his collection, I notice the random, empty spots where shoes once were but now, there's nothing. I pause and look from the beginning and there it is, no shoes in random spots, instead, there's a bit of dust.

What the hell?

It's almost as if...

I rush out of his room, maybe he left all his shoes and socks out here but there's nothing. I drop down to search under the tables, under the couches in

his room, but there's nothing. Even though his room is messy, there aren't any shoes in here.

My heart starts pounding all over again. There's no way...

Okay, what does that mean? Think Astraea, think.

Where would George hide his school reports whenever he got a bad grade—which to him, C+ was a bad grade? You know, the stuff he never wanted people to find out about him.

Under his bed, yeah but I just checked. There's nothing under his bed.

I glance at the bed once more, then walk around it. I study the bed with a cynical eye, trying to look at it like my brother. George would definitely do things that none of us ever thought of.

Where would he leave a clue?

“Shit, of course!” I squeal, beside myself with excitement.

Under the mattress!

With all my strength, I start pushing the heavy, memory foam mattress away and it gives just a little. Then with all my strength, grunting as I do, I push the rest of the thing clear off the bed and it slides away, hitting the carpeted floor with a little thud.

And voila, a blue letter!

I make a mad dash for it then, holding in a breath as I feel the thick paper in my hand. This time, the paper doesn't have any name on top of it. It's just there.

Dropping to the floor of his room, I rip open the seal, not caring to be careful or to even think that maybe I should hold off. I just act on pure instinct, tearing the thing then shaking out the letter onto my lap.

This one is a thick, expensive embossed paper, different from the one I found under the model of our old house.

Unfolding it, I release a shaky breath and then start reading it.

Twin Turbo,

If you're reading this, then you're probably annoyed that you didn't find everything where you thought it might be. Yeah, I wanted you to work for it a bit, sue me! What fun would it be to just leave this under my bed? Besides, I wasn't a hundred percent sure who might get in here but I know it's you. It has to be you, twin turbo.

Astraea, by the time you're reading this, I'm guessing everything has gone to shit and you're suspicious of every single thing that everyone has told you, let alone the people who have told you shit that has led you to venture for answers. And frankly right now,

suspicion is now your only reliable best friend. Suspicion will—hopefully—save your life because baby girl, it's in danger.

listen, I'm not dead. Well, I hope I'm not.

My jaw drops to the floor, my eyes widening as I re-read that part. What the ever loving fuck?

Actually, I'm writing this right now before I leave to stage my death—only this time, fucking Dereck Myers believes that he's actually going to drug me that I end up dying in a way that he'll never be a suspect.

He's a mule but he's also an answer. I just hope that I don't actually get killed—because the truth is, there's a high chance that I might not make it to the end of the night.

So, you reading this now, means that I'm out searching for answers—everyone believes that I'm dead—that's a good thing, don't blow my cover, sis! I'll put packs of ice cubes in your bed like when we were eight!

Hopefully by the time you make it to the end of this letter, I might have found some answers and I'm on my way back. But, too much is at stake here, precious lives that I'm responsible for, are on the line. Lives that mean everything to me, that I can't afford to lose, are at stake.

If that's the case and I'm actually gone, I've laid out some points in this letter that I hope you might vaguely know about, but first...

I've been battling this nagging feeling that something happened to you that night, a few years ago. Something you refused to tell me about—no matter how many times I tried to coax it out of you, you kept your mouth shut.

I knew that you were, and still aren't, crazy. You're as sharp as a whip and sending you to London—to some mental institution none the less, that was a big red flag!

So, I did my own research and Astraea, I'm so mad right now, I can't even see straight. I'm mad at you for not letting me in. I'm mad at myself for not piecing it together soon. I'm frustrated with myself that I never held you when you needed it, instead, I left you alone for long periods of time just because you wanted me gone. But I should have stayed. I should have been there. I'm so sorry.

Not that a mere apology will fix your soul, but I promise you this, I'm hunting him down. I gasp, tears pooling in my eyes. He knew! George knew what happened to me. Oh God. I read on.

I can't tell the boys right now, and I'm sure by the time you're reading this, they would have grilled you for leaving them but I know one thing for sure, they'll find out and when they do, there'll be hell to pay even if they act like everything is fine and forgiven when they're around you.

Breathe, Raen and try not to get as mad as I know you're getting right now. But don't let your emotions overwhelm you. At least, not now.

The Phoenix Corps is real! There's so much I can't tell you yet but just know that we're connected to them way more than I thought. One way or the other, the PC is responsible for every shitty thing that happens in Westbrook. Don't underestimate them.

1. Look into the signatures on the form for that institution for your admittance. The person who sent you to London is not who you've been blaming, but I think that's an answer you should want to find out for yourself to start your own healing and forgiveness journey.

2. I know you're wondering why I left the key in Syrus-the-snake's home—it's a figurative symbol. Tell the boys, they'll get it. You'll hate this one but there's no other way around it. Just trust...

3. Stay the fuck away from Richard! No matter what he tells you, or how he might seem to you, stay away from him! The journal I sent you, don't you dare give it to him! Keep it safe and study it. Nothing is ever as it seems, twin turbo.

4. We were once triplets, Astraea. This is probably the heaviest one yet, but I don't know how to break it to you without feeling a deep stab in my heart that I can't stop. I have no idea what happened to our sister; only two women know and they won't talk about it no matter what.

I know you're probably feeling a lot right now, but if I'm to guess, there's a lot of anger and resentment in your heart. I get it. Talk to Mom. Don't be so hard on her, even though she fucking deserves it.

Twin turbo, my soul is yours and I love you, okay. You're not alone. And even if the boys have infuriated you to hell and back—because I know that will happen—just know that they need you now more than ever. You are and you've always been the glue that keeps us all together.

They've been breaking apart since you left— but you brought them together once, please, do so now because as shit hits the fan, their lives might be in trouble, too.

Watch out for Noah, he's been sinking into depression each day— if there's anyone who knows what that feels like— and I hate myself every single day that I got to you almost too late that night— it's you.

Emmett— yeah, he isn't doing so well, twin turbo. I'm searching for a way to guarantee his heartbeats. But he has a broken heart. Figuratively and literally. He might not know how to express himself but I've seen him light up only twice in my life and shut down just as quickly. When he talks about you and when he sees Ivy.

Talk to Ivy.

Choose your allies carefully.

Don't be too hard on yourself, baby girl.

As for King... where do I start? He's complicated. He's mean. He can be clueless but one thing I know about him is, he feels like you're too good for him and that you'll never want him. I guess that's why he acts out and wants to punish anyone that he feels, demeans him. It's fucked up, but I get it. I trust that everything between you two will work out. That is, if both your stubbornness doesn't kill you off, first. I'd never trust anyone else with your safety other than him.

Don't get it twisted, I'll still kill that asshole if he breaks your heart. But, he's got scars, Astraea, scars that might be our fault...

But if this letter finds you in a place where doing all this is impossible, and you're too hurt to trust anyone or anything, just know that I need you to fight.

Your key to find me— The Phoenix.

Twin turbo, I'll do everything I can to keep my girls alive, even if it means sacrificing some time away from home and going off on my own.

Burn them all to hell, Raed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Holy shit! What did I just read?

But, he's got scars, Astraea, scars that might be our fault...

What does that mean? How did we cause Ace...I mean, Alex's scars?

My heart is pounding so damn loud in my chest, threatening to burst out of my chest. I can't stop the tears from falling down my cheeks, or the way my hands are shaky, holding the letter, the words now blurred. I can't believe this.

Everything hurts.

My limbs are heavy.

My heart aches.

I can't breathe.

I feel more confused than I was even though I know I should be enlightened somewhat. One minute I'm feeling overheated with barely contained excitement bubbling in my stomach that George is alive, then the next, a bucket of ice-cold water is tipped over my head with the realization that he might be dead after all—no one actually knows. Maybe he's somewhere out there right now, doing whatever the hell he's doing but he might be in danger. Or maybe he's six feet under and rotting.

“Fuck!” I breathe out, the paper crumbing in my hands. I let it go immediately, afraid that I might tear the delicate paper by mistake. The truth is, I don’t know what to make of these clues, but I do know one thing, I have to fucking figure it out right now because I think I’m a few months too late.

According to Trumbull, George counted on me getting this letter a few days after I came back to Westbrook Blues. This means, he knew that Amanda and Syrus were planning to marry Emmett and me. He knew, which means he told Emmett, who in turn signed that damn paper. But is it official?

And I’m guessing he’s been waiting since the time he was declared dead, for me to fucking find him but I think we’ve both run out of time.

Don’t let your emotions overwhelm you.

“Yeah, way to warn me in advance, George.” I grumble, knowing that I don’t have the luxury of sitting and get angry over the fact that my own brother was just as much a Blue Boy as the rest of them, managing to so many secrets from me without even flinching.

I wipe my tears away, then sit up straight to re-read the damn letter. Then I read it again, until it feels like I’ve memorized it to my broken soul.

Stay away from Richard.

What does that even mean? Of course, I know that Gorge knew all along that Richard wasn’t our father but why warn me now? And most importantly, what’s with the journal?

But then, if he sent the journal, then it means there’s something valuable about it that has nothing to do with me writing down my feelings like I thought. Does the journal have something to do with Richard, The Phoenix Corps or both?

I recall the heated confrontation at the hospital the day I thought Ace had gotten Emmett killed and it turns out the whole operation was messy at best, with the boys beefing among themselves but it led me to get the key, that led me to Trumbull that led me here. It seems like George saw this coming. He knew something like this would happen, but how?

What’s the end game?

I get up from the floor and read the letter again, skipping the parts about a certain boy that I won’t name and the parts where George admits that he found out what happened to me and go straight to the bullet points he wrote.

The Phoenix Corps...

There's so much I can't tell you yet but just know that we're connected to them way more than I thought.

How is that? If I'm not mistaken, the boys said something about how Spider and Kim were a part of this group. Who were they anyway? A group of vigilantes? A terrorist group?

I snort, dismissing the thought as soon as I think it. There's no way Marie would allow her only grandson to ever disregard humanity like that. Spider was raised to care, to look out for people—not to be an ignorant douchebag.

That said, I want answers. Maybe I can call Spider! If I call him, maybe he might know what George is talking about. But he might be with the boys so no.

Taking a deep breath, I drop down and reach for my phone that lies on the floor and search for a number that I didn't think I would be calling this soon. Not after everything.

Without another thought, I dial her number, even though I know a large part of me resents her, maybe even hates her and doesn't want to call or have anything to do with her, but I need to get in line with the devil that was always beside me this entire time.

Her phone rings only once then she picks up, breathless and shocked as if she can't believe that I'm calling her either.

"Astraea?" she gasps out, her voice low. "I..."

"Where are you?" I cut her off, getting right to the point, unable to bite the anger in my voice or keep the terseness out of those words either.

"I'm just...driving to clear my head," she answers, blowing out a frustrated breath.

"Good, pick me up." I quickly say, knowing that I sound rude as fuck but my idiotic politeness has led me to this hurtful place in my life. I stuff the letter back into the envelope.

"What?" she questions, her shock coming back. I put the phone on speaker and set it down.

"I said come and pick me up from my house," I repeat, reaching over to pull George's mattress back in its original position, just in case the person who came in here comes back again. "I mean, you know exactly where it is, don't you?" I taunt, a humorless laugh leaving me.

"Astraea, I don't think..." she starts but I cut her off

“You said you were the only one in my corner,” I grunt, this damn mattress is heavy as fuck. “Did you lie about that too?”

“I...,” she starts then clears her throat. “What are you doing? You sound breathless.”

“Rearranging furniture and feeling hellish as fuck,” I grit out, finally setting the mattress in place. “You didn’t answer my question. Did you lie to me? Not that I’d be surprised.”

I listen to the heavy, weighted silence on her end, my heart pounding in my chest.

“No,” she breathes out. “Despite what you might think Astraea, I actually care about you. You’re my best friend.”

“Yeah and your dad raped me.” I spit out but as soon as the words escape my mouth, I slap my mouth shut. She flinches on the other end and then there’s silence.

“Kim...” I start, not knowing what I’m going to say.

“Where do you want to go?” she questions instead, cutting me off. Hutting my eyes, I mumble my answer, knowing damn well that I’m not ready for this but I don’t have a choice.

“Wherever those damn boys are.”

Silence greets me instead and I start shaking.

“They’re at a house party in the Valley but I hear all sorts of crowds are there.”

“Of course, you would know.” I mumble but she caught that too. I sigh, “I’m sorry, it’s just that...”

“Nah, you meant to say that, I get it,” she grits out, the words filled with barely restrained pain and something else that sounds a lot like determination. “I’ll be there is ten.”

“I’ll be at my gate.” I say, then we hang up.

I sneak out of George’s room the same way I came in, then lock the door behind me. I rush to my room upstairs. Rushing into my room like a tornado, I toss my phone on the nightstand then quickly walk to the closet, removing my shoes as I go to change my jeans, swapping them for a nicer, tighter pair that I know makes my ass look great. I swap out my top for a silk crop top, without a bra. I grab another jacket and then I grab a pair of black ankle boots that add a few inches to my height.

Next, I grab some shiny, strawberry lip gloss, applying it to my lips. Then some eyeshadow, then I run a comb through my hair that has

surprisingly grown at least five inches since I cut it what seems like a lifetime ago when I thought that my brother was dead but alas, the heartbreaker might just be alive. I hope.

I look at myself in the mirror, taking a deep breath.

“How did we get here, huh?” I whisper, trying to prepare myself for what’s to come. I know I’m going to see *him*, so I need to switch off my damn feelings. I can’t let *him* affect me even a little bit.

I grab the letter from the other pair of jeans I was wearing and I’m out. Let’s do this.

I rush for my bedroom door, making sure to grab my phone on the way out, but as I snatch it off my nightstand, I find the drawer with the bottle of Xanax pills that I stole from the hospital, since mine are being kept by my loving mother. The bottle was prescribed to a Mason Hennings, but I’m sure that Mason Hennings will get another prescription filled. I open the drawer and sure in enough there’re still there.

No, Astraea, don’t...

I stare at the orange bottle, my heart pumping so hard and loud in my chest. I try to fight the temptation, the compulsion to take the damn pills but I just...just one more won’t make a difference. It’ll calm me down and keep me in check, Just one...

I grab the bottle and shake out a pill, swallowing it without water. I close the cap, then stare at the bottle. I look over my shoulder, then open the damn thing again, shaking one more pill out and pop it in my mouth.

It’s just two pills, it won’t hurt anyone. Besides, I’ll get off the damn opioids soon enough, just not tonight. Tonight, I need them more than ever to be calm.

I open the drawer again and stuff the bottle at the very back, hiding it with the clothes in there. Then I make my way out of my room. I have no idea why I’m sneaking out of my own room, but a sense of urgency has me on high alert.

I glance from left to right and even over my shoulder as I rush towards the stairs, only now noticing that these stairs are so different from the ones from three years ago. The very ones that I ran down, trying to escape from...Larry.

I don’t know if it was a conscious decision on my mother’s part to rebuild the house in completely new way but I’m glad it doesn’t resemble that house of horrors.

As I get to the bottom of the stairs, my escape right across the large foyer, the hairs at the back of my neck stand up on end and I freeze on the spot.

“Hello Astraea.” A deep voice says behind me, making a chill race up and down my spine. I don’t know why such a violent reaction attacks me when I turn around and meet his frosty, hard gaze.

The gaze of a man I haven’t seen in weeks. The very man my brother warned me of. Steeling my spine and making sure my facial expression is neutral, I study him.

“Hello Dad.” I say in an equally monotone, bored tone of voice, lacking emotion like a hardened criminal. But inside, I’m shaking.

I don’t know what it is about the way he’s looking at me, but for the first time ever, I’m truly scared of this man, painfully aware of George’s letter that’s stuffed in my back pocket, his warning about Richard making alarms blare in my head.

We stare at each for a long minute, him studying me with an expressionless face but I can’t help but be wary and take a step back. It almost feels like...I’m his prey.

Dread moves through my system, freezing the blood in my veins. Who is this man?

“Dad, huh?” he questions, the corner of his flat, papery thin lips twitching with an ugly smile, but it comes out looking like a grimacing.

“Aren’t you?” I question, deciding to go on the offense right there and then, George wouldn’t have mention anything about Richard if the warning wasn’t merited.

Something happened here, and it has everything to do with this man.

“Well, we both know that isn’t true,” he starts, taking two steps towards me, his movements matching those of a stalker and combine that with the fact that we’re in the great hall, a flashback hits me square in the chest.

Larry tackling me to the floor of the foyer, pinning me down until I could see the high ceiling and the crystal chandelier.

Did Richard have anything to do with that?

I start sweating, my body trembling just a bit as I watch him. Say something, Astraea!

“Is...” I stutter, then clear my throat. “Is that why you left?”

He stops, then lets out a small chuckle. “In a way,” he answers, his voice rough, like he’s been smoking five packs a day.

Larry also smelled like cigar smoke. I shiver.

“Your mother did her best to keep the truth hidden from both of us, but it appears everyone else knew that I wasn’t your biological father right from the start,” he goes on, jerking me to the present.

“Well you should be glad the truth is out then,” I breathe out, steeling my spine to stop the trembling, as I look at him. “You’re off the hook now. No need to pretend you have a fatherly bone in your body.” I spit out.

He studies me for a second, then takes another step, getting closer to me.

“You see Astraea, I was raised by a man who was too cold to even appreciate that he had a family. His wife was blindly devoted to him through the infidelity and all the scandals. She tried everything she could to please that man. She even tried falling pregnant countless times, losing each child until one day, she got pregnant successfully,” Richard starts, his voice as impassive and cold as ever.

“It was a girl,” he smiles, watching me, but it looks all wrong and villainous. I take a step back and he smiles for real. “It turns out, the man wanted a girl all along, to remind him of his dead mother. The woman gave birth yes, but the little girl died within five hours of her birth, driving the man insane.”

I gasp, my body tense as I watch his face rapture into some kind of anger mixed with sadness.

“The man’s anger drove him to be a resentful, cold and angry person that when his wife later gave birth to another child, a boy this time, he didn’t give a damn, you know why?”

I mutely shake my head, discreetly looking around for something, anything.

“Because according to him, a man is nothing if he doesn’t have a girl child that would be his pride. A girl that would make him the envy of men.”

I feel like retching, my stomach protesting as he says those words, his gaze locked on me.

“You’d think he would want an heir, a boy to continue his name but that didn’t matter because to him, no one would ever do it quite like him. No son of his would take his identity from him because he wanted to be peculiar, one of a kind Senator of the state of California,” he laughs,

God, he’s got daddy issues, huh?

“So, what happened to the little boy?” I question after a while, unable to bite my tongue.

“Well, he grew up. His father constantly told him the same thing so when he met this woman in a bar one day over eighteen years ago, things happened of course. Until two years later she told him that he had knocked her up and that she was raising two kids by herself, he wondered,” he pauses, taking another step closer. “Was one of those kids a girl child.”

My heart is pounding so hard in my chest. The look in his eyes though... if I don't get away from him right now, I don't know what he'll do.

“Lo and behold, one of them was a little girl with round cheeks, bright eyes,” he says, now directly in front of me, a faraway look in his eyes. “You were shy at first, could never let me hold you but soon you adjusted. Of course, I didn't much care for the boy, my upbringing ingrained so deeply in me, but I didn't care about that. I had a daughter. My pride and joy! The princess who would make me the envy of men! We were a happy family.”

He isn't wrong. We were happy once. I was close to this man once.

But now, I feel sick to my stomach that I was a pawn to him all along and now he's mad that it turned out, he lost his pawn.

“Richard...” I start but he cuts me off.

“You know, I started suspecting that you weren't mine when you started looking a lot like your mother's brother,” he goes on and I freeze.

“My mother's brother?” I question, a frown now on my face, replacing the panic and fear. “My mother only has a sister—who you're intimately involved with.”

“You know about me and Sarah?” he halts, taken aback by that little admission.

“What? You think I wouldn't find out that you were dipping your pen in family ink when you should have been visiting your supposed daughter after what happened to her?” I start, anger now rising in me with a ferocity that I didn't know I possessed.

“After what happened to you?” he repeats as if what I'm saying is outrageous, then he throws his head back and laughs.

It's hard, it's cutting and makes me take another step back, watching him as if he's going to attack me anytime. “What happened to you was a message...”

“Richard!”

Snapping my head to that tersely spoken word which feels like a reprimand and a warning all at the same time, I notice my mother standing there—looking regal in her ball gown black dress, diamond studs on her

earlobes, that match the delicate necklace on her neck. She's dressed to the nines but the way she's standing there, she looks like a warrior.

"Are you ready to go?" she questions him with a hard, cutting smile, completely ignoring me as if she doesn't see me standing there.

I look back at Richard and that's when I notice that he's also dressed in a fine tux, the lapels draped in silk, his expensive dress shoes gleaming as if they're both going to a dance, or a fundraiser ball.

"Yes, of course." Richard says, clearing his throat. Then I watch incredulously as he pulls himself together, straightening his bowtie and smoothing his jacket as if to tuck in the monster that he keeps tightly reigned in.

Who is this man? And why does it seem like my mother has him on a leash?

"Let's keep this charade going, shall we?" he says smoothly, his voice now cultured and soft but the look in his eyes as he glances from my mother to me—it promises something.

Something that I'm not quite sure I'm ready for nor will I like. My mother straightens herself, extending her delicate neck, watching him right back as if daring Richard to make a move.

The fuck?

"I'll just get my notes, make sure this speech is epic." Richard says and then disappears in the direction of his study, leaving my mother and I standing there, a tense silence hanging over us.

"Where do you think you're going, young lady?" my mother demands, quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Out." I say, releasing a breath I wasn't aware I was holding all this time. "Richard says you have a brother." I start, watching her face.

If she reacts in anyway, I miss it. Her face remains stoic and blank, the look in her eyes as flat as her pressed hair that falls to her back.

"And do you believe him?" she questions instead, her voice just as cold.

"Why wouldn't I?" I question, "What would he gain by lying now?" I watch her, shifting my weight from my left leg to the right, but she only shakes her head, as she turns away.

"Stay away from Richard, Astraea and go back to your room," she commands, "You're not going anywhere."

I snort, unable to believe the way she's treating me right now.

"We have to talk," I say instead, watching her but she turns to leave.

“Do as you’re told, Astraea.” And with that, she leaves.

I stand there for a second, watching her disappear down the direction Richard used.

I don’t know why but the way my mother warned me away from Richard sounds a lot like George’s warning. Why is that?

And my mother has a brother?

What the fuck?

But as I hear the faint clicking of her heels in the distance, I know she’s coming back to force me back to my room so I turn and make a mad dash for the door.

I have to get to the bottom of this shit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Astraea

Kim is parked out at my gate by the time I get out of the house and rundown the long driveway to where her car is running. I quickly open the passenger door and hurl myself in.

“Go!” I yell. Without hesitation, she peels out of there, making a U-turn towards the estate gates.

I’m breathing fast and hard but it’s only when we’re going down the hill, with the estates getting smaller behind us, that I take the moment to breathe.

I glance at Kim who hasn’t said word and I notice her hallowed cheeks, the way her hands grip the steering wheel with a white knuckled grip, as if she’s holding on for dear life. Even with all of that, she looks flushed, her hair messy as fuck, a glazed over look in her eyes, but she also looks like she’s been crying.

“Where are you coming from?” I question, frowning at her. She smells like...sex.

“I...,” she stutters, glancing at me, looking guilty. “I was with someone.”

“Did you have fun?” I watch her, knowing that Kim is the type of girl who will never let anyone near her if she didn’t feel some type of way. She’s not ‘fuck-em all’ type of girl, she grows attachments. Strong attachments.

And there's only been one boy that I know off that she really, really despises, yet he's the only one she's ever let close to her. I guess that's how attraction works.

"If fun includes an angry fuck, with growled words, biting, tension and a denied orgasm, yes it was hella fun, can't wait to do it again," she grit out.

Well damn.

"There are times when I knew I should've stayed away from a certain asshole, but I kept going back," I start, looking out the window. "I don't know if I was attracted to the pain of being near him, or the agony of being seen by him but all I wanted to do was..."

"Be with him," Kim finishes.

Silence stretches between us for a while and honestly, there's nothing to say.

"I don't think going to this party is a good idea," she starts after a while of tense silence and angry energy between us. "I don't think you should be going there."

"Because of what? My life is in danger?" I scoff.

George said the same thing in his letter.

"But the question is, who am I in danger from?" I shake my head. "From who, Kim? I don't see how else that asshole can destroy me more than he did."

"You're wrong again," Kim says, glancing at me, then back to the road. "He can reach in and cripple you from sides you never thought would hurt you."

I just escaped a suspicious looking Richard and an equally strange looking Amanda.

Don't be so hard on Mom, even though she deserves it.

What the fuck did George mean by that?

My phone starts vibrating in my pocket. I dig it out and notice that same number that I don't know, trying to call me. Just like before, I reject the call and stuff my phone back in my pocket. I look out the window, thinking that she won't answer my question but after a while, she answers.

I turn back to look at her profile, my face tight and taut with anger.

"Astraea, you have to believe me," she starts after a while. "When you told me what happened to you, I swear that's when I started questioning everything. I didn't know it was him who..."

“Raped me.” I finish for her as our gazes connect for a second, then she looks away.

“Yes,” she breathes. “But I had stopped giving him detailed information about you from that night we spent at your house, when you invited me for a sleepover.”

“Why?”

“What?” she questions, glancing at me.

“He’s your blood, your DNA, your father, and at that time, I was just a girl you felt sorry for enough that you hung out with, so why would you stop reporting to him?”

She lets out a rough breath, her nose flaring.

“He’s not my father, as far as I’m concerned!” she spits out. “Yes, he’s my sperm donor, but he’s nothing to me but a liar, a monster who has the ability to take my sisters away from me and I owe him nothing.”

I watch her after her outburst. It’s only now that I notice that Kim is just a girl, like me, going through the worst of nightmares.

She’s tough not because it’s cute to be tough but because she has to be tough. She doesn’t have a choice, but to hold all together, I see that now.

But that doesn’t dispel the hurt in my heart that she caused.

“That still doesn’t answer my question, I mumble.

“I did it for you.” She whispers after a while of tense silence in the car. “At the time, he didn’t care but then overnight, he just flipped. He became obsessed with any detail concerning you and King—but I was now ignoring him because I was now piecing everything myself, which is why I think he sent his pride and joy into the field to do his dirty,” she growls.

Brittney.

“Does Brittney know about her father?” I question with a frown.

“You’re asking if that bitch knows that her father is a psychopath who threatened me to do as he says, transferring me to Westbrook Blues just to spy on you—with a knife around my terrified seven year-old sister, Kylie’s neck—promising that if I don’t do as he instructed, a fate worse than death will fall on my sisters?”

I’m stunned by that, I don’t even know what to say.

“Or are you wondering if she knows that her father is a serial rapist? Take your pick, it won’t matter because she’s wrapped in a bubble that her father is the best thing to happen to the world even though he lives in the shadows.”

“You hate her.” I conclude watching the way he shoulders are set back, like she can’t even relax even now, as if she’s anticipating danger.

“For more than I can ever describe to you,” she says, with a deep sigh. “But she’s her daughter for real. She doesn’t care that he repeatedly raped my mother, young boys and girls...” she chuckles, but it’s hard, edgy, filled with trauma and fear.

God.

What is wrong with that man? I feel sick all of a sudden.

Clutching my stomach, I fight an onslaught of flashbacks as they assault my mind. I can almost feel the weight of his body pressing me down. I can smell the cigar smoke that clings to his body. I can taste the blood in my mouth.

“Astraea!” Kim shouts, then I feel a cold breeze moving across my face, jerking me back to the present. I look around, feeling dazed and notice that we’re still in the car with Kim.

She’s watching me, a worried look on her face. I glance towards my window and notice that it’s open. She must have lowered it for me to get a grip.

“What the hell?” she demands, looking scared.

“I...” I start, my voice hoarse. “It’s nothing.”

“That wasn’t nothing,” she shrieks. “You literally stopped breathing,” she rushes to say, glancing at me then back at the road, her voice high pitched with panic. “I think you need to see a doctor.”

“No!”

“Astraea...” she starts.

“I said it’s nothing,” I yell, feeling claustrophobic, something I’ve never felt before. I start sweating.

“Oh God, Astraea!” she shouts.

I shake my head, trying to clear that haze away then I look at her.

“I’m good.” I murmur. What kind of pills did I take?

“What’s going on with you?” Kim demands.

“It’s just that I’ve been having really these intense flashbacks and they feel so damn real at times, thrusting me back to the night I was violently introduced to Larry...”

“God,” she breathes, and I look away.

I feel like I’m back to square one. Like all the progress that I’ve made in the past four years, to actively get over and heal from my trauma, just

flushed down the drain and now, I'm dealing with everything on super-max, super-sensitive and I'm not sure if I'll make it to the other end, seeing as I'm popping pills all again.

The truth is, I'm a hot mess. My mind is messed up.

I feel like I'm burnt out and I think I'm the one who lit the match to my own demise.

"Hey, it's going to be alright," Kim says, glancing at me.

"That's what everyone says but they don't really understand what I'm going through," I murmur.

"This week alone, I found out a lot of shit that has destroyed me." I start, keeping my voice low as we go down some roads that I faintly remember from childhood. "I found out that everything I thought I knew about everyone around me was a total lie. Everyone treated me like I mean nothing, like the truth means nothing. Everyone has kept secrets from me and it's all been in the name of protecting me."

Kim remains silent, letting me talk but with each word, she tenses up, knowing damn well where I'm going with this.

"I've been broken before, Kim but this time around, I'm hurt for reasons that I wasn't counting on and quite frankly I never saw any of this coming."

I never saw that Emmett was sick or that my own mother would fix me up to marry him.

I never counted on Noah being hurt by the same girl we both let in our lives and hearts.

I never thought I'd fall for someone as deeply as I did, loving him with parts of me that I mistakenly thought he saw and understood. I never counted on giving him my heart and soul. But I wasn't counting on him destroying me with a simple flick of his wrist.

I never counted on that same boy claiming the girl that roofied my drink or that he might claim her in front of me. Even though I suspect that something else is going down, the hurt isn't something that'll go away that easily.

I shake my head, looking out the window. I don't have time to dwell on that same shit. Right now, all I fucking want are answers. The rest won't heal my damn soul!

"Astraea..."

"You hurt me, Kim." I cut her off, glancing at her as she parks the car down the road, since the entire street is blocked off, every spot taken by cars.

It looks like a big party.

“You hurt me deep,” I look at her, our gazes holding. “You hurt me deeper than I thought possible.”

She visibly flinches but she doesn't look away. She opens her mouth as if to say something but I don't stay to listen.

I open the door and quickly get out. I'm not trying to be rude, it's just that, I don't think I'm ready to hear how sorry she is. I don't even know if I have it in me to forgive anyone as easily as I've done in the past.

A blue-eyed devil has continuously broken my trust and the shattered my heart time and time again, and what did I do? I drew doodles in my notepad, losing my concentration on things that actually matter all because he knows how to fuck me good. Or maybe it's because he made me feel warm, loved and seen? I can't do that anymore.

I'm not a victim and I refuse to let the past win.

So, with that thought in mind, Kim and I silently walk down the street toward the large house with loud music that's making the street vibrate. As we get closer, I notice lawn chairs everywhere, solo red cups strewn around and people dancing, laughing, enjoying themselves. Some are even playing a beer-pong game outside, how they manage to enjoy it in this brisk night air, is beyond me.

“Damn, this is one hell of a party,” Kim whistles as she looks up to the top deck facing the street where I think a couple is fucking and sharing a blunt at the same time.

“Now, that's a skill that I think I envy,” I nod in agreement. Shaking my head, we head for the front door but before we get in, Kim grabs my upper arm and stops me.

“Keep your head down, and try not to get attention on yourself,” she whispers in my ear. “Larry's people might be here. This isn't just a high school party, Astraea. Someone out there...”

“You mean your father?”

“Yes, Astraea, my sperm donor, maybe yours too, wants you dead. Don't underestimate the fact that between now and reaching the boys, someone can snatch you. It's crowded so it'll be an easy deal.”

I look at her and in that moment the promise of real threat comes alive, George's letter burning a hole in my back pocket.

“Okay, I just need to find one of them and then we can leave.” I say, looking around.

She watches me, hesitation on her face and then the next thing she nods and we're on the move. We pass some drunk assholes, singing the national anthem at the top of their lungs.

"What kind of high are they on?" I shout, shaking my head.

"The good kind, I think, but it's a karaoke contest," Kim shouts in my ear, pointing at the large screen behind the group.

"Are you sure they are here?" I shout back at her, going from one room to another, peering in.

"They must be," Kim shouts, "We just need to find a large, congregated crowd that look like they've just seen angels."

Or devils, depending on how you look at it. We go up the stairs but find nothing, then we start moving towards the back of the house. And that's where we find almost everyone running to.

I notice some girls squealing, grabbing each other's hands, excitement and arousal in their eyes as they rush to the back of the house.

"Follow that stinking scent of arousal," Kim shouts above the music and I nod, knowing that she noticed the commotion ahead to. But there are so many people, I can't even pass through.

Bodies start slamming into me from every direction.

"Excuse me..." I shout, but my voice drowns down. More people press into me, until I start feeling like I'm sinking in the crowd of people. But before panic can set in, Kim hauls me back.

"You good?" she shouts, a worried look on her face, mixed with annoyance. I manage a small nod, feeling a bit shaken.

"Okay, stay behind me. I know where they are," she shouts. Grabbing my hand, she starts leading me the rest of the way, pushing people out of her way with so much force, leaving them stunned and speechless. Hell, I'm impressed.

Kim can be intimidating as hell when she wants to be, and she knows no one will say a damn thing about it to her face. She has a spectacular resting bitch face on the best of days. I guess it came with all that Phoenix Corps crap.

"Oh my gosh! He's alive!" I hear people shouting the more we move into the crowd. I notice the look on their faces. Bemused, shocked and stunned.

"No way, he died!" Someone shouts and it's chaotic the more Kim pushes us through.

“He’s out there, holding court with them!”

They could either be talking about Emmett or it could be... no, there’s no way he’d be here. He needs me to find him.

“Omg, take a picture!”

“What the fuck!”

Drunken gasps and murmurs start getting louder the more we move into the crowd. My heart thunders in my chest but as soon as we clear the crowd, my eyes zero in on the exclusive, tribunal shit going on at the far end of the patio.

Seriously?

Spider, Emmett, Noah and someone else who I think is the blue-eyed asshole, are seated around a roaring fire, passing around a bottle of alcohol with tense expressions on their faces. If they notice the attention on them, they don’t let it show, they don’t even look like the care. Hell, Noah’s playing with a baseball bat, ignoring the girls that are purring his name from the house.

It looks like no one but the four of them on the back patio, as if it’s only for them.

“Holy shit.” Kim breathes beside me.

I notice the blue Lamborghini from so long ago parked at the end, I think it’s Noah’s car. Then theirs *his* car—I hate that car. It looks like they have an exclusive parking, one where they don’t get boxed in—even if the house isn’t theirs.

Fucking entitled pricks.

They look like freaking gods, hardly moving or even saying anything. But as I study them, a flash of blonde locks catches my eye

I squint closer, my brow furrowing, but I can’t see exactly what or who it is.

I take a step closer just as Kim tries to pull me back.

“Astraea, I think we should just go...”

And that’s when I notice who exactly it is, and my blood runs cold.

Brittney is draped all over *his* lap, as if she belongs there. Then I watch as she flips her long hair, tossing it over her shoulder as she giggles as if one of the guys said something funny but I can clearly see that Emmett and Spider aren’t paying attention to her and Noah is frowning at her. But she doesn’t care. I watch as she gazes down lovingly with a smirk on her face someone whose face I can’t see from here.

My nose flares, my temper rising as I watch her from the sidelines, acting like she owns the place, like she belongs there. But what hurts more is the fact that none of them are doing anything about it. They just tolerate her presence.

It's as if they...replaced me.

Replaced me with that bitch?

Hell no.

I watch as her take the bottle that I think he has, intercepting the pass to Emmett, then with an exaggerated wink from her rainbow shadowed eye, she presses her lips where *his* lips have been.

It's as if a switch has been flipped and all I can see is red. I feel murderous as fuck.

"Astraea." Kim starts but I'm not listening.

I push my way out of the crowd, not caring who I shove until I break free from the onlookers that stand there like fucking addicts, getting their Blue Boys fix. Making sure to put sass in my strut, I seductively move my hips the way I've noticed Kim do, knowing that all eyes are on me, a pair at a time.

I unzip my jacket, then discreetly pull down my top to bring my girls on a bit of display as I go. I've got great tits, but tonight they have a special assignment. I know I'll regret this tomorrow but tonight, to hell with it.

As I go, a large guy moves from out of the shadows, about to intercept me but as soon as he takes one good look at me, recognition flashing in his eyes, he steps back with a small smile, allowing me to proceed.

Emmett and Spider see me coming first.

"Holy shit." Emmett breathes as he stands up. Spider stands up too with a smile of approval on his face. He nods at me, and I smile.

Noah looks over his shoulder, playing with his baseball bat. As soon as he sees me coming though, a huge smile graces his face and a twinkle lights his eyes as he stands up.

"Damn," he breathes, watching me. "You look like hell should be scared of your fire power."

"Are speaking from experience?" I question, my voice a bit smoky.

What the hell were those pills? Ordinary xannies don't do that.

But you took two, bitch!

As soon as I speak, I watch as if it's a slow-motion film as *his* head snaps up and he immediately pushes Brittney off his lap then stands up. The bitch

gasps, a bemused look on her plastic face but Alex doesn't pay attention to her. He's staring at me, unable to look away.

"Oh, I heard from the once dead, now alive like Lazarus from the Holy Book," Noah snickers.

"You reading your word now? I'm so happy, was wondering when you were going to get saved." Emmett shoots, then he looks at me. "You look great."

"You look as alive as ever." I shoot back, looking away quickly. I still feel so damn guilty over what happened between us at the hospital.

"It's good to see you," Spider says, engulfing me in his arms for a hug.

"Well, I hope you don't mind me crashing your party. I think my invite got lost in the mail." I say and he chuckles, pulling back.

"You know how the postal service is set up these days," he says. "You came alone?"

"No, I came with..." I cut off, glancing over my shoulder, confused. Where is Kim? It's as if she disappeared. I turn back and notice the sour, angry look on Noah's face. Yeah, she ran.

"Uh, what are you doing here, bitch?" Brittney protests, getting up as well, reaching for her Kings' arm like a floozy. She frowns, watching me with disdain and panic in her eyes. "this is a private, Blue Boys meeting."

I stare at her, silently. A steely kind of resolve has fallen over me. I feel calm, steady and ready but inside I feel the anger churning in my gut, making me feel volatile. The faux calm I have on is a lie. I'm unsteady as hell.

"How riveting." I sarcastically say. "It must be liberating."

"What is?" she demands, rubbing her tits on King's arm whose frozen, still staring at me.

"You know, finally admitting to yourself that you don't only look like a boy, from the sex crazed look in your eyes, you look like you have your own blue boys to deal with."

She gasps but I'm not done.

"You need a sex toy to help out with that? I'm sure your daddy's got plenty." I grit out, watching with obvious satisfaction when her eyes widen with surprise. "I'm sure he can help you get your rocks off." I say, taking a step in her direction but Noah blocks me and then lets out a hyena laugh to dispel the tension.

"You bitch..."

“Yeah, yeah, I told on you and your amazing relationship with daddy?” I mock, “Go cry me a river, boo but whatever you do, make sure you’re gone.”

“You can’t tell me that!” she gasps. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Your worst nightmare about to obliterate your fucking life, that’s who the fuck I ma, now please go away.” I say, turning to take a seat in the chair that Spider vacated. “Oh, and feel free to take your King with you. We have important matters to discuss in my Blue meeting.”

I feel mean and vindictive. So damn brutal but the look on Alex’s face thrills me like nothing else in this world. Breaking and burning a king has never felt so damn good, I think I’ll do more of it.

“Hot damn,” Noah hoots, “She’s back y’all!”

“You can’t...” she stutters, her mouth hanging open. I can hear people laughing in the background. There are people filming this no doubt but I don’t give a damn. “Alex,” she whines.

I look up then, meeting his frosty gaze. Color has returned to his face. “Alex, are you just going to stand her and have her insult us like that?”

I cock my head slightly to the left, watching him. Knowing damn well that he can’t read me like he used to. I won’t let him manipulate me anymore.

What are you going to do, your highness?

I cross my legs, making myself comfortable but our gaze doesn’t break.

“Alex!”

“She’s right,” he starts, his voice like silk. “My girl doesn’t want you here, and as such, I don’t want you here too.”

“Exactly,” Brittney breathes, a sigh of relief escaping her lips. “Leave, bitch!”

She looks at me with triumph in her eyes.

He’s looking at me as he says that. I tense up for a split second, but then, he turns around and stares at Brittney with a cold, impassive expression of his face filled with hate.

“You’re the only unwanted, desperate object here. I’m talking about you, Brittney.”

Confused, Brittney looks from me to Alex, then her face darkens with anger.

“No, you can’t do that to me!”

“I’m not going to repeat myself, leave,” he finally says, his voice like thunder and lightning all at the same time. An involuntary shiver moved down my spine, noticing the way his muscles bunch in that t-shirt, as if the cold doesn’t bother him.

Why should it when he was cold inside.

“But...” Brittney gasps, reaching for his arm again but he shakes her off, not even looking at her.

“Leave.”

Brittney opens her mouth as if she’s about to let loose on some word diarrhea but she looks up and notices that everyone is watching her. She frowns, snapping her mouth shut. Then she looks at him anger darkening her face but she holds her tongue, then she looks at me, her eyes blazing with fury but the way she composes herself in impressive as hell.

“You’re going to be sorry for this,” she says, with a tight smile on her face. “I’m going to destroy you. Don’t forget who his queen is.”

“Oh sweetie, you can be his queen, his fuck toy, cum bucket...I don’t give a damn,” I wave my hand dismissively. “Some of us know our own worth. We don’t have to wait for some guy to validate us, we crown our damn selves.”

She tenses up, her face darkening even more with anger. Yes, that’s right bitch.

“Careful, Astraea. Or I’ll shoot,” she seethes, making me smile.

“Fire your shot, bestie.” I mock then my smile vanishes without a trace. “I know what you did. I’m coming for your ass.”

Her jaw drops to the ground, shock making her face grow as white as a sheet. Huh, guess she thought I wouldn’t figure out that she drugged me.

“Why don’t you run along to your daddy and be a good little spy,” I drop my voice to baby talk, a tight smile on my face. Her eyes flash with mirth. There’s no doubt that she knows that I know who her fucking father is. Now, let’s see what she’s going to do about it.

“Well, we shall see,” she spits out.

With a huff, she flips her hair over her shoulder and leaves but not without making my blood run cold. Noah, Emmett and Alex watch her go, all three of them with impassive expressions on their faces.

“Are we just going to let her threaten Astraea like that?” Noah demands, turning to look at his friend.

“It’s not time yet.” Is all he says as he turns to look at me, then he looks at Spider, his jaw locked, fists clenched. Spider chuckles silently, then he turns to shoot me a wink.

It’s not time for what?

“Gotta go check if the trash has been thrown out,” he says, with a smirk “Don’t be a stranger now.” He turns to leave.

“This is your house, right?” I question him, remembering the instructions I got from the letter and he stops.

“Thought you knew that already, where did you think you were going?” he asks with a charming smile on his face. I could see how easy it was to falling love with a guy like Spider. Hell, it would be so much better if we fucking lost our minds and hearts to guys that were safe in general, but I guess I wasn’t wired like that and that fucking sucked.

“Don’t be cute,” I tease. “Where’s Ivy?”

His smile falls after that, and then he looks up as if to stare at someone, an unreadable expression on his face, then he looks at me again, a small smile back on his face but it’s not the same.

Yeah, I fucked up.

“She’s not into partying these days so she’s helping out as a volunteer at the hospital with Gran,” he answers after a while. “She does that a lot.”

“Okay,” I mumble, feeling sad all over again.

“Call her,” Is all he says then he’s gone. The music is turned up louder but still, no one approaches the porch. I stare at the fire, knowing that all three of the boys are looking at me, waiting.

“You called for a blue meeting, the floor is yours, Baby Blue.” Noah starts a smirk on his face as he settles into the chair across from me, King and Emmett taking their own sits, all of them watching me.

“I got into George’s room,” I start, knowing that it’s best to just get straight to the point.

Emmett and Noah suck in a deep breath but Alex just watches me without saying a word.

“Okay, and...what did you find?” Emmett questions, leaning forward. “Was...”

“No,” I shoot it down and notice the looks of disappointment on their faces and I reel back. “Wait, what were you hoping I’d find in his room?”

“George himself,” Noah spits out, grabbing the bottle of Jack from the little table right beside the fireplace.

“What?” I look at Emmett and he nods.

“Here’s the thing, Raea,” he starts, looking at me with a somber look on his face. “We knew George’s bedroom door was locked, we had one of your maids check for us. So, when we realized, a few weeks ago, that your DNA and the one of the person they buried when you came back, didn’t match, the possibility of George being alive became really high.”

“So what?” I start, “You thought he’d have the fucking accident, then he’d be in there on a damn hospital bed, hiding from the forces that are now trying to take me out?”

“It was a possibility,” Emmett nods, a tight smile on his face that doesn’t reach his eyes. “I mean, any possibility is better than nothing, but now that you’ve been in there and…”

“He wasn’t there!” I grit out, cutting him off, tasting the bitterness of my dead hope on my tongue.

“Yes, he wasn’t,” Emmett looks away, his jaw locked, tense energy radiating from him. Even Noah just shuts up and drinks his whiskey, but Alex just watches me. It’s clear that the boys miss George. And they have this undeniable hope that he might be alive and that’s good for me right now.

“Okay listen,” I start, clearing my throat. “The key you got wasn’t the right one anyway.”

“How is that possible?” Emmett questions, confused. “I got the key from my father’s study where George left it.”

“He left a key there alright, but it wasn’t the one to his room,” I say and then I go about explaining everything that happened with Trumbull. The carved box. Noticing that someone was in his room. The models of the estate homes. The fact that his shoes were missing. But for some reason, I keep the letter to myself, not wanting to share it yet.

“For some reason, George knew a lot of shit would happen. He said that Dereck was a mule but he was also an answer, so I think we should find…”

“No way,” Noah jumps, “You’re not going anywhere near that asshole.”

“Agreed but wait,” Emmett starts, frowning at me. “George said?”

Shit!

“Did you talk to him?” Emmett questions, watching me intently, as if sensing for lies.

“In a way,” I say blowing out a breath. “He left me a note.”

“Fuck, why didn’t you say anything earlier?” Noah demands, a smile on his face. “Where is it?”

I pause, looking at the flames, debating whether or not I should show the boys the letter.

If George wanted the boys to have it, he would have addressed it to them, but as it stands, he made sure that I’d be the only one who would get in his room and get his message.

“I don’t have it,” I answer after a while and Noah presses his lips into a fine line, unhappy. “What? It’s a lot of crazy going on. I don’t know who’s watching me at any given time so I’m not going to let anyone know that my brother left me a clue to find him.” I say, throwing my hands up.

“He left you a clue so you can find him?” Emmett questions, leaning forward.

“Yeah, he said something about ‘The Phoenix.’” I explain, my confusion coming. From the corner of my eye, I notice Alex tense up like he knows what I’m talking about. “What the hell does that mean?”

“The Phoenix?” Emmett repeats and I nod.

“It’s clear,” Noah starts, looking at his best friends. “The fucking Phoenix Corps is the key.”

“Then that means their roots are deeper,” Emmett says, watching me.

“Or Astraea is right, we have to find fucking Myers,” Noah states but Alex is just quiet, watching me. His jaw locked, nose flaring.

“But why would George leave a key in my father’s study?” Emmett questions, rubbing his jaw with his forefinger and thumb.

“Oh, the letter said that your father ‘is the key’ and that you’d know what he means by that.” But he did say something to the effect of, your father is the key,” I say, all the while I do my best not to look at him but I fail. His heated gaze draws me to him with each beat of my heart.

I can’t help but notice the way he watches me. Silently, taking me in as if he knows my secret, like he knows I have the letter with me, but I don’t look away. Instead, I hold his gaze, fascinated by the reflection of the flames, dancing in his eyes like he’s the devil.

I shift, feeling liquid heat pooling in my pussy as I stare right back, receiving the promise in his eyes.

He wants me.

Too bad...

“Well damn,” Noah whistles. “Why didn’t we think that this would be a big game for that bastard.”

“What does it mean?” I question. “What does he have to do with anything.”

“He’s the one who’ll give us answers about the Phoenix Corps,” Alex starts, his voice washing over me. I close my eyes, hanging on to the tingly feeling of being turned on by him.

As long as I don’t get any closer to him, I’ll be safe. I have to be.

“Shit, then let’s fucking go!” Noah starts, getting up. “If fucking Syrus is the key, then we don’t have to deal with Dereck until later.”

“That won’t be possible,” Emmett starts, running a hand through his hair, messing it up in obvious frustration.

“Why the fuck not?” Noah demands. “He does know you’re fucking alive, right?”

“Yes but,” Emmett starts, looking at me.

“But what?” Noah demands, getting antsy.

“He’ll want something first. He’s not a normal, scared man you can just demand information from and get it straight,” Emmett states, looking at me. We know that Syrus already has what he wants but in the interest of breaking the truth to Alex, we need to do it bit by bit.

“Well, what does he want?” Alex questions and we all look at him, but he’s watching Emmett, a silent message passing between them. “No fucking way.”

“King...” Emmett starts but he’s cut off by a loud growl that makes my heart pound.

“I said no! You’d respect that if you know what’s good for you!” he growls standing up now, looking down at Emmett. “She’s not yours.”

Noah snorts loudly, then looks away after Emmett and I cut him a look.

“It’s the only way, King.” Emmett growls right back, standing up to face his best friend. “If there was another way, George would have said that.”

And it’s already done...

“Don’t pretend like you’re doing any of this for anyone but yourself,” Alex growls, taking a step closer to Emmett. “You’ve always wanted her, salivated over her for years and after all the shit we’ve gone through, you’re still going after her.”

Oh my God.

“Can you fucking listen to what you’re saying!” Emmett grits out, anger darkening his features. “This isn’t about you and me! This is about George who we all vowed to fucking do right by, or have you forgotten?”

“I haven’t forgotten a single thing! But you’re the one that wants to prey on...”

“Stop! Both of you!” I yell, standing, jumping between the two of them. “I’m sick and tired of the angry tension and fighting between you two!”

“Come on, Baby Blue, it was about to go down. Let them beat the crap out of each other. Again,” Noah whines. I cut him a look. He pretends to seal his lips shut then tosses the key away.

“You think I haven’t noticed the bruise on your face, blue fairy, or the fact that you’ve been drinking like a fucking washed up, has been?” I scold, “Walking around smelling like a strip club, with bruises on your face.”

“Damn,” he whispers. “That’s harsh.”

“Yeah, I’m not done with you,” I warn, making sure that he knows he’s got it coming. I’m going to rip him a new one when I deal with him later. But for now, I turn to Emmett.

“And, what do you mean by it’s the only way?” I demand, ignoring the penetrating gaze behind me.

He sighs, shutting his eyes for a second. When he opens them again, most of the anger is gone. “Do you really not know? It makes sense with what he said about your mother.”

I was hoping he wouldn’t be right nut Emmett and I were still going to do it anyway.

“Yeah, I thought as much,” I murmur, looking at the flames. “I guess we’re going to get married, then find the Phoenix.”

“Like hell you are!” Alex starts, grabbing my arm tight in his hand.

“Let go of me,” I seethe, looking up at him.

“I won’t let you marry him,” he grits out, watching me right back.

“Do you have to be such a hit head about everything?” I demand and he smiles, but it’s cold.

“Heavy is the head and all that bullshit,” he says with a cold smile on his gorgeous face, as that was reason enough to be an ass. He obviously wasn’t interested in listening to reason or going along with anyone’s plan other than his own, as a plume of smoke floated around him like the remnants of burnt out souls that he dragged to hell like a hobby.

Mine included.

“King, we’re also doing this to keep you out of jail,” Emmett blurts out, making Alex and I tense up.

“What?” he questions.

“Shit,” Emmett breathes. “You weren’t supposed to know that.”

“I wasn’t supposed to know what?” Alex demands, pushing me gently out of the way as he steps closer to Emmett.

Not this again.

“Please don’t...” I say behind them.

“You comfort me then you still keep shit from me?” Alex grits out slowly, his fists clenched. “And if I’m to guess dear old Syrus and her mother are setting me up to go to jail on the basis that I what? Killed you?”

“That and that you murdered George,” Noah chimes in happily.

All the cards are now on the table. Silence falls over us, but Alex just stands there, then without warning he turns around and grabs my hand and his jacket, then he leads me to his car.

“Let me go,” I grit out, knowing that people are watching but he keeps going, ignoring me.

“I swear to God, if you don’t stop manhandling me...”

“You’ll what, pick him over me?” he growls, unlocking his car and the next thing, he’s strapping me in expertly in the passenger seat, then he shuts my door so loud, my ears ring.

In a split second, he’s in the driver’s seat, he starts the car and we’re out of there, leaving a shocked Noah and a tense Emmett.

“Where the hell are you taking me?” I demand, so damn angry with him, I’m seeing red.

“To remind you who the fuck I am to you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



From the moment I heard her voice, I sobered up quicker than a fucking party nun on Sunday morning after girl's night. I can't describe the way my heart started pounding in my chest when I saw her, looking sexy as hell, her body sensual as ever, making blood rush to my dick. I had no choice but to get fucking Brittney off me.

One, because she had just sat there and I was warning her to get the hell off my damn lap, but she didn't fucking listen and two, she had it coming.

But seeing Astraea, and the way she dared me to deny her, to go against her, fucking embarrassing me with that taunt about me going along with Brittney, I knew immediately that she was here for a fight and she wanted me to fucking decide.

And she'll get my fucking decision. I choose her, every fucking day. But I feel like she needs a fucking reminder of who she belongs to.

"Are you even sober?" she scoffs, folding her arms with a huff.

"You're the worst kind of hangover cure, but you fucking still give me damn headache," I growl, my dick hard as fuck, needing to ascertain the fact that she still want me no matter what she fucking said in that hospital room.

“Well, as long as you hurt in some way,” she mumbles, looking away, her body tense, making her look sexy as fuck. She’s a showstopper. Before everything, I would have said she doesn’t know just how stunningly sexy she is, but with that fucking strut that had the guys standing up and whistling, I think she’s coming into her own power.

Only it infuriates me to hell and the fact that she fucking disregards me like she can move on from me, I won’t take that. He should know better than to tease a starving man.

“I hurt more than you could ever know,” I start quietly, “But something tells me you like it that way. You want me to hurt.”

“Yes,” she quickly says, not denying it at all. “Maybe then you’ll know that you’re not a god after all. And having your heartbroken out of necessity is fucking messed up.”

“I didn’t hurt you out of necessity,” I deny, my voice low.

“You fucking did!” she seethes, turning in her seat to look at me. “You chose to hurt me, remember? You decided to pick her, when you know damn well what she did! You made a conscious decision to lie to me! You and you alone led Larry to my fucking door!”

“I didn’t know, Astraea, Jesus.” I breathe out, my heart pounding away in my chest, knowing that this pit was boiling and it’s only now erupting because we never fucking talked about anything. “You think I can live with myself right now knowing that he came after you. After what he did to me?”

She remains quiet, watching me but she doesn’t cry.

“You think this is fun for me? That I put you on his radar by hanging around you like a fucking puppy?” I growl. “From the day I found out what happened to you, I can barely sleep, can barely function, or tolerate my damn self, knowing that I wasn’t there that night!”

It’s the first time I’ve actually acknowledged how messed up and twisted inside I’ve been, because of her yes, but a lot of it is because of what happened to her. And now the fact that it was Larry who did what he did, that killed me.

“I promised to protect you because I swear I fucking knew it back then, you were going to be a target because of me,” I whisper, my grip on the steering wheel tight and bruising, but I don’t care. “You were the most gorgeous thing I’d ever seen, stars in your eyes that made my heart fucking

beat for something other than the emptiness that I've felt for so long and all I've ever wanted to do was be your everything, Astraea."

She doesn't say anything as I pull up to the Brooke House, grateful that we're alone and secluded, away from prying eyes and everyone who wants to get in our business.

"If you think you're going to lay a finger on me after you touched that bitch, you're fucking out of your mind."

"And if you think you'll fucking marry Emmett, you're stupidly mistaken," I seethe, glancing at her. Her beautiful face is stoic, her features creased in a frown, watching me. The tension in the car is so thick, you could slice it a million different ways with a steak knife, but you'd never take what we have away.

"It's not your choice! Besides you moved on just fine as far as I've seen!"

"Damn it, Astraea, I did that for you!" I growl, punching the dash. Pain shoots through my knuckles and I curse, looking away. She flinches, watching me but I can't even dare to look at her right now.

It's dark out, I feel fucking vulnerable and I hate it. I hate feeling this way in front of her. Weak and pathetic and not knowing what she fucking thinks of me.

"You claimed that bitch right in front of everyone, called her queen and then let her rub all over you like a bitch in heat, for me?" she mocks, her voice sarcastic as hell. "The way she broke the news about Kim, the way she prances around that school, talking smack about me, you let her do that for me?"

"Yes," I answer simply.

"Explain," she demands after a while and I sigh, knowing this was coming.

"Brittney has pictures of you," I bite out, hating the visuals that flash behind my eyes.

"What kind of pictures?" she questions, her chest now heaving up and down fast.

"It doesn't matter, we're almost done extracting them, but we just need to find her father..."

"I said what kind of pictures?" she demands again, her voice catching.

"Astraea..." I look at her, ignoring the pain in my hand as I reach out to frame her delicate face in my hands. God, I'd do anything for this girl. I'd

do anything to see those stars back in her eyes, but there's nothing but fear and confusion right now.

"What kind of images does she have of me?" she asks again, flinching away from my touch. "Tell me."

I sigh, my head hitting the backrest. I know I could show her the images, the ones that Brittney has sent me each time she thinks I'm trying to crawl back to Astraea. But some evils are better than others and I know Astraea isn't going to let this go.

"They're images from four years ago," I start, and she gasps, her body trembling.

"He took...pictures of me?" she questions, looking dazed.

"He took pictures of me naked, battered and bruised."

"Stop," I grit out, not wanting her to describe it as shock waves of anger moving through my body, reawakening the urge and hunger to hunt down Larry, Eli's warning can go to hell, I want to kill him.

"Oh God," she breathes, shuddering as she clutches her chest. "Oh my God,"

"Astraea..."

"He has images of me..." she gasps, then her body starts shaking so hard, prompting me into action.

I quickly reach for her seatbelt latch and unlock it, then reach for her, pulling into my arms, making her straddle me but she's still shaking, her gaze unfocused.

"Astraea," I call but she shakes her head, her face growing as white as a sheet, her lips trembling, reminding me of something else that happened before.

"Astraea!" I call, louder this time, gripping her upper arms, but her eyes get darker. "Fuck!"

Panicking, I open my door and get out of the car, with her in my arms, then hurry into the house, but she doesn't so much as react to the change of environment. Unlocking the door, I pass through the general area, then go down the hall. Quickly going through the security checks, the inner door opens, and I take her to a room that I'll remind her who the hell she belongs to.

I don't bother switching on the lights, knowing that she doesn't need that right now. Besides, the moonlight is filtering in through the window.

I take her straight to the bathroom, opening the shower, I run the cold water on and step in with her in my arms. She shrieks as soon as the cold water pelts down on her, hanging on tighter to me.

“What the hell?”

“You looked like you were having a panic attack,” I answer, holding her tighter to me, “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

This is the reason I didn’t want her to know all of this in the first place. I knew it would affect her, and her mind would chew her up. Protecting Astraea is not only a physical job that I take seriously, it’s a full time vow I made to her when we were kids. And if it includes being a heartless jerk to a bitch like Brittney to keep Astraea safe, then so be it.

“Make me forget,” she whispers, pulling my hair at the nape of my neck. We’re fully clothed, the water is icy cold, but my dick is as hard as ever.

“Make me forget.”

“Astraea, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” In as much as I want to sink into her depth, I don’t think I want to fuck her right now when she blanked out on me.

“Don’t act like you’re a good guy now when we both know you drove us here so you could fuck me into submission,” she whispers, now seductively moving her body.

“You want to fuck, hard,” she whispers, biting my neck now as she drops down to stand on her own.

“You want to teach me a lesson on who I belong to,”

“Astraea, don’t push me.” I grit out, feeling like all the blood in my body has rushed to one part of my body and my whiskey brain has since switched off. Instead of stopping at my harsh voice, she grips my shirt in her hands and makes me remove it. Like a puppet, I let her pull the strings until she I’m naked in front of her.

Then she makes short work of stripping her own clothes before I can reach for her. I hungrily take her in, every glorious inch of her, noticing that she’s thinner now, and the reminder that she tried to take her life in front of me days ago.

My nose flares, a growl rising in me but I bite it down, not wanting to spook her but fuck me, she twists me up inside.

“Now fuck me,” she demands, grazing her hard nipples on my chest, hiking her leg around my hip, making sure my cock is directly close to her sleek heat, making me groan.

“You don’t want this,” I warn, my gaze hooded as I look down at her, getting angry that she’s taking the emotion out of the way we connect. She’s trying to keep her fucking heart out of this.

Not if she wants this cock.

“Fuck me,” she challenges, “Unless you aren’t man enough to...”

Before she can finish that, I pull her up, forcing her to hang on to me, doing my best to ignore that bandaged wrist but I can’t help the fury that’s rising in me. I push her into the cold wall of the shower. Without the usual care I take into making love to her, I line my cock with her pussy and in one hard thrust, she screams, holding onto me with dear life.

Her hot, wet pussy welcomes me, clenching around my cock, making me stars but I don’t stay to enjoy the feeling. She wants me to fuck her hard, fuck her into submission, I’ll do just that.

Clenching my jaw, I pull her hair, bite her neck and fuck her as hard as I can, knowing that she’s in pain but her body is coming alive with an impending orgasm, shuddering in my arms.

“Yes,” she screams, her fingers running through my hair, as her legs tighten and lock at the small of my back. She moves with me, meeting me thrust for thrust.

My balls tighten, the need to shoot my seed in her so damn strong but I don’t, instead, I bite every inch of her wet skin that I can, marking her, claiming her, enjoying the hell out of her screams of pleasure.

I pull her hair, making her neck longer. “Come,” I growl in her ear and she spasms wildly in my arms. I watch her, daring her to shut her eyes this time but she doesn’t watching me right back as she rides her fucking orgasm like a pro, her pupils dilated, her back arched, her pussy throbbing and I just keep fucking her through it, not allowing her to come down from her high.

“Shit, shit!” she gasps. Holding on to me like a koala bear.

“Feeling fucked yet?” I growl, unable to hide my anger for even a second. She holds my stare and mutely nods, looking wary of me all of a sudden. I pull out of her slowly, missing her heat the moment I do so.

“Good,” I say, switching off the water as I step out of the shower with her still in my arms. “It’s time I make love to you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



My jaw drops to the floor, my body tensing up, instantly aroused like nothing else as soon as he says that. I was just screwed in the shower to a powerful orgasm, but even then, he was distant. I didn't know I was craving him, desperate for his closeness until he said that.

We're dripping wet but he doesn't care. He gently places me on the bed, and then he looks down at me for a long minute, his gazes hooded. I have no idea what he's thinking, but I'm suddenly aware that he hasn't kissed me.

We just fucked but he didn't even kiss me.

"Kiss me," he commands, as if he was just reading my mind, but I'm frozen, staring up at him, unable to do anything.

"I said kiss me," he grits out, hovering over me, his hard body pressing into me, his muscles bunched together, his eyes glittering a bright, fierce blue that I can see with the aid of the light from the bathroom and the moonlight in the room.

"You overdosed on fucking pills years ago, I was there," he starts in a low voice.

"Your body grew limp in my arms and I fucking thought you were gone.

You slit your wrist right in front of my eyes and destroyed me when you drank that fucking morphine like a feral beast, Astraea.”

It’s the softness of his voice that breaks me. A sob that I’ve been suppressing deep inside bubbles in my chest, threatening to spill over. I look away but he growls his displeasure, gripping my chin with his calloused forefinger and thumb, forcing me to look at him.

“Don’t,” he grits out. My heart is thundering so damn hard in my chest, I bet the entire town can hear it. I can’t seem to be able to catch my breath, our gazes locked and I’m trying my best not to breakdown and sob in front of him.

“You wanted to quit on me, Astraea,” he goes on, watching me. “You accuse me of making decisions that hurt you but Astraea, you continuously make senseless decisions that destroy me and no matter what, I can’t recover from that.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m tongue tied, scared shitless and I feel so raw, stripped down and vulnerable in front of this boy.

“Everything I’ve done, has been for you. I’ve hated you from the moment I saw you, but I hate the fact that you’re also the only person in this fucking world who can make a nightmare bearable.”

“I…”

“I hate that I depend on you so fucking much,” he says, now spreading my legs softly, placing a pillow below my ass. “I hate that you smile for him,”

I don’t have to ask who he’s talking about. I already know. I open my mouth to say something, anything really but he shoots me a look that silences me.

“I hate that you think the worst of me,” he whispers, staring at me, then at my now wet and ruined bandaged wrist. Embarrassed, I quickly move it out of his line of sight, but he stops me, grabbing my wrist and then he places a kiss there, daring me to look away. I don’t though.

I can’t look away even if someone had a gun to my head.

“Kiss me, Astraea,” he repeats. I’m so damn breathless, and trembling. I’m naked in front of him but I’ve never felt more seen before.

Slowly, as if I know that if I so much as make a move wrong, he’ll snap, I graze my fingertips up his bicep, his thick neck that has bite marks, the nape of his neck where I pulled his hair in the shower. I touch the tip of his ear, then, as tentative as a virgin, I graze his lips with my fingers, hunger

and arousal growing so potent in me, I feel like I might combust any moment now.

He watches me hungrily, and I slip my finger in his sexy as sin mouth, but before I can retreat, he bites down, I swear, I think I cum with just that.

“Let me kiss you,” I groan, my voice hoarse, thick with arousal that I can’t help but feel. I cradle his face with both my hands, pulling him down to me, then without a thought in the world, I press my lips to his, kissing him hesitantly, like he’s going to devour me.

He growls low in his chest, angry all over again, “Stop playing with me,” he grits out, pulling my hair again, “Kiss me like I’m worth a damn! Kiss me like you fucking see me, like you feel me, damn you!”

He groans the words out like he’s in pain, and I can’t help but want to kiss him. Pressing my lips to him again, this time I’m not shy, I kiss him in earnest.

I kiss him with everything I have, everything I am, vowing in that moment to make this last, to pour out my heart and give him everything that I am without saying a damn word because come tomorrow, he and I will be nothing to each other.

I’m going to keep my promise to myself. I can’t let him keep hurting but he’s also like a fucking drug in my system that gets worse each time I’m away from him.

I kiss him like an addict getting their next fix after trying, and failing, to stay away.

I kiss him like he’s a long-lost lover.

I kiss him like he’s my past, present and future.

I kiss him with every agony in my soul, with every burnt and rung out thought in my head,

I kiss him like there’s no tomorrow.

On their own volition, my legs wrap around him, feeling his hard cock pressed on my inner thigh. I use my heels to try force him to thrust, but he chuckles lightly, pulling away from me. He starts kissing every inch of my face, instead. My forehead, my nose, both my eyelids, my cheeks, my neck. Then he goes down, kissing my tits, then he kisses my hard nipples, making me gasp but before I can recover, he twists one so hard while biting in the other at the same time, I almost jump off the bed.

“Fuck!” I gasp, as he sucks on the abused nipple, then he switches and bites the other while twisting the other one

Liquid heat shoots down my body and I gasp, feeling wanton.

“Please,” I gasp out, not knowing what the hell I’m asking for. He chuckles and then starts kissing my stomach, going down the length of my body until he right there, licking my pussy lips from one end to the other. It feels like electricity has been charged in my body and I scream.

He’s barely touched me and I’m all but a fucking mess.

“Please,” I plead again, gripping his wet hair in my hands, staring up at the ceiling in the dark room, it’s crazy how heightened your sense can get when your vision is a bit dim.

Every inch of me is aware of him. I can feel him breathe and right now, I know that he’s staring intently at my sex. My cheeks flush with embarrassment and I try to close my legs, but he stops me with a chuckle, his long, deft, calloused fingers grazing my inner thighs, making me shiver.

“You want it, don’t you,” he taunts, his voice thick and so damn delicious. Before I can answer, he slips two fingers into me and my back arches off the bed, making me moan.

“You’ve got to be louder than that,” he groans, adding another finger in me, thrusting slowly, then he starts picking up the pace. Without warning, he flicks my clit with his tongue and I almost see stars.

I scream but he doesn’t care, instead, he eats me out in earnest, alternating between thrusting and eating me out. He doesn’t stop until I cum, twice back to back, never letting me get down from the high.

It all feels different. On one hand I feel like he’s trying to tell me something, the loving way he holds me, the way he watches me with satisfaction lighting his eyes as I cum makes my heart skip a beat or two. Then there’s the relentless way he wants to make me cum, like he’s taking out his frustration and anger out on my body.

He pulls up and devours my mouth, fucking my mouth like he did my pussy with his tongue and fingers. We move like magnets, needing no instruction as his thick, engorged, throbbing cock finds my entrance.

We groan at the same time when he thrusts into me slowly, with care, unlike when we were in the shower. Our gazes are locked on each other, and he kisses me but he never closes his eyes, watching me like I’ll disappear if he does.

It’s too much.

The way he holds me, the way he looks down at me, the way he...makes love to me, it’s all too much.

My chest bubbles with emotion, the sob I was keeping at bay attacks me out of nowhere and tears start streaming down my face. He doesn't ask me what's wrong, he doesn't stop, instead he holds me even tighter, licks my tears with his tongue the kisses my eyes with a groan, hitting my sweet spot with each thrust.

He thrusts deep, hard and with a finesse I don't think I've ever experienced with him before. It's so good, I don't want it to end. He hits my nerve endings, making me moan and gasp all at the same time. He fucks me like he's apologizing, like he regrets something.

Looking deep into my eyes, it's like he's looking for something, like wants me to see him too. To recognize him.

My heart flutters in my chest, I feel like I'm literally on a cliff and I'm about to fall to my death. Tears keep falling down my cheeks, but he licks them.

"It's so good..." I moan, holding him to me. Wanting him. But then, in the middle of a thrust, he stops.

"Star," he whispers, tipping my head up, his blue eyes so damn bright in the dark room, I feel like I'm drowning in him. "I love you."

My entire body tenses for a split second, hardly able to believe my ears but I... I can't say anything back.

"I love you, Star," he repeats, thrusting again, but I know he's waiting for me to say something. He watches me, but as the silence stretches on and I can't say anything at all to save my life, his eyes grow darker. It's like watching the light in someone's soul, snuff out.

I wonder then if I'm punishing him for when he didn't tell the words I wanted to hear weeks ago. Or maybe... I'm not in love with him anymore...

"Say something," he demands, watching me with desperation. "Tell me you fucking love me, Astraea."

"I can't..." I whisper, swallowing a ball of nerves but he keeps thrusting, touching my nerve ending but I can taste violence in the air. My senses are heightened, attuned to him in a way that I'll never understand.

"Say my name," he growls in my ear, watching me, now fucking me in earnest, his movements hard, yet fluid. Angry, yet tender.

"I can't," I gasp, getting higher, closer to the edge.

"Say my damn name, Star," he groans again, pulling back to stare deep into my eyes, deep into my soul. I bite my tongue his name on my lips, but

somehow, I know if I say it, it seems like I'm betraying a part of me.

"Tell me you love me," he thrusts, hard.

I know I'm going to be sore in the morning but I clutch him to me, refusing to do as I'm told. Refusing to cry. Refusing to acknowledge that we've reached an impasse between the two of us, but he still makes my fucking heart pound.

But I can't tell him what he wants to hear.

His face darkens right in front of me, then in one move, he flips us, and suddenly, he's below me and I'm on top, but not the way I was expecting, I'm facing away from him, my back fused by sweat to his front, my legs hooked around him.

"You want to use me, use me," he bites out, fucking me hard. Jack hammering into me, he fucks me so hard, I see stars, I get wet with each thrust, then he pulls my hair, wrapping a hand around my neck, squeezing as if to choke me.

"Ride me, damn you!" he growls in my ear, grinding deep inside me, I moan so loud, I'm sure the walls are shaking, but I ride him, grinding my ass into his pelvis, feeling reckless with abandon.

"I'm nothing more than a toy you've been throwing away, huh?" All the tenderness in his voice from before is gone, replaced by a cold fury I'm not sure we'll survive after tonight. He squeezes my throat, fucking me so hard, and it's so damn good.

"I..." I start but it comes out as a strangled choke instead. He smiles at my ear, squeezing even harder.

Fear for my life takes over as my vision blurs, I start gasping for breath, but he doesn't let go. He tightens his grip around my neck and my hair, pain shooting through my scalp and the need to breathe takes over my body in a frenzy.

He doesn't stop fucking me, growling below me like a feral beast.

Surely, he doesn't mean to cause me this much pain. Surely, he doesn't want to kill me. Right?

I grow impossibly wet, tight and without warning, I come so hard, I scream, barely cognizant of the fact that he's also coming, growling and moaning in my ear, prompting my orgasm to heights I never knew I could reach.

"You're fucking mine," he growls, my body spasming on top of him. When he lets go of my neck, I gasp for breath, feeling more alive in this

moment than I've ever been in my life. "And you'll never be anyone's."

That declaration snaps me out of my haze and I shoot up, scrambling away from him in shock. I grab the bed sheet as I go, not caring if I jostle him, all I want right now is to cover myself, and catch my fucking breath. I notice the light switch and flip them on, needing to flood the light in the room.

What have I done? What the hell am I doing letting him fuck me?

"What?" he watches me, a lazy smirk on his face, when I'm horrified with myself.

"You punished me for not saying your name?" I question, but I can see the answer on his expressionless face.

"It's not like I'll lose sleep over it," he answers after a while, not even denying it. "Besides, I find that when you're in my arms, you let go."

I tense up, but he just keeps going, a sexy smirk on his face.

"You come alive because you know I'm the only one who truly sees you behind that mask of impulsive decisions and bravery that'll get you killed," he goes on, voice low and seductive, I'm growing wet again. "When you're in my arms, you know I'm the only that's able to make you come so hard, you feel like I sedate that potent, vicious darkness in you."

Oh my God.

He's so right...

"You're sick!" I accuse, feeling flustered that I came in his arms while fearing for my life, all because I didn't utter his name that's still on my lips now. Or that I didn't tell him, I loved him back... but the truth that he makes me come alive the moment he touches me, that's a whole lot of evil in one person. Because that just makes sure he has power over me.

"This was a mistake," I say, shaking my head. Then I look up, and he's just watching me, his hot gaze penetrating into me. "You're not going to apologize, are you?"

He shrugs, watching me silently, not caring at all about his nakedness, but his hungry gaze travels down my body that's barely covered by the sheet. It's a good thing that this is the last time he'll ever see me naked, or the last time I allow him to 'sedate' my vicious darkness.

How can one moment with him be so fucking sweet, the heavens ache and then the next, we're thrust back into hell?

"I'm not going to apologize for you showing the error of your ways or for making sure that Emmett knows that you're mine," he grits out, a dark

look in his eyes.

Confused, I frown, not knowing what he's talking about. Then it hits me like a I've just been struck by lightning.

Horried, I look around the room and notice the basketball hoop at the back of the door, the table by the window with half done drawing, sketches and paintings.

I gasp, as I take it all in, knowing that this, is Emmett's room.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

He fucked me in Emmett's room! Oh my God.

"Why?" I question, my heart pounding.

"Because he'll never have you. No matter how many times he might dream about you in this very room, he'll never have you."

I swallow my scream of frustration, recalling everything that happened in this very room just now. We literally fucked in every one of Emmett's personal spaces. His shower, in his bed. It can't get any worse than that but Ace doesn't give a damn.

I compose myself, knowing that I can't let him win. Not this time.

"Your queen has pictures of me, after her father raped me," I start, my voice cold, detached, I can't even recognize myself.

"Star..." he starts but I cut him off.

"My mother and Syrus hatched this elaborate plan to make sure that Emmett and I get hitched on my birthday, which—surprise, surprise—is in a couple of days. If we don't, they made sure to dangle your future right in front of me." I say, moving around Emmett's room, looking for his clothes since mine are wet.

"They said you have illegal deals that you participate in, that you have some shit going on that'll make sure you go behind bars if discovered," I say, spotting a chest of drawers with Emmett's clothes.

"What are you doing?" Alex demands behind me, but I ignore him, grabbing one of Emmett's neatly tucked large t-shirts. I drop the sheet and wear the shirt. Then I open another drawer and find basketball shorts. They'll have to do.

"My mother threatened to frame you for George's murder and well, I'm sure you know about Syrus," I shake my head, chuckling to myself. "That's

how badly they want us to get married but none of that matters now, you know why?"

"Astraea, don't you dare..." he growls, fury glistening his blue eyes.

"I thought to myself, I'm too young to get married and besides, I gave my heart a long time ago to someone who I thought—until recently that is—would love me back, but you certainly showed me."

Emmett's shorts are too big, so I fold them twice, then rummage around for a belt.

"So, I'm going to show you." I start, tossing my still wet hair over my shoulder as I glance at him. "I kissed him."

He tenses, almost looking like he just froze in place. Time suspends in the air between us but I forge on anyway.

"I kissed him and it was so damn good," I go on. "He did this thing with his tongue that almost made me cum in my jeans and he hadn't even touched me."

A loud, animalistic growl I haven't heard before sounds in the room. I smile, but it's cold and calculating.

"You think we made love tonight?" I taunt, watching his jaw tick. "I just wanted to fuck you out of my system. You know, to make way for something...new that will soon..."

"Astraea, I would shut up if I were you," he growls, the look in his eyes murderous and maybe even a little bit hurt. He looks like he could set the world on fire because of me.

I set him on fire.

"I signed the papers!" I shout, ignoring the tears in my eyes, the breaking of my soul and everything else that yearns to be claimed by him. "I'm going to marry Emmett." I announce with a sweet, serene smile on my face.

"And it's not because of my mother or because of Syrus Easton, but because I fucking wanted to, and I can definitely belong to someone else." I tell him, feeling powerful as he reacts, his face darkening, his nakedness still appealing yes, but I don't care. Not anymore.

Ignoring my damn broken heart that seems to crack every time I'm with this guy, I look for some socks. I find them and put them on one by one, knowing that someone is sewing in the room.

"You're not going to marry him," he booms, watching me as he sits up on a bed that isn't even his. He looks stressed and jealous but that's not my problem anymore.

“And you know what, thanks for introducing Emmett to my scent, he’s going to enjoy it for the rest of our lives,” I mock. “And don’t do us both a favor. Don’t bother acting like you’re scary and intimidating. You and I both know he doesn’t give a damn about your anger.”

“Astraea, careful of what you’re saying,” he growls, making me chuckle.

Ace has no remorse for what he has done. He didn’t look sorry and he certainly didn’t give a damn about anyone or anything. All he bothered to care for was making people suffer. He craved that sweet, agonizing ache of suffering he inflicted on others, but he enjoyed it more when I’m the one suffering.

So, I’m taking a page out of his book this time around. I finish dressing up, this will have to do until I get back home, then turn to walk towards him. He doesn’t push me away when I step between his legs, like we’re lovers. I run my fingers through his inky hair and then place a kiss on his forehead.

“Thanks for the mind blowing fuck, I won’t forget it,” I say, pressing another kiss on his nose, then I drop to bite his neck again, then I suck, making sure I leave my mark on him.

I mean every word I’m saying. I won’t forget the way he made me reach a high that I know no one will top.

“Don’t do this,” he growls, watching me with dark, empty eyes, I swear, the blue is almost gone as if the darkness inside him is finally swallowing him whole.

Good, devils like him deserve to suffer.

“Beg, it might go over better for you,” I whisper in his ear, unable to stop the malicious smile on my face, ignoring the cracking of my heart and the pain lodged in my back from the knife he plunged there. He growls, helpless and defeated.

Finally, I plant a soft, chaste yet bitter kiss on his lips and pull away immediately before he can trap me.

“Astraea...” he growls again, looking hurt and wounded. Boo fucking hoo.

“I bet you’re wishing you never met me, huh? Because I wish I never laid eyes on you.” I finish, then turn to leave.

But his low, humorless chuckle stops me. I glance over my shoulder at him.

“You’ve been in a habit of contradicting yourself for so long Blue Star, I doubt you even know your own regrets.” He says. I can feel him moving behind me but I’m frozen in place, barely able to breath.

“And you know all my regrets, am I right?” I grit out, hating that I just gave him an opening to crumble my resolve.

He moves in then, moving my hair over my shoulder like a whisper and his large, strong arm wraps around my waist from behind, then all of a sudden, we’re plastered together. My back to his hot, still naked front.

I’m wet all over again.

He’s impossibly hard. Again.

“No one knows you like I do.,” he whispers. “Just like no one knows you cry yourself to sleep, hating that you can’t stop loving me, wanting me, craving me.”

He wants to hurt me, but I don’t care anymore. Instead of reacting the way he hopes I do, I stay there in his embrace, allowing myself to enjoy it for a minute. I feel him sniffing my hair, breathing my scent in and I know he’s fully relaxed now, thinking that he’s got me sucked in his vortex.

“Then you should know.” I whisper.

“Know what?” he grumbles, the vibrations moving between us, making me shiver but so bite my lip.

“That I’m learning to get over loving you.”

He flinches as if I’ve struck him across the face, but I don’t stay to look at him or how his heart is about to join mine on the floor.

Broken and bleeding.

So, I leave. Just like that.

CHAPTER THIRTY



As soon as the door shuts behind me, I let out the cry that was lodged in my chest. I have no idea how we came in from, but I run down the hall, looking for a way out. Tears blur my eyes, making it impossible to see until I crash into a hard, solid body in front of me.

“Whoa, whoa,” Noah’s soft voice reaches my ears as he pulls me back, studying my face. Without hesitation, he pulls me into his arms. I cling to him like a hurt child and cry.

I’m glad it’s Noah. I can’t bear to face Emmett right now after what I just did. Oh God.

“What’s wrong, Baby Blue?” he whispers. “Did you mistake his forced sincerity for love?”

I shudder at that and the tears stream faster, making me tremble in his arms. God, I’m so fucking stupid!

“It’s going to be alright, Baby Blue,” Noah soothes, “Just wait and see.”

I wish I could believe him. I wish it was that simple but even I can hear the disbelief in his voice as he says that. We both know it’s not going to be alright. It’s just going to get worse.

“Take me home, Noah.” I plead into his chest. “Just take me home.”

And he does. Without question or hesitation. We're silent in the car, I can feel his occasional glances and I know for certain that he wants to say something but he doesn't.

"Just say it," I sigh, looking out the window, but I can't see any further than the road. It's pitch black out there, a perfect setting for a horror movie. If they need a plot line, I volunteer my life!

"I didn't say anything," Noah denies, glancing at me.

"Your thoughts are pretty loud, Noah."

He doesn't say anything, but I know he's trying to phrase it. I knew this was coming and knowing Noah, he was going to blast me when we were alone and since this is the only time we've been alone since the hospital, I guess I should go first before he eviscerates my heart.

"Where were you?"

"What you did was fucking stupid!"

We say at the same time, looking at each other but it's not funny. There's no humor here.

"I know you want to rip me a new one, but I'm go first," he starts, grabbing my hand, the one with the slashed wrist wrapped in a wet bandage. It's only then that I noticed we're parked right in front of his mansion, not mine.

"I know we lied to you, hell, I was in the dark with you at the end. And I also know that life's been shitty, you don't know who's who now and it's been messy as fuck, trust me I know that," he starts, tugging my hand, silently wanting me to look at him. "But this, what you did back in that fucking hospital, that was messed up!"

"Noah..."

"No, let me finish," he cuts me off, his voice hard as steel. "I know you have your own special connection with Emmett and I know you and King have had complicated feelings for each other that tangles up your lives, fussing them together. I know that, but I didn't expect you to disregard me like that."

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

"I thought, since we had that talk a few months ago when you came back, that you were done leaving me. That you wouldn't go breaking the fucking trashcan that is my heart,"

“Your heart is not a trashcan,” I start but he cuts me off.

“According to some lying, conniving spy, I’m nothing more than a rubbish dump,” he whispers, his eyes flashing with emotion that quickly disappears before I can place it.

“Oh Noah,” I start, but like before, he cuts me off.

“What I need to understand it, what is it about me that people choose to overlook me?”

If breaking one’s soul had a sound, the gasp that leaves my mouth is it, but he forges on.

“What is it about me that inspires people that I foolishly care about, to leave me, abandon me, make me feel irrelevant like my own fucking thoughts don’t matter?”

“Noah, that’s not...”

“You know it’s true...” he breathes deeply, unshed tears shining in his eyes. “You recently did that. My mother is keeping shit from me. My brother... and then...”

Kim...

It hits me so hard in that moment, Noah and I are coincidentally in the same boat but we have never truly given ourselves the time to grieve together or to try and mend these...mismatched pieces of our broken souls.

“Noah, listen to me,” I start, quickly unbuckling my seatbelt to get closer to him. “There’s. Nothing. Wrong. With. You!” I grit out each word, allowing them to ring true with each syllable and nuance, because without a doubt, it’s true.

He looks away, but I palm his face in both hands, forcing him to hold my gaze. I don’t bother wiping my own tears away because it’s no about me in this moment. I’m responsible for this. I need to fix it. But I don’t know if anyone can fix Noah.

“I messed up,” I gasp, my heart aching so hard, I can feel myself disintegrate from within. “I am messed up, Noah, and for reasons I can’t quite explain to anyone or understand myself.”

“But why did you...?”

“The truth is, there isn’t an actual explanation I can give you to make you forgive me. I was careless. I abandoned myself. I lost myself and frankly Noah, I think I’m still lost right now.”

He just stares at me for a hot second, fighting his tears. Then he reaches up for my left hand, and starts caressing the bandage, a stricken look on his

face.

“Unfortunately for the two of us, I think we are lost,” he whispers, then cups my left cheek, a lone tear falling down his cheek. “I see Craig when I look at you and I lost him, Astraea you...”

I don’t even let him finish, I launch into his arms, going over the middle divide, and into his lap, with a gasp of pain, I embrace him tightly in my arms, squeezing him to me as I let go in his arms, finally letting the storm, that has been brewing in me, loose.

“I’m not interested in losing anyone else, least of all you,” he whispers in my hair, fiercely holding me to him, allowing me to cry. “I can’t lose you, again.”

It’s right there in his car, in his arms, that I allow myself to truly feel the shame of loving a guy I knew was bad for me. The confusion that my brother left me in. The danger that I’m leaving under the same roof as a monster that has been tightly sheathed for years but I hadn’t realized it. And the fact that I haven’t been a good friend but felt so entitled to demand those same people to be loyal and love me with honesty.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” I cling to him, repeating the words as if I’m trying to convince myself. I’m asking for forgiveness, but I know I’ll never forgive myself. “I’m sorry for lashing out at you at the hospital.”

“In the spirit of honesty, I think I deserved some of that but, Baby Blue, I’d never hurt you. None of us would ever do that.”

I scoff.

“Okay, well, not intentionally. At least for some of us.”

“I’m still sorry, for breaking my promise. For being selfish and self-serving.” I gasp out. “And I’m sorry about Kim...”

“Don’t...” he harshly chides. “I should be the one apologizing for that mess.”

“Noah...”

“I don’t want to talk about it or her,” he cuts me off, looking away. “Just shut up and let me fucking hold you while you comfort me.”

I smile, but it’s sad, allowing him to tuck me back in his arms. We stay in his car like that, trying to comfort each other, until he reaches over in his dash for a little bottle of Jack. I roll my eyes and sigh and he looks away, pretending like he can’t see or feel my obvious judgement.

“Some demons are best faced when your wits are dulled.”

Isn’t that the truth.

“I’m popping pills again,” I whisper, closing my eyes shut, burrowing into him. He tenses under me, getting colder as the seconds tick by. So, I just explain.

I tell him about the tempering program the doctor put me on. I tell him about the shit that went down in London.

“Whoa, whoa, backtrack right fucking now!” he seethes, pulling me back to look at me. “You over fucking dosed on xannies while you were in that fucking headcase prison?”

“You’re starting to realize I have head issues huh?”

“Well, that’s a given, seeing where we’re from but, why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Wait, I thought George or Alex told you about that...” I frown, now really looking at him but he chuckles softly, but it’s brittle and almost malicious.

“Nope, just another secret that was kept from me all because they were trying to keep me safe,” he scoffs, chugging his Jack. “But of that was two years ago, then King knew exactly where you were when you were in London?”

“I...” frowning, I really think about it. “Yeah, he knew.”

But why didn’t he tell Noah and Emmett? They were surprised and very upset when the truth finally came out, and so was Ace. So, was he acting or was he angry about something else entirely, sworn to secrecy by...my brother?

“Well damn,” Noah seethes. “Way to kick someone in the nuts when they’re fucking down to their last wish.”

“Again, I’m sorry. A lot of strange things have been happening lately, friends keeping secrets from each other...”

“Yup.”

“Let’s not do that,” I rush to say. “For real this time. You and me, no more bullshit, no more red tapes or edge entities or fucking secrets and half-truths.”

“That’s all I’ve ever fucking wanted, right from the start,” he says, looking down at me. “Someone that matters to you. Someone you can be yourself around.”

“So does that mean we’ll try going to therapy again?”

“With that hella blunt, foul mouthed yet incredibly hot, Dr. Spring?” he questions, eyes wide.

“Dr. Summer.” I correct, chuckling lightly. “Yeah, she’s blunt but not so bad.”

“Well, I for one don’t plan to change my drinking habits or my sex drive for that matter, so some couch time with that sexy ass doctor will do me some...”

“Noah!” I swat his chest and he laughs, gazing down at me. He laughs but soon grows serious, watching me with something I can’t place in his eyes.

“What?” I question, my voice a low whisper. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“It could have been you and me, Astraea.”

“Noah...”

“And you know it,” he cuts me off, with a sad smile. “It could have been fucking easy, mad fun and well, fucking incredible. But you and I both know, he’s owned your fucking heart since the day you say him.”

My heart stutters in my chest, hope fluttering in my belly.

I love you.

I shiver, remembering the way Ace said those words. I wanted them to be true. I desperately wanted him to love me. But mixed somewhere deep with lust, anger and jealousy was more darkness that I wasn’t sure I could survive. I can barely survive my own right now.

There was this look in his eyes when he said those words that almost had me believing. But then he fucked me in Emmett’s room just to send a message like I’m his property. I kill that hope immediately.

Hope has done nothing but fuck me seven different ways to hell recently.

“Yeah, too bad it doesn’t go both ways,” I mumble under my breath, but he hears me.

“Hmm, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

And with that, he opens the door, but before I can right myself to get out of the car, he lifts me in his arms, then sets me on the hard ground, only to lift me up again and toss me over his shoulder.

I squeal, surprised.

“Put me down!” I demand, but he just laughs his signature hyena laugh that I haven’t heard in so long, my heart hurts.

“No way a I letting you walk into my mother’s house dressed like a homeless tomboy with no shoes!”

I swat his ass, but I’m smiling from ear to ear. God, I missed him.

“Careful baby, I’m horny as fuck and that little spank will get you on your back in two seconds flat!”

“Noah!” I gasp but all he does is laugh the entire way to his room, where he deposits me on his large, fluffy bed, tosses me the remote, then he leaves for fifteen whole minutes and comes back with a first aid kit and a tray of hot, delicious looking food, only to find me freshly showered, wearing his long sleeved shirt that reaches my below my knees.

“Oh great, you showered. You reeked of wet sex, but I’m glad I wasn’t the one to tell you that, so well done you.”

My jaw drops to the floor. Without even thinking about it, I grab one of his pillows and starts swatting him with all my strength!

“That’s not nice!” I shout, chasing him around his large, presidential suite style type of room but he only laughs.

“Seriously, you didn’t notice?” he chuckles, evading me, waiting for me to grow tired of chasing him. He doesn’t have to wait for long, it’s been one hell of a day.

“You’re an asshole!” I accuse, breathless, collapsing on his bed.

“Yeah well, an asshole who’s going to feed you and clean up that wrist.”

With the T.V in the background, a silent, maybe even still drunk Noah wrapping a fresh, clean bandage around my wrist, my heart aches for a whole different reason.

Noah is unravelling right under our bloody noses and it’s all our fault, the people who say, love him.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Noah,” I whisper after what feels like an eternity, wanting to make sure that he knows it.

“Yeah, I’m not a good guy,” he whispers back, placing a soft, chase kiss on my slashed wrist. “But I’ve done nothing but try to do right by you.”

“That’s because you’re not just the good guy,” I say, holding his gaze. “You’re the best guy.”

“Yeah?” he smiles, then quickly grows sombre. “Don’t you dare pop another pill again!”

Hmm, I don’t know if I can promise that. Even now, I’m trying to stop myself from shaking, knowing that I want a pill right now. But I think sleeping here will do the trick until I can safely quit the damn pills. So, I just smile and nod, but I can see he doesn’t believe me.

We carry on though, knowing that we’re both too raw to push each other just yet.

We'll deal with that tomorrow.

For the first time in what seems like forever, I feel like myself again, in Noah's bed, watching some shitty movies that he likes, but I hate. He drinks and I join him.

I don't think I ever understood the appeal of drinking until then.

"It helps for the time being, but just know your demons will still be there when that whiskey clears your brain," he warns, tucking me under his arm until I fall asleep, not knowing that I face a battle tomorrow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



I love you.

What the fuck was I thinking? Uttering those words to a girl that claimed she didn't want me, telling me that she's going to marry my best friend? But that stunned look on her face, like she couldn't believe I said that. Well, that made two of us.

I think of going after her, but my nakedness served a purpose to derail her thought pattern not to be an exhibitionist to Emmett and Noah who might be roaming around the house right about now.

The decision to fuck Astraea in Emmett's room was a spur of the moment thing, something that I fucking knew I had to do to ascertain who the fuck she belongs to and now and I pick up her clothes that we left discarded in Emmett's bathroom, I'm not quite sure if I made sure that she'll never want anyone else other than me or if I drove her further away. I grab a towel from the rack and wrap it around my torso, then go about picking her shoes. I think she left here in just socks.

Not my finest night, that's for sure.

You're not even sorry.

She's damn right I'm not sorry! I'm not going to apologize for wanting her as savagely as I do. I'm certainly not going to apologize for making sure

that I fuck her in this very room when the owner would—and maybe he did—walk in on us.

“You done?” A terse, angry voice speaks behind me, making me tense. I was wondering when he was going to come in here and chew my ass off for what I’ve done.

“Nah, I think she went to grab something to eat before we get into round four,” I mock, but I don’t feel good about it. Strangely, my chest is tight, the image of her shutting the door in my face, telling me that she’s going to choose this prick over me.

“Really?” he mocks right back. “It didn’t look like that to me when she ran out of here, with my clothes on, tears streaming down her face.

That tugging in my chest starts again, but I act like I’m not affected, picking up her jeans from the floor. What does it matter that she left here crying? I’m not the one who decided to be heartless and fuck my brains out and never actually open my heart in the process it.

She gave me a few inches of her heart tonight. I could feel the distance she was trying to keep between us even when I was inside her and that made me see red. I couldn’t stop myself from bleeding out on that bed, that I had to make her see the error of her ways.

I hate the fact that she was actively trying to push me away, denying me her soul, during the most intimate act we’ve ever shared. Squeezing her neck wasn’t meant to choke her, but I knew that violence would hurl her over the edge, proving to her and to myself, that her and I were more alike and they’ll never be anyone who understands her needs or how her mind fucking works like I do.

“You’re are one fucked up sonofabitch. For a moment, I thought, maybe you actually care for her and now, you’re making it all too easy to believe that you don’t deserve her.” Emmett grits out behind me and I nod.

He’s right, I don’t deserve her, not after everything, but I do know one thing, if hellish, broken souls fit as well as we do, then we deserve each other if nothing else.

“That’s your opinion,” I say, feeling tired. I’ve felt it coming for a while now and I know I’m going to crash soon. We have a big game on Friday and we haven’t been to practice is days. I know coach will let us play but I’m fucking tired, I can barely keep my eyes open.

“Did she sign it?” I question, my voice soft and low. Too calm for my liking but I’m so damn tired, I can barely open my eyes.

“You’ve got her where you want, so you shouldn’t be intimidated by a fucking piece of paper, right?” he taunts with a chuckle. I know he expects me to fuck him up but I don’t think Astraea would actually go through with kissing anyone that wasn’t me, let alone sign some marriage contract. Even if it was to protect me.

She just wouldn’t. She wouldn’t hurt me like that.

“Yeah, keep feeding yourself those lies,” Emmett says, folding his arms. “Keep underestimating her.”

I stay silent, a buzzing in my ear.

“You’re going to wake up one day and realize that the more you push her, the more she’ll want to leave your ass.” Emmett says, shaking his head when I turn to leave his bathroom.

“She’ll never leave me.” I growl, holding his gaze. Emmett tilts his head slightly to the left, studying my face, the way I’m standing and then he frowns.

“Are you sure about that?” he questions.

Am I sure of the attraction between Star and I? Absolutely.

Am I sure that I’ve ruined her for anyone else, including the guy she claims she wouldn’t mind marrying? Hell fucking yes!

Am I certain that she’ll never leave me? I...

“Mind your fucking heart defects, Emmett,” I growl, shoulder bumping him as I go.

“Guess that answers my question,” he says but there’s no malice or contempt in his voice. And I hate that. I hate the raw sadness in his voice. I hate that he’s looking at me like I’m losing it. I hate that I feel like I am losing it and don’t know where to go from here.

“Well, I hope you like the smell of sex in here, seeing as you’re not familiar with it,” I mock, making my way out of his room.

“And I hope she breaks your heart! You know, since you’re not familiar with that possibility!”

I don’t stop to acknowledge him but what he doesn’t know is, as that tightening in my chest intensifies, is that Astraea had already broken my heart.

Savagely, carelessly, ruthlessly...and I don’t think that was the end of it either.



The door creaks open bit by bit, echoing in my room. I pull the covers around me even tighter, trying to stop myself from shivering or else he'll know that I'm awake.

I have to sleep!

If I pretend to be asleep and fully unconscious, he won't come near me.

He won't touch me. And maybe, he won't force me to touch him.

The door creaks again, then a bright light reflects on the opposite wall from my door, and I know, without even looking, there's a large figure standing in my doorway.

I should have locked my door! Wait, I did lock my door! I double checked before I got under my covers. But it doesn't matter. Nothing ever stops him from coming into my room.

Okay, try to think of good things. I made friends today. I can't stop thinking of that dark eyed girl with stars in her eyes. Maybe I can wish on those stars to save me tonight and forever.

The door creaks again and I hold my breath, clutching the broken glass in my hand, ignoring the blood that's dripping from the cut I just gave myself.

I'm still so sore from what he did to me last night, hurt that my father didn't believe me when I approached him about it this morning, but I'll fight Larry myself.

I have to!

Maybe it's not him. Maybe it's Mom! Maybe she's come to check on me after what I told her a few days ago. Maybe she's here to read me a bedtime story like she used to when I was younger.

Or maybe...maybe it's Dad! Here to check that I'm safe.

Maybe they do believe me after all, about Larry and what he's been doing when he gets in my room.

Maybe...

Maybe...

Maybe...

But, it's the smell of cigars and alcohol that bursts my bubbling hope, reaching my nose before he even speaks. There's no doubt in my mind now. He's here and he knows what I did today! That I told on him.

I tense up like a coiled cobra, just waiting to attack if he so much as touches me.

"I know you're not sleeping, my blue-eyed monster," he whispers in the dark, his shadow growing bigger and bigger, but I don't make a sound.

Just because he knows I'm awake doesn't mean I'm going to prove it to him so I don't move, my eyes tightly shut, facing the wall away from my door. Away from him! But when I peak just a little bit, I think I can see him smiling at me.

It's leered, a bit crazy and a lot scary!

"I know you were waiting for me," he starts, letting out a small chuckle. "And I also know you like my nightly visits. Very, very much."

I don't like your nightly visits, you prick! I hate you so much!

"Hey, do you want to know what I just found out tonight?" he starts, voice chirper and louder. I feel my bed dipping, he just took a seat at the base of my bed. I force myself to stay there and not move, even though I can feel the heat of his large body at my feet.

"Your ass hat of a father just told me to stay away from you and his wife!" he exclaims, the whispering forgotten. "Can you imagine that?"

I make sure to suck in my breath as quietly as I can manage, exhaling through my nose like I'm asleep.

I planned for this night. I know what I'm going to do. I just need to be certain to execute my plan the right way because Larry is much bigger than me. Way bigger and I'm so small. That's why I couldn't fight his large body off of me last night.

But now, I have to defend myself.

"I wanted to tell that pompous jerk that your mother begged me to fuck her, you know, as a payback to her ex best friend. It's shocking that she found out who I was after so little time!" he drones on and I hear the flickering of a zippo, then the next thing, my room is filtering with smoke. He's smoking in my room, again.

"As for you, well, I wanted to tell him that you were also a project that I was told I could destroy, you know, since your mother's ex best friend basically wants your mother and her offspring wiped from this earth because of past dues, you know women."

I have no idea what he's talking about. My palm hurts from the cut, but I grit my teeth and clutch the thick broken bottle piece tightly, ignoring the pain.

"Of course, your mother doesn't know that I was sent here by her ex best friend but still, it's so crazy that she's about to wake up and realize that

they're soon going to be neighbors!" he exclaims, and I know he's smiling.

"I think my work here is almost done. I've successfully made sure that the Blue Generation includes four families, I now control two of those families so ultimately, I have all the power!"

He laughs then, a genuine, boisterous laugh that makes shivers go up and down my body. He starts chocking on the smoke, but he laughs through it like a maniac.

"You know what, my little blue-eyed monster, power is everything! Power will get you places, like the scariest motherfucker in the world who your father thinks he got rid of. Beaumont, the fucking Phoenix!" he goes on, his voice hoarse and rough, I hate it. "It's a shame your father is not a thorough man, or he'd do his research and realize that he isn't out of the clear yet. I mean, it's pretty easy to manipulate and destroy Philip, you just need to be patient and hit him where it hurts, his fucking money."

I can hear how excited he is. He's beside himself with ecstasy and now, he's about to act out.

Then I feel it, the touch. On my thigh. But I wait. He's obviously drunk and out of his wits.

"Power is attractive as hell but never let anyone have power over you," he says, his voice serious for a bit. "Shit, who am I kidding, there's always going to be someone out there with more power than you. You now, like me."

Without warning, he rips away my covers but before he can go on to touch my wee wee, I jump up from the bed, wielding the thick glass in my hand. In a split second, I soak in the shock on his face but I don't waste a single second.

Attacking him, I start slitting his arm and any part of him that I can reach. My little arms swinging with fury and feelings that I don't understand.

"What the hell!" he booms but I'm lithe and quick, ducking his reach each time he tries to grab me.

Jumping away from him, I land on the floor and run for the door, but before I can reach it, he catches me, picking up from my waist. Panic makes me act quickly without hesitation. With the glass in my hand, I bring it to his left eye, but before I can lodge the glass in his eye, he shuts both eyes and I cut from his eyebrow to his chin, making sure I put all my weight behind it, satisfied when I see the white cuts before the blood starts.

He screams like he's on fire then. blood starts gushing from his face and he starts yelling.

"You sonofabitch!"

He drops me and I watch satisfied as he tries to stop the bleeding, I hadn't noticed that he dropped his cigar on my bed and that fire had caught until the flames grow bigger and the fire alarm starts blaring in the house.

From beyond my bedroom door, I know everyone in the house is waking up and they'll soon come to check where the fire is. They'll find Larry in here. He can't escape now.

Finally, they're going to see that I wasn't lying. But before I can do anything, Larry realizes this and then he pushes me out of the way, making his way out the door.

He's going to escape!

"They're going to catch you!" I shout, my voice strong and sure. Different from the one I had before I ever laid eyes on this monster.

He glances back at me, a frantic look in his eyes but even then, the hate in him stops me dead in my tracks.

"No one's going to believe you, little monster and you know it!" he starts, then he throws his head back, laughing. "Just like no one will love you!"

I'm frozen in place, fire spreading around me, but I can't move. It's those eyes, those dark brown eyes with the flames dancing in that that I'm stuck on.

Those dark, brown eyes...

"You're wrong!"

He laughs instead, then he slowly starts walking towards me.

"You think they're coming to rescue you?" he mocks. "Where are they? Why aren't they charging in here like superheroes?"

The smoke alarms keep blurring, the fire getting hotter behind me but I can't move. I'm going to burn and die in here. Alone.

"You're always going to be alone. And you'll never forget me!"

"No!"

"Yes," he laughs and laughs and I start hyperventilating. "Burn, little King, burn!"

"No."

"Burn, King!" he shouts, his dark eyes wide.

Those eyes are so familiar. I've seen those eyes.

“NO!!!!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



With a roar, I jerk up right, my heart pounding hard and fast in my chest. Feeling disoriented, I look around for any sign of a fire, or for fucking Larry but there's nothing.

"Jesus," someone breathes behind me and I tense up. "What were you dreaming about?" Noah questions, panic in his eyes as he steps closer. I realize then that he was trying to wake me up.

"It's nothing." I gasps out, shaking my head but I know I haven't had that dream in years. I haven't dreamt of Larry since Astraea came back.

Astraea!

"Where is she?" I demand, knowing that Noah took her home a few hours ago.

"Dude, you've been out for almost two days. It's Friday morning!"

What? No fucking way!

"What happened?" I demand, noticing that I'm in my room at the Brooke House. I have no idea how I got back in here. One moment I was trying to tell Astraea that I love her...

Wait, I love her!

It's been love all along! It wasn't hate, it wasn't resentment. She's not related to Larry! Everything I've felt for Astraea has been nothing but love!

Larry was fucking wrong. Someone will love me! Someone already does love me!

“Where is she?” I demand, pushing my sheets and covers away. I need to shower and get to her right fucking now! Nothing else matters at the moment.

“About that...” Noah starts, his voice uncertain and shaky, making me pause. I look up at him, studying the look on his face. He looks hella pissed, angry but also, he looks...terrified.

“Noah,” I start getting up, ignoring my nakedness, it’s not like he hasn’t seen me in my birthday suit before. “Where. Is. She?” I demand, gritting out each word like it’s being bitten out of me.

I don’t know why my heart is pounding.

I don’t know why I can’t shake the residue of that nightmare.

And I also don’t know why I need to get to Astraea right now.

“Fuck, King!” Noah starts rambling! “I’ve been trying to wake you the fuck up since last night because I thought we had it all under control with the picture situation, since no one could reach you but then things got pretty wicked way too fast and now...”

“I won’t repeat myself.” I warn, my vision getting blurred with anger, my heart pounding in my chest. Sweat dots my brow and dread pools in my stomach. I can’t catch my fucking breath. Where is she?

“I don’t know,” he answers after a while, then he starts pacing. “I tried to check the locator app you installed on her phone for her location, but she left her fucking phone at my house.”

“What?” I yell, my blood boiling. “Why the fuck would she leave her phone?”

Over the past months since I stole her phone and installed the app on her phone, she has never gone anywhere without it. I chalked it all up to the fact that she knew I would always find her with that app, for her safety and my sanity she silently obliged, one of our many mutual understandings.

This is bad.

This is very bad.

“You better fucking know!” I shout, unable to temper down my voice or the way I feel like I’m falling into a bottomless pit of suffering. “And what the hell do you mean by ‘picture situation’?”

He tenses, then sighs.

“You know the pictures of Astraea you said Brittney had and we thought we wiped clean?” he starts, eyeing me.

No...

“Yeah well, we didn’t do that properly!”

“Fuck!” I explode, then look around my room. I need to get the hell out of here and go get my girl, then I’ll deal with the people I should have dealt a long time ago! “How many pictures were leaked?”

“There was just one picture online, I had it taken down within minutes of course, but the damage has already been done. People saw it, and I’m guessing, people downloaded it,” he starts, then kicks the chair in my room, sending it skidding across the room, crashing into the wall.

“What kind of picture?” I grit out, unable to recognize my own voice.

“It was doctored, to make it seem like Astraea is a porn whore,” Noah seethes.

“Well, she fucking isn’t!” I shout, feeling like I’m going mad with fury.

“Yeah, but that’s not the worst of it.”

“Spit it out!” I demand, watching him.

“Kim’s baby sisters were kidnapped and well, she, Ivy and Astraea are also missing now,” he rushes to say. “My guess is, they went after the kidnappers.”

The room closes in on me. Suddenly, Noah looks like he’s faraway and I’m suffocating. I can’t lose her...

The pain in my chest feels like someone just emptied a round of bullets into my chest and I’m bleeding to death. My worst fear realized. But Noah’s not done shattering my world.

“I think the kids were taken by the Phoenix Corps, aka, Larry, which means, the girls went after Larry on their own.”

“Fuck!” I explode, rushing around my room so I can quickly shower and go set the world on fire until I get to her. As I go, I pick up my phone to see that I have about a hundred missed calls on my phone and a single text from Eli. I pause, sucking in my breath.

“What?” Noah demands. “You’ve got something?”

I read the text again. “It’s a location.” A location with an instruction. An instruction that I’m going to follow through.

“We don’t fucking care about at damn location!” he explodes, “Get your shit! Babies are fucking missing and they’re with a pedophile!”

“They’ll all be at this place,” I state, trusting my gut about this. “I just sent the location to you.”

“Just like that? What do they want?”

“Our presence.” I grit out, my mind racing with all sorts of scenarios. Nd how the fuck is Eli involved in this?

“That’s it? The just happen to want our presence? I happen to think that’s stupid and we don’t have fucking time to be playing fucking games right now!” Noah explodes, “Did you hear what I said.”

“Astraea, Ivy, the girls and Kim will be alright,” I tell him, not believing a single word but I have to trust in Eli. He hasn’t given me a reason to suspect otherwise of him and the fact that he has a rep that makes men like my father tremble, is a bonus. I have no reason to believe that Eli would lie to me.

“How do you know that?” he demands.

“I have it on good authority.”

He watches me, then nods but I can see he’s not happy about this.

“What about that bitch, Kim?”

“Well, her grace period has since expired. Call Ethan and tell him to bring it!”

Noah pauses, looking at me like I’m an evil mastermind, but a steel kind of resolve has fallen over me. I’ve forced myself to calm down. I need to have a clear head about this.

“We need to coax that bitch out properly.”

“That won’t be hard. She’s messed up a lot of fucking lives!” Noah seethes. “And for that, she deserves something steeper than that!”

I reel back, pulling on a pair of sweatpants. I study Noah, taking in his red face, the barely repressed fury in his eyes. I know Noah’s hated Brittney for a fucking long time, but it’s never been to this murderous point. I bet my fucking life that it has Kim stamped all over it.

“Noah, I’m going to need you to fucking breathe and let that anger go.”

“After what she did to Astraea? To...”

Kim.

“She’s not worth jail time. A girl like that will destroy herself, eventually.” I caution, hoping that he sees reason. I don’t need Noah going off on Brittney right now, there’s a time for that. “Right now, we need to get the girls.”

“You’re right but Brittney...?” he demands, his face almost red with repressed anger. I know how he feels, I’m on my tipping point myself and the worst is yet to come.

“Will get what’s coming to her,” I say, “I promise you brother.”

Shaking his head, Noah takes out his phone.

“Where’s Emmett?” I question, knowing that he and I are not on the best of terms right now.

“Driving around with Spider, looking for them. I mean, Ivy is also missing so...”

“Send them that location.”

I don’t bother explaining further but as I drop my phone, my stomach rolling, after texting Brittney that I miss her and want her, I notice Astraea’s clothes from last, well from Wednesday night, when I fucked her to within an inch of her life. Fuck, she lights me up.

There’s a piece of paper peeking out from her jean pocket. I bend down to pick it up. Her clothes and mine are dry now obviously, so is the paper. Unfolding it I notice that it’s a letter.

It’s the letter from George!

I knew she lied that night. She had it on her!

I read the letter quickly, nodding at shit that I already know and the shit I’m starting to realize.

Key to find me—The Phoenix.

Why does sound hauntingly familiar?

I read it again, looking for clues, but then I get to the part where George wrote about me.

But, he’s got scars, Astraea, scars that might be our fault...

What the fuck?

“Noah,” I start, still looking down at the piece of paper in my hands that has the potential to swallow me into the pits of hell.

“Yeah?”

“Did she sign it?” I question, every nerve ending in my body charged and waiting.

“King, dude...” he starts, looking around. “I think...”

“Did she fucking sign it?” I grit out each word and he nods, looking away.

So, it’s true. She was telling the truth. And she probably did kiss my best friend. Again.

Once might be a mistake. But when it happens twice, that's a fucking choice.

I read it gain, from the start but as soon as I get to the part about me, it hits me and I drop the letter in shock and pain.

My dream.

Larry.

Astraea.

George.

Richard.

Syrus.

Emmett.

Amanda Fields.

My mother.

Philip.

Eli Beaumont.

Me....

My fucking world collapses right in front of me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Unknown

UNKNOWN: WHAT'S TAKING SO LONG? WHY HAVEN'T YOU DONE ANYTHING?

STRANGER:

UNKNOWN: I KNOW YOU'RE READING MY MESSAGES! IGNORING ME WON'T MAKE THIS GO AWAY!

STRANGER:

UNKNOWN: IF YOU DON'T GET BACK TO ME IN THE NEXT FEW HOURS, I'M GOING TO TAKE MATTERS INTO MY OWN HANDS. THE GIRL HAS THE JOURNAL, I JUST KNOW IT! BUT I CAN'T FIND IT IN HER ROOM!

STRANGER: DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO.

UNKNOWN: I WASN'T LOOKING FOR YOUR PERMISSION BUT, YOUR SISTER IS ON ME! SHE'S GOING TO FIND YOU!

STRANGER: NOT IF YOU FIND HER FIRST. TAKE ONE FOR THE TEAM! DO IT FOR THE LOST DREAMS, LOST RELATIONSHIPS, ETC, ETC.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Astraea, 12 years old.

Like a little thief in the night, I glance from left to right as discreetly as I can, making sure I stay blended with the walls, with my back pressed flat against them as I go. But that's stupid, the walls are stark white and I... I freaking look like a pig that's been happily rolling around in mud all day long.

My tennis shoes, socks and legs are covered in mud. I look back from where I came from, I see my footprint.

"Shit." I whisper. There's no way I'm getting away with this. Not with all the evidence behind me.

But then again, I can always pin it on Noah! My mother knows how George and his friends are messy. They play football a lot, regardless if it's rain or shine. And lucky for me, it just rained yesterday and it's a bit muddy outside, which means my mother will believe me.

That is, if she doesn't catch me tip toeing in this huge foyer!

I need a game plan. I need to leave a muddy trail that leads to George's room so my lie can be more believable. Yeah, that's a good idea, let me do that. No way am I going to tell my mother that I was chasing down Noah, hailing mud balls at him in anger for what he did.

I'm so dead if my mother catches me.

I sneak into the foyer as quietly as I can, trying to make as little noise as possible. I look guilty, I feel guilty and I'm dirty. See, this is why I don't have any girl friends of my own. I'm freaking weird! But in my defense, it's all Noah's fault!

I glance down at my clothes, caked with splatters of mud everywhere. Crap!

I'm definitely getting a whole lecture, forget getting grounded for the rest of my life, I'll be locked inside the house for crimes I never actually committed. Well, I did, but only because I was trying to defend myself.

Damn you Noah to hell and back, urgh! Sometimes I truly hate that brace-faced shithead! The little shit made me eat worms the other day at school. Ahh! He put fat, large earthworms in my sandwich and stupid, hungry me, I took a bite out of that disgusting thing!

Just you wait until I make you eat dirt, you little devilish Blue fairy from hell!

And to think the guy lured me into a false sense of security and love, offering me a sandwich that even looked appealing to the eye, only the damn thing had two large, fat earthworms in the middle!

Yeah, revenge is going to be sweet. But right now, I'm faced with the task of sneaking out of my own house and try not to be seen by anyone—worst of all, my mother who breathes fire whenever she looks at me, especially after she received the call to come to school earlier today.

Nothing I do is ever good enough for her. To her, I'm just a glutton of disappointment after disappointment. She looks at me like she doesn't know what to do with me anymore. I roll my eyes just thinking about her.

Right now, it will be best for us to avoid seeing each other as much as possible. Heaven knows she'll strike me down if she sees me dirtying her custom tiled floors that were imported from Egypt or somewhere in the world that I don't care for.

"Mom, what's wrong with you?" I hear my brother's voice, making me pause. My heart starts racing as I back track to the slightly opened library door that I just passed. He sounds agitated, a bit angry and that makes me frown. Of the two of us, George is the level headed, composed one so the tone of his voice makes me feel agitated as well, worry driving me to eavesdrop.

“You have to tell me the truth,” I hear his voice again and I swear, my heart almost stops beating all together. “Because I know you’re fucking lying!”

Because George NEVER talks to our mother these days. Like never. They barely even look at each other, like a rift has been growing between them that I hadn’t noticed until it was so severe, George was practically just a visitor here.

He spent most of his time at either, Noah or Emmett’s house and then stayed overnight with Ace. The four of them were thick as thieves and it made me happy that my brother had people who had his back.

But at the same time, it made me feel strangely bitter that he was never really here. With me.

“George, sweetheart, everything is alright. There’s nothing wrong with me,” my mother soothes. But it’s that tone of voice that makes me frown. I haven’t heard my mother talk like that in so long, all I’ve known lately is her tough, commanding voice.

What’s going on?

I inch closer to the door, pressing my ear to the door so I can hear more clearly.

“You’re too young to be getting worked up over nothing, George,” she continues. Her voice is soft, and maybe even vulnerable and small.

That’s not my mother. She isn’t a weak, damsel in distress kind of a person. My mother is strong. She has a sharp tongue to mach. I don’t even know who this person is that’s taking so soothingly.

“That’s bullshit and you know it!” George explodes and I creep in closer to the door but I can’t really see them. “You thought no one would notice, but we all did, mother! How does it feel, huh?”

“George calm down,” my mother tries to sooth, but my brother is beside himself with anger right now and something else that I can’t place. Hurt? Frustration?

Is my mother sick?

“How the fuck am I going to calm down when the asshole you married isn’t even our father?” he shouts and I gasp.

What?

No, there’s no way...

“George...”

George starts laughing, humorlessly, painfully—his voice filled with hurt.

“Did you think we wouldn’t notice? Do you honest think he doesn’t suspect a thing right now?” George chuckles again. “Please tell me you don’t actually think him a fool, mother?”

What does that mean?

My heart is pounding so loud in my chest, as if it wants to explode. What are they talking about? Suspect what? George must have it all mixed up. There’s no way what he’s talking about is true.

So, why would he be this upset over a lie?

“George, my love, you’re playing with fire,” my mother starts, her voice growing shrill and high pitched as if she’s suddenly on high alert. It’s almost as if she’s about to cry. “Richard is your father.”

George laughs again. But why? Our father is our father...although he’s always been a distant, strange man.

There’s something about his presence these days that stifles the air in the house. He and my mother hardly ever talk. He’s hardly home. He doesn’t tolerate George and I. But there’s this certain way he looks at me sometimes...

“So, does that mean if Aunt Sarah falls pregnant right now, with his baby, it won’t matter to you who the father is, right?”

Huh? What does our seventeen-year-old aunt have anything to do with this?

“That’s enough of you, George!” my mother cries. I peak through the slightly ajar door, trying to make out what’s going on in there, but I can’t see a single thing.

“How do you do it, though?” George questions. “How do you let that man anywhere near you when you know what he does when he says he’s going away on his business trips?”

“Oh God, you’re too young...”

“Too young to what? Know that you and Richard are not really lovers? That your marriage was out of convenience?” George questions. Our mother gasps and I can’t even move.

My heart literally stops beating. Time seems to stand still as dread and shock settles into the pit of my stomach.

“What?” Mom gasps out and suddenly she’s in my line of sight. I don’t think she’s noticed me so I move into the shadows, barely able to breathe

right now as everything sinks in.

My parents were really odd. They never did the traditional, romantic stuff other parents do, but they never really argued though. They just had this cool indifference towards each other.

“How...?”

“How did I found out that Richard wasn’t our biological father, or any other father for all intents and purposes?” George interjects, his voice cold, cutting and just pure angry.

“Yes.” Mom gasps out.

“The day I needed blood at the hospital. . .you remember that, don’t you?” George starts. I remember that day too. George had an accident at school where he lost a lot of blood and they needed to give him more blood, so they just asked our Dad who was there, to donate.

“Oh God.” My mother says as sinks into the chair behind her, her entire frame shaking.

“Yes,” George seethes.

“Oh my God,” my mother repeats.

“Save it, mother. God isn’t going to save you now.” George spits out.

“Does your sister know?” Mom questions, looking up at George who I assume is standing in front of her, but he snorts. “Please don’t let her find out, you have to keep her safe, George.”

“Wow! So, lies and deceit are designed to keep people safe now? Got it.” George says and suddenly his voice is loud as if he’s coming this way.

I start panicking.

“George! This is bigger than you think!” she calls after him, her voice shaky and frantic but she forges on anyway. “You have to trust that for whatever reason, I’m doing the best I can to keep both of you safe.”

George laughs then but I can hear the pain in that laugh. I can feel the devastation piercing is heart like it’s happening to me.

“Keeping us safe, huh?” he questions with a rough chuckle, making me lean in forward. “Safe from what?”

But all she manages to do is shake her head, her lips pressed into a fine line with tears streaming down her eyes.

“I’m not a monster, George but I’ve done terrible things,” she starts, her voice breaking at the end.

Dread...it blooms from the inner most parts of me and starts working its way to the rest of me as I listen. I swear with the silence, that falls over the

room, I can hear all three of our heartbeats pound agonizingly, slowly, hard and excruciating.

“What have you done?” George questions, his voice low but hard and unyielding. I watch him turn back and walk towards our mom slowly, watching her as she rocks back and forth.

“Mother what did you do?” George questions again and I inch in closer to see her face but George’s is shadowed, his jaw clenched tight. Mom shakes her head again, her entire body trembling and shaking in the chair as she rocks herself.

“Life has been hard, my sweet boy,” she starts. “All this...” she says, waving at the expensively furnished library. “It was to give you and your sister a better life than the one I had.”

“Is that why we moved to Westbrook?” George questions. “Is that why you brought us here?”

She remains silent for a while, and for a moment, it doesn’t even look like she’s going to respond or even acknowledge that there’s someone talking to her.

“Coming here was necessary.” Is her only response.

George laughs again, throwing his hands up in the air. George was more mature than I was, he saw things in a way that I didn’t and he was smart. He’s the one who taught me how to sense when someone was spouting bullshit or when the truth was evasive. This. . .was both.

“Necessary huh?”

“George, everything I’ve done, right from the start has been necessary to keep you alive. Every move I’ve made, every decision, it’s all been a sacrifice!” she says as she gets up suddenly, fire in her eyes.

“You’re too young to understand this but I’m hoping some day you will. I’ve lost so much. I’ve sacrificed my life to be here. And when it comes to you and your sister, there’s a greater plan at work, all you need to do is trust that I love you and will protect you with everything I am.”

“Mighty words coming from you,” George sarcastically says, folding arms.

“I know it’s hard to understand now but you’ll get in time. But now that you’ve told me that Richard knows that you’re not his biological children, everything is about to change. Hell, I think that’s why...” then she grows silent.

She’s spotted me. I freeze, holding her gaze, but there’s no anger there.

“That’s why what?” George probes.

I can’t even breath, unable to look away from my mother. She looks haunted, sad but freaking determined.

“That’s why I have to make another sacrifice. He won’t rest until I’m destroyed,” mom says.

I want to step in and say something. I want to tell her that she doesn’t have to do what she’s planning to do. I want to tell her that I love her and for whatever reason, Richard won’t harm us but there’s a warning in her eyes.

“You’re not making any sense,” George echoes the words of the question buzzing in my mind. “Who will not rest?”

“It’s bigger than you think, baby boy,” she soothes him but I know she’s also talking to me.

“What does that even mean?” George’s counters, his words harsh and angry.

“George, you have to understand. Sometimes knowing the truth can do more harm than being in the dark.”

And that isn’t insane and creepy at all. Shivers and goosebumps grace my arms and all over my back. There’s an air of doom in my mother’s words as she speaks now, as if she’s about to tell us the apocalypse is here to destroy us.

“So, there’s comfort in the dark, is that it?” George says, his voice filled with sarcasm that I think he’s been learning from the boys, his best friends, where they all disappear for days on end, wrecking havoc and mayhem somewhere, making people fear them.

“In this case, yes,” she quickly says as she grabs both George’s hands. “I know you’re a smart boy, George. The way you carry yourself and the way you can see things so clearly is a gift. But I need you to do this one thing for me.”

“You’re crazy if you think I’ll do anything for you.” George grits out as he watches her but I know my brother. He loves our mother, no matter what she’s done.

“It’s not for me, my love. For your sister,” she says, and I freeze again, not knowing where this is going. There’s an urgency to her voice now that wasn’t there before. Like she knows she’s running out of time.

“Why?” George questions, his voice filled with alarm. That more than anything else tells me that there’s more going on.

“Because I’ve done terrible things before. I let loose a monster once upon a time and I fear that same monster is going to come back. But this time, he might hurt and destroy my babies,” she hurries to explain and I see her look up toward the open door so I move back into the shadows, pretending like I’m not there.

“What monster? What the are you talking about?” George probes again.

“Keep Astraea away from that King boy and I wish you would listen to me when I say you shouldn’t be friends with him either,” she suddenly says, her voice back to being hard and commanding.

“What does Alex have anything to do with this? And why do you hate him so much?”

“I don’t hate the boy, but I do know that the past will come for all of us if you both keep associating with him.”

“What did you do?”

“I made a heavy, heavy sacrifice,” she says. “I made a deal with the devil and it didn’t work out so great in the end,” she quickly says, her voice cryptic, strange and just flat out alarmed.

“Mom...”

“And the thing about the devil, George, is that he always comes back to collect.”

“What does that even mean?” George questions, now stepping closer to our mother, worry in his voice. “Who is this person you’re talking about?”

But she ignores that question too, a steely kind of resolve falling over her like an armor.

“It means there are forces out there that want you dead, both of you,” she rushes to explain, and I watch right in front of me as my mother—who always seems to be drunk and out of her mind these days—straightens her spine and palms my brother’s face.

“And I’ll be damned if anyone tries to snuff your lives out. I know loss, I know what death feels like and I will never allow myself to go through that again. No matter what I have done.”

My heart is beating so fast I think I’m about to have a heart attack. Is that even possible? Can kids my age suffer from heart problems?

“Which is why some sacrifices need to be made now,” she says, her voice hard.

“What sacrifices?”

Yeah, what sacrifices, Mom? I don't like the sound of this. I don't like it all. The goosebumps covering my body can attest to that.

“Sacrifices that you might end up hating me for.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Hours before...

I gasp awake, my heart pounding so hard in my chest. I look around and notice that I'm still in Noah's room but that...that wasn't a dream!

That was a recollection of something that actually happened! I remember that day now!

Why had I forgotten?

For so long, my mother never wanted George and I to get close to Ace but that day, I remember that conversation... my mother was scared of something that happened, something she had done.

Christin had my mother investigated, and it turned out Amanda Fields only came into existence when she married Richard.

My mother was best friends with Denise King before.

Denise said she 'got rid' of one of my mother's babies.

Richard knew for years that we weren't his kids. He told me so last night. So, what did he act brand new the day Denise broke the news to him?

Then there's the issue about Ace. George mentioned something in the...

The letter!

Pushing away the covers from Noah's bed away from me, I get off his bed, ignoring Noah's loud snoring. I need to read that letter again. George

said something about Ace and his scars in that letter.

I'm guessing he knew that Philip was whipping Ace, so he might mean those scars are our fault but I doubt that. I think there's more to Ace's 'scars' than I realized.

Could it be that he meant my mother caused them? And that by association, we are guilty?

You started looking like your mother's brother...

I gasp, rushing around Noah's large bedroom, looking for my clothes. But then I glance down at the clothes I'm wearing, and it all comes back to me.

Ace and I fucked.

I'm now calling him Ace... WTF?

He fucked me in Emmett's room. I ran out wearing Emmett's clothes. Which means one thing, I left my wet clothes in Emmett's bathroom, the same clothes that have the letter from George!

"Fuck," I breathe out, my heart racing.

"Cursing in the morning, Astraea?" Noah grumbles, flipping over to his other side.

"Noah, wake up!" I rush to him, shaking him awake.

"No, I'm not going to school today," he grumbles again, grabbing the pillow I was sleeping on to cover his head.

"Urgh, I don't give a damn about school right now! We have to go to the Brooke House!"

"What for, Baby Blue?" he murmurs, obviously sinking deeper into his peaceful slumber. "It's too early."

"Noah! You don't understand, this might all be my fault!"

"Okay," he whispers, then he starts snoring.

Seriously? Okay? That's all I get?

Looking around his room, I notice the door to the bathroom. I've got an idea.

I run into his bathroom. There's a cup on the lavish vanity sink. I grab it and fill it with ice cold water, then rushing back into his room. Tip toeing towards him, I softly lift the pillow from his head, exposing his head.

I take a step back from his bed, making sure I give myself distance. I bite my lip, then splash all the water in the cup to his face.

"Ahh!" he yells. "What the fuck?"

I hold in my laughter, knowing that will piss him off even more.

“What the hell, Astraea?” he demands, a shocked look on his face.

“You snore,” I accuse, then dash for his closet. “And we have to go!”

“Go where?” he grumbles, his morning voice deep and pissed off. Yeah, he’s mad at me but this can’t wait.

“I told you, we’re going to the Brooke House.”

“You can’t be serious right now,” he calls after me as I rummage around his large closet, it’s all designer fits in here. Everything looks expensive, a lot of his clothes still have tags on them, showing that he hasn’t even worn them. “You’ve forgiven him that quickly?”

I gasp, then peep out the door at him. “I did not forgive him!” I seethe, “Forgiving is an act that happens when someone actively and sincerely asks to be forgiven! And he hasn’t done that, so...”

I get back in his closet.

“Sweatpants are at the back of the closet, in the wardrobe with the gold knob,” he calls.

Gold knobs, of course.

“Extravagant much?” I deadpan, taking the directions I’ve been given. I open it and alas, sweatpants galore. “Where are the t-shirts?”

“The chest of drawers in the middle and I’m not extravagant.”

I don’t reply at that, rolling my eyes.

“Okay, maybe just a little bit,” he scoffs. “But what’s the point of having all this money if I can’t spend any of it?”

“Clearly,” I whisper, then pause as I think of what Christina told me yesterday. Money is the root of all evil, it even drives estranged fathers to try contacting their sons in the hopes of getting that money.

Shaking my head, I grab everything I need. I’m going to have to rush to my house and get some shoes. And if I can talk to my mother, that would be great. There’s a lot she knows, obviously.

“So why are we going back there? You said you don’t want anything to do with that guy anymore and I support you hundred percent, even though it’ll be weird because you’re both my day ones, so...”

“Noah, can you just brush your damn teeth and grab a quick shower while I shower in the guest room and we can go?” I say, rushing out of his room. I need to get that letter before anyone can read it.

Before Ace reads it.

“You’re actually serious about this?” Noah questions, a somber look on his face.

“As a heart attack,” I say, holding his gaze. He nods and I leave, in search of one of the many guest bedrooms in this mansion. I find the one I used before. Shutting the door behind me, I quickly get into the bathroom and shower, thank God that Christina keeps all the guest bedrooms stocked with shower gel, shampoo, conditioner and all that fancy shit.

As soon as I’m done showering, I connect the blower to dry my hair, then I wear Noah’s clothes. They’re a bit big of course, but not as massive as Emmett’s so they’ll have to do for a run to grab a letter.

Five minutes later, I’m done then I go in search of my best friend.

“Noah, you can’t seriously take more time to get ready than I do!” I shout behind his door but he doesn’t respond.

“Noah!” I grumble, growing impatient. When I don’t get an answer back, I push open his bedroom door and see him bristling with anger, scrolling through his phone, with another phone pressed to his ear.

“Right now!” he shouts. “Get it down right now!”

What’s going on?

“Noah?” I call but he doesn’t hear me.

“Don’t tell me that shit! It’s all over social media sites! Throw the damn book at them. I don’t care what you do! Threaten them or something, this is child pornography!”

Child pornography?

I push the door wider and go to him, my eyes glued on the screen of the phone he’s scrolling furiously through, his face darkening by the second.

Dread pools in the pit of my stomach. Every nerve ending in my body is on standby, as if I know that whatever he’s viewing on that phone or whoever he’s talking about, has everything to do with me.

Brittney has pictures of you.

I can still hear Ace’s clipped words from last night. I can still see the disgusted look that was on his face when he said that.

I’m going to make you pay.

Brittney warned me, last night. She warned me that she was going to come after me.

Without another thought, I reach out to grab the phone from Noah, my heart in my fucking throat.

“Baby Blue, I don’t think you should...”

But it’s too late.

I notice my long hair first.

The way it's fanned out on the wooden floor, the tresses long and regal. Next, it's my arms. One of them is squeezing my breast and the other, I look down, is barely covering my exposed vagina.

My stomach protests but I clamp a hand over it, stopping myself from retching.

"Astraea, we're taking care of it." I can hear Noah's panicked voice, but it sounds like it's coming from somewhere else. Like it's faraway, getting drowsy and unclear, but my eyes are sharp and focused on the picture in front of me.

It's me, naked on the floor, my eyes barely open but I know better, I was conscious that night. But it felt like, I had an out of body experience, watching from above as my body was brutalized, abused, then toyed with after he was done, three times.

I watched as he arranged me the way he wanted, taking pictures of my comatose body, all the while, he was laughing, talking about how he'll show them both.

And the next thing, I'm falling!

"Astraea!" someone shouts but I'm back there now. Mind, body and spirit present with my thirteen-year-old self. The little girl who wanted to die that night. The little girl who couldn't scream anymore, her voice hoarse, her spirit broken.

I'm back there with myself, where my life changed forever. I'm back there staring up at the man who had eyes similar to mine...

"Oh God," I whimper,

"Shit!" someone, Noah, curses, then I'm being moved. I'm placed on something soft. His bed, most likely.

"Shit, shit," he breathes, pushing my hair back but I fold into myself, as the shaking starts all over again.

"Answer the damn phone!" Noah shouts but I can't take it anymore. The shaking grows stronger and stronger as the whispers come back again. The room grows smaller, I feel chillingly cold and hot at the same time.

But all I can hear is his laugh.

His loud, boisterous, manic laugh...



"Astraea, babes, I need you to breathe," a voice whispers softly over me, my hair being smoothed away from my face. "Just deep breathes,"

Her voice is soothing and confident, I have no choice but to follow her careful instructions.

“There we go,” she whispers again. “A couple more deep breaths.”

I follow through, but my heart is still beating painfully in my chest.

“How do you feel?” she questions and I open my eyes. At first, everything is blurry with tears, then I blink the room into focus.

“I feel like I’m having a heart attack,” I groan, feeling devastated and small.

The voice chuckles, a sexy chuckle that sounds familiar.

“Well, you’re not far off,” Ivy says softly. “You had a panic attack.”

I sit up then and notice her sitting at the edge of Noah’s bed, then she extends a bottle of water to me.

“Drink this,” she says, a small smile on her face. “It’ll help with that parched throat.”

“How are you here?” I question, gratefully accepting the water, gulping down half the water without stopping.

“Easy there,” she chides. “Noah called Kim and well...”

“Here we are,” Kim says, coming into focus. I look up and she’s standing to my left, a worried look on her face. “Are you alright?”

“Besides the fact that there’s a picture of me as a thirteen-year-old girl, that had just been raped, on the internet? Oh, and the fact that panic attacks are now a common feature in my life? Besides all that, I’m doing well.”

“I’m so sorry about that,” Ivy says, a stricken look on her face.

“On the bright side, the picture has been taken down,” Kim points out and I just stare at her, not knowing what to say. It’s one thing to be raped but another to have a picture of yourself, vulnerable and hurt, on the internet for the world to see.

“How many people do you think have seen it already?” I say, feeling drained and so damn tired all over again. I’m just...tired.

“It’s hard to say,” Kim answers, a frown on her face.

“But the boys are out doing only God knows what, to make it all right. They’re all mad as hell, looking for whoever did this,” Ivy informs.

Nothing will ever be right or normal, ever again.

“Brittney,” I spit out, looking at Kim as I say that. She doesn’t look away, doesn’t frown or deny it. Instead she nods, her face smoothed out.

“It’s definitely her! After you embarrassed her at the party last night, I knew she was going to retaliate,”

“Wait, you stayed?” I demand, still pissed that she ditched me.

“Nah, I noticed that I wasn’t wanted so I left before it turned ugly,” she whispers, hugging herself as she looks around Noah’s room. “I heard from the grape vine.”

“As usual,” I murmur with a sigh. I can’t be mad at Kim for this, but I’m still bitter as hell.

“Did you see the picture?” I question her.

“Astraea, I don’t think it’s wise to go digging for worms right now...”

“Answer the damn question, Kim,” I seethe, feeling agitated, embarrassed and humiliated. I never, not once, thought that something like this would ever happen to me. And the fact that I trusted Ace when he said he had gotten rid of all the pictures...

“A chain message was sent to everyone who goes to Westbrook Blues,” Kim says softly. “It’s bad.”

I laugh then, shaking my head in self-pity. I’m such a fool.

“I guess she bested me yet again,” I whisper. “Nothing can be worse than that.”

“Don’t say that,” Ivy starts, “It’s all going to be alright.”

“Exactly,” Kim echoes, a self-assured look on her face. “It’s going to be alright. We’re going to find that bitch and...”

But before she can finish, her phone vibrates with a text.

“Hold on, it’s my little sister texting...and she never texts, she usually just calls...”

“Hey, it’s going to be alright,” Ivy says, grabbing my hand. “I know your life’s been crazy lately, but I do think that every storm settles down eventually and you’ll see the opportunity of a rebirth.”

“I love your optimism,” I say, not wanting to offend her. “You must get that from Marie.”

“You’re damn right,” she laughs. “Speaking of which, Gran’s been trying to reach you. She told me to tell you to call her as soon as possible.”

“Oh, about what...”

“OH MY GOD!” Kim screams, making Ivy and I jump.

“Kim, what’s wrong?” Ivy questions, her eyes wide and frightened.

I stand up and take the phone from Kim’s shaking hands, her eyes wide with fear.

For the second time today, I’m staring down at an image of a little girl, but this time, it’s two little girls who look a lot like Kim, with little cute

pink dresses, but the terror in their eyes and the gag clothes in their mouths suggest something else.

“What’s going on?” Ivy demands again.

“Someone kidnapped Kim’s sisters.” I say weakly, my body growing heavy with tension.

“What?” Ivy gasps, grabbing the phone. “Who did this?”

“Larry,” Kim and I say at the same time.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“Okay, I realize that there’s a whole lot that’s going on that I’m sure I don’t know about. And quite frankly, I feel like we’re out of our depths here, so shouldn’t we be calling the police, you know, the actual law enforcers who can help out?” Ivy questions, but she’s still calm and collected. I don’t know why I expected her to run or at the very least, freak out.

“Because these people don’t mess around and I’m not wasting a second away from my sisters,” Kim grits out as we round the shabby house that’s on the outskirts of Westbrook Blues. “And I don’t trust the system enough to involve them in this.”

“Well then, no going back, huh?” Ivy exhales loudly, but follows Kim anyway.

“Are you sure this is his house?” I question Kim as we go, clutching Noah’s baseball bat in my hands.

“It has to be,” Kim says. “This was a good idea, by the way. The guy practically hates you.”

“Isn’t he the same guy my Gran said paid some nurse at the hospital to drug you?” Ivy questions, her voice a hot whisper at my back. “You know, the one who probably had something to do with George’s death?”

Except, he might also be the key to finding George alive... fingers crossed.

“Yup, he’s the one and only,” I whisper back. “My brother also said that Dereck is an answer. And since he works so well with Brittney to try to get into Larry’s organization, I know he knows where Kim’s sisters are.”

“So, what are we going to do? Just walk in there and what, demand that he tells us where the girls are, or else we rearrange his face?” Ivy questions again.

“Yes,” I answer simply. I don’t care if we have to use violence. After the days I’ve been having in Westbrook Blues, I need to blow off some steam that has nothing to do with me being flat on my back, naked.

“And if he decides not to tell us a damn thing?” Ivy questions.

“Then we make him talk,” Kim grits out then without warning, she runs for the front door. Ivy and I glance at each other then we scramble to catch up, simultaneously throwing rocks at the front windows of the raggedy, old house, watching them shatter.

“Open the door, you scumbag!” Kim shouts, pounding away. “Open up before I break this damn door and whoop your ass with it!”

“Damn,” Ivy whispers, staring at Kim.

At this point, I’m not even shocked at the fire in Kim’s eyes or her frantic, anger charged actions. She’s told me about how violent and unpredictable Larry can be and having tasted a dose of that lethal poison when I was thirteen, I know I’ll do anything I can to get those girls back, before they fall victim to a fate worse than death.

I won’t sit by, wallowing in self-pity because the world has a picture of me naked. I’ll worry and get depressed about that later but for now, I won’t let Larry win. I won’t let another unsuspecting little girl.

Not because I want to be a fucking hero, but because I want Larry dead.

“I’m going to count to three!” Kim bellows, ready for anything.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming,” a voice says from within and we all tense up. Kim holds up the butcher knife she took from Christina’s kitchen. I wield the baseball bat and Ivy just stands there, looking unbothered.

The door creaks open and Dereck peeks his head out but that’s the only opening we need. Charging in with a war cry, we push the door at the same time, pushing him until he falls flat on his ass.

“What the fuck?” Dereck shrieks like a little bitch, wide eyed and shocked. “What do you want?”

“You know exactly what we want, you jerk!” Kim seethes, shutting the door behind us with a loud bang that shakes the entire house.

Frantic, Dereck tries to get up on his feet but before either Kim and I can blink, Ivy gives him a swift kick in the sternum, then another at the back of his left knee, making him fall back down to the hardwood floor with a thud.

“What the fuck?” Dereck howls but Kim and I ignore him, starring at Ivy, stunned into silence.

“What?” she shrugs, still looking unbothered. “I train in various, err, self-defense arts with my brother... and sometimes with Emmett,” she rushes to say, glancing at me. I blink, feeling like I just got bitch slapped.

“Well damn,” Kim whistles.

“I feel like it’s a lot I don’t know about you,” I say, still stunned, but then Dereck curses again, trying to get up. “But we’ll talk about that later.”

It turns out George was right. Ivy and I do have to talk. One day, we will. I just hope it won’t be too late to do that.

“Good idea,” she says then delivers another devastating kick to Dereck’s gut and he hitches over.

“Okay, okay,” he cries. “The drugs are in the back, under my bed. All the money I have is in the bathroom, behind the toilet.”

“How fucking convenient for us,” Ivy says. “And gross.”

“We don’t need your fucking money!” Kim spits. “Where the hell is your girlfriend?”

He struggles to sit up straight but when he does, he looks round, terrified, then he looks at me, recognition setting in.

“You!” he gasps, looking genuinely stunned. I frown. It’s not the reaction I was expecting at all. His cheeks turn pink, as if he’s blushing, then he starts looking around his small living room that’s dirty and out place. “I wasn’t expecting you to come here.”

“What?” Ivy, Kim and I say at the same time, frowning at him.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he looks embarrassed. With himself and with his home. That’s...odd.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve dreamt of you in my personal space, with me...” he starts, making me frown.

“Eww, shut up!” I rush to say, feeling disgusted but Ivy bursts out laughing.

“I think you have an admirer, Raea,” she laughs.

“It’s not funny!” I say, feeling strangely mortified by the way he’s looking at me.

“Astraea Clara Fields,” he breathes, a look of ecstasy on his face. “I’ve dreamt of you for years, since the day I met you. If you’re here to take my virtue, I’ll give it to you freely!”

Take his damn virtue? What the fuck? I reel back.

“Dude, are you high?” Kim demands, poking him with her boot.

“Yes,” he says, never taking his eyes off of me, watching me like he’s never seen a girl in his life. It’s creepy and unsettling. “I’m high on love.”

That does it for Kim and Ivy, they double over laughing but I’m just flabbergasted, anger making my blood boil.

“Love? You love me?” I demand, clutching the bat tighter.

“I’ve loved you for a long time, beautiful Astraea,” he answers, looking doped up. I think he is high.

“Really? Then why are you trying to kill me?” I grit out, ignoring Kim and Ivy who are laughing at the wrong time. We need to get to the girls, we don’t have time to deal with this shit.

“About that,” he starts, scratching the back of his head, “I didn’t have a choice in the matter to be honest. They sent me with Brittney to make sure that you were drugged. I’m glad you didn’t die. I had to switch the injection when Brittney wasn’t looking.”

“What?” I demand, stunned by this. “You had to switch the injection from what to what?”

“And you didn’t have a choice?” Ivy demands, with a serious look on her face.

“Who the fuck sent you in the first place?” Kim questions, stepping closer, all traces of humor gone without a trace.

“Listen,” Dereck starts, making a move to get up.

“Don’t you dare!” Ivy grits out, getting ready to kick him silly. “Stay down there!”

“And answer the damn questions!” Kim threatens as she circles him, looking around the messy room. “But first, how do you afford to go to Westbrook Blues when you live in this dump?”

“Right? I thought you were a drug lord,” Ivy frowns, obviously unimpressed. “I guess you don’t make money after all.”

“Shut up, this is all your boyfriend’s fault!” he snaps, rage in his eyes but he doesn’t move.

“Whose fault?” I ask, my heart thundering.

“You honestly don’t remember do you?” he scoffs, shaking his head at me. “You can’t see the resemblance on my face with someone you used to know?”

I study him but I have no idea who he’s talking about.

“We’ve met before?” I question, still confused. I’m so sure that I only met this dude the first day I attended Westbrook Blues, not any other time before.

He chuckles, but it’s cold and aloof. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, you only ever had eyes for that prick who ignored you in public, but claimed you everywhere else. How pathetic is that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I deny, remembering that I need to get to Ace, possibly before he reads that letter. But first, Kim’s sisters.

“I’m sure you don’t. You’ve always been clueless, always had a knack of choosing assholes over the good guys,”

“Hey, you can’t talk about my girl like that!” Ivy warns, kicking him again. “I’m the only one allowed to call her clueless.”

“Really?” Kim and I say at the same time.

“What?” she shrugs. “He’s right, you can be clueless at times, Astraea.”

“Yeah, we established that,” I grit out, annoyed that they’re all right. I am a fool and here I am trying to make up for my character judgement. “Listen, Dereck. I don’t know you and you don’t look familiar, but you obviously seem to know more about me, so why don’t you get to explaining!”

“Yeah, that’s how I remember you, always strong willed, with a sharp tongue and you knew you had four brooding jerks behind you, such a spoilt bitch.”

Is this guy bipolar? Just now he was confessing his love for me and the next he’s cursing me out? The fuck?

“So, you were what? Jealous?” Kim questions, “You decided to teach her a lesson because you’re poor and struggling?”

“No!” Dereck vehemently denies. “Your so called Blue Boys destroyed my life!”

“How?” Ivy questions, arms folded.

“My parents divorced...” he starts.

“And here we go again,” Ivy scoffs, “Just another privileged, white boy thinking their ugly behaviors are acceptable because their fucking parents divorced! Listen jerk, the world is full of people without parents, some were dumped by their parents at a fucking young age but that doesn’t give us the license to go around joining gangs and trying to kill other people just because we’re jealous and hurt or the classic, we don’t have a choice!”

Dereck blinks several times, staring at Ivy, his jaw dropped and for the first time since I’ve met Ivy, I see her for who she is. A girl whose hurting, has her own demons but doesn’t let them win.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, steeping away from Dereck. “I just can’t stand people like him.”

“I get it,” Kim says. “But we need answers, Dereck or we’ll hurt you.”

“Like I was saying, my parents divorced because well, my father got laid off from his job. The company went bankrupt after a huge Ponzi scheme scandal. So, we had to move. He changed his name and changed careers because well, everyone who had invested in that company lost a shit ton of money,” he starts, looking at me. “My mother was already cheating with my Dad’s clients so when the whole scandal blew up and my Dad lost everything, she divorced him, married the prick and they moved to...”

“Westbrook Blues,” I finish for him, but I still don’t get where this is going.

“Yes,” he says, looking away. “They moved because the guy was offered a job as the president of a prestigious company, King’s Hedge Fund!” he announces with an exaggerated flourish.

“What?” I gasp, my mind buzzing like a damn beehive. That’s one of Philip Kings companies.

“Well damn,” Ivy says, leaning against the door, unmoved by Dereck’s sob story. “So, what happened next?”

“You don’t get it! I had to change my name too! I didn’t want to associate with my fucking low life of a father, so I took my stepfather’s name, Myers, neglecting my father who was left alone.”

Ivy yawns dramatically while Kim rolls her eyes, but I’m actually shook. I never saw this coming.

“So, I started school at the prestigious, notorious, Westbrook Blues High. Good ole Edward paid for everything, all with an ulterior motive,” he seethes. “He’d continue paying for my education if I became close friends with the Blue Boys.”

“Aww, you wanted to be the fifth?” Ivy taunts, crossing her arms and jutting her hip.

“Yes!” Dereck grits out, mirth in his eyes. “They were all this town ever talked about. The boys everyone wanted at their parties, in their schools, on their fucking teams. I wanted that!”

“So, in other words you’re just a shallow, crackhead teenager who wants popularity?” Kim mocks. “Guess you’d go to all sorts of lengths to achieve that, even kidnap children!”

“Whoa, if there are children that were taken, that’s all Brittney and her father,” he states, eyes hard. Then he swivels his head up to look at me.

“But I won’t help you because of her!”

“Because of me?” I frown, watching him. “I never did a thing to you and quite frankly, I don’t even know you.”

“Well, I’ve known you since I came back,” he starts. “You see, part of my agreement with my stepfather was, if I was friends with the Blue Boys, then it would be automatic that he’d be chosen for the fourth family bid shit since at the time, your family hadn’t been made official.”

‘And then?’ Kim demands, impatient.

“And then that didn’t happen. I did everything to get King’s attention but he just didn’t see me! Montreal made fun of me, embarrassing me without even trying and Easton was just cool and indifferent most of time but then I saw you and your twin...”

My breath catches, my heart pounding so damn loud, painfully aware of the fact that this asshole had something to do with my brother’s death/disappearance act.

“I saw the bond between you, the way you made each other happy. Then there was the way those bastards behaved when they were around you, the way they watched you.”

“What?” I breathe out but he just laughs.

“Yes, it’s true!” he rushes to say. “I’m not the only one who saw it! The entire school knew it too, hell, the entire town,” he says, waving his hand around. “They acted different with you, like they wanted to please you. It was almost as if, you were and maybe you still are, everything to them. So, it didn’t take long to realize that you were the glue that kept that band of assholes together.”

“So, you decided to destroy me to get to them?” I demand, my anger coming back.

“The opposite actually. I asked you out. It was so easy to be enchanted by you, the way you are, you’re the envy of many but you don’t even know it,” he rushes to say. “And besides, the whole George, drugs, Brittney, The Phoenix Corps and you came way later.”

“Trust me, she knows now,” Kim says, “Brittney made her presence known.”

“Yeah, Brittney couldn’t stand you for years. She promised that she’d destroy, actually, the way she’s so committed to that cause, it’s as if she made a vow in blood, all because you had fucking King’s attention on you.”

“So, Brittney was your in to get to Astraea and the Blue Boys?” Ivy questions, now invested in the story like the rest of us.

“Not until later when you came back,” he says, then he looks up at me. “See, I once asked you out on the first day of school freshman year...the same year we got a new teacher at school.”

“Coach Myers?” I remember he did transfer to our school around that time, or was it a year before?

“No, that’s my stepfather’s childless brother who got me into Westbrook Blues High,” Dereck seethes. “I’m talking about another teacher.”

“Mr. Smith?” I frown again. I question, that jerk hated me. Made my life hell. “What does he have to do with all of this?”

“Because he was your biological father, wasn’t he?” Kim starts, watching him.

“Yes,” Dereck seethes. “Mr. Smith to his new clients. Since he changed careers, but to me he was a low life, stalking father.”

“But, you called Coach Myers your father?” I question. “Identity crisis much?”

“Nah, Coach and I had an understanding, before he screwed me over and didn’t bail me out of jail after a particular party that went south.”

“So, who bailed you out? Your bond was high as fuck.” Kim demands, watching him with a frown.

“I think you already know the answer to that,” he says, a sick, twisted smile on his face.

I’m stunned. This is too much information coming at me all at once.

“Mr. Smith? Isn’t that the guy that had his house vandalized a few years ago? It was painted with hellish marks that had him chased out of town by religious folk, then later news broke that he was arrested because he was believed to be trafficking children?” Ivy questions, eyeing Dereck now.

“Yup, that’s my father,” he scoffs.

“Why didn’t he like me?” I demand. “Why did he make my life at school hell?” I know this isn’t the time to question why an insignificant person would not like me and frankly, I shouldn’t care but Dereck’s father constantly belittled me in class for no apparent reason.

“Because I told him you were the reason why I’d never leave Westbrook. So, he thought maybe if you didn’t like school, you would transfer. Classic, old school bullying.”

“That’s messed up! But Astraea had nothing to do with what happened to your father.” Ivy says, shaking her head.

Hmm, I might know who vandalized the dude’s house and never said a word about it. Shit, the boys did that for me, didn’t they?

“Of course, King found out that he was my father and that I wanted you, so...they had me...”

“Shit, I know you now!” Ivy exclaims, her eyes widening. “You’re the kid that got...”

“Exiled, yeah, whatever,” Dereck seethes, looking away again.

“Well, shit.” Ivy breathes, watching Dereck in a mix between fascination and pity in her eyes. “Why the hell didn’t you tell me we were going to hassle the dude who got Exiled?”

“Uh, am I the only one who doesn’t know what the hell you’re talking?” Km chimes in, looking as confused as I feel.

“Nope, I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean either.” I shake my head, looking from Dereck to Ivy. “What do you mean by he got exiled?”

“Not exiled, I’m talking about The Exile,” Ivy starts, waving her hands in the air, dramatically.

“Is there a difference?” I question, thinking she’s taking this too far.

“Only one of the most embarrassing, most mortifying event to ever happen to a high schooler. Shit, the tradition didn’t even start in Westbrook Blues, but the Blue Boys adopted it like what, five years ago.” Ivy starts, pacing as she goes.

“So, what exactly is it?” I question.

“Oh, it’s like...”

“It happens when you least expect it. Everyone would be there, to witness the most demeaning thing to ever happen to another human being. Essentially, it’s like you’re being dimmed a fucking outcast, right in front of

everyone,” Dereck starts, looking down at the floor but I can see how tense his body is. “It’s a public humiliation of sorts, dramatic but effect as hell.”

“And the boys did that to you.” I finish, not even knowing that this happened.

“Yup, right after I asked you out actually,” he chuckles softly. “We had a football game that weekend, I made second string and all that but the entire school, the opposition’s school were all there to witness me being Exiled like a fucking dog, banished from anything mainstream because I had the guts to ask you out...”

“Or that your father was a jerk to Astraea,” Ivy says, arms folded. “No one’s going to feel sorry for you.”

“Because you didn’t get the sound rang on you, did you?” Dereck spits.

“Whatever, where the fuck is Brittney?” Kim growls, standing over him like she’s about to torment him.

“I have no fucking idea,” he laughs then. “If she has something of yours, then you better know she has a fucking army of people that hate the Blue families behind her.”

“I don’t give a damn if she’s got an army of a thousand behind her, I will find my sisters alive and intact!” Kim seethes, dropping down to his eye level.

“Your confidence is a turn on but unfortunately, with the return of the friend you were supposed to betray ruthlessly, your father is on Brittney’s side. Hell, I bet he’s the one that ordered your little, innocent sisters to be taken.” Dereck says, a cold smile on his face.

“And you have no one else to blame but yourself,” he whispers, watching her. “Larry doesn’t give a damn about anyone.”

“Where is he?” I demand, my voice hoarse, eyes wide. If it’s terror at hearing Larry’s name that makes chills race down my spine, I don’t fucking care. “Where the hell can we find him.”

“Well, I would tell you but like I said, I won’t,” Dereck grits out, watching me. “You’re the reason my life spiraled out of control! Your family is the reason why my fucking stepdad never got to be included into the Blue Gen families. It’s all on you!”

I still on the spot, the accusations hitting me square in the chest. Everything does feel like it’s my fault.

Ace’s scars, it’s my fault.

My mother... my fault.

My lost sister...my fault.

Everything is my fucking fault.

“And you know what the kicker is, even if I tell you, there’s nothing you can fucking do because the Phoenix is in town and if he’s there, no army or your pathetic Blue Boys can stand against him,” Dereck laughs, maniacally.

Kim, Ivy and I look at each other silently. There’s no masking the uncertainty on our faces but you can’t deny, we’re not giving up now.

“Well then, Dereck,” I start, clutching the baseball bat in my hand. “You and I are going to settle score.”

“How?” he chuckles. “Are you going to fuck me?”

“Nah, I’m sure the sex dolls you’ve been fucking since you were Exiled, are good enough to take your virginity.” Kim grits out, pointing the knife at him.

“We’re going on a ride,” Ivy says, walking around him, then she grabs his collar at the nape of his neck, standing him up.

“You’re going to be a good, strung up, drug mule, little boy,” Kim says, standing along with him.

“And you’re going to fucking take us to your girlfriend, Brittney, her asshole of a father and this Phoenix.” I finish, then turn my back on him opening the door and we leave with a stunned Dereck.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Dereck warns for the hundredth time, but we ignore him like we’ve been doing for the last ten minutes.

“Shut up!” Kim seethes. “The only thing you should be concerned about is whether or not you gave us the right place.”

“You know it’s correct. Besides, I wouldn’t lie when I know you’re going to fucking lose and die at the same time,” he chuckles.

We’re in Kim’s car, driving to God knows where. The road looks and feels familiar though.

“What happened to my brother?” I blurt out, turning around to look at him from the passenger seat. Dereck is next to Ivy at the back whose been silvering blows to his nuts each time he tries to complain, squirm or be nonsensical. “You drugged my brother, didn’t you?”

Dereck shuts up right then, looking away as if he didn’t hear what I just said. I nod at Ivy and she ouches him. Twice.

“Answer her! I really don’t care about you, dude,” she threatens.

“Shit! Okay, okay!” Dereck says. It’s not like we’ve got his hands and feet tied, but he’s acting like he’s in bondage. Idiot. “George and your boys broke up and there were rumors that he was going to be Exiled.”

“And then you drugged him.” I accuse.

“Whoa, George approached me!” he seethes, “It’s not like I went looking for him, even though he did come in handy with information on King, Easton and Montreal, but we had our orders to take him out.”

“Who ordered you to take him out?” I demand, getting riled up again. “Who?”

“Well, you’re about to find out.” He smiles sardonically, looking straight ahead. I turn around and come face to face with a blockade.

“Shit!” Kim growls “I should have known that they would be expecting us.”

“I told you!” Dereck laughs as huge men with large guns stride towards our car.

“Back up!” Ivy shouts, her voice filled with panic.

“Too late for that, they’re blocking the back too,” I say, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Shit, shit!” Kim breathes, glancing at me but there’s no fury in her eyes. We both look at Ivy in the back, silently communicating like we did before in Dereck’s dirty ass cabin.

“Come out of the car, with your hands up and we won’t kill you!” A voice says over a speaker, making us freeze.

“You’re screwed now,” Dereck laughs, still sitting there, watching us.

Glancing from Ivy to Kim, ignoring Dereck

“Why the fuck not,” Ivy says, and I nod.

“Let’s go get those babies.” I say, grabbing Kim’s hand. I don’t know if I’m trying to comfort her or trying to comfort myself, but I know we need all the strength we can get for what’s about to happen.

Without wasting another second, we open our respective car doors, leaving Dereck who is laughing maniacally now, watching us in glee as we raise our hands in the air, walking towards their black SUVs.

Three large men with solemn expressions on their faces meet us halfway. I expect them to roughly grab us, tie us up, then gag us or put bags over our heads but instead, one of them stops before us and the other two walk over to Kim’s car and grab Dereck roughly.

“Hey, what’re you doing?” he yells. “I’m one of you! You can’t do this to me! They came to me! They held me hostage!”

“Please, we don’t a gun between the three of us,” Ivy rolls her eyes.

I frown, watching the scene unfold. Dereck struggles but they restrain him then take him to the SUVs that were blocking us from the back.

“Talk about a plot twist,” Ivy says.

“Tell me about it,” Kim agrees, a small smile on her face.

“Miss. Astraea, Miss. Kimberly, Miss. Ivy, we didn’t mean to use force on you, if you’ll please come this way,” the military looking man in front of me says.

He knows our names. He knows our fucking names! All of them are Phoenix Corps but why would they rough up one of their own.

“Uh, what’s going on?” I question, uncertain about all of this.

“Are you about to kidnap us?” Ivy demands, frowning.

“Like you did my sisters!” Kim shouts. “Where are my sisters?”

“I’m sorry for your distress but all the answers you seek will be answered in due time. Please, this way.” He gestures towards the waiting SUVs with other scary looking men, but we don’t move.

“We won’t hurt you,” the man says, trying to smile but it doesn’t work well for him.

Glancing at Ivy and Kim, I can’t help but feel like I can actual trust what this guy is saying. For some reason, I trust that they’re not going to hurt us and that whatever is at the end of the drive these scary looking men are about to take us on, are much needed answers.

“Well then, let’s go.” I start and then walk towards the car. Ivy and Kim follow silently, but I can feel their unease. We get into the one of the SUVs. As soon as the guy closes the door after him, we peel out of there like a scene out of Fast & Furious, but no one is chasing us.

We don’t utter a single word in the car but I can see that we’ve since left Westbrook Blues, now on the outskirts of town but I still don’t know where the hell they are taking us.

All too soon, the car skids to a stop, we hold our breath collectively. Doors open and close, echoing in the large airplane hangar. I look around and notice small, stylish planes. Four to be precise, and they all have what looks like birds...or wait—they are Phoenix birds on the side of each plane.

Shit. If the heavily armed men that took us weren’t an indication of an underground outfit, these private jets are all the proof in the world.

“Okay, whatever we do, make sure we don’t die,” Ivy says softly. I nod, about to say something but someone else responds, making my blood run cold.

My heart stops beating, my breath catches in my lungs and everything inside me just...collapses.

It can't be...

"It all depends on what you do from here on out," he says. "But I'm sure smart girls like you know when to keep your mouth shut, right?"

Oh God.

I gasp, but I feel like I'm frozen in time.

Is it possible that I'm hallucinating all over again? That the withdrawals are kicking in again?

"Holy shit!" Ivy breathes, shock evident in her voice.

"Hello Ivy," the cultured, deep voice says, and I finally move, turning to look at him, my heart in my fucking throat.

"George?" I gasp, eyes widening.

I'm suddenly face to face with a smiling, handsome face that I would know from anywhere.

"Hey, Twin Turbo," he smiles, his sharp, chiseled cheeks flushing pink with a light blush as if he's suddenly grown shy. "Missed me?"

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heart fucking beat.



"Did we die and go to some place where we get judged if we're going to Heaven or hell?" Ivy gasps, her jaw dropping as she stares at my...twin brother.

Oh God. It even feels strange to say that. Let alone, look at the guy and not imagine him in a coffin, six feet under up in the private burial plots of Westbrook Blues.

"If it were, then you already know, we're going to hell for all the shit we've done to get here," George says, smiling at me but all I can do is stare at him like a fool. Unabashed and so damn frightened like I'm staring at a ghost, afraid that if I say something, he might disappear.

"Are you going to say anything?" he asks, stepping closer to me. "God, it's so good to see you. You've no idea how long I've waited for this day."

Waited for this day?

"I..." I start but my voice is all shriveled up, and dry like I swallowed a freaking desert.

"Twin Turbo, it's me," he says, spreading his arms wide. "I'm here. I'm alive."

He says it so casually like it should solve every single problem in the world, like he doesn't owe anyone an explanation for what he put me through.

"Astraea," Kim calls gently, coming closer to me. "I hope you're not having another panic attack."

"Another panic attack?" George's voice booms in the space of the hangar. I blink slowly, watching fascinated as his face grows larger, then smaller all at the same time. Yup, I was right. He isn't real.

"Astraea, stay with me," Ivy says quietly, grabbing both my hands. "Just breathe."

"What's happening to her?" George demands. Why is he agitated? I should be the one freaking out. I almost smile.

Have you ever hoped for something to come true with all your might that when it's finally right in front of you, you're not prepared to deal with it so, you just...blank out and start panicking? That's me in a nutshell.

"Just give her a little space. You just shocked her to an inch of her life, George," Ivy says, ever so gently. I bet she's asking herself what the fuck is going on.

"But..." George starts but Kim explains.

"She's had a pretty hard time lately," Kim says as I slowly take in deep breaths, feeling like I'm slowly losing it.

"This is all my fault," George breathes, stepping closer to me, a frown on his gorgeous face that I haven't seen in so long.

"You're damn right, this all your fault, dumbass!" I gasp out each word like a panting dog, looking around like I'm lost.

"I know. I messed up and I'm so sorry about that," he says, looking contrite, anyone could easily fall for that half-assed apology. I wasn't just anyone though. I'm the twin that grieved for him, meanwhile he was out here, joining cults or gangs, or whatever this is.

"Sorry?" I gasp, standing up straight, getting my bearings about me. "You're fucking sorry?"

"Twin Turbo..." he starts, knowing that it's coming.

"What exactly are you sorry for, George?" I start, stepping closer to my brother with his muddied, green eyes that stare at me with caution. George is a whole head taller than me. He's bigger than the last time I saw him.

His hair is cut short, but still wavy like he's a fashion model. My brother was in a word, handsome. Of course, growing up I heard all the rumors

about my twin brother from girls that used to bully me.

“Are you sorry for making me, your best friends and the rest of the world believe you were dead for months?” I scoff. “Or are you sorry for all the time I spent in a painful limbo, fracturing my fucking soul with wondering where you were and if what happened to you was my fault for not seeing that you were in danger all along. But clearly, there’s no danger here.”

“Twin turbo..., Astraea. Listen, I...,”

“Why would you do that to me?” I whisper, the tears I’ve been suppressing since this morning when I saw that picture of me on Instagram. This is too much though. This hurts way worse than my shame. “George, why...?”

“I’m sorry for all of it, Raea,” he starts, his voice breaking at the end, then he shakes his head looking away. “You have to understand, there is real danger,”

“The real danger here is you’re part of the fucking Phoenix Corps, George!” I yell. “Which inevitably means you helped Brittney and Larry to...”

“No, I didn’t help anyone. This is all me.” he starts but I cut him off. I don’t want to talk about it.

“How could you?” I gasp out each word, pain filtering through me like I’m having a stroke. It feels like half my body is numb with feeling, and the other half is about to burst with the same intense feelings.

I don’t know if I should be dancing around, celebrating, praising my luck or the gods in the universe that my brother is alive, or if I should kick him in the balls, storm out of here and never talk to him ever again.

But that’s not why we’re here.

“Where are they?” I demand, watching him, knowing that we’re in a large room full of heavily armored men, all of them watching us but not doing anything that comes across as threatening. It almost as if, they’re actually watching out for us—or waiting for my brother’s command.

WTF?

“Where is who?” he questions, with a frown.

“Where are the kids you kidnapped to get us here?” I demand, looking around.

“Kids?” George questions, frowning.

“I know you have them, but I never thought my own brother would stoop so low as to kidnap little kids!” I yell at him.

“Astraea, I’d never kidnap a child, That’s the last thing I’d ever do!” he denies with a vehemence I that shuts me up for a second.

“Okay...,” I murmur, frowning at him. That was a bit much, even for him.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I have...” he fades off, shaking his head. “Look, no one took any...,”

“Actually, there were two little girls that were kidnapped earlier today.”

A different voice interrupts. This one is deeper, harder, you can tell that the speaker is older, distinguished but as I look up, I swear, I almost crap my pants. The guy is scary but that’s not it.

He looks like a carbon copy of George.

I almost do a double take, as the man in an Armani suit, his hands in his suit pant pockets confidently strides over to us, watching me with this... unreadable look in his eyes.

“What the fuck?” George starts, as he turns to look at the older gentleman. “You had some kids kidnapped?”

“I must admit, I’ve done some pretty fucked up shit in my life, but I didn’t take any kids,” the man answers, still staring at me. I stare right back, feeling like I should know him but I don’t.

“But...,” George starts, looking confused.

“And no, your kid wasn’t taken either. She’s safe,” the man says, glancing at my brother.

His kid?

My jaw drops to the floor. Ivy gasps behind me and George’s eyes widen as he turns to look at me, realizing that I caught that end part.

“Astraea...,” he starts to explain, but I cut him off.

“You have a child?” I question, hardly able to believe what I’m hearing. This can’t be real.

“Fuck,” George starts, running a hand through his hair, nervously. “This was not the way I thought today would go.”

The way he thought today would go?

“What the hell does that mean?” I demand, “Can you start explaining all this shit? What’s happening here?”

He steps closer to me but I take steps back as well. Who is this guy? I hardly recognize my own brother.

“Astraea, listen,” he whispers, his eyes begging me to listen to him. “I can’t explain right now. I’ll explain later, but right now, I need you to trust me.”

“Trust you?” I shout. “Are you out of your mind?”

“You have an intense fire in you,” the man starts. I stare at him past George’s shoulder. He’s strange to blurt that out but I’m weirder still, for wondering why he’s saying that about me.

He obviously the man in charge of whatever shindig is going on here. I notice the way every single man in the room straightens, all of them standing ready at attention.

He’s the Phoenix.

“You’re even the spitting image of Claire,” he goes on, ignoring my staring. He’s looking at me like he’s seeing through me, like he’s talking to someone else. I glance at George, but he just looks away, secrets heavy in his eyes.

“Claire is my second name,” I start. “My name is Astraea.”

“Astraea Claire...,” he whispers the words so reverently, as he steps closer to me. “She gave you her name.”

The only she I think he’s talking about, is my mother. Did this man sleep with her too?

“My mother’s name is Amanda,” I start, my heart pounding, feeling like this is the most crucial moment of my existence.

“You know that’s not her name,” George says softly. “Listen, Twin Turbo....,”

“What’s going on here?” I demand again, ignoring my brother, my chest heaving up and down so fast, I’m going to have a heart attack. “And who are you?”

I stare at the man, I can’t help but feel like I’m under a hypnotic spell, weaved by him. I feel like I know him, like he’s a part of my life somehow.

“Do I know you?” I question, my heart in my throat.

“To be honest, you should’ve known me. I should’ve been in your life from the beginning,” he says that he’s really mad about that fact.

I gasp, taking a step back.

No. Fucking. Way.

“I’m glad Claire named you Astraea after all. We loved that name,” his voice is deceptively soft, I shouldn’t trust it or him but the way he’s looking at me. Like I’m his long, lost treasure that he didn’t know he had.

“No,” I take another step back, shaking my head, trying to clear the buzzing and the whisper of voices. “This is crazy.”

“I’m looking at you, and it all feels right. You’re my daughter, Astraea.”

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

“Holy shit,” someone breathes behind me, but my head starts spinning all over again.

George is alive.

George is part of this...Phoenix Corps shit.

George is a father?

And now this man? It seems like he not only knows who my mother is, he knows everything intimate about her. He looks like my brother, for God’s sake and there isn’t much evidence you need after that.

“Who...,” I choke on the word, then clear my throat. “Who are you?”

“My name is Eli,” he starts, carefully taking a step closer to me, his eyes glistening with something close to tears. “Eli Beaumont.”

“You’re...” I look at my brother then. “The monster who’s been hunting me and my friends down. The one who kidnapped my friend’s sisters.... And you’re the one my mother was running from.”

“Your mother was running?” his voice booms in the empty space, sounding surprised. From the corner of my eye, I notice the men clutching their guns, all of them ready to defend their leader. Eli looks at George, then back at me, something close to clarity relaxing his facial features.

“She ran?” he repeats, this time taking a deep breath in and out.

“Yes,” George answers. “But we don’t know from whom.”

“Yeah, I think I know from who,” Eli says, a calmness coming over him that makes me shiver. I’ve witnessed that calm, right before my brother wrecked havoc.

“What?” George questions, his entire body tense, coiled and ready to do irreparable damage. “Who is it?”

“Larry,” Kim steps in, tears streaming down her face, having heard everything and piecing it together.

“Your mother’s psychotic, evil brother,” Eli announces.

And with that announcement, a dark cloud washes over me, my confirmation settling into my stomach.

The last thing I remember was a look of complete fear on Eli's face as the ground opened up and swallowed me whole.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



“That’s a fucking bad idea!” Noah bursts, tugging his hair like a madman. “You can’t seriously be thinking about doing that.”

“It’s the best idea we’ve got right now,” Emmett says. “He won’t see it coming.”

“Really?” Noah scoffs. “Can we be sure that he doesn’t already know what we’re doing right now? I mean, aren’t you the one who always says, this asshole knows everything about us? Our fucking dick size included?”

“Yeah, but I got a lead that Larry’s been acting strange for a few days now, something to do with a powerful, out of town visitor,” Spider explains, with cable ties in his hands. “Which means he’s preoccupied, trying to fix his own problems.”

“And who’s to say his problems don’t all revolve around all of us?” Noah demands.

“I don’t know man. If that was the case, he could have easily gotten to us already, not go around using Kim and her sisters, that screams personal to me,” Emmett explains. “What we need to do right now, is figure out who this out of town visitor is. And I’m assuming it’s your contact?”

“Yes,” I grit out, unable to look at him without thinking that he kissed her.

Unable to get the fact that she signed that piece of paper, legally binding her to my best friend.

Unable to get the gruesome scenarios of my girl in the same space as Larry. I want to gorge his fucking eyes out just for laying his sickly eyes on her in the first place, before char-broiling his hands, then chopping them off to make him eat them.

“We already have the location. We can go there directly without doing any of this,” Noah points out. “We’re wasting so much time right now.”

“We’re wasting a lot of time by arguing. It’s been over twenty-seven hours since they were taken,” Emmett states, glancing at me in the process. He knows that I know. “I say we make the asshole think he’s got us exactly where he wants us. Make him feel big and invisible before we gut him.”

“At this point, we need to surprise him from an internal point of view. If we just storm in there and demand he release those girls, there isn’t a guarantee that he won’t kill them on the spot,” Spider explains, looking tense but also hyper aware of his surroundings, focused and down for anything, like the rest of us.

“Besides, it’s too predictable,” I say, my fists clenched, feeling a murderous urge that I can’t deny. I’ve held back this entire week but with everything I now know now, I don’t know who I’ll kill first. “He’ll be expecting us to lose our heads, march right in there and demand he release them.”

“Exactly,” Spider agrees, throwing his hands up. “We’ve got to be fucking smart about this. I’m not losing any one of those girls that he’s using to get to us.”

“Once again, using his daughter to get what he wants,” Noah grits out, looking away. “Okay, if we’re going to do your shitty plan, let’s do it now before I change my fucking mind. I’m not wasting a second away from her.”

Her...

“Neither am I,” Spider says, Emmett nods, then they all turn to look at me.

“You’ve hardly said a word and for some reason, this is the deadliest I’ve ever seen you all my life,” Emmett observes, watching me.

There’s a lot running through my mind. I have so many questions but the more I think about it all, the more everything becomes clear.

The way George used to look at me. The way he used to... well pacify a lot of my anger like he knew where it was coming from.

He knew.

There's no doubt about that now. The asshole knew what happened to me, but he never said a word about it to me or to anyone else.

Then there was the way their mother used to look at me, like she was fearful of me. It's like she thought I knew something about her.

Then there was the beef between her and my mother. The way they would blame each other for the way their lives went to shit. The anger and resentment between them always felt strong but I never thought it would be caused by Larry...

"I need to get to her," I seethe, ignoring Emmett's inquisitive gaze as I look at the rest of the boys. "Okay, who wants to rough my ass up, tie me up, then deliver me to the Phoenix Corps like you just conquered me?"

"That can be a team effort, your highness," Noah smirks, "You've been a dick lately."

"Yeah, we all have our demons," I say, watching him. "Don't we, Noah?"

"That's it, I'm going for that devilish face!" he shouts and comes charging for me.



"Where have you been?" a rough voice demands. "You know the boss has been beside himself with agitation and shit lately."

"Yeah, I know that," Spider grits out. "But I think I've got something, or rather, some people here that he's going to want to have."

"Some people?" the voice questions, "You didn't..."

"Well, like I told you, I've been tailing their spoiled asses for months now, with a specific reason in mind," Spider spits out, his voice dripping with contempt. "They are self-serving jerks with golden spoons in their mouths, but they can also be gullible. It wasn't hard to trick them to come out."

"Then you jumped them!" the scratchy, rough voice exclaims in glee. It's like the guy hasn't hit puberty yet. Then the next thing I know, the bag over my head is ripped away.

For a second, I'm blinded by the bright light that's directly in my eyes, I wince, making the guy who's standing beside Spider laugh with glee. "You

took the great, mighty king down. God, I hate this asshole. Thinks he's everything."

"Oh yeah," Spider spits out, looking mean and vindictive. "But he's nothing. And tonight, he pays!"

"Oh yeah, look at how pathetic they all are. Is Montreal passed out?"

"Yeah, too much of a pussy that one," Spider says. "He was easy as fuck."

"I told you they were all talk, with nothing to show for it. They just flex their pretty boy muscles but when it comes down to it, there's nothing there."

I force myself to remain calm and not fidget. Noah curses beside me and Emmett just stares at them, discreetly looking around. And to think at midnight, it will be Astraea's birthday, and this is the shit we're in.

Fuck!

"Look at the lot of them, let's see how their fat bank accounts will help them escape the fire of the Phoenix Corps!"

A resounding shout echoes in the room, cheers growing louder as the same guy comes closer, then he grips my hair in his hands, lifting my face to look at him.

"Alexander fucking King, I've waited what seems like years for this day to see you get the judgement that you deserve!" he whispers, his hot breath on my face and that enrages me. I butthead him. He howls, letting go of my hair as blood starts gushing down his nose.

"You sonofabitch!" he roars. "You're going to get it tonight! Take these scumbags to him!"

Another cheer rises and then we are grabbed from the truck by other large, tough looking assholes.

"Well, they hate us for real." Noah whispers, looking around but he's even angrier at this point. But even with all that anger we still have something that make my stomach protest, fear.

Fear of the unknown. Fear that this might all go to shit and there's a huge possibility that it will.

"Were you expecting your fan club?" Emmett whispers back but I remain quiet, waiting for him. I know he's here. I know he knows we're here. I know he'll have a sinister smile on his fucking cut face, waiting for me.

“No, but a nice, toasty warm welcome would have done the trick,” Noah chimes in, being petty as always.

“Don’t worry, hell will have a committee down there, waiting for you.” I grit out, sarcastically.

“I wouldn’t expect nothing less from the devil,” Noah grins, then he looks at the guy beside him, his voice now normal. “Hey, do you think your leader is worse than the devil?”

“Shut up!” the dude growls, pushing Noah but he just laughs, anger flashing in his eyes.

“Ahh,” a cheery, loud voice calls out, making silence fall over the large plane hangar. “Well, well, well. My luck has just changed, dramatically!”

I still in my tracks as his voice registers in my system.

I remember it so clearly, sometimes I hear it when I’m all alone in the dark.

“Take off your shorts.”

“It doesn’t hurt.”

“What have we got here?” he goes on. “You, the large, brooding one must be Emmett Easton. You look just like your father. I wonder if you’re as much a poisonous snake as he is, managing to chase away your sweet mother towards another man like that.”

From the corner of my eye, I notice Emmett tense up, then he glances at me. *Don’t lose it, not right now.* I say with my eyes then he looks at Larry again.

“And this must be Noah Montreal. Can I just say, I’ve been a fan of your mother’s work for years. Hollywood could do with more of her crackhead, drunk type to move plots along.”

Noah growls, fighting the hold on him. “I’m sure you like them comatose and powerless, don’t you, you pig!”

Yeah, count on Noah being one loud-mouthed hothead.

“Hmm, not really. Christina’s way too old for me. I like them, young and strong, right my little blue-eyed monster?” he questions, walking towards me, watching me with a look in his eyes that promises hell.

His face looks bad, the ugly scar making his face look irregular and monstrous. “I missed you so much.”

Noah and Emmett turn to look at me, but I remain mute, staring at Larry.

“Aren’t you going to say something? I mean, I came back to his wretched town for our little reunion,” he says, with a smile on his face. “I

mobilized this rebellious army, for you. Just to get to you.”

Even then, I can see the horrors in his eyes. This is the man that touched me at night. Then later came back to sodomize my girl.

This is the man with the same dark eyes as that girl.

This is the man who was sent to do what he did to me, by another woman who has the same eyes as her daughter and this man.

“See daddy, I told you they would come!” A nasal, irritating voice that grates at my nerve endings, calls from the left of us. Everyone in the room turns to look at Brittney as she comes in strutting her nasty bits like an overcooked noodle with high heels, on a fashion runway.

“I never doubted you for a second, pumpkin,” he says, gesturing for her to come closer to him. And then the most disgusting thing happens.

They lock lips and share an actual kiss.

Emmett blinks. Noah starts gagging and the rest of the idiotic goons in the room pretend to look away, but they’re used to this from the looks of it.

“Why am I not surprised that you fuck your Daddy?” Noah starts, looking disgusted.

“Well, he’s more of a man than some I know. I mean, at least he’s able to get it up, if you know what I mean,” she giggles, then walks towards me, trying to be seductive and failing miserably. She looks like a mosquito in a human skin suit. “Unlike some pencil dicks.”

Noah throws his head back and lets out a hyena laugh. “So, you’re saying, in front of all of us, that with all your slutty skills, King couldn’t get it up for you?”

“That’s exactly what she’s saying, bro,” I mock, watching her with a hooded gaze. “Apparently, I’m not man enough.”

“Well damn, somebody owes me a hundred grand for that,” Noah whistles, shaking his head.

“A hundred grand for what?” Brittney demands, folding her arms in irritation. “Is it to give your little girlfriend?”

“Nah, I don’t do girlfriends,” Noah mocks, shaking his head. “But I do like making bets against princesses like you. Little soldier whores like you can fuck anything, do anything for example, their fathers and still walk around like any love stick in the world is theirs to ride. Looks like my argument against that was right! You can’t get every dick you desire, not even to save your life.”

“Listen you scumbag, I’ve had about twelve years of your bullshit and that ends tonight! You are the reason why that little bitch got her claws in Alex. You are the reason why he refused to look at me,” Brittney seethes, her eyes blazing.

“I’m pretty sure that has everything to do with the revolting stench of rotten cum in your mouth,” Noah deadpans, staring at her.

Brittney’s face turns different shades of red as the rest of the room erupts in snickers and throats clearing.

“Daddy!” she whines, looking scandalized. “I think we should cut his tongue out.”

“What?” Noah laughs, taunting her. “Is the truth too hard to swallow that two-dollar whores and cheap porno films can make King hard before you can ever do that? Or the fact that you try so hard, but nothing ever happens, so you run to daddy, asking him to fuck you?”

Without warning, she slaps Noah across the face, but Noah just keeps on laughing, knowing that he’s struck a nerve.

“Enough!” Larry’s voice booms. “That’s enough playing around. We’ve been trying to get these bastards for two years now and tonight, we’ve got them! Without us even doing anything.”

“What does that even mean!” Emmett starts, “Be a man and let the kids and the girls go, before this night turns into your worst nightmare.”

“Kids and girls?” Larry frowns, then he looks at me, realization dawning on his face.

“Ahh, so the little bitch I did a favor by fucking four years ago, my other illegitimate child and her little sisters are missing?” he starts his eyes widening in joy. “Fuck, this has to be the best night of my existence.”

“What the fuck?” Noah demands. I look at Larry then at his daughter. It doesn’t surprise me that we’ve walked into a trap. I have to stay calm now and think of a fucking way out of this mess.

“You didn’t tell your Daddy that you were acting alone?” I start, looking at the girl who leaked a naked photo of Astraea on the internet. The way I’m going to mess up her life... words haven’t been invented yet.

“Please, some of us don’t spend the rest of our days working to please our fathers just to gain his love,” Brittney taunts, watching me. “I told you what I would do if you so much as breathe in that bitch’s direction. I warned you and now, that image has over a thousand downloads. So, it’ll be out there, forever! I won!”

“Care to tell us what it is you think you won?” I start, taunting her.

“I managed to destroy her, fool,” she starts, looking uncertain of her own wickedness.

“Yeah sure, you did it, Brittney. Give her a crown, she’s deserves it!” Noah starts, rolling his eyes.

“I said enough!” Larry demands, just itching to be in control. “You can stall all you want but I’m the one in charge of your demise here.”

“Really?” I taunt. “I don’t think so. Because all I see here are a bunch of fools who are blindly following you because they think you’re everything. They think you’re the fucking Phoenix, but you and I both know, you’re nothing more than a pathetic excuse, a vile pile of human waste who’s afraid of power and doesn’t have any power.”

That riles him up like nothing else. If you call a psychopath powerless, their disgusting, deep soft spots get tingled and they feel like they should prove their own insecurities wrong.

“You have some nerve, my little blue-eyed monster,” he starts, taking a step closer to where we stand, a machete in his hand. “Every day, I look at myself in the mirror and this is all I see.” He points to the ugly scar that runs from his eyebrow to his chin.

“It’s as ugly as you,” Noah taunts, with a sardonic smile on his face, glancing at me.

“But I think you know that already,” Emmett joins in. “You look in that broken mirror of yours and think to yourself, ‘what might I have done to piss off God so much that I was this ugly’?”

“And I bet the answer would be just as silent as you’re powerless,” I finish. “Tell me something Larry, what were you going to do, after you took us, that is.”

“You’ve got some balls on you. To talk smack like that when you’re surrounded by people who hate you so much, they were all willing to leave everything behind just to dedicate their lives to make you suffer,” he starts, chuckling to himself. “But since you asked, everything is about to go down, you were the last pieces in the puzzle.”

“And what’s that?” I demand.

“Well, you just called me weak and powerless,” he starts and then extends his hand out, and a machete is placed in his hand. “True power is not given, my little blue-eyed monster, it’s taken. By spilling of blood.”

“Is that what you’re trying to do here?” I say, looking around at familiar and unfamiliar faces of misfits, assholes and douchebags that have an axe to grind with one or all three of the Blue Boys. Four, if we’re counting the half-dead.

“Here?” he starts with a scoff. “You see, let me tell you all a little story. Once upon a fucking hard time, there were two kids—siblings really—a boy and a girl. Of course, the boy was older and stronger than the rebellious, pathetic little girl so he took it upon himself to...redirect her ways and teach her how to be a woman who can survive in this cruel, cruel world.”

I almost gag when I realize exactly who he’s talking about and what he must have done to her when they were kids.

“But the world is a crazy place, no one likes minding their own business so, she was taken away and put into this foster home. But even then, that girl knew where her loyalties lie. The boy went out into the world and started studying what wealthy man like. I mean, he saw that he was nothing like them. He didn’t have their fine pressed suits.”

One that he’s wearing now, looking distinguished, yet hiding a monster underneath.

“They had expensive watches on their wrists, they spent hundreds of dollars in nightclubs but I thought to myself, we are all the same red blooded males. Surely there’s something common between us. And I was right, there is one thing!”

Sex.

“Sex! And it’s worth a lot when you have a sister as beautiful as mine was, so I made her a deal that she just couldn’t resist,” he says.

“Fast forward all that bullshit. I met the right man—who, coincidentally, is the same man that we’re going to execute soon enough—they had their relations. She was my money maker, her client list kept getting longer sure, but I received word one night. My sister and her first client kept on seeing each other in secret without payment! Can you imagine that insanity?”

Amanda fell in love with that man and I’m starting to realize who he is. Everything he said that night at the Pit is now starting to make sense as well.

The way he got incredibly mad about Larry.

The talk about the boy who’s claiming that Eli is his father.

“Then, she fell pregnant! With twins!” he says, spreading his arms wide. “Of course, she had the genes and all that, so I wasn’t surprised. But imagine my shock when we learned, that she had another baby growing in there as well! Wowzer, it doesn’t take a genius to realize that she had slept with two men, without protection, on the same day.”

He swings the machete around, pretending like he’s in a duel with someone. Brittney pulls up a chair and sits down, looking down her nose at us.

“My super sister! She had fallen pregnant with kids of a man who thinks he biologically can’t have kids at all. I knew that his fucking sperm was powerful because that asshole was and still is, one of the most powerful men in this fucking world,” he growls, looking pissed and jealous.

“And soon, you’ll take his place Daddy,” Brittney says, looking just as evil as her father.

“Of course, I will,” Larry says. “But back to my story. See, before we found out that she was pregnant, I did something, something that made sure our powerful client would try to murder my dear sister if he ever found her—that was to ensure that they never saw each other again. I was running a well-oiled business with more girls, including another blue-eyed goddess.”

I freeze, my jaw locking. I look up at him surprised.

“Oh, you thought Denise and I didn’t know each other before all the mess with you and my sister’s revenge plan on her?” Larry pouts, knowing exactly what he’s doing.

“You’re lying!” I seethe, waves of fury rising in me.

“I mean, she did try to pacify me with cheap sex but when it came down to it, the bitch couldn’t even spread her legs like she used to back in the day,” he says with a smile, knowing that he’s got me.

“Shut your mouth,” I growl, fighting against the damn cable ties that are cutting into my flesh.

“No, no, let me finish the story,” he says, pointing the sharp machete at me. “You see, your mother and my sister were best friends but from what I understand, one of them slept with someone’s else man or something like that, and then they hated each other, and then my little sister gave birth, your mother stole those babies and ran with them, in an effort to hide them or something like that.”

“But they were found in a bathroom,” I seethe, remembering the newspaper clipping that George printed.

“Oh yeah, but one of those unfortunate babies was already dead.” Larry says it so casually, like it doesn’t even bother him that one of his own nieces died in a fucking, dirty, public bathroom.

“So, little Claire blamed it all on her best friend who let her down but really, it was because of your Daddy—but that’s another story,” he rolls his eyes, clearly enjoying this because he knows he’s destroying me with each revelation.

“How did you come to my house? Posing to be a lawyer of all things in the world. A pig would have sufficed,” I demand.

“I wasn’t your father’s lawyer, little boy. I’m way too sophisticated to be anyone’s lawyer. I came here for business and a little plan of revenge that I couldn’t resist when I finally met you,” his sickening eyes glisten in the brightly lit room and I feel like murdering him with his own machete. By the end of the night, I’m going to be labelled a murderer. “Philip knew the underbelly was controlled by the Phoenix Corps, so he contacted us. I was sent.”

“I assume you made a deal,” Emmett prompts, waiting.

“Greasy handshakes and closed door deals are how I fucking operate. I told him that I wanted him to make sure my sister and that moron, Richard are part of the Blue Generation, promise shit. Your father is one asshole, can you imagine he tried to go after the Phoenix?”

Larry shakes his head as if shocked. “I’m surprised that Beaumont hasn’t figured that out yet.”

Oh, he fucking knows and has been acting for years now. Speaking of which, where the hell is he?

“No matter, so long as Philip and I were in business together,” Larry says, swinging the machete.

“What kind of business?” Noah questions, watching him like a hawk.

“What do you think is Westbrook Blue’s underbelly made up of?” Larry questions, looking like he’s a fucking teacher in a classroom.

“Drugs,” Emmett answers, glancing at me. “George. Dereck. Drugs.”

I notice Spider standing to the far left of the hangar, keenly observing and listening in to everything.

“Bingo!” Larry exclaims, smiling widely at Emmett. “But as greedy as that loser Philip King is, he wanted to get in on that action, but it was more of a gateway to joining the Phoenix Corps, with ulterior motives of course.”

“What ulterior motives?” I grit out.

“I’m sure you already know that, the reason why he’s been trying to get rid of Easton’s boy here and then Montreal. Claire’s boy is gone of course, so he was good to go, until you faked your own death,” he points at Emmett, looking surprisingly impressed.

“Sorry to have messed up your plans, but we don’t give a shit,” Noah growls.

“Oh, but you should. Where do you think your mother is right now?” Larry questions, looking sure of himself.

“No, you don’t have my mother,” Noah bluffs, his jaw ticking, fists clenched tightly his knuckles are practically white.

“No, I don’t. She’s with the man who walked out on her and you,” he announces with joy.

“No, she’s not! She went to Paris!” Noah denies vehemently.

“Sure, sure,” Larry tsks. “Whatever makes you sleep well at night.”

“You sonofabitch!” Noah starts to charge for him, but I stop him, getting in his way. “If you touch one hair on her head...”

“Easy there, Montreal. I have no plans for your mother. That’s all on your fucked up, internal family dynamics.”

“Is that why you want us here?” I demand. “To taunt us with all your made-up stories?”

“Nope, I simply came here to fuck over my sister and get what I want. The fucking Phoenix will be dead soon and I’ll be there, his humble second in command, ready to assume his role,” Larry announces, a fucking smile on his face. “He doesn’t have an heir. He doesn’t know about Claire’s daughter. He’ll die a lonely, sad man. All that power, his world-wide reach, influence...all gone.”

Where the fuck are you, Eli?

“I’ve been working like a fucking dog for that asshole, all while knowing that this day will arrive. I did warn you, you will pay for past cutting sins,” he smiles, taking a step closer now, his intent bright in his eyes.

“So, raping a little girl was your way of what? Righting a wrong?” Emmett starts, watching him. “You recruited your daughter to drug her, didn’t you?”

“Rape?” Brittney gasps, standing up now. “You raped Astraea?”

Larry shoots Emmett a look that promises retribution as he turns to look at his daughter. “Now pumpkin, I told you that I had a score to settle.”

“You said you had to teach your sister a lesson!” Brittney screeches, taking a step back. “Not rape a little girl.”

“Oh please, it wasn’t rape if she wanted it!” Larry booms, taking a step towards her. “I’m so sick and tired of these bitches saying I raped them. She was lying. Claire tried to hide her in London, but I found her anyway. She just didn’t have the damn journal.”

A journal?

“Why?” Brittney demands, tears streaming down her face. “Why did you do that to her?”

“Well, to send a message to my sister of course!” he shrugs as if it’s common sense. “Oh, and to teach young King here a lesson as well. You cut me, I’ll cut you right back.”

“Is that why you killed George?” I start, the cable tie breaking around my wrists. I can feel the blood dripping, but I ignore it. “Was that to teach your sister a lesson too?”

“Please, I had nothing to do with that,” Larry scoffs. “But I did give the person who wanted to get rid of George the resources and one of my own to enact his plan of revenge.”

“Who was it?” Emmett demands.

“Richard of course!” Larry says, looking annoyed. “Are you even keeping up? I told you, Claire was pregnant with triplets who had two different fathers. The fraternal twins in one sac—my stunningly beautiful niece who I can’t wait to see again, and her brother—and then there was another baby who died. That little girl was...”

“Richard’s daughter.” I finish, my body tense and heavy with anger.

“Yes! You’re getting it!” Larry laughs, looking invincible. “It was Richard that killed that poor boy, not me! Stop accusing me for ill prepared work that I didn’t do.”

“That’s because you’re an expert in everything you do,” a voice booms from behind us and we all tense up. From the shadows, he comes in with his hands tucked in the pockets of his suit pants, looking every bit the most powerful man in the room.

Larry freezes, frantically turning around to look at the owner of the voice that just spooked the shit out of him.

“You’re truly a mastermind, Larry my dear old friend.”

I turn to stare at Eli. He looks a bit too still, too calm and I know then. He heard everything.

And he is the fucking Phoenix after all. It's there in the way he walks. The way he discreetly looks around, eyeing each asshole in the room. They tremble, back away, trying to straighten up, fumbling around to stand still, fear on their faces. The gritty rumors about this man...

Respect is not demanded, it's earned and this man, Eli Beaumont, the head of The Phoenix Corps, the man I've been working with to take down my father, is Astraea's father.

"Ahh, Eli," Larry starts nervously. "I... I wasn't aware that you would be joining us tonight."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



“Please, don’t stop your storytelling on my account,” Eli starts, watching Larry. “My children and I were just listening in.”

“Your children?” Larry’s jaw drops to the fucking floor as first, George walks in, a murderous look in his eyes, then a shaken Astraea who looks as white as a sheet. She looks like she’s sick. She stares back at me, her eyes wide with shock.

“You...,” Larry stutters, pointing at George.

“Yes, yes, I’m alive you piece of shit,” George seethes, not taking his eyes off of Larry for even a second.

“Holy shit,” Noah breathes, excitedly. “You’re alive, George you son of a gun!”

“But, how...?” Larry says, looking around, wide eyed. “You were buried!”

“No, they buried old Mr. Smith, the homeless man that the community of Westbrook Blues refused to help when he lost his job, his house, his healthcare and his family. You know why?” George says, advancing on Larry slowly. “He got hooked on the drugs your mules were selling! The same drugs you had stupid Dereck try to overdose me with.”

“Clearly he failed,” Larry whispers, then he looks around the room, the realization that his life is over flashing in his eyes. “I’ve been set up!” he shouts. “Eli, these are the kids I told you about! The ones that have been trying to kill my children!”

Noah scoffs and Emmett rolls his eyes.

“Is that right?” Elis starts, watching him. “Tell me what happened, Larry my old friend.”

I don’t know if Eli is faking camaraderie or if he actually believes this fucker, but all I know is, Larry is fucking done.

“Yes, yes,” Larry starts, dropping the machete. “I’m a father, Eli. See, these are my children, my girls.” He points at Brittney who still looks disgusted, and Kim who has her two sisters clutching both her legs, hiding their faces from Larry. Terrified and shaking. “Do you see how scared they are? It’s because of this band of bullies, that terrorize this town! Everyone knows about them, the fucking Blue Boys, and how they scare and intimidate little girls.”

“So, you came down here to what? Bully them right back?” Eli questions, a mockery in his voice.

“To defend my family,” Larry says. “I’m sure you know how it is, now that you’ve reunited with your children that Claire never told you about. I mean, I advised her against it, I knew you would find out sooner or later. I just didn’t think it would take this long.”

“What the fuck?” Emmett breathes, looking baffled. “The balls on this guy.”

“Oh, come now, Larry,” Eli starts laughing, nodding to one of his men that I saw at the Pit with him that other night. The guy looks around, and without a word, Emmett and Noah are released from their restraints, three guards are now behind Larry. I take the opportunity to rub my wrist, accessing the damage caused by the cable ties. “Didn’t you just tell these boys that you made sure Claire never told me about my children. Aren’t you the one who blamed the death of my brother on her?”

“Fuck,” Noah breathes, walking towards Astraea.

“Eli, you know as well as I do that Claire is a bitter, vindictive woman. I wouldn’t lie to you about that,” Larry goes on, spewing his lies. “You have to believe me.”

“What exactly do you want me to believe you about, Larry?” Eli starts, taking off his suit jacket.

“Everything!” Larry exclaims. “Believe me about everything. I’ve been by your side for years. Through that nasty break-up with my sister, through the messy bouts of being the most sort after man in the world, I’ve always been right there with you.”

“Your sister?” Eli says, rolling the sleeves of his shirt, a calm, almost dead look on his face. I don’t know what he intends to do but I’m going to kill Larry. I’m going to look him in the eye as I end him. “Are you talking about the same sister who you violated, touched without her consent, then sold her body to the highest bidder night after night?”

“Eli...,” Larry starts, taking a step back, watching the man who he wanted to eliminate just a few minutes ago, with fear.

“Are you talking about the same sister who’s kids she had to hide from you, only for you to...” Eli cuts off, taking a deep breath. He glances at me. We hold gaze for a second, but I see the rage in his eyes. I see the pain, the agony and the burden of an absent father. Yeah, he knows what happened to Astraea, alright.

He looks at Astraea then at George. “George, get your friends, your sister and leave.”

“But, Dad, I...,” George starts.

Star tenses the moment George addresses Eli as Dad, which just shows that she hasn’t quite gotten over the fact that her brother faked his own death just to look for Eli who I’ve known for years.

“It’s best that you’re not here for what’s about to happen,” Eli says. “That includes you, King.”

“No.” I growl, stepping forward. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Neither am I.” Astraea says, taking a shaky step forward.

“Astraea, now isn’t the time,” I say, not looking at her. “Please go. And take your husband with you.”

“Your husband?” Eli frowns, staring at his daughter. “Did I miss something.”

“Ahh, you think Claire is innocent in all of this?” Larry shouts, making everyone look at him. “She made a deal with Easton to marry off their offspring and from what I hear, the deal will be sealed tonight with a judge!”

“Tonight?” George questions. “Fuck!”

The hell?

“Claire put her own daughter in a mental institution for four fucking years!” Larry goes on. “If a mother can do that to her own child, do you think she’s any better than me? Think about it, an arranged marriage, a mental institution for four years!”

“After you raped and violated your own niece, you disgusting, pathetic sonofabitch!” I grit out. “You destroyed her and for that, you’ll fucking pay.”

I start advancing towards him, but Emmett and Noah hold me back as Larry throws his head back and laughs.

“Aww, my little blue-eyed monster,” Larry *tsks*. “She doesn’t love you. She chose your best mate and tonight, they’re going to seal the deal. She’s not worth fighting for. After all, everything that happened to you, is because of her!”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” I shout, pushing off Emmett’s hold on me as the painful reminder that Astraea actually signed that contract haunts me all over again. The very one that already had Emmett’s fucking signature on it before everything went to shit.

What else is a fucking nail to the balls other than that?

“Look at your face now,” Larry points, laughing. “You know it’s fucking true. I told you before, no one will ever love you!”

“That’s a lie!” Astraea shouts, running towards Larry.

“Astraea, no!” Kim shouts after her but she ignores him.

“You’re the one who’s not loved here! You’re the one who...” she shouts, but George stops her, picking her up but she keeps on fighting.

“I destroyed you good, didn’t I, my little niece,” Larry chuckles, inflicting as much damage as he can.

“Peter, Spider, get these kids out of here, right now!” Eli demands, a devastated look on his face as he looks at his children.

“I’m not going anywhere!” I shout, staring daggers at Eli who shakes his head, sorrow in the depths of his eyes but even that too, I notice because I’m feeling it.

Everything that happened to me, happened because of these people.

I’m a fucking mess because of them.

I feel everything and nothing, because of them!

“Come on dude, you don’t want to be here,” Spider says. I look at Noah and he’s got both of Kim’s sisters on each of his hip, quickly walking

towards the waiting SUVs that I hadn't noticed before. "Everyone else is going to hell in a few minutes."

"I'm not everyone, and I'm not fucking going anywhere until he's..." I start but he cuts me off.

"King, look around you," Spider whispers. "The room is full of Larry's assholes and in a few minutes, FBI agents are going to storm the place to get them. You don't want to be here."

"FBI?" I frown, staring at the guy I thought I knew, but clearly, I didn't.

"Get your girl and get out of here." Spider warns, pushing me a bit towards the cars, but I don't budge.

"But Eli..." I protest and he cuts me off.

"Is the one who ordered this to happen. Go!" Spider says.

"Get them out!" Eli starts again and the room starts scrambling, some of Larry's lackeys trying to escape but there are Eli's seasoned and highly trained Phoenix Corps agents standing right behind them, blocking their escape.

"No, I'm not going anywhere!" Astraea shouts, tears streaming down her face, unable to look away from Larry. I run to her, noticing that George has tears in his eyes as well.

"Take her and go!" George demands, looking at me.

"You and I have to fucking talk, you asshole." I seethe, staring at my best friend.

"No shit, sherlock!" he growls, holding his twin sister. "Raea, calm down. This night isn't over."

"It isn't over because of your games, George!" she cries, pounding his chest.

"I'm sorry but if you don't go with Emmett tonight to officiate your marriage, my daughter will be taken from me!" George says and I freeze, my jaw dropping to the floor.

"Your fucking what?" Emmett demands, coming closer to us.

"Shit, I don't have time to explain right now. I'm counting on you to do this. Syrus can take my baby away. My fucking life is in your hands."

"Why don't you go and deal with it yourself?" I growl.

"Don't you think I don't want to cut his fucking balls and make him eat them for threatening my child?" George seethes, then his face breaks into a look of desperation. I look away. "This is delicate, and you can always stall

until midnight, until you're officially legal but make sure you're there, right in front of Syrus and the judge. Please help me."

A heavy silence falls over me as Astraea and Emmett nod.

I had nothing to lose then. I completely shut down, a cold calm washing over me like I've been submerged in an ice lake. I stare at the three of them, making their plans together, disregarding how I feel about it all. Like I don't matter. When they have destroyed my life.

I turn away from them, everything chaotic around me. Larry is laughing like a maniac, death hanging over him. But unbeknownst to everyone else, death hangs over me too.

"Alex!" someone shouts behind me, but I keep going, ignoring them. For the first time in my life, I've finally seen these assholes for who they are.

"Ace!" I freeze in my tracks, hesitating for just a few seconds. Is she worth it? She doesn't even love me.

"Ace!" she shouts again. I can hear the faint sounds of sirens in the distance. I need to get out of here, so I keep walking, but Eli stops me, getting in my face.

"Kid, don't walk away from my daughter," he says, his voice low but hard.

"Your daughter is married, Eli," I spit out, not looking him in the eye. "She can go fuck herself for all I care."

"It's out of the respect I have for you that I'm not going to bash your head in, but you need to watch your mouth," he warns, and I smile, feeling reckless and chaotic.

"Look at you. A father for less than a day and already you deserve a lifetime, best father of the year award!" I mock. "Where were you when she needed you, huh?"

I'm itching for a fight.

I want to feel something other than the dark, rage that's about to swallow me whole.

"You had that piece of shit right under your nose, and he raped her! He raped me! And it's all because of you and your sick offspring that I'm in this shitty mess."

Eli doesn't say a word but the tingling sensation at the nape of my neck tells me why. I turn around and there they are. Noah, Kim, Emmett, George and her...staring at me with shock and pity.

I'll be damned if I ever have anyone pity me.

“You think it’s all my fault?” Star whispers, brokenly, her big, dark eyes filled with pain but as I look at her, I can’t help but see her uncle.

“It might as well be,” I seethe, watching her. “At least that’s what you told me when you accused me of leading him to your door. But tonight, we found out that it was the other way around, wasn’t it?”

“Boy, I’m warning you...,” Eli growls behind me but I ignore him.

“Here stand my friends. My brothers and the girl I gave my all to, all of them betrayers, liars and cheats. When I was acting alone, all in the name of saving your asses, protecting you,” I stare at them, my voice calm and steady. “You accused me of murder.” I stare at Emmett.

“You accused me of being a coward who didn’t know what rejection felt like,” I look at Noah.

“You disregard how I feel because to you, I feel nothing, is that right?” I stare at my best friends then at Eli over my shoulder.

The sound of sirens grows louder and with it, the sound of my life ending. Not literally though. I won’t do anything as reckless as to kill myself. I still have my mother and Philip to deal with.

“I have to tell you something,” Star starts, tears streaming down her delicate cheeks.

“I’m sure it doesn’t matter. Like I don’t matter,” I say, staring her in the eyes. “Do me a favor, Astraea, stay the fuck away from me. You’ve done enough. That goes with the rest of you.”

“You’re making a grave mistake,” Eli whispers hotly, an angry look on his face. “Stay and listen to her.”

“If I stay, I’ll kill that sonofabitch. If I stay, I’ll hurt her even more. If I stay, you’ll hate me,” I say when I turn my back to my so-called friends and the girl I’d lay my life down for.

“Ace...,”

“Star,” I savor that name, painfully aware that it’s the last time I’m saying it. “We were never anything worth a fucking damn. Congratulations on your fucking marriage.”

“No...,” she starts but this time, I don’t turn back around. I keep going.

She means nothing to me now.

And with that, I get into the first SUV which happens to be running, without a driver behind the wheel. Shitting my door, and with one last look at her, I peel out of there.

I meant every word I said.

CHAPTER FOURTY



Waking up on a makeshift hospital bed, hours after fainting wasn't the most shocking thing that has ever happened to me.

Finding out that George was alive, for real, and that he was a father, should have given me the slip, it should have been the biggest life altering news to anyone, but it wasn't.

My life changed the moment I woke up, with a doctor I've never seen in my life hovering over me, with a smile on his face, delivering news—in confidence of course, that I wasn't prepared for, while my brother, my father and my friends stood right out the door, impatient and worried, takes the cake.

"You alright?" Emmett questions, his voice soft and low, jolting me out of my thoughts. I don't say anything, choosing instead to watch silently as the scenery outside the window slowly pass.

"Raea, talk to me." He almost pleads but I'm empty inside. I can't take his hurt, his pain and add it to mine. I'm on overload as it is right now, I can't take any of his.

"Please drive faster," I murmur, still feeling lost and in shock. I have no idea what just happened to me in that hangar. I have no idea what to think of my life now or the truth that I found out today.

I glance down at my stomach. I shudder, a cold chill passing down my spine. I feel sick again, but I clamp it down. All I know right now is, I need to keep moving and focus on the next thing I'm supposed to do. Help my brother.

Stop Syrus.

Face the monster that is my mother.

Am I like her?

"Sure," Emmett says, but I can still feel his intense gaze on me, but he doesn't say anything else. We drive in silence until I can see the estate gates looming ahead. I notice the Phoenix emblem on the gate and now, it all makes sense.

This all belongs to the Phoenix Corps, it belongs to the man who I just found out, is not only the ruthless leader of that organization, but he's also my father.

There's a lot going through my mind right now, but I can't get what Ace said to my face tonight out of my head no matter how much I try. I can't get the blank look on his face out of my mind. The way he softly broke me, the way he looked at me like I'm filth under his shoe, I'll never forget that. Not ever.

Tonight, I found out that I'm the reason why he was abused as a child, not the other way around.

I'm the reason, directly or indirectly, it doesn't matter. I heard everything Larry said when we were behind that door. I wanted to burst through and shoot him in the head, but George held me back, while Eli just looked at me with a kind of sorrow and brokenness I've never received from an older male figure before.

"Do me a favor, Astraea, stay the fuck away from me."

Oh God...

How am I going to do this?

"Was he right?" I start after a long, tense silence. "Was he right about everything he said?"

I know he doesn't know the new low I've sunk to, no one knows but the way Ivy was looking at me, I think she suspects.

Emmett glances at me, then sighs. "I have to be honest, all of that was fucked up but you have to understand, Astraea, you're not to blame for sins that you didn't commit."

“Aren’t I, though?” I scoff, staring at him. “If I wasn’t born, then maybe my mother would have never set her toxic brother on Denise and her family, all in the name of revenge.”

“Please stop, Raea,” Emmett starts, his voice getting harder. “You heard what George said, you’re not to blame. If anything, you’re the innocent bystander in all of this. Including King.”

Innocent bystander...

“But...”

“But nothing, Raea,” Emmett cuts me off. “King’s been through a lot lately and honestly, we hurt him. I never knew he was... FUCK!”

I flinch at that outburst, but I understand. Tonight, everyone found out that Ace was molested by the same asshole who raped me. A man I should have been calling my uncle. Kim and Brittney’s father. My mother’s brother.

There’s nothing more disgusting than that.

“I’m sorry, I’m just... if I had known that he was going through all of this, I would have...”

“What?” I prompt, looking out the window. “Loved me less? Been there for him?”

“Understood him a bit more,” Emmett finishes, glancing at me. “I’m so incredibly sorry, Astraea.”

Yeah, me too.

“Where do you think he went?” I question him, worried about Ace like nothing else in this world. I need to talk to him because I’m fucking terrified and scared shitless.

“I’m not sure but he needs to get some air. I doubt he’s able to stay away from you for more than a few hours at a time. He was almost manic without you when you were in London.”

“Somehow, I think this time is different,” I whisper.

“He’s hurt, angry and he feels betrayed. I’m not making excuses for him, but stupid things are going to come out of his mouth here and there because we all know, he’s a heartless jerk.”

“Yeah, he is heartless.” I whisper.

“Not when it comes to you, Astraea,” Emmett says just as softly. “If there’s such a thing as a good time to hold on to that irrefutable fact, it’s now. It always gets worse...”

“Before it gets better?” I chuckle, surprised that we’re now parked right in front of his mansion, the front door is open, with my mother standing there. Looks like she was expecting us after all. “I’ve heard that one already and I don’t believe in it. If everything you love and everything is going to hell, there’s no stopping that.”

“You have too much hope in your heart to believe that, Raea,” he says with a frown, not making a move to get out of the car. “At least tell you me you still have that.”

“Not so much, unfortunately. My mother is a master manipulator who fucked me up, royally,” I say, then look at him.

“Emmett.,” I start after a while.

“Yes?”

“I can’t marry you, no matter what happens in there,” I whisper, staring at his gorgeous face. “I don’t mean to hurt you. And you should know that I love you...”

“But not in the way where it burns you the way it does with King,” he finishes, watching me with a guarded look in his eyes. “I know.”

“God, it’s a mess and that kiss...,” I look down at my fingers, feeling ashamed of myself. “I know that there’s someone out there for you. Someone will love you, Emmett.”

“But that someone isn’t you?” he smiles. “And it’s not the person you’re thinking. I’ve hurt her too much to know when not to hurt someone anymore. I’m not an asshole.”

“Why does that sound like you’re trying to convince yourself?” I question, frowning. “You love her.”

“Raea, men with shitty hearts don’t get lucky in love,” he says and with that, he opens the door to get out of the car, but I stay in my seat, unable to move. “You coming?”

“Yeah, I just...,” I start but my voice drowns out, as tears clog my throat. “Can I use your phone? I need to make a call.”

“Sure,” he says, then he passes me his phone and shuts the door without another word. The phone is unlocked, so I scroll down his contacts and I see her contact. That means something, if he has her number. I’m not sure if they talk but...here goes nothing.

I type out a message and hit send, my heart pounding. I know he’ll know I did this, but I had to.

But before I can lock Emmett's phone, I notice the last call was from Ace.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

I dial the number.

I don't know if he'll answer knowing that Emmett is calling, or if he'll answer and say absolutely nothing. It rings about five times, but right before I'm about to hang up, he answers.

"Are you calling me to tell me that you're a happily married man, to gloat in my ear or to tell me how sorry you are for what I went through?" his voice is a slur, as if he's drunk.

"Ace." I whisper, a stream of tears falling down my chest.

"Ahh, Mrs. Easton!" he exclaims. "How are you?"

"I'm not Mrs. anyone," I start, looking up at my mother who's watching me from the door and Emmett who's standing right outside my side of the car, like a watch dog.

"Could have fooled me," he scoffs.

"Where are you, Ace?" I whisper, my heart beating so fast, I'm sure he can hear it through the phone.

"Somewhere, trying to get over this insane need of wanting you so desperately," he answers after a long second of silence.

Oh God...

"I need to talk to you," I start, swallowing my hurt and pride. The feelings that I have for Ace, no matter how messed up, will have to take a backseat here.

"Ahh, the time I tried to talk to you, you wanted me to fuck your brains out. I did that. I told you how I felt about you. You ignored that. You have no regard for the lives you mess up, do you Astraea?"

"No, it's not like that..."

"It's exactly like that. You're selfish as much as you're beautiful. You don't care about anything but yourself. And because of you and your mother..." he cuts off, blowing a breath through the phone. "I don't have anything to say to you. We were supposed to be it. You and I, Astraea."

"Ace, you have to understand, I'm..."

"Oh, now you call me that name. A little too late for that isn't, Astraea," his voice drops to a whisper and I know he's about to hang up.

“Astraea, you made a mess out of me,” he breathes. “Look what you’ve done to me.”

My heart shatters a million pieces. I caused this. I messed up.

“Ace...I’m pregnant,” I whisper, but everything in me is in pain. Every fiber of my being is in pain. I expect him to acknowledge what I just told him but instead he starts laughing.

“So, Emmett knocked you up too?” he chuckles but it’s mean and cold.

“Ace!” I gasp, feeling mortified.

“Did he fuck you in my bed? Was it good?” he seethes.

“That is way out of line! You know as well as I do that you’re the only one I’ve been with!”

“And I thought I was the only one you kissed, but that was a lie, wasn’t it?” he counters. “I lost my fucking virginity to you our first night, Astraea. I was waiting for you!”

“Oh my God,” I breathe out, feeling like I’m about to have a heart attack.

“Should have fucked one of the bitches that kept my dick wet in their hot mouth, something you’ve never done.,” he seethes. “Maybe Brittney and I can get together after all. Maybe I’ll knock her up!”

I cut the phone, unable to take any more of that. I stare at the mansion in front of me, unable to see anything until Emmett taps the window three times, a worried look on his face.

Smiling woodenly, I wipe my tears and open the door. It looks like, I’m going to have to do everything by myself from now on.



“Astraea, my dear!” my mother gushes as soon as I close the car door behind me. “I’m so glad that you’re here.”

A haze of anger falls over me as soon as we lock eyes. In this very moment, my mother is my worst enemy. I hate her. I know I should sympathize with her but the decisions she’s made in her life have brought me here.

“Ready to officiate our marriage contract?” Emmett whispers, reaching for my hand. I flinch away from the contact of his hand, then hate myself all over again when I see the hurt in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I’m just...,”

“Nervous,” Emmett finishes for me. “It’s okay but we have to sell it. We have to get in there and look like we’re in love.”

“Yes,” I nod, my heart empty, my soul heavy from the scathing words that I can’t get out of my head. There’s no forgiving that mess. Ace and I are simply, not possible, ever!

His hate managed to break my heart.

“Let’s do this,” I whisper, discreetly rubbing my womb. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t know if I’ll keep it but this is what I get for thinking a plastic dick wrap is enough when you fuck a guy like Ace almost four times a day, thinking that the world is perfect, waiting to tell him you love him.

I force my stomach to settle, ignoring the sharp pain there. I reach for Emmett’s large hand and latch on to it, practically squeezing his fingers to death, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“Astraea, you made a mess out of me.”

No, you made a disaster out of me, asshole.

“Aren’t you two lovely together?” My mother gushes, watching us with a smile that no one could tell was fake unless you lived under the same roof as her for as long as I have. She didn’t fool me, and she knew it, but tonight, I’m going to bust her shit wide open. “We’ve been waiting for you for a good ten minutes now, you’re late.”

“Considering this is my wedding, I can be as late as I want to be,” I scold, staring at her. She narrows her eyes, staring right back. I don’t know if she knows that her dear brother was in town all along and he’s probably bleeding to death right now, at the hands of one of her ‘clients’. My father.

God, I feel sick to my stomach.

“I’m glad you’re starting to realize that this is all about you, Astraea,” my mother says slowly. “We’re all here for you, even when you’re inconsiderate of other people’s time.”

It’s not the first time I feel like slapping her across the face, but it’s the first time I feel like breaking down at that instinct. I just want to go to my corner, hide and cry my heart out.

“Well, let’s go on with it, shall we.” My mother strides through the Easton’s front door like she owns the place, dressed to the nines in the latest fashions, her ears glimmer with her diamond studded earrings which match her shoes, her diamond watch, her diamond rings. It’s a wonder how much she gave up just to be dressed that way.

“Aren’t you going to say happy birthday to me, mother?” I question, feeling spiteful and bitter. “Or do I remind you of the two children you lost because of your recklessness?”

“I’ll admit, losing your brother and even your sister have been the hardest, most painful experiences of my life and I’ll never be over it, which is why we’ll celebrate your birthday tomorrow—when you’re actually eighteen,” she says with a barely there smile on her face, then turns to walk away.

“How does it feel mother?” I start, staring at her back as we follow her.

“How does what feel, dear?” she says from over her shoulder, glancing back at us. Emmett squeezes my hand, warning to keep it cool but I ignore him.

“You know, to sell your daughter to the highest bidder like your brother sold you per hour?”

I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. My mother freezes mid-step, her entire body still and unmoving. I hold my breath, not knowing what she’s going to say or if she’s going to slap me but she doesn’t move for a long minute.

I feel sick again.

“Let’s...,” she starts but her voice trembles. “Let’s go on, the judge and Syrus are waiting.”

“Mama,” I start but she raises a finger silencing me. She doesn’t turn around to look at me, doesn’t acknowledge what I just said, she just...keeps it moving like I didn’t just hurt her.

“No, Mama,” I start, walking faster to catch up with her. “I want to talk to you.”

“Not now Astraea,” she says, her voice unnaturally high all of a sudden. “We can do that as soon as this is done.”

And with that, she pushes a door open and enters with a flourish. “Syrus, Judge...Fields?” She pauses, her jaw dropping open as she stares at Richard’s older cousin who I hadn’t seen in years. He stands in the room, a calm smile on his face. Does he know that this is, in a way, illegal?

“Hello Amanda,” he greets and I frown, watching my mother shake her head. “Age and time are your best friend, Amanda. You look beautiful.”

“What are you doing here?” she questions, glancing at Syrus, then at the judge.

“Come now, Amanda. You knew we had to get a judge from somewhere,” Syrus says pouring himself a drink.

“Hey Amanda!” Noah greets, making my mother frown. Honestly, I hadn’t seen him either until now. He’s seated in one of the study chairs of Syrus’ office.

“You too?” my mother says, frowning at Noah then she glances at me as if to accuse me for Noah’s presence here. I’m even shocked to see him here.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, looking around, even though I know it’s pointless to do that. I know he’ll never want anything to do with me, even though we fucked and now, I’m knocked up

“Well, I couldn’t let you get hitched without your man of honor,” he smiles, winking at me. “We’ve been kicking it with my powerful judge over here, right Judge F!”

“That’s right young man. You’ve got a bright future in law ahead of you,” the judge says with an easy smile on his face. “Astraea, I haven’t seen you since you were this high.”

He brings his hand to his knee and Noah guffaws. “Right, that’s when she used to wet the bed!”

“Noah!” I grit out, staring at him in shock. “Don’t you have places to be?”

“And miss out on this fancy, yet bootleg kind of wedding that could really use some life? I think I’m right where I’m supposed to be, thank you very much,” he mocks, smiling from ear to ear.

“Well, I say the more witnesses to this union, the better,” Syrus says. “Judge Fields, if you will.”

“Wait,” my mother rushes to say, a wild look in her eyes. “If you’re here then does that mean Richard knows...”

“That you’re about to marry off my daughter to another man?”

All eyes swing to the door behind us and the tension in the room rises even further when the man standing there steps forward from the shadows, revealing the man George warned me about.

Richard.

The father of my sister, but for all I know, what was said by Larry can’t be trusted.

He stands there, looking rough around the edges. So out of sorts and not in his usual polished appearance. His hair is disheveled as is the rest of him. His tie loosened, shirt creased, suit jacket creased and dirty.

But what stops me in my tracks and has my mother gasping in a deep breath is the look in his eyes—which explains the gun in his hand that’s aimed directly at... my mother.

“Richard...,” Syrus starts but Richard swings the gun at him, his finger on the trigger. He looks unsteady, as if he’s going to fire anytime.

“Shut your damn mouth, Syrus. Making deals with my wife is one thing but sleeping with her? How pathetic can you be?” Richard shouts, a wild look in his eyes. He doesn’t waver on his feet, his words aren’t slurred so he’s obviously not drunk.

He knows exactly what he’s doing, despite what his appearance may suggest. He’s here with an intention to execute someone.

“And how was she? Was my cold wife a great lay?” He spits out, now pointing the gun at my mother who is surprisingly calm and steady. Somehow, I don’t know how, I’m now behind her, with Noah to my right and Emmett on my other-side.

“Richard, put the gun down, we can talk about this like civilized human beings.” My mother starts. Her voice is sure, steady and maybe even calm as if she’s dealt with this situation before.

Wait, has my mother been held at gun point before?

In that moment, I realize that I know close to nothing about my mother.

“Civilized human beings?” Richard throws his head back and laughs really hard, but it’s cold and ruthless, just like him. “You think you’re the master of civilized conversation, huh Claire?”

So, my mother’s name is indeed Claire? She gave me her actual name as my middle name? I don’t know what to think of that.

“Tell me something, when were you going to tell me that you were pregnant with triplets?” Richard goes on, stepping further into the large office. “Or at the very least, when were you going to tell me that the boy and this girl weren’t mine?”

“Richard, it’s not what you think. You don’t understand,” my mother starts.

“I don’t understand that you killed my daughter?” He roars, the gun shaking in his hand now.

“Listen, Richard,” Judge Fields, “Why don’t you lower the gun. We can talk about this.”

“Talk about this?” Richard scoffs. “You know nothing and if it wasn’t because we are family, I would shoot you in the head right now.”

“Astraea and Amanda are also your family,” the judge presses, taking a step forward.

“No, no, Clive, don’t be a hero,” Richard laughs, pointing the gun at him. “Ask this bitch if this girl is my child? Ask her, your honor.”

“Richard, you’re not yourself,” my mother says. “You know that...,”

“I know that you lied to me for years, Claire, Amanda, whoever the hell you are!” Richard shouts. “How could you keep a lie like that for so long, making a fool out of me out there. You think the whole world didn’t know I wasn’t the father to these kids?”

“Nobody made a fool out of you, Richard,” my mother denies, still calm and directly in the line of fire. Literally.

“Richard, mate. Put the gun down.” Syrus tries to step in.

“Back off Syrus before I blow your brains out!” Richard shouts, his arm now shaky but his finger is steady on the trigger. I frown.

“Richard, let’s go home and talk about this...,” my mother starts.

“No,” I step closer to her but Noah stops me.

“I don’t want to talk about a single thing with you! You’ve always been a whore, I knew that. You slept with me one night and the next you’re sleeping with someone else for a quick, Franklin.” Richard mocks, watching my mother. “Is that a lie?”

“I did what I could,” my mother says, straightening her shoulders, standing up straight.

“Sure, with your brother as your pimp,” Richard seethes.

“Is that why you’re mad?” my mother starts, as if she actually wants to make him made. “Then you are a fucking fool.”

“Amanda!” Judge Fields chides but my mother ignores him, staring Richard down.

“You’re a fool and you know it,” she points at her husband. “You never loved me, but the moment I told you I had children with you—after two years of your five seconds—what did you do?”

Richard doesn’t say a word, still pointing his gun at her.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she taunts. “You took me in, with my two babies just like that.”

She snaps her fingers, making Richard flinch. I stare, fascinated and seeing a different side of my mother. Even in the face of danger, she doesn’t blink, she’s even tougher and more resilient.

“You’re nothing but a power hungry, money loving bitch, Amanda!” Richard seethes. “You slept with rich men, because this is the life you wanted. From the slums you used to live in, you wanted someone to fucking upgrade you.”

“Don’t get it twisted, you asshole. I upgraded you.” My mother says, placing a hand on her hip. “I brought you into the fold. I gave you a fucking reputation and a pep in your step when Daddy disowned your ass.”

“Shut up!” Richard shouts, but it only makes my mother throw her head back, laughing.

“I made you. I gave you a place in this great town! You and I both know you wouldn’t have made it without me.”

“Shit, she’s crazy hot.” Noah breathes besides me. I poke him in the ribs, hard, staring wide eyed at Richard and my mother. This isn’t going to end well. Somehow, dread has settled so deep in my stomach that I know, I’m going to lose an illegitimate parent tonight.

“You had your pimp do all your dirty work for you, Claire. You had him go after Denise...”

“Ahh, Denise, the love of your life,” My mother mocks, waving her hands in the air, dramatically.

“Wait, what?” Syrus, Emmett, Noah and I say at the same time.

“Plot twist!” Noah says, but my mother and Richard don’t seem to care what’s happening behind them.

“You knew that I wanted her, not you but instead you’re a shitty friend and drugged me,” Richard shouts.

Drugged him?

“Drugs have always been in your family, huh?” He laughs then. “I guess karma is a bitch because that’s how your rude, hateful bastard of a son died. With drugs in his veins.”

Noah and Emmett stare at each other, then at me but my mother gasps, taking a step forward.

“What did you just say?” she starts, her breath sounding labored, taking tentative steps towards the man with a gun.

“You heard what I said, bitch!” Richard seethes, “And if you don’t step back, I’ll blow your brains out.”

My mother should have stopped then. She should have heeded his warning, but she didn’t, seeing the monster in front of her with new eyes. We were all on borrowed time in that moment.

“You had my son killed?” she gasps, watching her husband. For the first time, I can see that my mother is in pain and hasn’t gotten over the supposed death of her son. Which means, she doesn’t know that he’s not only alive, but he’s a father now.

“You’re damn right I did!” Richard says, puffing his chest out. “I got rid of that scumbag, just as I’m about to get rid of that little bitch of yours.”

And suddenly, the gun is pointed at me.

Stay away from Richard.

“You killed my son?” Amanda repeats. “It was you, damn you I knew it,” she cries, sobs now racking her small frame.

“Oh yeah, you’re one smart whore, aren’t you?” Richard mocks, still pointing the gun at me. “You knew I was going to come for your stupid babies, one by one, that’s why you were quick to hide her in London, telling me that she went to a fucking boarding school in Switzerland.”

Look into the signatures on the form for that institution for your admittance. The person who sent you to London is not who you’ve been blaming, but I think that’s an answer you should want to find out for yourself to start your own healing and forgiveness journey.

My mother is the one who purposely hid me away in London?

Don’t be so hard on Mom, even if she deserves it.

Was she protecting me the whole time?

“All those trips to Switzerland, telling me that Astraea didn’t want to come home for summer because she was enjoying herself with her new friends. Telling me that she didn’t want to come home. You knew I would keep the promise I made you all those years ago.” he whispers. My mother shivers and that makes me angry for some reason.

“What promise did you make her?” I start, stepping forward. Noah and Emmett try to hold me back, but I avoid their touch.

“Astraea, don’t!” my mother chides but I ignore her. I was so blind before, and I didn’t listen when she told me that everything she’s done it’s been for me. A lot of those decision though, they’ve now fucked up my life but I’m on my own now.

“No, Mama, I’ve heard enough of this ranting, foaming at the mouth, psychopath thinking he’s got us all where he wants us,” I start, staring him down. “What promise did you make my mother.”

Richard smiles, as if he was waiting for this very moment.

“Why don’t you ask your mother,” he says, still pointing the gun at me, a finger ready on the trigger.

“Astraea, baby, step back,” my mother starts.

“Excuse me, can we talk about this later!” Syrus bellows. “We have a wedding to continue.”

“Oh please, father,” Emmett starts. “The only reason you want Astraea and I married is because you know who her real father is. And because of that, you want to make sure when he comes to destroy you, our sham marriage will be your shield.”

“You...,” Syrus stutters. “You know about Eli Beaumont.”

“Even had a beer with the dude,” Noah starts. “I gotta say though, he’s one hell of a mean man who can hold a grudge like no man’s business. And when it comes to his children that he just learnt he has...,”

“What?” my mother gasps, now looking at me. “You saw him?”

“Yes Mama,” I whisper, unable to ignore the tears falling down my cheeks.

“He’s here?” she whispers back, a look of hope, joy and maybe even love coming over her like she can’t believe this is happening.

“Oh my God,” I gasp, covering my open mouth.

“You’re in love with the Phoenix?” Syrus exclaims, but my mother doesn’t even bother looking at him or anyone else but me.

“Where is he?” she questions, tears in her eyes. I’ve never seen my mother cry. Not even at my brother’s fake funeral.

“Probably skinning your rapist of a brother alive from the ankles,” Noah blurts out, unapologetically. I expect my mother to be saddened by that news but instead, a look of merriment enters her eyes, she looks thrilled by the news.

“Good,” she whispers, straightening her shoulders as she steps closer to me. “Astraea my baby, I’ve wronged you. I’ve put you in harms way and I know better than to ask you for forgiveness for not protecting you from that monster...,”

“Ahh, good ole Larry,” Richard cuts in. “He and I planned that night perfectly.”

“What do you mean by that?” I question but he starts laughing, looking crazy and frantic.

“How do you think he got access into the house? Who do you think paid the security guard to erase all the evidence of his presence,” Richard starts,

his voice low, fully aware of what he's doing, Breaking me even more.

“You sonofabitch!”

I jump the moment I hear his voice. Before anyone can respond, Ace literally jumps on Richard, trying to wrestle the gun away from him, but he's drunk! I scream

Emmett curses.

Noah jumps into action.

Judge Fields flees, like a coward.

My mother tries to push me backwards, into the corner of the office. Something breaks. Maybe it's furniture.

There are a lot of grunts. Syrus is shouting.

There's a sharp pain in my lower stomach. I pale, unable to breathe and I start feeling nauseous. My mother stares at me worriedly. She has a frantic look in her teary eyes. She's saying something to me, but I can't hear it because in that moment, a shot is fired.

Then another.

There's a loud roar, Richard manages to break free of the boys, and he has the gun in his hand. And it's pointed at me.

“Goodbye, my little star.”

And he shoots.

I blink.

My mother drops down to the carpeted floor, a stricken look on her face. She just saved my life. Jumping in front of the bullet for me.

And I was right, tonight I'm going to lose a parent.

CHAPTER FOURTY-ONE



They say death is silent. It just creeps up on you like a thief in the night, snatches you from your agony and delivers you where your life's work deserves.

That, just like time, is a lie.

Death is loud.

It makes a lot of chaotic noise.

It announces itself in pain and a misery that no one can explain.

Death suspends time, everything frozen in its cold grip that no one can escape.

Death cuts through your state of being, your neatly organized life and tells you that no matter what you do, you won't beat her at a game she's been playing from the beginning of time.

Maybe we as people were cruel to ourselves, because we flirted with death on a daily basis. Or maybe time was the enemy, it told lies and gave us illusions of what could have been.

Or maybe, death is just death.

Because as I held my dying mother in that ambulance, chaos breaking all around me, another life was dying inside of me.

“Somebody help!” Ace shouts, blood all over his clothes, his arms and face. My mother’s blood and the blood that’s painfully coming from a place that shouldn’t be bleeding this much, especially when one is pregnant.

“King!” someone shouts behind us but he’s frantic, he’s angry and maybe he’s now sober. We’re now at the hospital.

“I need a doctor!” Ace shouts, then jogs back to me with a barrage of nurses behind him, pushing one of those hospital beds that I thought I wouldn’t be seeing for a while.

“What happened?”

“There was a shooting. Her mother was shot. She started screaming in pain, and that’s when we saw the blood.”

“Sir, please step back and let us take care of her.”

“You don’t understand, she’s pregnant.”

Death made even the scariest life moments, precious. Right before it took them away.

“George! In here!”

“Where are they?”

“Astraea is going in...,”

“And my mother?”

Death also makes silence louder than any large, uncontrollable crowd at a Beyoncé concert.

“Hang in there baby, we’re going to make it,” Ace says, now in my face but I’m numb. I can’t feel anything but the hollow emptiness in me. “We’re going to make it.”

No, we weren’t going to make it.



“I’m so sorry, Astraea,” Marie says, tears streaming down her face. “I tried to call you.”

“I guess I missed your call,” I breath out, feeling so numb, all I want is to get out of this hospital.

“I just...,” Marie starts but Ace cuts her off, a blank look on face.

“Marie, thank you so much for everything but, she needs to rest. It’s been a long day. Frankly, you need to rest too,” he says, looking worn out, a fresh change of clothes on him. His hair is messy, like he’s been gripping it a lot.

“Yes, you’re right,” Marie smiles softly but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’ll leave you two then.”

She leaves the room, but we don’t say a thing until the sobs come for me.

Ace closes the door, dims the lights, then climbs in bed with me, holding me in his arms as I let go.

But he doesn’t say anything. Not a single word.

There’s really nothing to say when we already know who’s to blame for all of this.

For losing a baby in cold blood.



A knock sounds at the door, jolting me out of my thoughts. I look up and there stands the last person I thought I’d ever see here, holding a beautiful bouquet of flowers in her hands like she’s attending a funeral.

“Your son isn’t here,” I say, my voice hoarse.

“I...,” she starts as she comes in. “I’m not here for him.”

I tilt my head to the left, remembering everything Richard said right before he shot my mother.

“Right,” I scoff. “You’ve never been there for your only son.”

I don’t have the energy to deal with this woman. I’m aware that my mother sent Larry to infiltrate her house, just to wreck all sorts of havoc there, but it’s the last kind of guilt I need on my conscious right now.

“You’re right, I wasn’t there for him when he needed me.”

Confession of the decade from the world’s shittiest women. A round of applause for them.

“Then go talk to him about that, not me,” I say, trying to get up so I can go look for my mother.

“Astraea, I know you look at me like a monster, like I destroyed your life and that I didn’t want you anywhere near my son,” she starts.

“Are you going to tell me that that’s not how it is?” I mock.

“No, I’m not going to do that,” she says. “Instead, I’m going to tell you the truth.”

“Really?” I start. “Where are you going to start from? The part where you killed my sister?”

She sighs, looking down. But when she finally looks up, there are tears in her eyes, making me pause.

“Astraea, Larry was more than a monster for your mother and I,” she starts, not looking at me. “I’m sure you heard that your mother and I grew up together in a foster home? What they didn’t tell you is, we were both thrust into a cruel situation, which was nothing more than a bet for Larry.”

I hate the mention of his name, but I can’t help but listen anyway.

“You see, your mother and I knew that if we ever wanted to raise money to get an education—because that’s all we ever wanted to get out of hell—we needed to go where real money was. The idea was to date a wealthy, eligible bachelor and make it from there,” she says, a small smile on her face.

“But Larry messed it up, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” she grits out. “He started selling our bodies to the rich men he came across and two of them were Richard Fields...”

“Who you fell in love with,” I point out.

“Yes,” she says, looking surprised. “And the other was a man whose name we didn’t even know. See, we had to take turns to ‘please’ those men.”

I feel bile rising up my throat as she says that, I can just imagine what that entailed.

“Because at that time, Claire and I were just two young girls, raising a little baby that Claire then adopted as her own but kept tucked away from her father’s reach.”

“Sarah?” I frown, thinking of the woman who I thought was my aunt. She’s Larry’s daughter too? What the hell?

“Yes, Sarah. Of course, she turned out to be a bad apple, but that’s a story for another day,” she waves her hand. “But the thing is, we had to get to know these men. We actually talked to them before dropping our panties for them, a torture technique designed by that man as a full escort experience for his clients.”

I can see where all of this is going.

“Naturally, I fell in love with Richard. He was charming, smart and well, I just liked him and that night, after taking care of Sarah at the home, I was going to sleep with him and give him something I never gave anyone else before.”

“Your heart.”

“Yes,” she swallows, then forges on. “But when I got there, Claire had already serviced that particular client.”

“That’s when you started hating her,” I say, watching her.

“In a way, yes. I knew she had slept with him without protection because I had seen her stop taking her pills. She wanted to get pregnant,” Denise says, watching me back. “I thought she wanted to get pregnant by Richard and when she finally was, I actually believed the babies were Richard’s. That is, until I realized that she was in love with the mystery man.”

I’m stunned into silence. I don’t even know what to say to that.

“Claire was smart. She had an iron will when she knew what she wanted and she wanted that man. And it seemed, he wanted her too. They had a torrid love affair but when he wanted to take her away, she refused, telling him she had responsibilities. That’s when Larry found out and caused a shit ton of trouble for them.”

I heard everything that was said in that hangar. I know that Larry fabricated lies to Eli and painted my mother as a villain.

“By the time she found out she was pregnant with triplets, she knew they had two different fathers because she slept with Richard, trying to hide the fact that she was actually there for the powerful Phoenix.”

“So, she what? She ran?”

“What else could she do.? I hated her. Her fucking brother was a psycho. But she had to take care of herself. She packed up Sarah and she was gone, leaving me to suffer at the hands of Larry, that’s why I hate her.”

“You feel like she betrayed you when she left?”

“Claire broke my heart, Astraea,” Denise whispers. “But when we finally crossed paths, that was all forgotten because she needed help with delivering her babies. Having given birth to my own son a few months before her...”

“Wait, you were already pregnant?” I ask, frowning.

“Oh yeah,” she smiles. “See, one of Larry’s clients was Philip. Philip was my first ever. I lost my virginity to that asshole and well, he knocked me up pretty quickly. But I wasn’t aware that I was pregnant until around the thirteen, maybe fourteen weeks. I used to be huge back then.”

You wouldn’t have guessed that at all but the way she looks now. All monied, slim and shiny like a diamond.

“While I was jealous that Claire was sleeping with my man, I was already knocked and didn’t even know it. “

Well damn. That’s how Ace was born?

“To cut a long story short, Alex was born, forcing Philip to marry me. It was never about love, it was about legacy but my son, he was my unconditional love. My saving grace in the times when I spiraled into depression. He was and still is, my everything.”

“You should tell him that,” I say, looking away. I don’t want to cry, I don’t want to feel the absence in my womb but since I’m still bleeding just a little bit, it’s hard to ignore.

“God knows I try, but I messed up,” she says, looking away. “But back to the tragedy. Claire gave birth to triplets. Immediately I knew that the girl, she was born first—was Richard’s daughter. But Astraea, she was born a still born.”

“What?” I exclaim, my mind racing.

“Your mother swore me to secrecy but, little Amy was a still birth. That destroyed your mother, so much that one of you—either your brother or yourself—your heartbeat paused several times.”

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

“Her name was Amy?” I whisper, my voice hoarse. She nods, unable to say a word.

“She was tiny, beautiful and angelic, just like you when you were born,” she says, with a faint smile. “But that night, Larry found out your mother was giving birth in Phoenix, Arizona, so Claire had me take Amy to give her the funeral that she deserved, while she took you and your brother away, somewhere safe.

“She took us to an orphanage,” I finish, feeling devastated by this story.

“Yes,” Denise affirms. “I was supposed to get you two but...,”

“You didn’t.”

“I couldn’t,” she whispers. “God, I wanted to take care of Claire’s babies, but I couldn’t. I was already losing it with all this new shit. Money wasn’t a common thing for girls like me. We were lucky to see a fifty on a good day, Larry took all our money, but still that’s no excuse.”

I shake my head, looking away.

“I guess that’s why she hated me. For breaking my word. For not coming for you,” she says, looking away. “I earned her hate but my son didn’t deserve what that...,”

She takes a deep breath, obviously trying to calm herself down.

“You didn’t deserve that either, Astraea. The sins of your parents shouldn’t have touched you kids, but they did and now...,”

You just lost a grandchild...

“Thank you, Denise,” I say, not wanting to hear anything else she has to say. “Some advice for you, talk to him. You have no idea how time will go.”

And with that, I go to the bathroom and shut the door behind me, ignoring that the woman I’ve resented for years is crying in my hospital room while her son, his friends and mine were all listening by the door.

CHAPTER FOURTY-TWO



Claire

“Claire.”

His voice is as deep and as smooth as I last remember it. No one had ever uttered my name with a wicked intent hidden in that caress, but him.

“Why?” he questions, I can see him in my mind’s eye. I know I won’t ever wake up from this bed to see him. But I can imagine what he looks like. “Why would you do this to me when I just got you back?”

“Look at you, on life support, with a DNR bracelet on your wrist,” he breathes. Is he staring down at me? Can he see that I’m bold from cancer? Can he see that I’m a hot mess without all my makeup?

I want to say something, but I have a tube in my mouth. I’m worried about my daughter. I’m dying. “Why?”

I want to tell him that I deserve this. I want to tell him that I’ve lived a life filled with nightmares and ghosts, and if two gunshot to my lung and to my liver will take me out before the cancer can make me it’s bitch, then so be it.

“You should have looked for me,” he starts. “You should have come to me.”

Looking for you would have put my kids in danger much faster. I needed the time.

“You should have told me about that shithead, Larry.”

You wouldn't have believed me.

“Claire,” he repeats my name, then I feel his hot breath as he kisses my forehead. I whimper, wanting to tell him everything I’ve kept hidden inside, locked away for him and him alone. “You took my life and shot it all to hell.”

I blink slowly, but I fail to open my eyes. I know I’m on borrowed time and I need him to be the one to switch off this machine, not my babies.

“I’m always going to carry you in my fucking heart everywhere I go, Claire. I want you to rest now, knowing that I’ve got our babies. I’m going to protect them.

The last time I had chemotherapy, I wandered into George’s room, and that’s when I realized that he left Astraea a puzzle. It didn’t take me long to find George’s letter that he left under his mattress. I knew my baby was alive. A mother always knows, but I had to do my part.

I had to be a responsible grandmother.

Grandmother...

“Astraea...,” Eli goes on, breathing hard. “She’s beautiful, Claire. You did well.”

I messed up. I messed up big.

“And George, well, I didn’t think you’d name him that; Eli Jnr seemed more appropriate. I told you my name when no one else knew who I was.”

Ha! I knew this was coming. George is a strong, wise name.

“But, I can’t complain. You gave ma gift that no woman on earth was ever able to give. You Claire.” That’s when I feel it, a hot tear on my skin.

“I’ll always love you, sweet cheeks.”

Sweet cheeks. Yeah right.

“I’m going to open the door, they want to say goodbye before we switch this off. Just so you know, in the next life, I’m so coming after your hot ass.”

I’m holding on to that!

“Astraea, George, these are from your mother. Open them when you’re ready.”

I knew Christina was going to come through and give the letters to my babies. Asking her to keep George a secret was hard, but a mother will always be a mother.

Peace soon claims me.

I love you, my babies.
Now, to be with my love, Amy.

CHAPTER FOURTY-THREE



*My dearest Astraea,
My little star, there will come a time when you find out that I wasn't a hero.
That I wasn't a loving mother. When that day comes, I know you're not
going to love me.*

*I know you're going to resent me for lying to you, for putting you in a
position where life feels so uncertain. I wish I could take some steps back in
time and change some of the decisions I made when I was nothing more
than a revenge fueled monster who hurt another mother and child for my
own gains.*

*I was a young mother, grieving the death of one of my own. I was a woman,
hurt, abused and on the run.*

*If I were to explain to you every single mistake I made, I'm afraid your hate
for me will overwhelm me to a point where I can't even speak.*

*I'm so sorry for abandoning you when you needed me.
I'm sorry for doing nothing when you were violated so brutally, a crime that
I prayed would never touch you, after what I went through. I thought if I
had all the money in the world, I could have all the security in the world.
But I've since learnt that, you should be careful of who you let in your
heart.*

I'm sorry for the trauma that I don't think you'll ever get over. I only hope that with time, you learn to forgive yourself. NONE OF THIS WAS YOUR FAULT.

I'm sorry for getting in the way of your happiness. In my head, I knew when the truth blew up about the boy you've loved forever and my part in damaging his life so viciously, your life would be complicated way more than it deserved. Forgive me for setting you up for a marriage that I knew you never wanted. I thought since he was one of the boys you loved, it would be alright...

I'm sorry for messing up your life.

But don't forgive me, I don't deserve that.

Start with yourself. Be kind to yourself.

My baby, by the time you read this, I'll be gone. I've been sick a long time.

After all, the wages of sin, is death.

But just know, you were conceived in love. You are my light. You are my little star.

CHAPTER FOURTY-FOUR



Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

Heartbeat.

That night in the hospital, I lost more lives than I thought I was supposed to. I lost lives that I never knew I loved with a painful longing that I know I'll be feeling for the rest of my life, with nothing to fill that void. I lost lives that in that moment I realized, were worth much more than my own.

The life of my mother.

The life of a baby that was growing inside of me that I never knew I loved until now, shaking in my shoes, a blank stare in my eyes, feeling like a failure and the worst human being in the world.

And in a way, I lost my own life.

The way George, Noah and Emmett are watching me now at my mother's funeral, it's as if they expect that I'll jump into her grave with her coffin, but I don't. I stand put, clutching the letter that Eli gave me.

Eli, my father. He's standing right beside me, with shades covering the grief in his eyes. Having him here is somehow a comfort that I never knew I needed. For the first time, I knew I wasn't going to be alone, I had a force that the world has never seen right beside me. He holds my hand now,

smiling down at me, but I know, he's hurting, just like my brother who stands there, stoic, with guilt in his eyes.

I wish he wouldn't have to blame himself for our mother's death.

I wish everything was easier.

I wish the lies that got us in this mess, wouldn't have taken this many lives, but it has.

"At this moment, I invite anyone who has anything to say about the deceased, Claire Nicole..." the priest drowns out, looking uncomfortable.

"Beaumont," Eli speaks up, stepping forward as he looks at me, then at George. I look at my brother, feeling the beginnings of a smile on my face. Yes, my mother was and will always be, a Beaumont.

The sickening name of Fields never fit her in the first place. At least that's what I think until Eli explains.

"We got married in India, a rural ceremony that tied my heart with hers," he says, his voice rough as ever. "She's a Beaumont."

Tears glisten in my eyes. Of course, my mother was a romantic. It only makes sense how she rooted for love even if it failed her for most of her life.

"Yes, Claire Nicole Beaumont. Is there anyone who would like to say a few words?" the priest says, looking around the small gathering.

"I do," I whisper, my voice catching. Ace steps forward, reaching for me but I know if he touches me, I'll break down without saying what I need to say. So, I shake my head and he stops, a dark look in his eyes. I don't know what he sees when he looks at me, knowing that I'm the one who lost our baby.

"I never knew that her name was Claire, but she gave it to me," I start. "And it just so happens that my little niece," I glance at the seven-month-old baby in Lara Marrison's arms, a girl I hated back then. It's crazy how some things are beautiful, even in the dark. "Is also named Claire."

I choke up, looking at little Claire. Her round chubby cheeks, her wide, dark eyes so much like mine, piece my heart in a way I wasn't expecting.

God, I lost my baby.

Without another word, Ace is behind me, but he doesn't do anything, but place a strong, firm hand at the small of my back, waiting for me to finish and for that, I'm grateful. I need to do this.

"My mother was beautiful, graceful and she refused to lose," I continue, then I recount the little story between her and Denise and how they

competed on having the best charity in the world. Denise smiles through her tears as I say that, mouthing a thank you that I don't know if I'll accept just yet. It's so much hurt between us.

"She was strong. She was a great chef, her pies and cakes were legendary." George smiles at that, remembering the fun times in the kitchen that I thought I had lost memories of.

"But most of all, she sacrificed so much for me," I look down at the letter in my hand. "She gave me life and fought for my life, even though she was suffering loss of her own, she kept on fighting. She's told me over and over that I was the daughter of a soldier, I never believed her until now."

I step closer to her white coffin, with real gold handles and designs all around it. There's a picture of her smiling so brightly, her eyes are shining to the right, I look up at it.

"Don't worry Mama, you raised a soldier. Thank you for everything you did, even when no one understood you or had your back."

I think of every single lie that has gotten us here, she was still trying to shield us.

"Thank you for loving me when I thought you didn't," I continue.

I place a hand on my belly, now empty, without any signs of life in there.

"Thank you for protecting me when I thought I was alone."

"Thank you for being my mother. I love you Mama."

That day, up in the mountains of Westbrook Blues, I laid my mother to rest but all I could think was, I hope she has her grandbaby up there.

Which, in the end, had me breaking down in my father's arms for hours, and my mother was seven feet under cold, dead earth. She didn't deserve to be there.

I did.



Days go by with a pace that I thought was cruel. I stay curled up in my room, in the dark, with my stars glowing up on the ceiling but I don't feel peace. I felt restless.

Richard, my mother's supposed husband, was arrested for manslaughter of his wife and the attempted murder of my brother who, the state declared as alive and well. But it wasn't long that we found out he paid bail.

Soon after that, his body was found burned to a crisp. It is believed he was burned alive, with multiple forceful blows to his body in various

places. He was beaten and burnt to death, a fate I know was decided the moment he stole and killed Eli's heart.

I heard through Ivy and Kim that Dereck was also arrested and quickly sentenced for his own crimes that had nothing to do with the attempt on George's life and that comes from the fact that, Spider, undercover Phoenix Corps agent, was actually an undercover FBI agent.

The shit that happens in this world...

But in a way, it made a lot of sense. I just hoped my father wouldn't put a hurt on him so bad, he wouldn't function for double crossing him. But according to George, Spider and our father knew each other because of deals they had going on with Ace. Deals that I don't think I want to know.

George comes in every hour, checking on me. I look at him. I answer his questions. I eat the food he brings, then I turn away.

Noah ransacked my entire room, on the hunt for the pills I once told him I had in here and true to form, my room is clean and bare. There isn't even a single mild painkiller or any sharp objects that can be used to hurt myself. But I'm beyond that.

Emmett comes and stays with me, silently watching me, choosing to stay in the dark with me, listening with me as baby Claire cries down the hallway, but I can't bring myself to go down there and help, let alone pick her up.

She doesn't need a murderer in her life.

Kim and Ivy are there every single day and night, like they actually take shifts to stay with me when the boys aren't. After school, they bring junk food, movies and books. Kim even brought her iPod with six thousand songs. That afternoon, I sing and dance until I let go. We sing out of tune, on top of our lungs, and then we have a pillow fight, laughing at each other.

But soon after the music dies down, silence creeps back in. I tried to cling on to those fleeting moments of joy, but as days turned into weeks, I couldn't do it anymore.

But I never stay alone in the dark for long. While everyone is sleeping in their beds, I'm under a tree, wrapped around warm body. His mouth peppering my body with hot kisses. But the thing about Ace is, he allowed me to cry without judgement.

He didn't ask me how I was feeling.

He didn't tell me that it was all going to me alright.

He didn't mind when I lashed out and just screamed in the night.

He was just there. And he let me be.

But I wasn't a fool. I knew he still hated me. That everything he said before everything went to hell, was still true. No truer words had ever been uttered.

I had messed up his life. And even though he didn't accept my pregnancy the night I told him—which so happens to be the night I miscarried—he's still here. Silently resenting me while I suffocate in his embrace.

While I was trying to grieve, he was silently stewing in his own anger. It was wrong, selfish and I wasn't here for it.

We haven't spoken more than three words to each other, even though we spent hours in the dark together.

"Come here," he'd growl.

"Yes," I'd whisper, my heart settling, knowing that I was safe in his arms.

That was it. Nothing more. Nothing less.

We weren't on the same wavelength. He wasn't feeling what I was feeling and even though the truth is out, the truth about us, is still nothing more than ashes.

A knock at my door startles me out of the thought that drown me.

"Yes?"

"Hey sweetheart," Eli says, coming in my room. "I've got something for you."

He holds up a bucket of The Haven's fried chicken.

"You don't strike me as the type to like junk food like fried chicken." I say quietly. I still can't get over the fact that this man is my father. He just seems so...larger than life in a way I haven't wrapped my head around yet.

"I have it under good authority that this is your favorite food," he says with a smile. "May I?"

"Sure," I nod, hugging my pillow to my stomach, staring out the backyard from my balcony. "Mom's waffles and fried chicken was my favorite."

He pauses, placing the bucket on the small table on my balcony.

"She was a phenomenal woman," he grunts, not looking at me.

I'm just mad I didn't know the full extent of her awesomeness until it was too late.

“You disappeared,” I observe. I last saw him a few days ago and then silence.

“If I told you where I was, you would be an accomplice to a crime,” he says, joining me at the rail. “And honestly, orange doesn’t suit you.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“So, hiding away in your room?”

“Please don’t tell me you’re about to ask why I’m not going to school,” I mumble, still feeling strange.

“Well, considering your mother wrote to your school weeks ago, requesting for your leave of absence, as a concerned father, I think that’s covered.”

“She did that for me?”

“Yes, when you were in the hospital, the first time around,” he says, looking away.

“You knew I was in the hospital?” I question, frowning.

“Yes,”

“How?”

“Believe it or not, I’ve known Alex for years now, but my aversion and hate for this town made it impossible for me to care much about who else lives here.”

“My mother included,” I ask bitterly. Somehow, I’m bitter with this man. If he was here, my mother would still be alive. I wouldn’t have been raped and I would’ve been a simple girl, in love with a simple boy.

“I looked for Claire for years, but she covered her tracks well,” Eli says. “Or rather, that scumbag, Larry did all the covering, making sure I’d never find her...or you and your brother.”

“So, you just what? Gave up?” I scoff, stepping away from him.

He sighs, now looking at me with something close to understanding in the pits of his gaze.

“Astraea, sometimes when you love someone, and that love is born out of unfortunate circumstances. Everything is complicated, dark and messy, the odds of that love to survive are...”

“Slim to none,” I finish with a whisper, thinking of a certain blue-eyed boy.

“Yes,” he agrees. “And when you live the life I’ve lived, you realize that maybe it’s best not to have attachments. That it’s best you look like a lone wolf. A lonely man is a dangerous man, Astraea.”

I don't know what to say to that, so I just keep quiet, and drop my gaze to my hands.

"What did you do with Larry?" I blurt out, the question was already on my tongue but now that it's out, I actually want to know. "If he's still alive, I want to go to him."

"You're never going to step foot anywhere near that asshole, and so help me God, Astraea, my wrath is unending for what that man did."

"Does that mean he's still alive?"

Eli stares at me, cocking his head to the left as if to study me. I don't know what he's looking for, or what he sees in me, but he shakes his head.

"I'm going to keep him breathing for as long as I desire it, but you'll never know where he is," he says after a while.

"That man..." I start, but I don't even know what to say. I can start describing in detail how Larry single handedly destroyed all our lives. His own daughter even has a vacant look in her eyes when she comes here. Brittney...

"Alex, your brother and those boys dealt with that girl," Eli interjects, making me aware of the embarrassing fact that I'm thinking out loud.

"What?" I question, frowning. "They never told me."

"They were but maybe they realized that revenge isn't what you need right now."

"And you know what I need now, huh?" I start, feeling hot with anger. "An absent father that just came into my life?"

"No, but I know that look in your eyes," he says softly. "I was a young boy once, living in this town before it took away the only peace I had, my mother. I saw that look in my eyes."

Tears well in my eyes. Death had a way of connecting invisible dots that weren't supposed to be there, but with the clarity death provides, you see them.

"That look is a yearning," Eli says, stepping closer to me. "A yearning to leave everything behind and go away somewhere far, far enough it feels like nothing will touch you."

God, I can't describe how I've been feeling deep within bit as he talks, I can't help but identify myself with that.

I need to leave.

"You look around here, hoping to catch a breath but you know you can't," he continues, watching me. "You feel like you're suffocating,

everything is empty and loud at the same time and you just need an out.”

“Please don’t.”

“Astraea, I wasn’t there to watch you grow. I wasn’t there when you needed me. I wasn’t there when I should have been but I’m here today,” he says, now holding my hands, watching me with tears in his own eyes. It shocks me that a man his size and of his stature can cry but he does. “I’m here now, telling you that I’ll never abandon you. I’ll never forsake you. You’re my daughter, you’re a Phoenix. Even if you feel like you’ve burnt down to ash, you’ll rise.”

“I scoff, not sure of all of that, but he goes on.

“You, your brother and my grandbaby, you’re my entire life right now and baby girl, I would lay my life down for you.”

“That’s not what we need right now.” I whisper. “We don’t want to lose another parent.”

He engulfs me in his arms and we stay like that for a long time.

Soon after, decisions are made. I nod my head in agreement and he holds my hand, even though he knows that we’re going to have a mighty opposition to future plans that were set on that balcony.

CHAPTER FOURTY-FIVE



The last night we spend together, my broken star whispers several times that she loves me. She begs me to make love to her even though I know it's not time yet, I do it because in my head, I know she wants to feel something other than the agony that I know all too well.

I took her back to my room. We make love that night in a way that we've never done before. I'm scared to hurt her, but she holds me to her so tight, I can't help but let her feel how hard my heart is pounding. For her.

I let her feel how my chest is tight with pain I don't know how to express except in violence that I spent hours exerting on nameless faces down at the Pit, day in, day out.

I let her try to figure out how my head is messed up for all the mistakes I made.

How I let her down. Because I did.

I messed up so much there's no going back.

But that night, both of us reaching heights of painful pleasure that we could only reach at our brutal pace, I should have known that she was letting go.

I could sense her withdrawing from me each time I saw her. The look in her eyes grew distant every hour we spent apart, that by the time she would

meet me under the tree in our spot, she couldn't even look me in the eye.

Maybe it's because of that intuition that caused me to run to her house, so early in the morning, looking for her.

I know that that every is wrong the moment I see Ivy, Kim, her little sisters, Noah and Emmett in her living room, with distraught looks on their faces.

"Where is she?" I demand, looking around like a madman. I feel like I'm going crazy, like I'm losing my mind.

"I'm sorry man," Noah starts, not even attempting to joke around or waste my time. "She's gone."

"No, she's not gone."

She was just in my arms a few hours ago. In my bed. With me.

"Kind," Emmett starts, stepping towards me but I don't wait for that shit, I race up to her room. I trip and fall three times, disoriented and losing my breath, but I keep going. She has to be there.

If I stopped to actually pay attention to a large part of me that would always be connected and tangled to Star, I would have known that she wasn't there where I thought she would be.

I would've known that she left me.

That she finally grew sick of me.

"Astraea?" I bellow, bursting through her room, buy just like my brothers warned me, she's not there. Her bed is perfectly made. I run towards her closet, noticing that most of her clothes are gone but everything was done neatly, no sign of disorder anywhere. Which means she's been packing away her life for days.

In that moment, I see red.

How dare she kiss me at night, under a starless sky then when the sun rises, she's packing her bags to leave me.

"King," Emmett starts behind me. "She didn't want to get you mad."

Too late for that.

"She said she's sorry, but she has to do this," Noah says, a solemn look on his face.

She told them in detail that she was leaving but not to my fucking face. I was fucking in her a few hours ago, hitting her fucking sweet spot with each thrust and she has the never to leave me?

"How long ago was that?" I demand. Looking around, I notice George isn't here. Come to think of it, I can't hear his baby crying and I haven't

seen Lara. Which means, they're together. "Where is she going?"

My mind races a hundred per second. If she left hours ago, then that means she's probably in a plane, going somewhere. I can be on the next plane wherever the hell she's going in a few hours.

"Listen King, she knew you would ask us that, that's why she didn't tell us where she's going," Emmett says.

Yeah, that's how she is when she wants to royally fuck you over. She leaves and doesn't give you the fucking details.

I take out my phone and open my tracker.

She's on the move, on the interstate, heading for...I zoom in, going up that road, she's going to an airport.

With that, I'm out.

"King wait!"

"Don't do it man! Let her be!"

To hell with them!

I run back to my house, straight to my garage.

"Alex," Denise shouts, standing by the gate, holding something in her hand.

"Not now, Mother." I seethe, rushing to look for my car keys.

"I think, this is for you," she says softly, a look in her eyes that says she knows I'm in pain, but there's nothing she can do about it.

I stop, looking at the letter. I know who it's from. I know what it's going to say.

"You can go burn that."

And with that, I get in my car and race out of the car, with two other cars right behind me. If they think they're going to catch me or stop me, they're fairly mistaken. Should have known that these fuckers would take her side in shattering my soul like this.



I reach the private airport and there it is, a private jet with a dark Phoenix on the side. Should have fucking known that Eli wanted to play Dad of the fucking century.

"Astraea!" I shout, hardly even parking my car, seeing her standing there, hugging her brother.

Startled, she pulls back and stares at me. I can see George cursing but I don't care, I'm not here for his ass. I leave my car running, hoping that by

the time I leave this fucking airstrip, she'll be right beside me.

She better be or so help me, God.

"Astraea!"

"Come on, King, don't!" George grits out, a tired look on his face as he gets in my way.

"Step away before I fuck your face, your daughter won't even recognize you," I growl but he steps even closer.

"No, you're not going to stop that plane from leaving," he stubbornly says, "Back down."

"You're going to have to make me, asshole!" I grit out, not caring that her daughter will witness me embarrassing her daddy.

"Listen, you're my fucking best friend, but when it comes to Astraea, I'm willing to break that shit for real. You've done enough! I wasn't there for her before, but I heard everything you did to her,"

"Go hear how you fucking put her life in danger, and fuck off while you do!" I grit out.

"I hate myself for that but you..."

"George," Star calls, her voice soft, walking towards us as Noah and Emmett pull up on the strip. "Please stop."

"Astraea..." George says, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she says, our gazes now locked. She looks away first. That's her tell. She's fucking guilty and she knows it.

"Fuck King," Noah shouts, jogging over to us but I tune him out, staring at the girl who's had my heart in her toxic grip for years, since we were nothing but stupid kids.

"What's the meaning of this?" I start, making sure to keep my voice low and soft.

"George, please give us space," Star says, but she's not looking at me.

George steps away, motioning to Emmett and Noah as well. The wind howls between us, threatening to blow everything we are away with its force so I step closer to her, lifting her chin up with my fingers.

"Baby, tell me what's going on," I whisper, but she closes her eyes, a lone tear falling down her face.

"Ace, I'm sorry," she starts, "I'm so sorry for everything."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," I say but she shakes her head.

"No, I do and you know it," she vehemently denies, stepping away from me. "You were right, I messed up your life. I screwed it up."

I frown.

“Is that what this is about?” I say, blowing a breath. “Astraea, I didn’t mean any of that. I was angry and hurt, but I didn’t mean any of that mess.”

“Please don’t...don’t try and put some salve on this gushing wound, it’ll never close.”

“It won’t close or heal if you keep retreating away from me like that,” I growl, watching her feeling hopeless.

Feeling like I should be on my knees, begging her for something.

But also knowing that no matter how much I beg for the unknown, her answer will be no.

“Astraea, don’t fucking do this!” I growl, getting angry. “You’re acting like a fucking drama queen.”

She reels back and, her jaw now ticking.

“You’re a fucking time bomb, Ace,” she seethes, staring up me.

“Constantly angry like your father.”

“Like my father?” I throw my head back and laugh.

“Yes, you’re always angry!” she seethes. “You’re your father’s creation. Brutal, lethal, vicious, cunning and just...pathetically empty. Like your daddy,”

I should be shocked. I should blow a gasket, but I know her game. And it won’t work.

I lift my hand up to her cheek as if to wipe the evidence of her breaking away, but I don’t. Her tears don’t bother me anymore, not when she wants to hurt me so she can leave.

“And you, with every broken bit of you, the snarl on your face and the darkness that rivals the devil’s in your eyes, are my creation.”

She whimpers and I smile but it’s nothing soft or sweet.

“You think comparing me to my asshole of a father will let me let this go? Let you go?” I whisper, shaking my head but she just keeps crying, looking away. “Astraea, it’s not my fault I was born to a monster.”

“That’s not it,” she whispers.

“Then what is it?” I demand. “What is it so I can fucking fix it?”

“You can’t fix anything,” she says, looking away.

Fuck! I’m losing her and I fucking know it.

“Baby if you need to cry, cry. If want to scream, fucking scream. If you want to pound the shit out of me—if that means you’ll feel fucking better

and forgive me then baby, have at it. This is pointless without you, all of this is meaningless without you.”

She whimpers but I can see the decision in her eyes. So, I whisper, brokenly.

“Astraea, I mean nothing without you, can’t you see that?”

I hated begging but at this point, I didn’t see any other option. I can’t see a way out of this. She’s looking at me like this...is the end.

“Let go of my hand Ace, please,” she whispers.

“I can’t do that, Star.” I gasp out, hating the hoarseness in my voice. Fuck, I hate this entire situation. This ditch I dug myself into.

Her tears are streaming down her face but that doesn’t melt the resolve in her eyes or her steel resilience, it’s there because of me.

The tears, all because of me.

The suspicion and mistrust—all because of me.

“We weren’t ever anything worth a damn, right?” she says with a plastic smile on her face, firing the hateful words I once said to her, some time before when she was the center of my life. And now, she’s the center of my heartbreak.

“Astraea...,” I growl, tightening my grip on her hand. She flinches.

“Son, you better step back. I don’t want to hurt you.” Eli warns, stepping closer.

“Eli,” I turn to him but he looks away, shaking his head.

“It’s for the best,” he says, solemnly. “Besides, you still have unfinished business here.”

Unfinished business is a pathetic life without Astraea, not dolling out blows of revenge on Philip.

“Then I’ll follow you,” I grit out, staring at her, anger and pain burning bright in my eyes.

“Please don’t do that. I don’t...,” she starts then her voice fades away as if she can’t even finish her fucking sentence. At this point, anger and vicious rage moves through my system and my mouth opens, wanting to hurt her right back.

“Just fucking say it, Astraea!” I say stepping away from her, dropping her hand as if she just burned me, when she’s just shredding me to nothing.

No big deal.

Her eyes widen but I’m not done. I want this to hurt her as much as it’s destroying me.

“If you’re going to fucking break my heart then at least grow a spine and tell me to my face what you want to say,” I seethe.

“King...,” George growls behind me but I ignore him.

“Say it, Astraea!” I shout, trembling with anger. “Fucking say it! We lost a lost, you planned to leave me without saying it? Say it!”

“Alex.” Her old man warns, a heavy threat in his voice that I know damn well he can follow through on in the blink of a second.

“You owe me this.” I press, watching her. I watch helplessly as her chest rises and falls—three times. She looks down at the tarmac, then to the private jet behind her.

Then, as if it takes her all the effort in the world to look at me, she does.

It’s as if the world suddenly stops, my chest constricts in my chest as my lungs shrink like a homeless person’s balls in winter.

“Ace, I don’t love you anymore.” She looks me in the fucking eye as she says that. “You don’t deserve my love anymore.”

For every action, there’s an equal and opposite reaction.

Loving her with everything I had gave me an equal but opposite reaction from her.

“You never chose me,” she goes on, destroying me while I stand there like a fool. “You never once held my hand when I wanted you to.”

“Star, I can change...,”

“Please stay away from me.”

And with that, she turns on the heel of her Vans and runs up the stairs of the waiting plane, and disappears into the aircraft with my tattered soul in her grasp.

THE END



A BROKEN LETTER

I



Ace

Ace,

I have a confession to make, I lied.

I'm a fraud.

I'm not who the boys thought I was, but you saw through my bullshit.

I'm not strong. I'm not an overcomer.

The truth is, I destroy everything I touch. I make people do things they shouldn't. I'm the reason why everything is fucked up. I'm the cause of everything that goes wrong in our lives. I've realized that anyone that dares

to get close to me, ultimately gets hurt one way or the other.

That's not a fate I'd subject you to, even on the days when I hate you like nothing in this world.

I'm a hellish nightmare that I will never subject you to. The very look of me reminds you of a monster. So please, allow me to correct that. I don't mean to leave you like this, but it's the only way I know how.

Ace, I love you more than words can express on a mere paper. You've protected me, sacrificed for me, kept me safe but this town, it's not for me anymore.

You're not for me anymore.

I'd like to think that you were mine for a time that no one will ever replace.

I'd like to dream that you'll always be mine, but fire, like me, destroys everything.

Let me go, please. I deserve it for everything I did.

You'll forever be the love of my life.

Yours, (burnt out) Star.

It's been three months since she's been gone and it's only now that I open the damn letter she left. I'm sitting in the Pit, it's empty, everything is done, all set up for what's to come.

Lately, this plan of revenge is all I've had to focus on but even that lost its appeal the moment Star left me standing in that airstrip. Everything feels wrong, out of order and dull.

I can't bring myself to feel anything other than rejection and misery. I drown my ass in alcohol right at night, then put all my effort into trying to seem normal but everyone notices that I'm nothing more than a poorly functioning machine that can't be repaired.

I play football and get sacked every single game until coach had no choice but to bench me for the rest of the season.

My grades have tanked. I don't do my assignments. I hardly attend class.

I just exist. It's pathetic of me to suffer like this, to act out like this, but I've never hurt like this before. In a way, it would have been easy if she had just left without an explanation like she did before. Maybe I would want to spiral down an abyss like this.

"Staring at that paper and being a dick won't bring her back."

I tense up but I don't turn to look at him.

"So, you're giving me the silent treatment now?" Eli question, pulling the stool beside me at the bar. I sigh, taking the keys for the Pit, placing them on the bar.

"Everything's in place. He'll be back from Asia at six this evening. Is everything set and ready to go on your end?" I question, not even looking at him.

"Are you sulking?"

"Sulking would mean I have something bothering me that you can fix," I say, feeling a headache coming on. I just hope it'll be enough to fall asleep tonight. "Is it done?"

"Yes," Eli answers, watching me. "When Daddy dearest comes back, he'll realize that he just lost all his businesses, and that he's being sued, and investigated by the FBI for underground shitty deals. He's also going to deny it but the Pit has been a nice cover for drugs and prostitution. He's going to be eviscerated by the crowds that will be pounding away at his door for taking away their homes in the Valley with his development plan."

"Good,"

"Only question is, all the money from the companies, where's it going to go?" Eli questions. "You didn't give my people your accounts and shit."

"I don't want his money." I seethe, standing up.

"So, where is it going?"

I think of my mother and how she'll be impacted by this. I think of her in that hospital, holding Astraea's hand as they talked. I think of her marriage contract. The only time she ever cheated on Philip was when she was trying to divert Larry's attention off of me. I know she's a monster and I never want to see her again, but that doesn't mean she should suffer.

"Give it to Denise, at least a quarter of it."

"Denise huh?" Eli questions.

"I don't need the money," I grit out. I'm going to make my own fucking money. I'm going to be a fucking powerhouse all by myself, even if I have to start mopping floors to get there.

“And the rest?” Eli questions.

“Give it to some charity organization that makes other people’s lives better, or some shit. Abuse victims, whatever. I don’t give a damn.”

And with that, I go to leave.

“She’s doing well,” he starts behind me. I freeze, not turning back.

“Considering how everything went down, she’s doing well.”

I didn’t know what he wants me to say to that. After weeks of begging him to tell me where she was, I wasn’t going to do that now. She obviously didn’t want me and if there’s something that my fucking ass of a father taught me was, a King doesn’t beg for shit.

“Good for her,” I say and leave.

A BROKEN LETTER

II



*Astraea,
You could have killed me with a paperclip, than say those words to my face.
It's two thirteen in the morning. I'm sitting in our spot, under our tree,
staring at a sky full of stars that don't shine nearly as bright as you. You
tore your shirt to tend to my bruises under this tree.
I bruised us both with my actions and words.
Astraea...
Please, come back.
I messed up.
I know that.
But you better fucking come back before I set this world on fire!*

The first letter starts somewhere around the fourth month. Noah, Emmett and George thought an intervention was needed when they showed up, each with all the work I had to do to so I could graduate with the rest of the class.

Since shit went down with Philip King, his arrest and sentencing all over the news, I was staying in the Brooke House, never going anywhere. Looks like Eli destroyed Philip better than I thought, but Syrus was a loose screw.

“I’ve no idea where he is, but I know he’s plotting shit,” Emmett says, dropping my Calc books and shit I have to do on the bench table.

“Then we’ll deal with him when the times comes,” George says.

“You don’t expect me to read all this do you?” I grit out, pounding away at the punching bag I hug in the shed.

“You wanna know what I just found out?” George starts, looking at me.

“You can shove that information up your ass and go get constipated on it. “Fuck, I’m still mad as fuck at George.

“Being a dick won’t help you,” George says, “It won’t get her back.”

“What won’t get her back is the fact that I never wanted to lie to her in the first place!” I shout and they all freeze. This is the first time I so much as refer to her or mention anything about her. “I told you it was a bad idea to lie to her, but what did you do George? Where you my friend?”

I always knew lying to Astraea was a sure way of losing her trust, but no one would have believed me, let alone her, that I hate lies myself. No one thinks I feel, not even my fucking best friends.

“King...,”

“No,” I keep punching the shit out of the bag until Emmett has no choice but to hold the damn thing for me. “You messed it all up for me! You made sure I would promise you anything because I was your fucking friend. You thought you had her best interests at heart. You fucked me over for your own gain.”

“King,”

“You faked your own death and she came back a grieving mess, hell bent on answers that put her in danger!” I growl, seeing nothing but the bag.

“I...,” he starts but I cut him off.

“You lied about being a father and never told anyone!” I roar. “You’re a father!”

And I... I should be one too, but I’m not.

I stop, breathing fast and hard, a sheen of sweat covering my body.

“A real friend would have come clean about his own shit and owned up to his mistakes to the people he wronged,” I say, staring each one of them in the eye.

And with that, I remove the gloves, grab all the shit I have to work on for school and leave.

A FEW BROKEN LETTERS III



*Astraea,
You have to be the exact definition of selfish and bitter. You left me on that
tarmac. I gave you everything I was, but you left me.
Wasn't I enough for you?
Am I not enough for anyone?
My mother.
Mt father.
You?
Loving you was my worst sin and greatest tragedy.*

By some miracle, I graduate top of my fucking class, with prospects of getting the hell out of Westbrook Blues the day after graduation.

The relationship between me and the boys is well, tense on my part, but like persistent fools, they're trying to help. George tries to talk to me almost all the time, but I just can't deal with all that shit. I can't deal with his apologies or his excuses.

I feel lost and out of my mind, which is why that night, I resume writing her letters. Letters that I'll never send.

*Astraea,
Baby...
I miss you.
Every inch of me hurts way more than it should.
Alcohol and Noah numb it out.
But each time I look at your brother, I feel.
You force me to feel.
You force me to stare at myself in the mirror and see a monster.
You, Astraea.
Just you.*

Freshman year...

*Astraea,
I'm going to call you and you're going to fucking answer.
If you want to torture me some more, we're going to do that face to face,
with you in my arms, in my still new bed, in my chaotic yet sane life.
It's only the fact that Eli might actually kill me if I kidnap you that's made
me hold out this long, but I'm starting to think, maybe if I die, you'll finally
notice my absence.*

True to my word, I sum up the courage to call her. But, I'm tanked, having drowned four fucking bottles of Johnny. Today is the worst day of my life. I thought starting a new fucking chapter in my life will dull out the void in my soul, but it's been four months since I started classes at fucking Columbia. The only reason I came to New York City is because it's as far away from California as I could get.

But, I also know why I'm fucking here.

With each month that passes, the emptiness in my soul stretches even wider. So, it's with that reason that I call her to give her a piece of my fractured, scrambled mind.

"Hello?" her groggy voice comes through the line after two, twenty rings, I don't know, and I don't give a damn. But hearing her voice does something to my blood. "Hello?"

It would have been better if I talked to her answering machine.

“Star,” I croak out, seeing her face in the darkness of my large, still unfamiliar apartment that has seen me act a fool, trying to get over Astraea. Bring a girl up, but can’t stand if she so much as kisses me on the lips or actually make it past the elevator. Meaning, no girl has been in here and my dick, as far as it’s concerned, has been a virgin before Astraea and after her.

“Oh my God...” she breathes, the alertness now sharp in her voice. “It’s...you.”

I chuckle at that, but it’s bitter. “You still can’t say my name, huh?” I don’t know how I’m making sense or why I’m even on this call but all I know is, I could listen to her breathe for the rest of my life and die a happy man.

“I don’t know what to say,” she breathes. “Where did you get my number?”

“I’ve had it for a year and a half.”

But never called.

“And you’re calling now?” she scoffs, but it sounds like a snuffle.

“You didn’t love me anymore,” I say bitterly. “Isn’t that what you said?”

“Listen, Alex...,”

“Ace!” I cut her off, smiling like a fool. “My fucking name is Ace.”

“Well, Ace, I wasn’t expecting your call today,” she snuffles and I sit up straight. She’s crying. I place the bottle of Johnny on the desk, on top of all my business law books and listen carefully.

“I know you knew it was coming, sooner or later.” I say, making sure that I put her at ease. I know why she’s crying.

“Why tonight?” she starts after a while of silence. “Why did you choose to call tonight?”

“Because I’m drunk and I wanted to give you a piece of my mind for leaving me and then running away from me.”

Silences stretches between us. I start panicking. Knowing that she might just cut the phone on me.

“Did you think I’d let you grieve for the life we lost all alone now, did you?” I whisper and she gasps.

“You remembered?” she gasps, and cries at the same time. I clutch the phone even tighter, not caring that I might break the damn thing.

“How could I forget, Astraea?” I start, my chest cracking open. “Every single day, I feel their absence. I see little kids at random times on the street

and all I want to do is scream at them or the fucking Heavens, demanding for answers that I won't ever have."

"Oh God, please don't..."

"I've been grieving, baby." I whisper, ignoring the wetness on my cheeks.

"Me too," she whispers right back, her voice broken, filled with so much pain. "It hurts worse each time."

Yeah because this isn't just the anniversary of when Star miscarried, but when her mother passed away.

"Where are you?" I question, my voice breaking at the end. "Baby, where are you?"

"I don't think it's wise..."

"No, don't do that to me. I'm not going to grieve another day without you. I'm not going to let you cry by yourself. Baby, where are you?"

"Oh God,"

I stand up, stumbling a bit but I soon get my bearings. I don't give a damn if we're oceans apart or that I have fucking exams this week, or that the boys are flying in to meet up and discuss our fucking business proposal.

I just need to get to her.

"I've been going crazy. I've been hanging on by a thin thread, knowing that we're still under the same sky but it's not enough, Astraea." I breath, grabbing my keys to drive myself to wherever she is. "I'm coming to you, and I don't care where you are."

"Please tell me you're not about to drive in your current state," she whispers, making me smile. Of course she knew I was here.

"Astraea, I would run through hell, half dead and all just to get to you." I say. "I'd still get to you. If you let me, just tell me you need me, baby."

"I don't want to say that, because you'd think I'm weak." she whimpers.

"Never," I deny. "If anything, I'm the weakest between us."

Even though I was an asshole, I was fucking weak for letting her go and staying away.

"The truth is, I need you," she whispers, holding in her cry.

I close my eyes, feeling the burn in my heart. "Say it again."

She laughs then, her laugh filtering in through the phone, stopping my heart. I'm going to make her love me again. Even if it's the last thing I do.

"I need you, Ace," she says and I savor those words like a fuckin starved man. "I need you but I'm calling you an Uber."

“An Uber, huh?” I frown then it hits me. “You’ve know where I was all this time?”

“I’ve known for a year and a half,” she says, giggling. I can feel the smile in her words, I can’t help but smile as well even though I should be mad.

“I’m coming, baby.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

We don’t hang up, I just listen to her breathe the entire ten minutes it takes me to get to her apartment. Thank fuck it’s in a protected area. Of course, there might be Phoenix Corps people hiding somewhere, watching, ready to repeat to Eli. I’ll deal with that in the morning.

I run up the stairs, thanking my lucky stars that I don’t smell like alcohol and I’m somehow half sober. I won’t look like a sorry excuse of a human being in front of her.

The doorman opens the door for me and calls the elevator. I notice that he doesn’t ask me who I am, probably because he already knows. The sharpness about him suggests that he is under Eli’s payroll. But why the fuck isn’t Astraea in the penthouse suite?

But all that is forgotten the moment the elevator doors slide open.

She’s standing right there, hugging her midsection, tears streaming down her beautiful face. She’s so beautiful, I stop breathing all together. All I can do is stare at her. Unabashed, unashamed, unable to get enough of her.

“Are you going to hold me or are you going to just stand there and gawk?” she starts.

With more purpose than I’ve ever had in my life, I literally run for her. I drop my keys, my wallet, my worries, my pain, my guard, my fucking shit and just hug her to me. I pick her up, and tuck her into me, our bodies shudder at the same time.

“Star,” I breathe into her hair, holding her so damn tight to me, I’m the one who’s not breathing.

“Ace.”

Without another word, I kick my shit into her apartment and shut the door behind us. This...us...has been a long time, overdue. It’s high time I love this girl as best as she deserves.

I’m going to make it right.

THE END FOR REAL



*If you still have questions, and they should be three very important ones
that make your blood boil, then that means you kept up and you know the
Blue Boys aren't done avenging. Not by a long shot!
If you don't have questions, you missed a lot, go back!*

EPILOGUE



That night, tucked away in my bed, I cling to him like I've never done before and let go.

I cry, I shake and tremble.

I fall apart, withholding nothing, knowing, for the first time, that I'm not alone. Not this time.

Ace holds me the entire time. He shared my pain. He felt along with me and never let me go.

We lost a life that we never knew we had, until it was too late but that doesn't mean the pain magically goes away. In fact, with each week that passed from the day my mother died right in front of me, guilt churning in my chest, I've been struggling to grieve. I've been struggling to let go and forgive myself like she asked in her that one letter.

"It wasn't your fault," Ace whispers in my ear but I keep shaking. So, he pulls away, then hovers over me, forcing me to look up at him. "You did nothing wrong."

"I took the drugs, I drank that..."

I ignored Marie's calls, when she was trying to warn me.

I messed up.

"It's my fault..."

He growls then with his forefinger and thumb, he holds my chin in place, fire in his eyes. "What happened wasn't your fault, it was mine, Astraea. I'm the one who fucked up."

"No, you couldn't have known..."

"It wasn't about whether or not I knew you were carrying our baby, Astraea, it was about me being a selfish, heartless ass. I let you down. I lost my way and I can't tell you how sorry I am about that."

I hold him to me, he smells different but at the same time, it's still my Ace. His body is much bigger than I remember, rougher and much stronger. George told me how Ace spent his time. I know about the fights.

"I missed you like you won't believe, Astraea," he whispers, looking down at me.

My heart is bursting with so much right now. Receiving his call was a lot for me and I almost didn't answer, afraid that it was a prank but seeing him now in the flesh, God, this is everything.

"Ace..."

"Shh, baby," he presses a thick finger over my lips, hushing me. Desire shoots through my system. In that moment, I want him with an acuteness I've only ever experienced with him. As he watches me, his pupils dilate, hunger and sex flashing in his eyes. "Astraea," he growls.

"Please," I whisper, pulling that one finger in my mouth. I suck on it like I want to suck his cock. I grow wet at the illicit thought, imagining him pulling my hair, growling as he comes, prompting my own orgasm.

Hooking my leg over his thick thigh, I start grinding over his thick, hard thigh, I can't seem to stop myself, not looking away from him. Without warning, I'm flipped over on my back, my wet panties are ripped away, but I see him stuffing my panties in his pocket.

"You're a sexy little vixen, aren't you?" Ace growls, slowly, opening my buttons. "Twisting my hand until I give you what you want. Why, Astraea?"

I want him to call me his Star. I want that so much, my heart aches.

"Because you're the only one who can," I whisper, not looking away from him.

"Is that right?" he questions with a growl, tossing away my pajama top, leaving me bare for his eyes only. "Tell me some fucker didn't touch you. Tell me this is mine."

Then he pinches me clit. "Fuck," I moan, my orgasm close.

"So, what was I?" he growls. "Your 3am booty call?"

With a thumb over my pulsing clit, he plunges those two long, deft fingers

“Ace...,” I cry.

“If you wanted a fucking orgasm, then I’m you fucking guy.” He starts pumping his fingers in me, kitting my sweet spot in a way I was never able to on my own.

“Yes,” I scream, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as he pumps to two orgasm within a minute of each other, never letting me sleep. When I think he’s done with that, he picks me up and lies on the bed.

“Sit on my face, baby,” he growls. “Let me eat you out.”

Sweet Jesus, I die right there.

“I don’t think I can,” I whisper, but he grips my hips.

“You fucking can,” he growls low in his chest, looking so devilish with is blue eyes that I had missed with an intensity the blue sky couldn’t soothe. “You know you’re going to give it to me.”

With a shiver of excitement that I can’t suppress, I sit on his face, but the moment his tongue slides into my pussy, I jump as if electrocuted but he holds me still at my hips, restricting my movement until all I can do is ride him, forgetting that I might suffocate him. He just keeps going, his tongue expertly fucking me, my clit pulsing, getting all the attention it needs.

I see stars when I cum, twice again, like a chain reaction of each other. My legs shake, every inch of me awakening after along slumber.

“Fuck!”

“Yeah, that’s right baby,” he says, making me realize that he’s still down there. Jumping off the bed, my eyes wide as hell.

“Shit, are you breathing?”

He throws his head back, laughing.

“I’m good.,” he says with a smile. I look down and his cock is as hard as a rock in there, rigid and stiff. Biting my lip, I make to slip my hand in his sweatpants but he stops me.

“No, baby. If you touch him, I won’t be able to control myself and I need that control with you,” he says, making me frown.

“I’m not asking you to control yourself, I want this,” I whisper, almost begging. I want him in me.

“I know, baby but this time, I’m going to do the right thing first before I ruin you for anyone else.” He says, getting up now.

I start panicking.

“You’ve already ruined me for everyone else, Ace you calmed me already,” I start, feeling like I’m about to lose him again. “Where are you going.”

He stops, then studies me for a second.

“Come here,” he commands, in that low voice of his. I have no choice but to listen.

One step forward. Then the other and the next thing I know, I’m running to him. He engulfs me in his strong embrace, and I lace my head over his heart.

“Here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to go in there and take a nice long bath. I’m going to use the shower and when we’re done, I’m going to kiss you until you fall asleep knowing that I’ll never fucking leave you for another second.”

God, I missed him.

“Is that understood?” he demands. I nod with a smile on my face making him growl.

“Words, baby.”

“Yes, I understand.”



*Astraea,
Fall back in love with me...*

I wake up to that note and the smell of a rose right beside my — well, our — bed. Well, we haven’t moved in with each other but we do spend a lot of time between our respective apartments.

I smile, doesn’t he know that he’s won me over already. I sit up straight, feeling like I’ve been well fucked and loved through the night.

Well, finger fucked. He used a vibrator. He used toys that I had no idea exist but not once did he fuck me with the part of him that I need to be fucked by.

“Urgh.”

My irritation comes back a hundred fold. I glance at the watch on my night table and I jump.

Shoot, I’m late for my exam.

Racing to get ready, I speed through my shower, my makeup and everything else that I need to do. I grab my laptop, my phone and an apple. But taped to my door is another note with a rose stuck to the door with tape. Seriously? I smile like a loon.

Astraea,

We're going on a date tonight. Well, another one until you fall back in love with me. Dress sexy, comfortable and warm.

I don't know what to think of that note but by the time I hand in my psychology paper, having described in detail what trauma can do to a young female, I feel like I'm floating.

Rushing back home, I shower again. Do my hair. I curl it up, then I straighten it up all over again. I'm so nervous, I can't even think straight now or make up my damn mind.

"Fucking grow a pair," I whisper to myself. Closing my eyes, I get ready. I choose to wear a blue silk top that I brought because it reminded me of Ace's blue eyes. Then I chose a snug, pair of faded black jeans, my boots and then, last but not least, my pendant that I'm wearing for the first time in a long time.

Someone rings the door and I get all nervous again. I haven't gone a day without any kind of communication with Ace, I don't even know what that means or what to expect. I rush to the door but it's my driver. The one Eli assigned to me when I moved out here. He's my driver, but I know he's an assassin.

"John, now's not the right time." I rush to say, glancing at my watch.

"Well, if you want to get there, now is the right time." He says with a soft smile, passing me yet another note.

Astraea,

I've got a broken heart already but standing me up will mean your father will break more than my legs. Please come save me.

"Eli got a new crowbar. It's titanium" John says with a wink.

"You read this?" I exclaim, grabbing my purse.

“We all did. That boy better fucking watch it, ain’t nobody playing around in these streets.”

“Oh my God, let’s just go.” I say but I can’t help the smile that creeps up on me.



I don’t know what I was expecting but the moment we get in the car, there’s a box with a blindfold waiting for me. It doesn’t have a note, but I already know who’s it’s from and what I should do with it. Blind trust.

We drive for a while. I’m tempted to peak but somehow, I know if I do, Ace will know somehow. This makes my heart pound, and everything in me just blooms with a kind of joy I don’t think I’ve ever known. The car stops right before I’m about to remove the damn blindfold.

“Nope, that stays on.”

My heart stops beating the moment I hear his voice.

“I’m quite attached to my eyesight, if you don’t mind,” I whisper as he takes my hand, leading me out of the car.

“I’m sure you want to see my gorgeous face,” he growls in my ear, biting my lobe. “You look so delicious, so fucking sexy and MINE.”

There’s a promise mixed in a warning in that one word. I tighten my hold on his hand, feeling like I’m the only girl in this fucking world.

“Where are we?” I question, feeling the rush of wind in my hair and face.

“Can’t you tell?” he questions. “Concentrate on your surroundings, Dr. Astraea. I mean, don’t head shrinks do that sort of thing?”

I swat his arm playfully. “If you make fun of my chosen profession, I’ll maim your ass right here.”

I’ve kept up my self-defense classes, Ace and I are even training together.

“My bad, please follow the sound of my voice. And if you want answers,” he leans into my ear. “Try to figure them out.”

The first thing I notice is the loud noise. We’re definitely in a loud area. We are also in an open area, which means we might be at a concert? I can hear music or are those tunes?

“Wait,” I start. This can’t be. He didn’t actually...,

“Figure it out, huh?”

“Are we at a fair?” I gasp, my heart in my throat. Without another word, my blind fold is removed and true to all my senses heightened by the absence of sight, we’re at a fucking carnival! “Ahh!”

I’ve always wanted to come to one, but I’ve never been.

“Does that mean you approve?” Ace questions beside me but I start jumping up and down like a kid on Christmas morning.

“I love it, I love it,” I jump into his arms, wrapping my legs around his torso and kiss him.

“Hot damn,” he whispers. “Should have done this sooner if I knew I was going to be kissed like that.”

“Come on, let’s go!” I grab his hand and off we go. I drag him to every single ride that I’ve always wanted to try. He indulges me that night, we eat corndogs, and all sorts of junk food that he doesn’t like but he enjoys it anyway. I’ve never laughed as much as I laughed today.

I scream in joy, jump on his back. We get our faces painted. I make sure he gets a princess painting, with a tiara around his temples, it’s so beautiful, I snap a picture and send it to Noah knowing that this is material that he’s dying for.

“What did I get?”

“The one you wanted.” I say, trying my hardest not to laugh as little kids pause to stare at him, then they giggle and run away.

“Astraea?” he growls, grabbing me by the waist, forcing me to look at him.

“I...,” he looks so princessy, I can’t help but burst out laughing. “Let’s go to the Ferris wheel before they close.” I manage to say, trying not to laugh.

“You’re going to be sorry.”

“Yeah, if you catch me first.” And with that, I take off for the Ferris wheel but when I get there, it’s closed. The little twinkling light are all off. My heart plummets to the ground. I really wanted to get on this ride.

“Sad that they closed?”

“I was looking forward to this one,” I say, fighting irrational tears that I know I shouldn’t be feeling. “You told me to hold off.”

He warps his arms around me, rocking me in his arms.

“Are you going to cry?” he whispers.

“I think so.”

“Because of a stupid Ferris wheel?”

“It’s not stupid,” I defend. “And yes.”

“Really?” he presses a kiss to my neck, pressing his stick cock to my ass. I moan.

“No,” I whisper right back.

“What else is bothering you?”

“The fact that I think you don’t want me,” I gasp, the truth tumbling out of me, my high from tonight disappearing without a trace.

“Wait, what?” he starts, spinning me gently in his arms. “Where is this coming from?”

“From the fact that you only ever seem to fuck me with everything else other than what actually joins us together,” I tell him. “Is it because you’re afraid I might fall pregnant again.”

“Afraid?” he starts with a frown. Then he cups my face in his hands. “Baby, we found each other three months ago but I knew I was going to fucking put a baby in you from the day I knew I wanted you to spend the rest of your life with me.”

“Then why?”

“Because I wanted you to fall in love with me without my dick in the equation. The last time we made love, you left me, Astraea.”

“I had to,” I rush to explain. “I couldn’t stay there anymore with everything that happened.”

“You see, every time I find a moment of peace so I can sleep, I wake up with echoes of everything you said to my face that day.”

“I didn’t mean that either. I just wanted you to let me go heal...”

“Heal by yourself?” he demands, watching me.

“Yes...,” I breathe. I won’t lie to him. I did want to heal all by myself.

“All this time, I’ve been seeing a therapist of my own, Astraea.”

“What?”

“Every Thursday night, after class, I go to this gym. The guy is unconventional as fuck. He doesn’t do the whole office and couch shit, but he helps,” he explains.

I can’t help but cry at that.

“Why would you do that?”

“Ahh let’s see, I have three reasons.” he starts, stepping back. “Number one, I’ve gone through shit in my life that we have in common, but I don’t want that to dictate our lives anymore. Hmm, number two, I want to follow your example, you’re a fucking Phoenix baby, you rose from the ashes.”

I smile, tears streaming down my face.

“And the third reason?” I prompt.

“I’m just an asshole who wants a star to love me, the best version of myself.”

I whimper. In that moment, the lights for the Ferris wheel come on, a crowd gathers behind Ace but he doesn’t look away from me.

“Star,” he starts and I whimper again. It’s been so long since he’s said that to me, even when I try to coax it out of him. “This is our point of no return. I’m an asshole. I’ll fuck up, but the only time I want you to cry is when I fuck you to tears and when...”

Someone gasps behind us, an older lady.

“Language,” I say, he rolls his eyes.

“They should mind their fucking business anyway,” he growls. “This carnival is...”

“Ace,” I stop him. “Continue.”

“Yeah,” Ace starts. “What I want to know right now is, do you love me? Because baby if you do, it’s a wrap. There’s no getting out of this thing with us. There’s no quitting when shit looks ugly. There’s no grieving by your fucking self on those hard days. When you’re mine, you mine all the way through.

Oh God.

“If you love me, then you’re mine, baby,” he starts, watching me. “Do you love me?”

“Oh God,” I cry, trying to speak. “I love you more than words can say, Ace. God, I love you so much.”

“Then turn around, and look at your Ferris wheel,” he says.

I do and in bright, blue coordinated lights are the words. MARRY ME, STAR.

“Oh God,” I blink several times but it’s still there.

“Ace,”

“You said you loved me, the answer should be obvious here,” he growls impatiently behind me, making me laugh.

“Well, you better fuck me first so I know what I’m getting,” I say turning around and... he’s on one knee. I gasp.

“Star, don’t play with me. I have no qualms of making that ass red right in front of everyone, that sex starved woman included.”

Somehow, I know he’s not joking. He would do it.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Yes what?” he demands, “You better use those pretty words that come out of that pretty mouth that will be sucking my dick tonight.”

“Yes, you foul mouthed, idiot. I’ll marry you,” I say, feeling like I’m on cloud I don’t know...

“Thank fuck,” he whispers, a beautiful diamond ring with a light blue colored center diamond as the crowd cheers. “I love you. Through the messy shit, the heavy and everything in between us, I love you.”

I think in it’s that moment as I kiss Ace for the hundredth time that I actually forgive myself.

I forgive myself for thinking that love, fails us in the end. But my mother taught me something that I never thought possible.

Love does breed forgiveness.

And Ace, was in a way, the key to my own forgiveness. I think we all need that.



I once told my Spitfires that Broken Hate had about twelve endings and all of them weren't favorable for anyone, but I lied, it had thirteen. Yup, the odds weren't in anyone's favor. It felt like I was in the hunger games and Jennifer Lawrence was about to shoot an arrow through my brain, but here we are!

To Jenn ball, Sammy, Dani, Kylie, Mercedes— the first readers (and judges) of this story, thank you for everything.

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And lastly, the reader who's cried with me, screamed with me, got frustrated with these characters with me, thank you so much for taking your time to follow this story through. Trust me, I wouldn't be here without you. Please consider leaving me a short review of Broken Hate, it helps more than you'll ever know!

With so much love from this Spitfire, God bless you.

Thandie xoxo

BOOKS BY THANDIE



WESTBROOK BLUES SERIES

[*Reckless Hate*](#), #1

[*Vicious Hate*](#), #2

Broken Hate, #3

INCONGRUITY

The Billion Dollar Plan

A Billion Broken Pieces

Billion Dollar Hearts.

COMING SOON

Untitled, Westbrook Blues (standalone)

PR, Westbrook Blues #4 (standalone)

PA, Westbrook Blues #5 (standalone)

[*WBB, Just High School*](#) #1(standalone)

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