



BRUTAL BOYS OF EVERLAKE PREP BOOK 1

KINGS OF QUARANTINE

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Brutal Boys of Everlake Prep

Book 1

Caroline Peckham & Susanne Valenti

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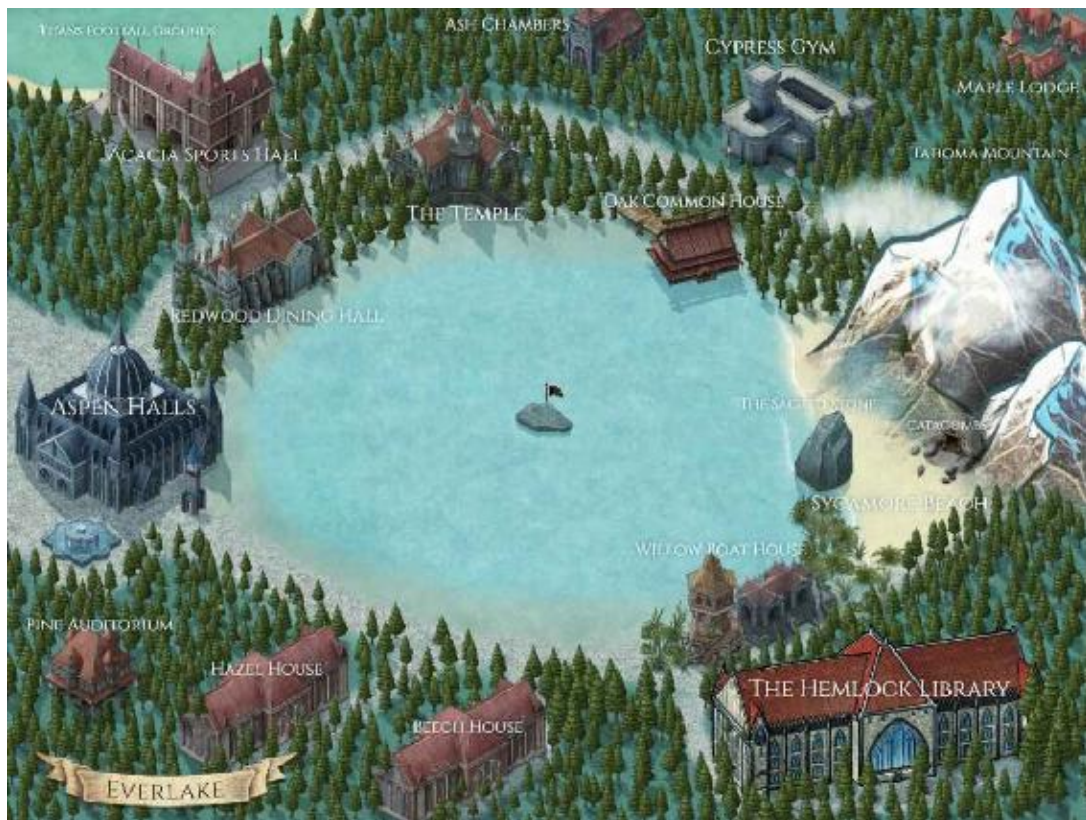
Welcome to Everlake Preparatory School.

This series is set in the fictional U.S. state of Sequoia and centres around a pandemic similar, but more extreme than the coronavirus. It's dedicated to everyone who is self-isolating, on lockdown, in quarantine and to all the key workers who are struggling through this impossibly hard time. We hope you get a few hours of entertainment out of this book to escape from reality and forget about the fact you can't see your loved ones right now and are missing normal life.

If you need a place to chat books and escape from the world, we'd love for you to come and [join our reader group](#). It's a great community who you can share your passion for books with as well as having a few laughs with!

We hope to see you there :)

Click the map to enlarge.





There's nothing like starting your first day at a new school with your dad tossing a gun into your lap.

"Dad!" I gasped, snatching the nine millimetre Glock into my grip and shoving it back at him. "Are you crazy?"

His usually smooth brow wrinkled in that way that told me he was about to show me the sterner side of him. We were closer than two knotted necklaces and just as inseparable, but when his usually long fuse ran out, he was one scary son of a bitch. My fuse was longer than his, but I didn't think I could pull off the Freddy Kruger stare he was pointing at me right now.

"Tatum, I'm only going to say this once." He reached over into the back seat of our Audi A4 Wagon, hooking my backpack off of it and unzipping the front pocket. He stuffed the gun inside before I could voice any more complaints and barrelled on. "This is for your protection. You're taking it with you."

"Dad, it's a boarding school for the richest kids in Sequoia State and beyond. What could possibly happen to me here?"

He released a sarcastic *ha!*, pushing his glasses up his nose. They were the only thing cliché about him being a virologist. He was a gun enthusiast, a black belt in karate, had scars on his knuckles from the fights he'd been in in his youth and his favourite hobby was doomsday planning. Like, he had legit bought a house in Elmwood Forest a few hours north of here with a bunker stashed with enough tinned food to get us by until the year three thousand.

To put it lightly, he was any teenage boy's worst nightmare. That was probably why I kept my dating life brief and to the point. Besides, with the way we moved around all the time, one night stands were a good way to defend myself from a broken heart. If I had no intention of making something last more than a few hours at a time, then I never had to worry about heartache and all of those other lovely things I'd rather avoid. I'd already had my fair share of that when I was a kid anyway after Mom had up and left us.

Dad gripped the back of my seat, leaning in close and giving me a firm look. "I've seen a lot of life, Tater-tot."

I rolled my eyes at the nickname and turned away, gazing through the iron gates ahead of us. A huge gravel driveway led up to the gothic manor house at the far end of it. It looked like something plucked out of a horror story, the clouds above not letting in a crack of light to brighten the ancient grey walls. Who even built a place like that all the way out here in the middle of nowhere? Count Dracula?

"Look at me, kiddo," Dad growled and his tone set my pulse racing.

I turned to him, frowning as I tried to figure out why he was acting like a lunatic over me going to boarding school. It wasn't like I'd wanted to come here. *He'd* been the one to push and push until I agreed. He had to work, he

said. He needed to travel all over the country, he claimed. But why couldn't I just go with him? I'd been doing it my whole life. Why stop now?

"You need some stability. And with the Hades Virus taking a grip in the world, I'm needed now more than ever."

I clucked my tongue. The *virus*. For the past couple of months 'the virus' had been like a pissy next door neighbour in our lives who let his dog shit on our lawn and peeped over our fence any time we got too comfortable in our own space. It was an ever-present, lonely pervert of a neighbour who needed to get a life.

I knew Dad needed to do this. He was important. He was working on a cure to save millions of people when this disease got out of hand – which it would apparently. But there hadn't even been a single case of the Hades Virus all the way out here in northern Sequoia. Not even in the next state over yet. The number of cases in America as a whole was only in the hundreds, but Dad was a virologist and he knew more about it than the government were letting on right now. If the virus got out of control, shit was gonna get bad. Like, *really* bad.

The problem was, Dad was also the only person in my life. It may have been selfish, but I didn't want to give him up. We moved around so often that the only friends I had were short-lived and fair-weather. Over the years, I'd turned to the company of books more than people when Dad wasn't around. Characters could never escape me. Not when I could trap them in my kindle for the rest of time. *Suckers*.

I bashed my head back against the seat, knowing it was petulant but not caring in that moment as I threw a growl of frustration into the mix too. "Why can't I just come with you?"

"Don't drag up that old argument, Tatum. This has been a long time coming. It's not like I *want* to leave you here."

I turned to him, finding so much love in his eyes that it made my heart hurt. Dad was my one constant thing in this world. As much as I hated to admit it, stepping out of this car into that scary-ass horror movie of a building was kinda freaking me out. And with the frantic look Dad was giving me and the gun he'd just stashed in my bag, I wasn't exactly getting the calming vibes I needed right now. Sure, I was trained to shoot, fight and forage. But this wasn't the apocalypse. I reckoned that would have been a walk in the park compared to this. Because this was the one thing I actually feared. *Bonding*.

Normally, I could fly in and out of people's lives like a breeze, never getting attached. I was a pro at that. But here, I was going to be immersed twenty four seven in the company of other teenagers. I was going to have to 'make an effort', 'get out of my comfort zone' and – heaven forbid – '*mingle*'. Though the idea of making real friends had always appealed to me, the reality was that I was always ready to up and leave them behind. For my scenery to change and for the faces around me to change with it. But this wouldn't be like that. Dad had enrolled me for the entirety of my senior year.

"Don't hate me," he said softly and I pursed my lips. I was seventeen. A year later and we wouldn't even have been having this conversation. Why did fate have to be such a bitch?

A guard ushered us through the two immense iron gates and Dad pushed the stick into drive as we sailed through them.

"Have you got your pepper spray?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"And your tactical pen?"

"Yup."

"And your self-defence keychain?"

“Yes, Dad,” I groaned. “You know I’m not actually allowed any of this shit inside the school gates, right? If I get caught-”

“I taught you too well to get caught,” he said proudly and a smile tugged at my mouth.

“Well that’s true,” I conceded and he shot me a grin.

We pulled up alongside the huge wooden doors and I tried not to feel intimidated by a building. It was working its hardest to look like a mean bastard though.

A guy appeared around the side of it, strolling towards us up the path and the sight of him made the breath stall in my lungs. Like, had the air actually just turned to stone? I couldn’t get a single ounce of it into my chest.

He wore a Titans football jersey in the school team colours of forest green and white, the material clutching his powerful frame. His face could have charmed a snake from a mile away, every line and feature the kind of angular I’d only ever seen in magazines. His inky hair fell into eyes that were the colour of jade and his boyish smile looked like it needed to feed regularly on innocent girl’s heart’s to keep it intact.

I wasn’t the type of prey this hunter was used to, but I also couldn’t deny the way my cheeks flushed and I was still choking on nothing but apparently solid air. My blonde hair, blue eyes and full lips were nothing but a mirage painted there by my genetics. They were skin deep, but I knew how to wield their power when I needed it. This guy clearly knew how to wield his own power too. But where I wore my skin like a shield, he wore his like a weapon.

He walked forward in the slow, casual way that said he was in complete control and he rolled up his sleeves before leaning down to knock on my

window. Dad lowered it from the master button, opening it an inch as he glared out at the heart-eater.

“Yes?” Dad asked curtly.

“Hey sir, you must be Mr Rivers? I’m here to show your daughter to her dorm.” He tossed me a flirtatious wink like my dad wasn’t looking, even though he’d addressed him and not me. I casually flipped him the finger in response and his hungry smile widened.

Dude had balls, I’d give him that much.

“It’s *Dr* Rivers,” Dad growled, closing the window again before the guy could reply and he laughed as he backed away from the car.

I unclipped my seatbelt but before I could get out of the car, Dad pressed his hand to my knee to keep me in place. “Don’t take any shit, kiddo. You remember my self-defence lessons against rapists?”

I laughed, shaking my head at him. “I remember. How could I forget? *Always go for the balls,*” I echoed from his teachings.

“That’s my girl.” He tugged me in for a hug, pressing a kiss against my temple and something in the tightness of his hold made me worry. “Nothing can hurt you here.”

I smiled as I pulled away, my heart twisting as I reached for the door. “Love you Dad.”

“Love you too, kiddo.”

I stepped out onto the gravel, taking my backpack with me as Dad popped the trunk from inside the car. My escort moved around to it promptly, flipping it open and lifting out my big ass suitcase which was covered in worn stickers from every state we’d ever visited.

“You get around,” the guy commented with a smirk, closing the trunk.

I nodded vaguely as I waved goodbye to Dad. He blew me a kiss before he drove away and I swallowed the hard lump in my throat as I was left

behind. It had just been the two of us for so long. What was life even going to look like without him in it?

“I’m Blake Bowman, quarterback of the football team.”

I turned to the guy, throwing my pack over one shoulder and masking any pain that might have dared slip into my features.

“That’s pretty typical of you,” I teased and he raised a brow.

“What? Good looks *and* star player for the Titans?” He pushed a hand into his hair, making his shirt ride up to give me a glimpse of the muscular V tapering beneath his waistband. I dragged my eyes back to his face again as heat licked down my spine. He was a stereotype of every woman’s fantasy. Tall, dark, handsome. And I could have made a pretty solid guess that he was also rich, charming and heartless too.

“No...arrogant and predictable.” I turned my gaze to the building beside us, gazing up at the honest-to-god spires poking out the top of it. Weirdly, there was a classic red Ford Mustang parked up before it with a little plaque saying it had been donated by a former student. This was only the beginning. The map I’d received in my welcome pack showed an entire campus awaiting me. The estate had been built on a huge plot of land between miles and miles of pine forest. There was a lake, a football stadium, a boat house, a state of the art gym and so much more. It wasn’t just a prep school, it was a damn resort. And I couldn’t deny I was pretty keen to see it.

“Arrogant, maybe,” Blake chuckled. “But predictable?” He walked up behind me, laying his hand against my back and sending a shiver through to my core. His rich scent of spiced cologne was too delicious not to notice as he leaned in close to my ear. “You won’t ever be able to predict my next move, Tatum Rivers. I promise you that.”

I lingered there for a long moment, the allure of him drawing me in hard. Expelling a breath, I pulled out of his honey-trap, glancing at him over my shoulder as electricity skittered through my skin. Maybe I'd read him wrong, maybe he wasn't Everlake's golden boy. Because right then he looked dangerous, like a hunter who hadn't eaten for days.

I painted on a smile as a cold breeze wrapped around me. "How do you know my name?"

"Because I was assigned the task of showing you to your dorm, duh. Come on." The darkness in his eyes faded from existence and I watched as he dragged my suitcase along behind him and led the way down a path to the right.

"Aren't we going inside?"

"That's Aspen Halls. For classes only. And as it's Sunday, it's locked up tight. If you wanna study on the weekends you can head to the Hemlock Library on westside. Accommodation is on east."

We rounded Aspen Halls and my pulse elevated at the sight before me. A hill rolled down to the most beautiful lake I'd ever seen. Its glistening blue water stretched out towards a snow-capped mountain in the distance. It was picturesque, breath-taking.

"That's Tahoma Mountain." Blake pointed it out. "And right down at the base of it is Sycamore Beach. It's a decent hangout, especially in the summer."

"Nice." I smiled.

Everlake Preparatory was right on the edge of the Chinquapin Mountain Range and though the air was cold, it was also the freshest I'd ever tasted. It was a far cry from the beach town in SoCal I'd been calling home for the past few months. I could practically feel my tan fading already as a lick of Fall hung in the air.

Most of the trees that circled the lake were pines and more gothic buildings poked out from within them, while others sat right on the lake's edge. I spotted the huge boathouse in the distance and students out kayaking on the still waters. The landscape lured me in, begging me to explore the rising hills of forest either side of the lake and the sun gilded beach at the most northerly point of campus.

"Wanna know the story of the Everlake, Tate?" Blake asked, his brows arching as that dark look entered his eyes again. He spoke to me like he'd known me a lifetime and I couldn't help but start to feel comfortable around him already. He had the kind of aura that drew people in and made them hang on his every word. I could see what he meant about being unpredictable, there was something purely wild about him which a part of me longed to know.

"Sure," I agreed as he led me down the hill toward the path that curved to the east of the lake. I hugged my coat tighter around me as a cool wind washed off of the water and brought the scent of reeds and the sound of chattering birds with it.

"There's a Native American legend from the Kotari tribe who used to inhabit this land. They warned the men who came here and settled around the lake that the Night People who lived in the forest were always watching them."

"The Night People?" I breathed. That sounded seriously creepy.

"Yeah, they're dark spirits who come in the night and drag their enemies into the trees never to be seen again." Blake's dark green eyes sparkled with the story and a grin pulled at my mouth as he went on. "The Kotari tribe warned them that if they didn't send sacrifices into the woods once a month, their entire people would be slaughtered."

“So what happened?” I asked, falling into the tale despite being totally sure it wasn’t true.

“They didn’t listen,” he said in a gravelly tone that sent heat flooding into my belly. “And a week later, their mutilated bodies were found floating in the lake. Hundreds of them. Men, women, children...”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, do you really expect me to buy that?”

He shrugged innocently. “I’m just telling you how it is. You’d better watch out or you might get offered up to the Night People for the monthly sacrifice. Because if no one dies...then we all die.” He jabbed me in the side and I laughed.

“So how can I avoid being chosen?” I played along.

“Well if you suck the right cocks I’m sure you can stay out of trouble.” He smirked and I raised an eyebrow at him.

“I don’t suck dick for favours. Besides, if I got thrown to the Night People, I reckon I’d come back leading them so I guess I’ll take my chances.”

“Is that so?” His eyes dipped to my mouth and he wet his lips like I was his next meal.

“Yeah, that’s so.” I smirked, turning my gaze out across the water.

An incredible old church stood out on the far bank, its high walls climbing up to a steeped roof. It even had a huge stained glass window in the shape of a crucifix taking up most of the front wall, staring out over the lake. I itched to spend some time exploring the building. I could see myself spending a whole lot of time in there.

No, Tatum, you’ve gotta stay out of your head for once and make friends.

I turned back to Blake in resilience, finding him looking down at his phone as we walked. His hair had fallen forward over his brow and his jaw was tight as he read some message.

“I’ve gotta make a call.” He parked up my suitcase and walked off into the trees at the side of the path without another word. *Oh.*

I turned back to face the view, hugging my arms around myself and soaking in the atmosphere. At least this place was pretty damn awesome. If I had to be shipped off to boarding school then it sure as hell couldn’t get better than this one.

The pounding of footfalls caught my ear and I glanced back down the brick path we’d taken and spotted a guy running towards me. He was tall and shirtless, sweat rolling down his muscular body toward the low-hanging black gym shorts he wore. He was tanned and gleaming. The dark blonde hair which was tucked behind his ears, the stubble, and the fierce look on his strong features and the ferocious tattoos lining his muscular chest made him look like some sort of Viking warrior as he ran my way. His ocean blue eyes flicked in my direction and a blush burst into my cheeks. I couldn’t control the reaction at all. Did every guy in this place look like a freaking fitness model?

He suddenly collided with my suitcase in the middle of the path and crashed over it, rolling onto his back as he hit the ground.

“Motherfucker!” he roared so loud that the mountain echoed it back at him.

I gazed at the floored god in absolute shock for a full second before I ran forward to help him up.

“Shit, are you alright?” I reached for him and he smacked my hands away, getting to his feet and gazing down at his smashed headphones on the ground.

“Who leaves their fucking suitcase in the middle of a pathway?” he demanded, pointing at it and I suddenly felt like a little girl being told off by my dad.

“I di-” I started but he cut over me.

“What’s your name? I don’t recognise you.” He narrowed his eyes, letting them travel down me like an X-ray.

“Tatum. I’m new.”

He tsked. “Are you stupid too?”

“I didn’t leave it there,” I said sharply, anger rising in my veins. “It’s not like I was standing here laying suitcase traps for students. It was an accident.”

His eyebrows raised then he smirked like he held a dark secret. He stepped closer, folding his arms across that heavenly chest of his while I fought to look up from it and stop picturing it pressed against my naked flesh. “Do you know what happens to mouthy girls in this school?”

Woah, asshole alert.

I gritted my jaw and stepped forward to show him I wasn’t going to be intimidated. It was my dad’s golden rule. Never show your opponents that you’re rattled. It gives them power. And when they have the power, they win.

“No, but I have a feeling you’re about to tell me.” I cocked my head to one side and he scowled hard enough to break glass.

“They make enemies out of the wrong people.” He stepped closer so the scent of sweat and something impossibly inviting slid under my nose. “And in case you haven’t noticed, *I’m* the wrong people.”

My heart thumped harder and I didn’t know if it was from fear or excitement. Sure, he was a dickwad with a superiority complex. But those types were the best in the sack. Not that I was going to let him know that some wild part of me was panting on the floor for him, stripping her clothes off. That bitch had no game.

“Lemme guess...” I tapped my lips. “You run with boys like Blake Bowman and are one of the *bros*. You’re on the football team and think you’re some kind of king around here because you won the genetic lottery. Most of the girls in this school spread their legs for you when you offer them nothing more than a glance in their direction and oh, I’m missing the most crucial part, you’ve never worked for anything in your life.”

He blew out a breath of amusement that somehow held no laughter in it. “Firstly, I don’t run with boys like Blake Bowman. I rule them. I’m not on the football team, I *am* the fucking team. And I don’t care if every girl in this school would bend over and let me fuck them every which way ‘til Sunday, I still wouldn’t. And you got the most crucial part wrong, princess.” He lifted his hand and flicked me between my eyes, making me jerk backwards at the pinch of pain. *What the fuck?* “I’ve worked for *everything* in my life. In fact, I *like* working for it. Working for it means I earned it. So the next time you wanna throw around judgements about people, I suggest you take off your shiny tiara and take a long, hard look at your reflection. Because you may look like a barbie doll brought to life, but I’m willing to bet you’ve got dirty little secrets too.” He turned his back on me, picking up his broken headphones and running on, leaving me in the wake of his words.

My heart thundered as I watched him leave, his back muscles flexing as he pounded along the pavement. That was the second guy I’d pegged wrong since I’d arrived and I’d only met two. I was gonna reserve judgement from now on. But I’d sure as shit got one thing right about that guy. He was an asshole. And I was happy to stay far, far away from him.

Blake soon reappeared from the trees, tucking his cellphone into his pocket and giving me a bright smile. “Sorry Tate, had to take that.”

“No worries.” I moved forward to collect my suitcase but he beat me to it, his fingers brushing mine as he grabbed the handle.

Tingles rushed under my skin from his touch and I glanced up at him from beneath my lashes with a smile. “Thanks.”

“Any time.” His eyes roamed over my face before he led the way forward with confident strides.

We soon turned down a path away from the lake, heading deeper into the trees until we reached a huge building with large, arching stone windows. Birdsong hung around me in the air and the sound of chatter carried from the housing building.

“This is Beech House, the girls’ dormitories. Here.” Blake tossed me a key and I snatched it out of the air. He gave me an appraising look then walked up to the wooden door to the right of the building and parked my suitcase beside him.

“I’m not allowed inside - which is a fucking travesty,” he said, his eyes dancing with light and I moved forward, but he threw an arm across the door to stop me from heading in. “But sometimes I break the rules for the right girl.” He shoved the door open, towing my bag inside and I laughed.

“What will happen if you’re caught here?” I teased as I followed him into the stairwell. Stone steps led up to the next level and lanterns hung from the walls, lighting the way in a soft amber light.

“I’ll get detention for being a bad boy. And if I get caught twice, I could get suspended.” He threw a grin over his shoulder as he started carrying my bag upstairs. “The trick is not to get caught.”

“Or ratted out,” I added.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he growled and the sound had my heart pounding.

“I wouldn’t,” I agreed. “If I didn’t want you here, I’d just throw you out myself.”

“Do you think you could?” he asked like he was challenging me to try and I laughed in answer, letting him wonder about that. I was trained in kickboxing and self-defence, so I totally could if I wanted to. My dad always joked he’d built me into Lara Croft and maybe that was a little true – except my version had less pointy boobs and couldn’t do a rolling tuck jump in tiny denim shorts.

We reached the third level and headed down a corridor with dark wood floors and rooms leading off of it on either side. “You’re in room three three three.” He stopped in front of it, backing away from my suitcase and pushing a hand into his hair. “See you around, Tate.”

“Thanks for the escort.” I smiled as he turned away, strolling off at a casual pace down the corridor.

A girl stepped out of a bathroom at the far end of it in nothing but a towel and shrieked as she spotted him. She turned back into the room crying, *Blake Bowman’s here!* and set off a chain reaction of excited chatter and giggles. Blake barked a laugh as he headed down the stairs and I shook my head before moving toward my room and pushing the key into the lock.

Guess the guy has a fan club. And I guess I’m hardly surprised.

I headed inside, the scent of cocoa and shea caressing my senses as I tugged my suitcase into the room. Two beds sat opposite one another and the whole place had been transformed by fairylights, rugs and mini cactuses. The unoccupied bed was piled high with clothes and I frowned as I looked to the girl sprawled out on the other bed in a crop top and red Nike shorts. She sat up in surprise, her large eyes scanning over me. She was model beautiful, her mahogany skin flawless and gleaming, her frame slim but rounded out by soft muscle and stupidly perfect boobs. Her hair was a tumble of hazel and her mouth was wide and currently hooked up into a smile.

“You’re the new chick?” she asked, leaping from her bed and darting across the room to the other one. She scooped all of her clothes off it and dumped them on the desk on her side of the room.

“Yeah, hey, I’m Tatum.” I offered her my hand but she came at me with a full on hug. The hand had been kinda weird anyway and I immediately warmed to her as she squeezed me tight.

“I’m Mila. I’ve been so fucking lonely in here, girl. You don’t even know. I *need* human contact.”

I laughed, dragging my suitcase across the room and lifting it onto the bed. “Well I’m kinda used to the quieter life so you’re gonna have to show me the ways of an extrovert.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, dropping down onto her bed and folding her legs up beneath her. She looked genuinely thrilled to have me here and it was kind of...nice.

I started telling her about how I’d moved around the whole country and by the time my suitcase was unpacked, I’d pretty much told her my life story. Not the dark parts, just the light. I wasn’t ready to open up about the shit in my past. But my days moving from town to town while Dad worked in labs all over the country was something I’d repeated a hundred times to a hundred people. Though maybe not in so much detail. I really did wanna make an effort here.

“So what’s your story?” I asked her, dropping onto my bed and shoving my backpack up by my pillow, overly aware of the weapon concealed within it. I couldn’t believe my dad had made me bring a gun. What did he expect to happen in a prissy boarding school for the sons and daughters of the elite?

“Well, my mom moved to the US from Pakistan when she fell in love with my dad while he was working out there. I’ve never actually been to

Pakistan so I'm a New Yorker through and through. My parents sent me way out here to get 'the best education available'," she air quoted the words, putting on a stern voice and I laughed.

She grabbed a bar of chocolate from her nightstand, breaking off a piece for herself before tossing it to me without even asking. I smiled as I picked up the bar, snapping off a piece and popping it onto my tongue. This place wasn't looking so bad after all.

"My dad wants me to get into Yale to study law." She pulled a gormless face.

"You don't wanna go?"

"If it was up to me, I'd be training to get in to Julliard on a dance major," she said with a dramatic sigh. "But they'd never let me. That's the way with parents right? Everything's in our best interest. So long as it's what they want us to do."

I blew out a breath, nodding in agreement. "Yeah...I totally get that. If it was my choice, I wouldn't have even come here. I would have stayed on the road with my dad."

"That's gotta be lonely though," she pointed out. "I mean, I get it. That's all you know. But have you seen this place? And girl, trust me, it's worth staying here just for the guys. You wait until you meet Blake Bowman."

I cracked a grin. "He showed me around actually."

She slapped her bed with a wild laugh. "Cute right? Actually cute is like calling him ugly. He's fucking hot. All three of them are."

"Three of them?" I frowned.

"Yeah, him and his friends Saint and Kyan. They call themselves the Night Keepers," she said ominously, glancing around her as if there was a sudden chill in the air. I almost felt it too.

“Why? Is that something to do with the Night People?” I breathed, hushed by the tension in the air.

Mila nodded. “Blake told you about them?”

“Yeah, but it’s just some legend, right?”

She swallowed thickly. “Yeah I guess...but those guys take it pretty seriously. And so does the rest of the school. The Night Keepers were four ruthless warriors, called upon to protect the Night People from the men who sought to claim this land. The myth says that they had hearts of stone and skin of iron. They built an army of nameless followers they called the Unspeakables.” Mila wet her lips, her eyes glittering and I couldn’t help but let the story infect me with its darkness. “But the Unspeakables weren’t just any men or women. They were traitors, liars, thieves and murderers. Anyone who had sought to hurt or betray the Night People. They were forced to do the Night Keepers’ bidding, stripped of their names and made to work in penance for their crimes until they were eventually absolved of their sins.”

“That shit is crazy,” I breathed a laugh, but Mila didn’t return it.

“There might only be three of them, but Saint, Kyan and Blake act like they really are the Night Keepers of Everlake. They’ve even laid claim to the sacred stone down at Sycamore Beach.”

“What stone?” I frowned.

“It’s this huge obelisk in the sand; its carved with markings of the Kotari tribe and tells the story of the Night People and how the Keepers came to save them. The legend says...” she dropped her voice an octave. “Anyone who dares touch the sacred stone will have their soul bound to the Night Keepers for the rest of time. They’ll be Night Bound.”

“How’s that different to the Unspeakables?” I narrowed my gaze.

“The Night Bound choose to be in servitude to the Keepers. They willingly sacrifice their soul to be everything and anything the Night Keepers desire. *Forever.*”

A shiver ran down my spine. “So what happens when someone touches it?”

Mila shook her head. “No one has ever dared, Tatum,” she whispered. “The Unspeakables have it bad, but being Night Bound would be pure hell. Saint, Kyan and Blake don’t play nice. Everyone fears that stone like it’s a bomb waiting to go off.”

“Great. I’ll avoid the rock then,” I laughed. “Sounds like I should avoid those guys too.”

“No way. If you’re in with them, this whole year is gonna be the best one of your life. But if you’re not...” She shrugged.

“What? Do they sacrifice you to the Night People or something?” I snorted, but she looked at me deadly seriously like that was no joke.

“Worse, babe. Far fucking worse.”

“Come on, they can’t be that bad. Blake seemed like a nice guy to me.”

She laughed like I was insane. “Calling him nice is like calling the devil pretty. If you’re on his shit list, he’s got a heart more vicious than a butcher’s. Though the fresh meat he likes the taste of isn’t cow, it’s human.”

I laughed in denial, breaking off another piece of chocolate. What she said did *not* add up with the friendly guy who’d just led me here. Sure, I could tell he thought he was the shit. But I couldn’t imagine him being cruel to someone. Then again, apparently I was a terrible judge of character.

“I guess I’d better be his friend then,” I said with a smirk and Mila laughed.

“Lucky for you, I already am. So you just bought yourself a free ride, new girl.”



Tick, tick, tick.

That fucking clock was about to meet the grey brick walls which surrounded me with the force of a HGV colliding with a minivan.

Tick, tick, tick.

Every. Fucking. Day.

I lay still in the ice white, eight hundred thread count organic cotton sheets that surrounded me and fought the urge to grind my teeth to dust as I waited for six am to tick the fuck around. This was the worst time of the day. When the rage which lived within me had spent the night feasting on my blackened soul and dragging up the things that fed it.

I slept in a bed that cost more than some cars, in sheets which were hand woven and changed daily, in my own private temple with the most picturesque view imaginable, and it didn't make a bit of difference. I hadn't slept through the night in...ever.

The mellow sound of Debussy's Clair de Lune finally spilled forth from the speakers hidden behind my headboard and I exhaled slowly as I opened my eyes.

The vaulted roof of the church I'd claimed for my own personal quarters opened out above me, the thick beams of the rafters tapering up towards the heavens. They said money couldn't buy you everything, but I sure as shit in a diaper hadn't found much it couldn't. I'd taken one look at the dorm they'd allocated me when I arrived here and told them fuck no. I wasn't sharing a room with anyone. I wasn't sharing walls with anyone either.

And when my family had threatened to remove me – and their contributions – from the school, Headmaster Brown had come up with the solution. This church had fallen into disrepair and was in serious need of a makeover. With a donation or three from my parents, this place had been ready within the week.

And really, an old church was the perfect place for a Saint to live, although the people who worshiped at my altar didn't tend to be the pious types. But I gladly took service from girls on their knees five times a week all the same. Though not here. Never here.

The Temple was my safe haven. No one crossed this threshold aside from me and the other Night Keepers. And my personal maid, Rebecca, but she came and went like a ghost whenever I wasn't here so I liked to pretend the place just kept itself spotless and ignore her existence.

I sat up, running a hand through my tightly curling hair as I looked out of the enormous stained glass window on the far side of the church which was in the shape of a crucifix. My bedroom was on the balcony level of the old church and wooden railings sat beyond the foot of my bed where I could look down at the level below.

The classical music washed over me and I took another deep breath. And another. My morning ritual had been this way for as long as I could remember.

I waited for six am then I worked on rebuilding the carefully constructed walls I kept up around my heart and soul at all times.

As the song came to an end, I slipped out of bed, pulling on a pair of grey sweatpants as I moved toward the edge of the balcony.

Blake and Kyan had beds here too. Their rooms were downstairs, to the back of the building and they slept here unless they found a girl to fuck. Then they went somewhere else, anywhere else, I didn't care where so long as my sanctuary stayed untarnished.

I leaned my forearms on the wooden bannister and looked down into the open living area below. The huge room was decorated in grey tones which screamed man cave. There wasn't so much as a scatter cushion or scented candle in sight, and that was the way I liked it.

Kyan was sprawled out on the five seater couch like a fucking animal. His dark brown hair fell loose around his face and he'd pulled his shirt off to reveal the myriad of tattoos covering his skin. His black jeans were unbuckled and his hand was stuffed inside them, firmly cupping his junk as he slept.

I'd told him more times than I could count not to fall asleep on the fucking couch, but did he give a shit? Not one. Not even a fucking rabbit dropping of a shit. If I didn't know he'd welcome a brawl, I'd kick his ass for it, but the dude lived to fight so I'd only be rewarding his behaviour by giving him a beat down.

I bit my tongue and looked down at the dark skin of my chest where the black ink of one of my two tattoos curved over my pecs in swirling script. *The days are long, but the nights are dark.* And didn't I fucking know it.

My other tattoo lay on the back of my neck, a tribal arrow with feathers hanging from it to mark me out as a Night Keeper. Blake and Kyan had their own marks too, each of our arrows slightly different but similar

enough to be clearly linked. And with them on show on the backs of our necks at all times, it was clear to everyone else exactly who and what we were. Brothers bound in ink and sworn to each other in blood. We may not have been related, but they were the only two people in this world who I actually gave a damn about and so help anyone who ever tried to come between us.

I padded down the curving staircase on bare feet, eyeing Kyan irritably as I went.

His heavy breaths came to me as I closed in on him and I crossed the huge space before the enormous stained glass window to stand over him.

The eighty inch TV on the exposed brick wall was still lit up with the pause screen for the zombie game he'd been playing on the Xbox last night and the headphones he'd been wearing now hung around his neck.

My toe nudged something sitting on the floor beside the grey couch and I glanced down at the bottle of Jack Daniels which was more than half empty.

He'd asked me to drink with him yesterday evening, but I hadn't been in the mood. So apparently a party for one had been on the menu instead. He hadn't been here when I'd headed up to bed last night and I guessed he'd appeared during one of the hours where my eyes had actually managed to stay closed.

Blake had been mysteriously absent too. Which meant Kyan had most likely headed into town.

He shifted in his sleep and I waited for the inevitable nonsense ramblings to spill from his lips.

"Wear the pink thong...looks best on a watermelon an' you know it..."

I snorted a laugh as he shifted in his sleep, his free hand scratching at the skull he had inked on his ribs before falling still.

My gaze scanned his split knuckles and my suspicions about his location last night were confirmed.

A group of kids from the closest town, Murkwell, had taken him out to join a gambling ring who ran bets out of an old barn up near Sahale mountain last year. They liked to waste their hard earned dollars placing bets on illegal fight nights which were hosted up there every few weeks and Kyan had found himself an outlet for his monster.

He'd taken us up there once or twice, but it wasn't my scene. A bunch of roughnecks swigging cheap liquor from the bottle and laying ten dollar bets on assholes beating the shit out of each other just didn't appeal to me. The bets weren't rich enough for my taste and the stench of body odour and damp straw turned my stomach.

But Kyan still liked to head down there and beat the shit out of mean fuckers with a chip on their shoulders about their lot in life. He had a thing for fucking the local girls too. Preferring to keep his specific preferences away from this place and the rumour mill of the rich and powerful. Though he claimed the reason was that rich girls didn't like to fuck dirty enough for him.

When I went down to Murkwell, I stuck out like a sore thumb wrapped in a designer coat with a thick layer of pretentious asshole smothered on top. It was all they could see; money, privilege, entitlement. But somehow, Kyan slipped beneath their radar, managed to relate to them. They *knew* he had more money deposited into his trust fund monthly than most of them made in a year, but they acted like they didn't.

And despite the fact that he shouldn't have been any more able than me to mingle with the commoners, he made it look easy.

It wasn't as if he was even likeable; Kyan's monster was much more visible than mine. It was painted on his flesh and spoke without a filter. But

maybe that was the key to it. People knew exactly *why* they should be afraid of him. Everything from the murderous look in his eyes to the permanent scowl etched on his face and the I-give-no-shits attitude he wore like armour screamed *run the fuck away* to any normal asshole. But with me it was harder to pinpoint exactly why you felt like shitting yourself in my presence. And in all honesty, Kyan might beat the shit out of you and leave you bleeding in the gutter in a puddle of your own piss. But if you became my enemy, you might just disappear altogether.

I turned away from one of the only two people in the world who truly knew me and headed past the kitchenette, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge before taking the stairs down to the old crypt.

I flicked the lights on as I descended, the cold concrete beneath my bare feet reminding me of the original reason for this building's existence.

The space directly beneath the old church had been emptied out and fitted with gym equipment. The stone chamber was always cold, but I never bothered to try and heat it. By the time the room even began to warm, my workout would be complete anyway so there was little point.

At the far end of the room stood a stone archway which led into the catacombs where the dead remained in their coffins, sleeping more peacefully than I ever managed. There was a gate further along the passageway to keep out anyone who found their way in from the caves at the far end of the tunnels down by Sycamore Beach.

I had the only key to that gate and I'd headed down into the dark with Blake and Kyan on more than one occasion. The underground passages crisscrossed beneath the ground surrounding The Temple but there was only one other exit which led out to the secluded cove by the lake. Another locked gate barred that exit and frankly, it was a total maze down there

anyway so I rarely made any use of it. Though it didn't hurt to have an escape route no one knew about.

I tapped a console on the wall and Mozart's Requiem started up, pouring from the speakers which hung in the corners of the room like a promise of all the things I ached for. I cranked the volume so that the stone walls sang with the perfection of the orchestra as I fell into a set of pull ups.

Nothing banished my demons like music. *Real* music. I could listen to modern trash easily enough when I had to, but there was nothing in the world like losing myself in the purity of classical music.

I pushed myself as hard as I could then forced myself on after that too. My muscles sang with power that bordered on pain and sweat glistened against my dark skin as my rage finally stilled and the calm I craved fell over me.

I did this every day. Twice a day. Last thing at night and first thing in the morning. The only time I made an exception for that was if I got myself wasted enough to pass out without it. It was my habit, my routine, my ritual. I needed it to function just as I needed air to breathe, water to drink and food to eat. Sometimes I needed it more than that.

The heavy thump of the deadweight hitting the floor drew my attention and I opened my eyes to find Blake starting up his own set. He didn't say anything; he knew better than to tempt the beast in me before I was ready to interact. But his presence was a balm on my soul.

I got to my feet as I finished my push ups and crossed the stone chamber towards him.

"First day back," I commented, moving to the weight rack and dropping down to start my set.

"This is the year, Saint," Blake said, moving to spot me. "I can feel it."

"The year for what?" I asked.

“For us. It’s all going to happen for us this year.” He grinned down at me over the bar as I heaved it skyward. I didn’t know how he managed to look so damn happy all the time, especially since his mom had died at the start of the summer.

His grief had consisted of three weeks of total silence and then *poof* Blake was back. Just the same as always. Big smile on his face, girls begging to suck his cock every other day, partying harder than any other motherfucker I knew. He just switched it off. Or so it seemed. But I knew him well enough to know that wasn’t the end of it. There was a hardness in him that hadn’t been there before. He had rage in him too now. He just hadn’t figured out where to aim it yet.

“Is everything ready for the party?” I asked between lifts.

Every year we threw a party to mark the start of term. But it was more than that. It was an initiation. Every fucker who wanted to be in with us came and we decided who made the cut and who didn’t through various tests and challenges. Sometimes they didn’t even realise they were being tested. But if you wanted in with the Night Keepers – which everyone did – then you had to make it past our initiation.

“It’s ready,” Blake confirmed. “This will be the biggest year yet. And better than that, we’ve got fresh meat attending.”

“New kids?” I asked. Every year we always had some new faces join the school, though they’d left it pretty late to transfer if they’d only be here for senior year.

“One.”

“Why do you look so pleased about that?” I asked, racking the weight and sitting up. “Is she hot?”

“Fucking volcanic, dude. Like magma hot. And I’m planning on getting burned real good,” he smirked at me and I stood, folding my arms.

“We’ll see,” I said in a tone aimed to piss him off and his gaze darkened predictably at the hint of a challenge.

He pushed his tongue into his cheek but refused to be baited beyond that, shrugging at me as he turned back to his deadlifts.

I left him to it and headed upstairs, chugging the bottle of water as I went. I grabbed another bottle from the fridge as I reached the living room and started on it as I headed back towards Kyan.

He was still sleeping with an ease that made my jaw tick. The bastard could literally fall asleep anywhere. Nothing haunted his dreams. Hell, nothing haunted him when he was awake either despite the fact that he’d witnessed and experienced plenty of messed up shit that should have.

Outwardly he was intense, dark, brutal, but I knew the truth of him. Inside, he didn’t feel any of it. Nothing. And every fucked up thing he did was with the aim of rectifying that. He was just trying to experience something, *feel* something on a real level.

I moved to stand over him and a dark smile pulled at my lips as I tipped the bottle up, pouring the contents straight over his head.

A bellow of rage burst from his lips as he leapt to his feet, tackling me before he’d even opened his damn eyes.

My back hit the carpet and I grunted as the air was driven from my lungs and all two hundred pounds of Kyan’s muscular body crushed me to the floor.

His fist drove into my side a moment later and I cursed as I punched him back, my knuckles slamming into his ribs several times in quick succession.

Kyan wasn’t as fast as me, but his blows fell like those of a sledgehammer as he reared over me and drove his fist into my gut. We had one golden rule when we fought like this. *Not the face*. We couldn’t exactly turn up to classes with busted lips and black eyes every other week.

Besides, my face was a work of goddamn art, I didn't need the canvas damaged.

"Next time just kick me, motherfucker," Kyan snarled, his wet hair hanging down over his forehead and dripping all over me.

I started laughing and he cracked a smile too, moving to get off of me.

As he made it to his knees I kicked out, catching him in the gut and knocking back on his ass. "Suggestion noted." I got to my feet and offered him a hand up.

He grunted a curse at me as he stood, pushing his hair out of his face as he turned to hunt for an elastic to tie it in a topknot.

I left him to destroy the couch in his hunt as he tossed cushions everywhere and headed back upstairs to my en-suite to have a shower.

The huge glass cubicle stood open for me and I moved inside, cranking the volume on some Beethoven, using the control panel on the wall so I could still hear it as I scalded myself clean in the hot water.

Steam billowed around me as I scrubbed the sweat from my skin and I felt my tension running away with the water down the drain as I completed my ritual. My demons never retreated fully, but I could cage them most of the time so long as I made it through my routine.

I headed to my closet when I was done, pulling out my dark green Everlake Prep uniform and dressing carefully. I knotted the tie perfectly, adjusting it at my collar before buttoning my blazer and smoothing out the creases. I tugged my shirt sleeves down so that they emerged from beneath the blazer, the platinum cufflinks I'd matched with the uniform catching the light as I made sure it all sat perfectly.

My tightly curling hair was cropped short enough to be low maintenance, but I still ran some product into it as I made sure it sat just right. Not a hair out of place.

Memphis men always turn out at their best.

By the time I re-emerged downstairs, Blake was waiting for me. He took pride in his appearance too, though he always styled his black hair in a way that looked like he hadn't bothered at all. But I knew for a fact that casual, I-didn't-even-make-an-effort look took him the best part of fifteen minutes with a hairdryer and half a can of hairspray to perfect.

Kyan was nowhere to be seen, which wasn't a surprise. He turned up late for everything if he even turned up at all. Everything aside from football practice anyway. Coach Monroe would have his balls and his spot on the team if he pulled that shit with him. He was about the only fucker in this school who held any real sway over us. Mostly because he gave no shits if we pissed money or were born to be the next leaders of this world. He only cared about one thing. The game. And if we did anything to negatively affect that, he'd cut us without so much as a blink of concern for what revenge we might cast his way. And I could respect that. Especially because his hard ass ways meant we were the best damn team in the high school league.

We headed out of the huge oak door which fronted The Temple and I fell into step with Blake as we walked up the hill towards the dining hall. Though calling it that was kinda like calling my family yacht a boat.

We had a classically trained chef running the kitchen and we sent over our meal orders via the school app in advance.

We walked through the trees up the steep hill towards the stone building which housed the Redwood Dining Hall and one of the Unspeakables darted ahead of us to open the door. I didn't thank him, didn't even offer him a smile like Blake did. What was the point? But I would have beaten his ass if he hadn't done it.

Our table sat waiting at the head of the room, positioned horizontally so that we could look out over the rest of the students like we were sitting at the top table at a wedding. I cut a path around the gathering masses and headed to the centre of it as Blake paused to talk to people.

I wasn't a mingler. It took a lot more effort than I had to waste and at least ninety eight percent of people weren't worth the bother.

The room was huge, big enough to hold the entire student body of two thousand people beneath its high ceiling. To the right of the dining hall, the entire wall was made up of glass windows which looked out over the lake and the mountains beyond. In the summer, the windows would be thrown open and we could eat out on the terrace, but it rained here more often than not so those days were few and far between.

No sooner had my ass hit the padded cushion on the mahogany chair than a member of the kitchen staff arrived with my breakfast. Two slices of whole wheat toast, crisp but not burned, creamy scrambled egg with crushed avocado and just a hint of seasoning. Even an idiot could cook that right, but if they'd managed to fuck it up they'd be hearing about it in their letter of employment termination. I'd only had to get three assholes fired before they'd figured out how to get it right. My mom ran the school board, so pissing me off was a pretty stupid mistake for a member of staff to make.

A triple shot espresso and a glass of freshly squeezed grapefruit juice appeared before me in the next breath and I turned my attention to my food as the rest of the tables filled.

The chair to my left scraped across the wooden floor as Kyan arrived and he dropped down into his chair, spreading his legs wide and slinging an arm over the empty seat on his other side.

"Your balls are just that big, huh?" I asked as his knee knocked against my thigh.

“You know it,” he replied cockily, his gaze skimming the room.
“Where’s the new girl then?”

I looked up too, scanning the sea of familiar faces for a moment before shrugging. “If she makes a habit of running later than you then there’s no hope for her anyway,” I said dismissively.

“The way Blake told it last night, she could be later than the devil to a church service and you still wouldn’t kick her out of bed,” he replied and I gave him more of my attention at that. Blake had had more than his fair share of girls and if he’d rated her that highly then she was undoubtedly worthy of notice.

Kyan gave me a cocky smirk as my gaze trailed over his tie which he’d hung around his neck without tying it. The four buttons he’d left undone revealed the flames surrounding the devil tattoo on his chest. He’d tossed his blazer over the back of his chair too and had rolled up his shirt sleeves to show off even more of his ink. He looked like a fucking dipshit and he knew it. He also did it more just to piss me off.

At least his hair had been tamed into its topknot, but the stubble lining his jaw told me he hadn’t bothered shaving for a few days. Honestly, if he was anyone else I would have had his ass expelled for the pure fact that his appearance fucked me off.

Before I could decide whether or not to fall for the bait he’d set me, Blake hopped over the table and damn near knocked my espresso over.

“I’m surrounded by fucking idiots,” I muttered as I rescued the coffee and Blake fell into his seat on my right.

He turned to throw a wink at the girls on the closest table as they watched his display and fell over themselves giggling in appreciation.

Dickwad.

The waiters appeared with food for the other Night Keepers and I tried not to sneer at the plate full of deep fried grease that landed in front of Kyan. That asshole was gonna be one fat old man if he didn't get that shit under control. Blake's stack of pancakes slathered in cherries and syrup wasn't much better either.

The ends of our table slowly filled with members of our clique, though I left decisions on who made the cut to Blake. No one sat opposite us, leaving the view over the room clear for us to watch our prey. Blake liked to joke that we were like kings sitting up here watching over the common folk. I tended to see that as less of a joke and more of a fact.

The waiters made quick work of rushing back and forth, handing out meals to the masses as I worked on finishing my food.

Just as I laid my knife and fork down, Kyan's elbow rammed into my ribs.

"What?" I snarled, shooting him a dark look, but he wasn't looking at me. His gaze was fixed across the room and there was almost a grin plastered on his face which was a feat in itself. Kyan only smiled in public if someone else was bleeding.

"The new girl just walked in," he said without tearing his eyes away from her.

I turned too, lifting my grapefruit juice to my lips and looking over the rim of it as I surveyed the crowd.

I didn't even have to hunt for her. The girl was like an emerald sparkling amidst a sea of shit. She wasn't even trying and yet she stood out from a mile away.

A waterfall of honey blonde hair fell in waves down her back to the base of her spine and my gaze naturally followed that line over the curve of her ass. I scanned down to the hem of her forest green pleated school skirt

which stopped just high enough to give me a glimpse of her tanned thighs. Her knee length socks took over from there, but I could appreciate the lines of her toned flesh through the tight material.

She was walking away from me and I was already captivated by the way her hips rocked and her hair swung.

She followed Mila Cruz through the crowd to a table of our followers and they made room for her to join them with wide smiles and enthusiastic greetings.

Gerald Holt gave her a huge grin as he leaned forward to drop a napkin over her lap and she laughed, waving him away with a casual gesture that said *no chance asshole* as she sat back, offering me a clear view of her face.

She had big blue eyes which sparkled with laughter beneath lashes long enough to kiss her cheeks when she blinked. A smattering of freckles graced her high cheekbones and her pink lips had a natural pout to them which instantly had me imagining my cock between them.

“*Mine*,” Blake growled beside me as he realised what we were looking at.

“Fuck that,” I muttered. “A girl like her is gonna want the top dog, sorry asshole.”

“Bullshit. She wants someone who can make her laugh, not a dipshit who doesn’t know to loosen his tie,” he goaded. “Besides, when did I ever agree that you were top dog?”

“You don’t need to agree, I just am,” I said dismissively and he bristled.

“Maybe she wants a man who will tie her to his bedposts and fuck her so hard she can’t walk straight the next day,” Kyan added in a low tone which made both of us pause.

I turned to him with an eyebrow raised. “Seriously?” I asked. “You wanna fuck a rich girl now?”

“First time for everything,” he said, his gaze sliding over the new girl in a way that told me he really was considering it.

“A nice girl like her won’t wanna mix it with you,” Blake taunted him. “She wants the golden boy.”

“Naw,” Kyan disagreed. “She’s no nice girl.”

“You haven’t even said one word to her,” Blake scoffed.

“Don’t have to, she has that look in her eye.” Kyan shrugged like that was an actual thing and I snorted a laugh.

“Whatever fuckers, the girl won’t look twice at either of you once she sees me,” I said cockily.

“Want a bet?” Kyan asked, tearing his gaze from the temptation in the room to offer me a taunting grin.

“We don’t need a bet,” Blake said irritably. “I told you, she’s mine.”

“You can’t just claim people, asshole,” I replied.

“Fine. I get first shot at her then,” he countered.

“How do you figure that out?” I asked.

“Because my mom is dead,” he said simply.

“That’s cold, man,” Kyan said, snorting a laugh.

Blake had started using that shit right after he’d snapped out of his grief. He wasn’t fooling either of us. He’d loved his mom and he was devastated when she caught the fucking Hades Virus. She’d been on a cruise to Hawaii right around the time when the cases there started exploding.

It turned out there *was* one or two things money couldn’t buy after all. And a cure to Hades was one of them. They didn’t name it after the god of the dead for no reason. I was just glad that we were holed up here away from all that shit. Everlake Prep was basically in isolation without even trying. The only place even remotely close to here was the town of

Murkwell and that was still ten miles out. Beyond that, you had to drive fifty miles to find anyone else.

Who knew being shipped off to the middle of nowhere would come in so handy?

For the moment, the virus was mostly contained to certain hotspots around the world, but it was obvious it was going to continue spreading globally.

Blake hadn't even been able to go and visit his mom to say goodbye. He'd had to do it over FaceTime, watching through a screen as day by day it ravaged her body and finally stole her away from him for good. Shit like that had to sting. But he wasn't letting it show. And if that was how he wanted to play it, then I wasn't going to call him out on it. His grief was his own.

"The truth hurts," Blake said with a shrug. "But it's still the truth. And I need to bury myself ten inches deep in Tatum Rivers to try and forget it."

"More like eight inches," Kyan mocked, his gaze turning back to Tatum. *Tatum*. Yeah, I could hear myself growling that name as I lost myself between her thighs.

"Are you seriously interested in her?" I asked, glancing at Kyan. He was as unpredictable as the damn wind, but he'd never fucked a girl from school before so it seemed unlikely.

He ran a hand over his stubble as he watched her for another minute before shaking his head. "Naw. Not worth the drama if she can't handle what I want from a girl."

I rolled my eyes at him and looked back at Blake instead. He was giving me the cocky fucker mask and I sighed dramatically.

"Fine. You get one free shot at the initiation party. I'll keep it in my pants until then. But after that, all bets are off," I said as my gaze drank in

the sight of the new girl again. All of that blonde hair would look really damn good knotted in my fists while I fucked her mouth.

“Trust me, brother. I only need one shot,” Blake said with a smirk.

He might have been right, but that was okay. He could take her for a test run before I took her for a ride. It didn't make much difference to me. Point was, that girl belonged to me. She just didn't know it yet.



I felt them before I saw them. Their stares burned, searing into my flesh like lasers.

“Holy shit, Tatum, the Night Keepers have noticed you,” Mila stage whispered loud enough for the whole table to hear. I’d hacked this mingling business already. Mila was connected. She knew everyone and *everything* about everyone. So long as I rode between her wings, I was going to sail my way right into the popular crowd. But there were three guys I supposedly needed to impress if I didn’t want to get outcasted and shirked from the community. The three guys who were currently assessing me like lions hiding in the long grass.

I let my gaze lift to the Night Keepers naturally, reacting slowly to Mila’s words and keeping my casual expression fixed in place. I sucked my lower lip in that way that drove guys crazy as I let my eyes meet Blake’s. Hunger, pure and simple, awaited me within them and sent a delicious warmth spreading out through the base of my belly. He looked like he was about to get out of his seat and come over so I flicked my gaze to the right

of him, taking in the Night Keeper who sat in the centre of their trio. The obvious leader.

“That’s Saint Memphis,” Mila whispered in my ear, openly pointing him out like she didn’t care how clear it was that we were staring at him. I didn’t even need to hear his name to know who he was. Saint Memphis was the son of Troy Memphis, the Governor of Sequoia. His daddy was the most powerful man in the state. And it looked like the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.

Saint exuded power. His eyes were as cold and as impenetrable as iron, but a small smile twisted up his lips in a way that suggested he knew something I didn’t. His skin was heavenly dark and the perfect angles of his face looked like they’d been designed by an architect. His hair was well kept and his uniform immaculate. Every movement he made was controlled, refined. Like he’d practised each one a thousand times. My core liquefied as the intensity of him dripped through me like burning candle wax. He reminded me of an emperor watching a gladiator fight, a simple flick up or down of his thumb deciding whether I lived or died. And something told me that wasn’t too far from the truth.

I let my eyes slide away from him and felt him stiffen the moment I did, as if he was shocked that someone would dare break his gaze.

On his right, was a beast. That was the only way to describe him. Visually, he was everything Saint was not. Relaxed, brutish, unruly. But as his eyes scraped over me with the sharpness of a knife, I could tell he was just as deadly.

“And that’s Kyan Roscoe,” Mila supplied.

His hair was pulled into a topknot and stubble clung to his jaw like he gave no fucks. He continued to give no fucks throughout the rest of his appearance, his blazer abandoned, his sleeves rolled up to reveal an artwork

of tattoos. His knuckles were bruised and split like he'd spent the night pounding them into someone's face.

My heart stumbled as he rubbed his thumb against the corner of his mouth, a dark hunter shining behind his eyes. It felt like a target was painted on my forehead and he was about to loose an arrow that would carve a hole between my eyes. My breathing was getting heavy as I pictured this wild man's hands on me. All three of their hands...

"They'll want you to initiate at their party tonight," Mila said, slicing through the red hot fantasy currently playing out in my mind.

I ripped my eyes away from them, turning to give her my full attention as I tried to quiet the rampant pounding of my heart. *Down girl.*

I blew out a laugh. "Initiate me? What's that supposed to mean?"

Everyone around the table exchanged worried glances and I looked to Mila for an explanation. She tossed her hair over her shoulder with an ominous laugh.

"You'll see, babe." Her eyes glittered darkly and I realised nearly everyone in the room was glancing my way like I had a glowing beacon on top of my head. The word *fledgling* was passing behind hands and under people's breaths and I guessed that was aimed at me.

I could feel the Night Keepers still giving me their attention and my spine prickled from all the eyes on me. They were picking me apart, hunting for weaknesses and I suddenly realised I needed to prove I wasn't the type to be messed with. I hadn't come here to fall under the rule of some preppy assholes. I wanted to make a few friends and glide through this year pressure free. But right now, the pressure on me was mounting and I knew I had to do something about it.

A whistle caught my ear and I frowned as I looked at Blake who was staring right at me.

Did he just whistle for me like a dog?

He jerked his head to beckon me over and my brows jumped up.

“Oh my god, Blake Bowman just summoned you,” a girl Mila had introduced as Pearl hissed from across the table, using a sheet of her inky black hair to cover her face as she spoke. She looked crazy excited, like I’d just been handed an invite to Prince Charming’s ball. But no one *summoned* me. It was rude, not to mention arrogant as hell.

I waved my toast at Blake to show him I was busy eating then took another bite out of it. A ripple of tension passed through the Night Keepers. It was almost imperceptible, but their gazes sharpened just enough to let me know I’d offended them.

Blake pushed his tongue into his cheek, leaning back in his seat so the front two legs must have been off the ground. He cupped his hands around his mouth and hollered, “Tatum Rivers, come over here!”

Blood rushed into my cheeks and I glanced at Mila who was staring over at the three guys with her lips parted. “You’d better go.” She turned quickly, prodding me in the side.

“Hey,” I hissed, but she continued prodding until I moved. Damn her.

I pushed back out of my seat and lifted my toast to my lips, finishing it in two angry bites before making a beeline straight for these so called Night Keepers.

The entire hall of students were giving me their attention, all conversation abandoned. I felt like I was walking up to the chopping block.

Heat slid down my spine and spread everywhere as the pressure cooker I was apparently in reached boiling point. The three guys before me eyed me like I was a sacrifice being offered up at their altar. And it sure as shit felt like that as I approached.

I lifted my chin, masking my expression so they couldn't get a read on my fear. My dad had taken me out to the woods in northern Virginia every summer since I was thirteen. He'd leave me in a cabin for three days with no food or water and I had to fend for myself. Last year, a black bear had come up behind me while I'd been out foraging for berries. I could still remember the icy cold clutch of fear the moment I'd first seen it. But Dad had taught me how to react in just that situation. I had to harness my fear, conceal it, make sure the animal didn't get any scent of it on the wind. Contrary to popular belief, unless a bear attacks, you aren't supposed to play dead. When encountering them in the woods, the key is being calm, collected and totally in control. So I employed that tactic now as I approached the table. Sure, I wouldn't have approached a bear in the wild, I would have been backing the hell away. But these boys were a different breed. A dangerous breed. The kind you had to make see you as an equal if you wanted to walk away alive.

I switched my focus to Blake as I reached the table and relaxed a little at the grin on his face.

I rested one hand on the back of the chair opposite him, giving him my undivided attention.

"Hey golden boy, you called?" I took a stick of spearmint gum from my pocket, unfolding it from the wrapper and placing it into my mouth. His eyes watched the movement with undisguised heat in his gaze.

"Hey, Tate." He threw a glance at Saint and my gaze travelled with his, landing on Lord Cold Eyes and assessing his reaction.

My heart was pounding a mile a minute and I wasn't even sure why. They were just boys. Beautiful boys, but so what? I'd seen their kind before. I'd even had them moaning my name and begging me to date them. So why were these guys any different?

The answer was instinctual. I just knew in the pit of my soul that they weren't your average assholes. From the way every student in the dining hall seemed to be holding their breath and straining their ears to listen in on our interaction. And from the way power rolled from them in waves. In another life, they would have been princes and lords. But here, they were just rich boys with big heads and bigger balls. And that, I could handle.

"We're throwing a party tonight," Blake said and my eyes snapped back to him.

I nodded, acting casual as hell and trying to ignore my pulse as it skipped and thumped in the base of my skull.

He stretched his muscular arms and placed his hands behind his head. I wasn't woman enough not to check out his broad chest as it pressed against his shirt.

"We've decided to give you an invite," Saint said and my throat constricted as I turned to him.

"So should I expect it to arrive via trained eagle or something?" I taunted, taking in the shiny cufflinks on his shirt. Despite the fact that they were all sitting down, I somehow felt as tall as Thumbelina standing on a toadstool beneath them.

Blake chuckled and I swear Kyan's mouth twitched. Saint didn't laugh. Didn't even smile. He gave me a stone cold wall of an expression and I mentally slapped the wild part of me as she imagined sliding her panties off for him. I wondered what it would take to crack that wall...to make that emperor moan my name and crave me like heroin. Trouble always seemed to find me, but at Everlake, I couldn't run away from it. So I needed to play this just right.

If winning these guys over was what it took to have an enjoyable time here, then challenge accepted. But I wasn't gonna bow at their feet to earn

their approval. I could do better than that.

“The eagle is on its way.” Blake winked at me. “You can skip the invite though if you come as my date. And I promise you will *come*.”

I released a derisive breath, screwing up the gum wrapper in my hand. “Are you sure you know how to make a girl come, golden boy? I’m sure there’s a lot of great actresses in this school,” I teased.

“I don’t just make girls come, I make them fucking *arrive*,” he said with a smirk that set my blood pounding, but I rolled my eyes so he couldn’t tell.

My gaze skipped back to Saint who was still glaring at me like he was hoping my knees would bend for him if he stared hard enough.

Kyan sat up straighter in his chair, resting his inked arms on the table as he assessed me. My eyes slipped to his busted knuckles and he flexed his fingers in reaction to my stare. “Something you wanna say, baby?”

He was obviously a fighter. Those wounds were layered on scars. Those cuts didn’t come from throwing his fists into the faces of other students who pissed him off. From the bruises peeking out beneath his collar, I could tell his opponents fought back hard.

“If you wrapped your hands for fights, you could avoid making a mess of them,” I pointed out with a shrug. Dad had taught me how to strap my knuckles when I was ten.

Kyan’s chestnut eyes shone as he leaned a little closer. “Maybe I like to leave a fight bloody.”

A shiver ran down my spine as this dark creature surveyed me. My mouth dried out and I automatically wet my lips, drawing his gaze to them.

“I leave my fights clean and victorious,” I breathed.

He locked his jaw tight. “So what? Did you take a self-defence class once or something?” He sneered and I straightened my spine under his belittling expression.

“Or something,” I said, turning back to Blake, wanting to be done with this conversation. “See you at the party then.” I tossed him a flirtatious smile that made him grin darkly then dropped the gum wrapper onto Saint’s empty plate.

I turned my back on them, but a fist suddenly snatched hold of my hair and fear crashed through me. I yelped as I was dragged backwards over the table, my skirt riding up over my thighs as Saint’s hot breath brushed my ear. “Take your shit with you. And if you ever insult me again, I’ll do more than pull your hair, Barbie doll.” He shoved the gum wrapper down my shirt, pushing it between my breasts with his thumb and I gasped as hot, burning embarrassment rushed through my veins, colliding with a heated ache between my thighs.

He released me with a shove and I staggered forward, taking in the crowd of students who were staring at me in a mixture of horror and amusement. I tried not to run back to my seat as Kyan’s cold laugh fell over me like icy rain.

I didn’t know if I was turned on or humiliated by the time I dropped back into my seat and Mila stared at me like I’d lost my damn mind.

“Holy shit, girl,” she breathed then a smile split her cheeks apart as she slammed her hand down on the table. “That was legit the best thing I’ve seen in like, a week.”

“You’re one crazy motherfucker,” Gerald said from beside me then leaned in and patted my arm. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I shook him off, but knew my cheeks were still bright red and the back of my neck felt hot enough to set fire to my hair.

As subtly as I could, I tugged the gum wrapper out from between my cleavage while everyone around the table *unsubtly* watched. I cleared my throat as I tossed it onto my plate and pushed a lock of hair behind my ear.

Pearl was giggling with the girl beside her, muttering words I couldn't hear which made each of them shriek with more laughter. My cheeks continued to burn, but I fixed on an expression of indifference and blocked out their mocking.

Slowly, the room filled with chatter once more and I tried to ignore the ache in my scalp from where Saint had yanked on my hair. I also tried to ignore how much that had weirdly turned me on. I definitely didn't have a thing for public humiliation, but hair pulling...yeah I could grow to like that. Preferably behind closed doors and with less clothes on – *fuck what am I thinking?* Those boys were bad news. I'd always had a bit of the devil in me and if I wasn't careful, I'd end up letting it lead me to sin.

If I screwed a guy on campus, I was gonna have to see him every day for the rest of the year. This wasn't what I was used to. So I needed to adapt to my new environment and start being smart about my life choices.

The bell finally rang to announce the start of classes and I breathed an internal sigh of relief. *Holy shit, it's only breakfast on day one and I've managed to incur the wrath of a demi-god.*

I'd already registered for classes yesterday afternoon and had my timetable in place. P.E. was the my first lesson of the day so I headed out of the hall with Mila as she led the way towards the Acacia Sports Hall.

She bumped shoulders with me as we walked, throwing me a smirk. "You'd better watch yourself with those boys, girl. I mean it. I've got balls of iron too, but I've seen what happens to those who piss off the Night Keepers."

I fought a tsk as we headed around the edge of the lake and students split off in every direction towards their classes.

"I was kinda aiming to disarm them, not piss them off," I said innocently. "Blake didn't seem to mind."

“Blake is a fuckboy with a one track mind. He’ll covet you, adore you, make you his one and only until he gets your legs spread. Once he’s had a girl, he loses interest. And I don’t just mean he ghosts her. He fucking *zombies* her. She might as well be the undead clawing at his window for the heartless treatment she’ll get.”

“Have you...” I raised an eyebrow and she released a hollow laugh.

“Fuck no. I don’t mess with Night Keepers. I mean sure, I would if they weren’t fifty shades of fucking psycho. But trust me, you’re safer to keep away from them and date normal hot guys. Play to their rules, keep out of their hair and you’ll have a sweet life here at Everlake. Have you seen how many dudes have checked you out in the past five seconds?” She gestured to a group of senior boys who glanced back over their shoulders at us as they walked by. One of them had his eyes pinned on Mila; he was blonde, tall, a typical jock with his killer smile which was aimed right at my roommate.

I glanced at her, finding her grinning right back at him. “Who’s that?” I asked, nudging her as he jogged off with his friends.

“Danny Harper. He’s on the football team,” she said with a devilish look in her eyes. “We hooked up at the end of year party before summer.”

“He’s cute,” I commented.

“He’s got a big dick too,” she said with a wild laugh. “He doesn’t quite know how to use it yet, but I plan on teaching him.”

I laughed along with her as she started describing the exact length, colour, texture and girth of the guy’s dick. That mental image hadn’t exactly been asked for, but she was clearly the oversharing type. And I was more than happy for the distraction from the Night Keepers. With dick chat or otherwise.

We headed down a track into the trees and the hazy morning light filtered through the canopy above us. The air was sweet and crisp and finally brought the heat of my body back down to a normal temperature.

A huge grey stone building appeared ahead of us, beyond which I caught a glimpse of a large running track and the edge of the football stadium. I noticed a bunch of students were waiting by the glass doors of the sports hall and frowned as two of them rushed forward to open them wide, yet no one moved.

My breathing hitched as someone shouldered their way past me and I scowled at the back of Saint's head as he strode toward the entrance, followed closely by Kyan who was rolling his shoulders like he was limbering up for a fight.

Blake caught my arm and I turned to him surprise, my heart thumping to a frantic rhythm in my chest.

"Here, fledgling," he breathed in my ear, his addictive scent making me wet my lips on instinct. He took my hand, placing something slim and hard in it before curling my fingers around it.

"Tell her what it means," he instructed Mila before giving me a wicked smile and following the other two Keepers into the sports hall.

"Are they for real right now?" I murmured as the other students headed in after them then lifted my hand to see what Blake had given me.

A sharp white object lay in my palm and I frowned as I tried to figure out what it was.

"It's a chicken bone," Mila supplied and I grimaced.

"Ew." I went to toss it into the bushes, but she caught my arm with a gasp, clamping my hand closed around it.

"It's your entrance pass to the party tonight. They won't let you in without it. And if you can't get in, you can't initiate."

“*Mila*,” I groaned. “I’m not taking part in some stupid hazing shit. I don’t want to be *initiated*.”

“If you refuse, you’ll automatically go on their shit list.” She sprang in front of me, stopping me in my tracks with a firm glare. “And what did I tell you about people who go on their shit list?”

I rolled my eyes in answer.

“*Tatum*,” she pushed.

I released a breath of frustration. “You said something about Blake being a butcher.”

“He’s vicious. They all are,” she insisted, her dark eyes suddenly full of concern. “Do what they say and they’ll leave you alone.”

“You sound like you’re afraid of them,” I dropped my voice as the last of the students headed inside.

“I am,” she breathed. “I’m not a pussy, girl, but those guys are dangerous. This is my last warning, okay? Heed it.”

I gazed down at the bone in my hand and sighed, tucking it into my pocket. “Fine, I’ll do their dumb initiation, but I’m not gonna start opening doors for them like some spineless idiot.”

“Yeah those dudes live really sad lives,” Mila sighed then glanced away like she wasn’t telling me something. Did she mean sad like miserable or sad like pathetic?

We headed inside and I frowned at her as she twisted a lock of hair between her fingers, ignoring my probing looks. I clearly wasn’t gonna get more out of her than that.

A huge glass wall ahead of us looked into the enormous sports hall where bleachers sat at one end, overlooking the basketball court in the middle. We peeled off to the right into the girls’ locker room and I headed

through the flashy space which had silver lockers with honest-to-shit fingerprint scanners.

Mila helped me set up mine and I tossed my stuff inside before stripping down and changing into the green sports skirt, sports bra and white tank top I'd been given at registration. The word Everlake was printed across the tank in bold green lettering. It was too big for me so I tied a knot in the bottom of it, showing off my summer glow stomach beneath it. That glow was gonna be sapped away by layers and layers of winter clothes soon enough, so I might as well let it shine while I still could.

We headed out of the room towards the basketball court and I almost made it inside before I realised I'd forgotten an elastic for my hair. I told Mila then turned back and slammed straight into a solid wall of muscle, stumbling back a step in alarm. I recognised the Viking asshole who'd fallen over my suitcase as he stared down his perfectly straight nose at me, his sharp blue eyes feeling like they were cutting into my flesh. His dark blonde hair was long enough to tuck behind his ears and his jaw was lined with stubble. The enticing scent of pine sailed from him and almost tempted me to lean closer.

"Was that another attempt on my life or are you really just as thick as you look?" he deadpanned and anger clawed its way under my skin.

My upper lip peeled back as I surveyed the dipshit in his fitted black shirt and grey sweatpants, apparently above wearing the designated uniform.

"If I made an attempt on your life, you wouldn't still be breathing," I said coolly and he laughed so hard it made my insides shrivel.

I tried to step past him and he barred my way by sidestepping, planting his huge ass chest in my path again. "You're late for class," he growled.

"And what? Are you gonna tell tales on me, asshole?"

His eyes flashed with rage and he pressed his shoulders back as a menacing smile pulled at his mouth. “Call me an asshole again and see what happens.”

I swallowed the sharp lump in my throat and mentally pulled up my big girl panties as I leaned toward him, tip-toeing up to get as close to his face as possible. “Ass...hole.”

“Detention!” he roared in my face, making my heart jolt in shock.

“What-” I blurted but he barrelled on over me.

“Next Monday night, six o’clock in my office.” His eyes gleamed as he gazed at me, waiting for the penny to drop. And it dropped alright. That bitch pinged off the inside of my brain and used my body like a pin-ball machine.

“You’re a teacher?” I breathed like an idiot.

He smiled like he’d won the lottery. Because he *knew*. He fucking knew I’d gotten it wrong and he’d let me believe he was a student just so he could wait to see my reaction when I figured it out.

“Come on, are you serious?” I demanded. “I didn’t know you were faculty.” I backed away from him. I mean sure, he looked mature, but he didn’t look like a damn teacher. What kind of teacher had a playboy smile and a warrior body? It wasn’t right. He could only have been a few years older than me. Max.

“Well maybe this will teach you a lesson about how to speak to other people with respect. Teacher or otherwise.” He pointed me back into the hall. “Go. Now. No questions.”

“I need an elasti-”

“Too late, princess. You’re late and if you waste another second of my time, I’m gonna make that detention a double.” He gave me a stern look which was hot enough to make my blood temperature rise for the second

time today and I spun away from him, making sure my long hair *accidentally* slapped him in the face.

“Woops, shame I don’t have a tie,” I said innocently as his heated breath ran over my neck from behind. He was herding me into the sports hall like a damn sheep dog.

“Watch it, Rivers,” he warned in a low tone only I could hear. “Or you might wake up with it all cut off.”

My heart missed a beat as he swept past me into the hall and I hurried over to join Mila amongst the masses. She had a red ball tucked under her arm and she frowned at my loose hair. I jerked my head at the teacher with a pout in explanation.

“Did he tell you off?” she asked under her breath.

“Yeah, he gave me detention,” I whispered with a scowl.

“Girl, you sure know how to make an impression on your first day.”

I threw my head back with a silent groan. I wasn’t trying to make waves, but I was making a damn ocean today.

“Monroe is a hard ass,” Mila breathed, glancing over at him as he started introducing the lesson. “But shit, I’d fuck him sixty eight ways ‘til Sunday if I got the chance.”

I snorted a laugh and Monroe’s voice cut through the air. “Miss Rivers, is there something funny that you’d like to share with the class?” he snapped, his voice ringing right through to my soul. Holy hell, that stern tone did bad things to me, but it also made me dislike him even more.

“No sir,” I said innocently.

I glanced at Mila who was hiding behind a tall guy with broad shoulders. She held the red ball against her crotch as she rolled her eyes back into her head and mouthed Monroe’s name.

I tried to choke it down, but a laugh tumbled from my lips and Monroe's eyes snapped back to me with a deadly promise in them. "See me after class, Rivers. I'll teach you a thing or two about respect."

A collective *oooh* sounded out around me and I folded my arms in annoyance. It wasn't my fault Mila was funny as hell. And dammit, I did not need any more trouble coming my way today.

"But before that, you can come up here and demonstrate today's exercise." Monroe waved his hand and I blew out a breath before heading up to the front of the class. I could feel my cheeks colouring as he swivelled me around to face the other students and my eyes immediately found Blake, Saint and Kyan. The three of them were standing to one side of the class, their arms folded as they gave Monroe their attention.

"Memphis, Bowman, Roscoe." Monroe directed them forward, tossing a sack of balls at their feet. "Let's remind everyone how to play dodgeball."

"Dodgeball?" I scoffed as Saint barked a callous laugh. "What are we, twelve?"

The three guys lined up in front of me while the rest of the class closed ranks, sniggering as they watched.

Blake was the only one of the boys who was smiling like this was a game. The other two looked like they were about to charge into battle. *Oh shit.*

Monroe moved closer to me with a goddamn smirk, lowering his head to murmur under his breath. "Fuck with me, Rivers, and I'll fuck with you harder." He strode away to join the crowd, folding his arms across his chest and bringing his whistle to his lips.

Asshole!

The shrill noise sounded and the three guys launched the first balls at me. I flinched, trying to spring away but one slammed into my arm and the other

hit me in the gut with sheer force. Rage and embarrassment tangled inside me as they continued their assault and I totally lost my cool as my skin stung from their attacks. I snatched up the balls as they bounced to the ground, hurling them back at them so they had to deflect and dodge them themselves.

A ball slammed into my cheek and pain splashed through my skin from the power behind the throw. *Ow!*

Monroe's whistle blew again and I fought the urge to lift a hand to my stinging skin as Saint smirked at me like the devil himself.

"What was that about you always coming out victorious from a fight?" Kyan asked coolly.

"Do you normally fight your opponents three on one?" I shot back and a smile twisted up the corner of his mouth.

"Alright, everyone split into two teams, we're gonna play a full game. If you get hit you're out." Monroe blew his whistle again and Blake took a path straight for me. He reached out, brushing his knuckles against my burning hot cheek and the touch sent off a chemical reaction in my body. I was pretty sure none of his balls had hit me and was even surer that had been deliberate.

"You okay, Tate?"

"Your friends are assholes," I pointed out.

"Nah," he said with an edge to his tone I didn't miss. "They're just waiting for you to prove your mettle. You're doing good so far. Impress them at the initiation tonight and they're gonna like you a *lot*." The way he said those final words and paired them with stroking his thumb down my side had a deep shiver running through me.

I glanced over his shoulder, finding Saint and Kyan waiting for him. They weren't looking at me like they wanted to hurt me anymore. They

were looking at me like they wanted their hands on me too. And it set off a fire in my flesh I couldn't ignore. But after the dodgeball bullshit and the hair pulling, I only had time for one of them.

I turned back to Blake with a smile, gliding my fingers over his arm. "I don't care if they like me, golden boy." I ran my hand all the way up to his shoulder, his muscles flexing beneath my touch.

"But you care if I do, right?" he growled like he needed to know the answer to that.

I leaned in close to his ear, a smile pulling at my mouth as I prepared to tease the hell out of him. "No, not really."

I turned and walked away to join Mila in one half of the class, scooping up a dodgeball and preparing to get some revenge on Saint and Kyan. Blake wasn't deterred and he crossed the room to join my team too.

"You okay, girl?" Mila asked, her brows pinched in concern.

"I'm fine," I said firmly, casually tossing my hair over my shoulder in case anyone around me was sniffing for weaknesses.

"Monroe always does that shit to newbies. Although, you're the first one I've seen fight back. You were lucky they were playing nice." She grinned at me and I broke a smile.

My dad had taught me to scream, kick and bite if I ever got backed into a corner by an enemy. But the key was to never get cornered to start with. So if the Night Keepers were intent on testing me tonight, I had to be ready for whatever their initiation involved. Because if that was an example of the boys playing nice, I wasn't looking forward to finding out what it was like when they played dirty.



The dodgeball game was as savage as expected with this bloodthirsty lot. Eric Balthers was the first to be sent to the nurse when Kyan Roscoe slammed a ball into his face hard enough to break his nose and Kirstin Effers followed him as Blake Bowman's ball took out the backs of her knees and she fell hard on her elbow.

I was sure she hadn't broken it, but I couldn't stand a crier so I'd sent her scurrying off too. She could wipe her snotty nose and dry her damn eyes good and proper before she came back into my class. No. Thank you.

I watched the princess as she darted around the sports hall. Her aim was good and she had the cutthroat instincts she'd need if she expected to survive this place. She wasn't even afraid to go up against the top dogs and I suppressed a smirk as she aimed a ball perfectly, catching Saint Memphis square in the back of the head. It was against the rules to hit above the shoulders, but I didn't give a shit about enforcing that particular rule. Especially for him.

Saint swung around with the glint of the devil in his eye as he snatched up a ball of his own and threw it back at her with his full strength. The

princess didn't even flinch, planting her feet and catching that motherfucker like a pro. She stumbled back a step, but it was clean.

"You're out, Memphis!" I shouted, punctuating it with a blast of my whistle.

Saint stalked from the game with a heat in his expression directed at Tatum which said he was gonna kill her or fuck her. Maybe both. I just hoped she didn't lose that spark in her eyes once she fell prey to him and his friends. Which she would. The Night Keepers weren't even trying to hide the fact that she'd become their latest infatuation and the sad truth was, that probably wouldn't end well for her.

I glanced at my watch as we closed in on the end of the lesson and released two short blasts on my whistle to call time on the game.

"Next time, let's see if any of you can actually *dodge* the balls," I growled, letting them see my disappointment in the piss poor effort I'd just seen from most of them. There were a few exceptions to that, but I didn't hand out praise like candies at halloween. If they wanted my flattery, they'd need to do something a lot more impressive than be good at a game designed for kids.

Blake Bowman cupped his hands around his mouth and crowed like a rooster to celebrate his team's victory, running over to Tatum and slapping her a high five. In all honesty, I hadn't bothered to keep track of the score so I had no idea if they'd really won. Who gave a shit anyway? Aside from Blake of course. That kid had to win something at least five times a day to keep his ego propped up and he invented competitions for himself to win if there weren't enough real ones to keep him satisfied.

Kyan Roscoe strolled up to me, re-tying his top knot as he offered me a dark smile. "Are you free tomorrow night, Nash?" he asked me casually like we were old friends instead of student and teacher.

“It’s Monroe around the other students,” I reminded him, rolling my eyes. Not that he ever listened.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Actually I’ve got a hot date,” I joked. The only chance of that would be if I went off campus, and with the staff meeting planned for tonight I’d have to do an extra workout tomorrow to stick to my goals so there wasn’t much likelihood of that. Besides, the closest town was ten miles away and it wasn’t exactly filled with bars and nightlife. No, once I set foot on campus I basically got to say goodbye to my dating life until the holidays.

“Yeah. With me. I promise to treat you real nice before I get you on your back and start pounding you,” he joked and I snorted a laugh.

“You know I prefer being on top,” I replied, earning me a heated look from Pearl Devickers as she walked by. I swear that girl could scent testosterone from a mile off and always came panting like a bitch on heat at the slightest whiff. I cleared my throat as Kyan laughed. “Fuck off before you get me into trouble.”

“Yes, sir,” he said mockingly as he backed away. “Tomorrow at nine?”

“I’ll text you. I do have other students to teach, you know?”

He nodded, hiding his smile as he headed away after his friends. It wouldn’t matter if I told him to meet me at four am, he’d still show. Kyan was even more addicted to training than I was and he was damn good at it too. It didn’t hurt that our little sessions earned me a cut of his illegal brawl winnings either. Although officially I didn’t know anything about those of course.

I folded my arms and watched as all of the students headed away to the locker rooms to get changed.

The princess fell into step with Mila Cruz, laughing her head off once again as she sashayed out of the gymnasium without so much as a

backwards glance.

My jaw ticked as I waited for her to remember her rendezvous with me, but she just kept walking. And walking. And fucking laughing.

I blew out a long breath through my nose and started counting to one hundred as I gave her one final chance to realise her mistake.

One, two, three...

What was it about these jumped up little rich kids that made them believe they were so superior? Was it the solid gold diapers they wore to catch their shit as babies or the thoroughbred ponies they were gifted for their fifth birthdays?

Twenty six, twenty seven, twenty eight...

Maybe it wasn't the *stuff* though. Perhaps it was the careless way Daddy ignored the cleaning lady or the look Mommy got on her face whenever the bellboy dared to open his mouth.

Forty one, forty two, forty three...

It could be the casual way their parents tossed hundred dollar bills out as tips as if they weren't even worth the paper they were printed on.

Seventy five, seventy six, seventy seven...

Maybe it was all of those things, but I had another theory. I was willing to bet it was the way their parents just made problems magically go away. DUI? *Sorry Officer, maybe I can just pay the fine this time and we can forget the paperwork.* Disgruntled employee? *Just talk to my team of lawyers, they can wrap up your issues in a mountain of red tape and you can sign an NDA for good measure.*

No problem was too big or payoff too small. And that just had to fuck up an integral part of a kid as they grew up. What was life without responsibility, accountability, *consequences*? They were given free rein to

be little assholes as often and as aggressively as they liked. It was no wonder they all grew up to be a bunch of fucking dicks.

Eighty eight, eight nine, ninety...

My jaw locked tight as my gaze remained fixed on the door to the girls' locker rooms.

Yeah, that was what was wrong with this bunch of next generation pricks: no culpability, no responsibilities, no *repercussions*.

Well that shit didn't fly with me.

Ninety eight, ninety nine, one fucking hundred. Alright then, princess, you asked for it.

I lifted my chin and strode towards the girls' locker rooms with a deep scowl etched onto my features.

The blue door stood closed before it and I banged my knuckles against it heavily three times.

“Male staff member coming in, cover up your tits and put your pussies back undercover. You've got five seconds to comply!” I barked.

Squeals of alarm came from the girls who were changing inside accompanied by some fuckwit going *wooooo*. I was pretty sure that was Pearl Devickers and if I could prove it she'd be enjoying detention for a week.

My temper rose as I waited for them to get their shit together and I knocked the door open once they'd had enough time.

I strode straight into the open space between the lockers. A few of the girls looked scandalised, most of them seemed resigned and a couple had *accidentally* forgotten to cover themselves up properly.

“Heathcot, Devickers, Smith and Pride,” I snapped. “Cover yourselves up and report to detention on Monday.” They all started giggling, clearly wanting detention with me but they were out of luck. I'd had enough

practice dealing with horny schoolgirls to know how to disarm this kind of shit. “You can report to Mr Hutchins straight after class.”

Their faces fell at that and I fought a smirk. Hutchins had B.O. and bad breath coupled with a great passion for cataloging dusty old books which he found in the back of the library. His detentions consisted of way too much time stuck in a small room with his stench and a boring as hell task which took hours to complete. Maybe after enduring that they’d think again about trying to flash me their udders.

Silence fell as the offending girls gaped at me in horror and hurried to cover themselves properly. I looked through the cloud of bimbos for my prey as the rest of the girls in the room waited to see what I wanted.

“Princess,” I snapped as I pointed her out. She turned those big blue eyes on me and blinked innocently.

“Yes, sir?”

Good to see she knows how to be respectful sometimes.

“Did you forget something?”

She stared at me for a long moment, batting those long lashes, but I could see the cunning hiding behind the bimbo mask and I wasn’t falling for her shit.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, I thought you meant for me to come and find you after I got changed?” she tried.

“I did not. My office. Now.”

“Okay...I’ll just finish getting changed and-”

“Are you deaf, princess?” I asked in a deadly tone as I stalked towards her. “I didn’t say to come in a minute. I said to come *now*.”

“I could come now if he wanted me to,” Devickers murmured behind her hand and I pointed a finger at her without turning from the princess.

“You just earned yourself a whole week with Mr Hutchins after school, Devickers,” I snarled and she gasped in alarm.

The princess hesitated, glancing to Mila Cruz who had the good sense to nudge her towards me. She was still wearing her forest green gym skirt and sports bra so I didn’t know what she was blushing about. Actually, on second look that red tint in her cheeks wasn’t a blush, it was rage, pure and simple. *Bring it on, princess.*

I gave her a mocking bow and pointed her ahead of me towards the door.

She pouted her lips in that way rich girls always did when life was being oh so fucking unfair and strutted out of the locker room ahead of me.

I followed and waited for her to turn right before barking, “Left!”

She whirled around angrily and I directed her along the corridor to my office.

I hounded her all the way there, walking close enough to catch the scent of vanilla and honey blossom which clung to her skin and enjoying the way she tensed up at the feeling of me on her heels.

We reached my office and I leaned around her to open the door, pointing at the wooden chair before my desk. It was a damn uncomfortable piece of furniture which I’d taken great pleasure in selecting especially for the little shits I had to drag in here for a tongue lashing.

The princess dropped down onto the chair and crossed her legs as she waited for me to move to my desk. But I didn’t. I closed in behind her, moving closer and closer until I was rewarded with her straightening uncomfortably in the ass numbing chair. No one liked to know they had a wolf at their back.

“There are several things which I won’t tolerate in my class, princess, care to guess what they may be?” I asked in a dangerously low voice.

She cleared her throat before she answered, tossing that long, blonde hair in a casually flirtatious way. But I wasn't going to be tempted into looking at her like that.

"My name is Tatum," she said in a surprisingly strong voice. "Tatum Rivers."

I barked a laugh in surprise. The girl had balls. I liked that. It would just make it all the more entertaining to break her in. Which I would. Because they all fell into line with me one way or another when they realised that their money, influence, family names and plastic perfection looks didn't mean shit to me. I wanted respect. And the best they could hope to earn from me was my respect in return. Though that was a hard won prize.

"I don't think you're quite grasping the seriousness of this discussion, princess," I growled, circling her like a predator about to go in for the kill. "I don't tolerate backtalk, name calling or fucking giggling in my class and you've started off our relationship by offering me all three."

I came to a halt in front of her and she was forced to tilt her head back as she looked up at me. Her golden hair spilled down her back and the sports bra offered me a way too easy view of her full breasts as they strained to escape the elasticated material. *Goddammit.*

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, widening those big blues at me as she laid on the innocent act again. But this one was a far cry from innocent. She reeked of trouble and the endless depths of those eyes sparkled with nothing but disobedience. Hell, I almost could have sworn she was enjoying this. She liked going toe to toe with a strong opponent, but I'd be damned if she'd be coming out on top with me.

I sat back onto my desk in front of her, spreading my legs wide as I curled my fingers around the hand-carved oak.

“You’re not leaving this office until you tell me what you were giggling about,” I said, snagging her gaze and keeping hold of it.

She bit her bottom lip, not nervously like she should have been, but seductively like she knew exactly the way to a guy’s libido with that one practiced move. But that shit wasn’t going to work on me.

My eyes narrowed on her and I folded my arms as I waited.

“I can only apologise again,” she said and she almost sounded sincere that time. “But I can’t remember what made me laugh now...”

I didn’t reply. My jaw tightened and I scowled down at her as I waited her out, giving her a look which let her know in no uncertain terms that there wasn’t going to be a free pass here.

Kudos to her though, she made it longer than a minute in silence before she cracked. Most of the kids couldn’t go beyond ten seconds of that shit.

“Do you seriously need to know?” she asked, her gaze slipping from my face for a moment and landing on my crotch before she flipped it back up quickly. This time the colour in her cheeks really was a blush.

“Enlighten me,” I demanded, but I was pretty sure I had the gist of it from that look.

When I’d taken this job I hadn’t given much consideration to the fact that I’d be put in a position of power over a bunch of girls who were only a few years younger than me. I’d had my own reasons for wanting this position. For *needing* it. And my goal didn’t have anything to do with school girl crushes and horny teenagers. But they had certainly caused me more than a few headaches since my arrival.

“Well, I was just commenting on how you don’t look like your average teacher,” she said, keeping her features straight as she forced her tongue around the words.

“And?” That wasn’t all of it, not by half and I was more than happy to mortify her with the goal of earning the respect I needed from her. Besides, it didn’t exactly hurt my ego to have a beautiful girl talking about me like that and I wasn’t beyond enjoying the words even if I’d never act on them.

“And...someone might have mentioned that they wouldn’t mind...dating you...”

“*Dating me?*” I asked scathingly. “The truth, princess, or you’ll be earning detention for being late to your next class too.”

“Fine,” she growled, raising her chin as fire flared in her eyes. This answer would be the truth. “We said we wouldn’t mind fucking you.”

My pulse spiked at that sentence coming out of her pink lips. I’d guessed Little Miss Innocent was more than used to getting dirty with the commoners from that look in her eye and now I had my answer.

“Is that so?” I deadpanned. “Well, sorry to burst your bubble, princess, but I have no interest in screwing little school girls.”

Her nostrils flared with rage at my insult and I swiped a hand over my mouth to hide my smirk.

“Don’t worry, I have no interest in screwing assholes, either,” she ground out.

I snorted a laugh and leaned back against my desk. I should have chewed her out for it, but I was quietly impressed that she hadn’t just flushed beetroot and dissolved into tears of embarrassment.

“Good.”

“Is that all?” she demanded, pushing herself to her feet as she prepared to leave.

“Almost.”

She ground her teeth as she was forced to wait for what else I had to say and I let the moment drag as I drank it in. Maybe I was a power junkie, but

I didn't care. I couldn't help but get off on knocking these rich little assholes down a peg or two.

"You laughed *twice*," I said in a low voice.

For a moment, confusion warred in her gaze before she realised that I wasn't going to let her leave without the full story.

Now that she was on her feet she was eye to eye with me where I perched on my desk and the depths of her blush rose up beneath the freckles which dusted her cheeks. But she fought the embarrassment away with tooth and nail, her gaze hardening as she looked right into my eyes.

"It was a joke about what it might be like to have you on your knees with your tongue between my thighs. But on second thought, that was a terrible joke. Everyone knows that arrogant assholes like you don't know a G-spot from their elbow and you wouldn't be able to find my clit with a map and GPS."

My eyes widened at the balls on her and I was left momentarily speechless by her little display. The cocky asshole in me was tempted to grab her by her hips, toss her over my desk, hitch that little skirt up and prove her wrong...but that was definitely crossing the teacher/student barrier and I had zero desire to go to prison for the sake of proving to a girl that I could make her come so hard she forgot her fucking name. No map required.

"Is that all, sir?" she demanded haughtily and I pushed my tongue into my cheek to stop myself from grinning.

It was damn nice to find a worthy adversary to go to bat against and if that was the way she wanted it, it was fine by me. *Game on, princess.*

"That's all," I agreed easily. "I'll see you in class tomorrow."

She whirled toward the door and her long hair flicked around her, but I was ready for it this time and I leaned back before she could slap me in the

face with it.

She stalked towards the door, her posture rigid with rage and I waited until she stepped through it before I called out to halt her.

“Oh, and, princess?”

“Yes, sir?” she practically snarled.

“Don’t forget about your detention.”

“Can’t wait,” she muttered before striding away and I finally let myself grin.

I was looking forward to next Monday already. *Better bring your A game, princess, because I’ve barely even begun with you.*

My phone buzzed in my pocket as I ran up the hill towards Maple Lodge where the staff lived on site. We each had our own apartment within the enormous building which was big and lavish enough to be fit for a prince, but there was also a huge rec room where some of the staff liked to hang out together in the evenings. And that was also where Headmaster Brown liked to host the staff meetings. In the evenings. After dinner. Because who didn’t want to spend their free time discussing work matters? *Fucking asshat.*

My phone buzzed again and I broke into a sprint. That would be Miss Pontus warning me that I was cutting it fine. But I knew that. I thrived under pressure so I’d set out on my evening run an hour before the meeting was due to begin and I’d taken a route that usually took me an hour and twenty.

I felt half dead, sweat was pouring off of me and my muscles were burning in that way which promised me all kinds of aches come morning. But I’d done it. Fucking smashed it. Just like every goal I set myself.

I pounded my way to the front door and fell forwards, bracing my hands on my knees as I fought to catch my breath.

It was cold out, especially now that the sun was down and my breath rose before me as I started my cool down routine.

Maple Lodge stood at the top of the hill overlooking the valley which contained the rest of the school grounds. It was set back by the perimeter wall to give us some privacy from the students and there was only one path that led up here so we were pretty well away from them.

I took a few minutes to catch my breath, admitting to myself that I *was* a bit late for the meeting now, while not really giving a damn. I was the school P.E. teacher, it was practically in my job description that I stay in shape. And I ran at this time every evening. The Headmaster could bite me if he had a problem with that.

Music floated to me over the trees which surrounded campus and I huffed out an irritated breath as I realised the students were having a much better night than me already. It was half tempting to sneak down and join in with their initiation party. Aside from the fact that they'd clearly recognise me and either want me to fuck off or socialise with them and I wasn't sure which of those options were worse.

I missed my frat house brothers. They knew how to party. And the reality of life as a teacher at this school was so much tamer than I was used to. But that was a sacrifice I was willing to make. Because every day I spent here, moulding the minds and bodies of these pretentious little douchebags, was another day that I drew closer to my goal. And I *was* getting closer. Inch by delicious inch.

I turned my back on the grounds and the music which came from the party the Night Keepers were throwing and headed into Maple Lodge.

The heavy oak door swung open and I walked down the green carpeted entrance hall towards the rec room at the back of the building where I could hear Brown addressing the staff already.

The double doors stood open so I slipped inside, skirting the huge room and the gathered staff members until I found a spot by the rear wall.

Miss Pontus offered me a smile as she spotted me and I gave her a nod in return. She could have left it at that but of course she waved too, drawing more eyes to me. I ignored her, fixing my gaze on Brown as I set my jaw to end the interaction.

She looked away and I gave no shits as her shoulders sagged in disappointment.

Dammit.

“So far the government guidance is simple. Minimise trips out and social gatherings, be aware of contact with anyone outside of your family. So, for now, I think it’s pretty simple for us here. We’re in a remote location, all of our supplies are delivered and we’ve only had twelve cases confirmed in the state so far. As it stands, I believe it’s perfectly acceptable for us to carry on with business as usual,” Brown said.

He was a tall man, ex military and still in the habit of standing ramrod straight like he had a cane shoved right up his ass with his hands clasped at the base of his spine. His hair was non-existent but he had a full, black beard.

He’d adopted a tough but fair attitude when it came to dealing with the students here. Fair being a loose term as he changed his definition of that depending on financial contributions and donations from parents.

For example, Saint Memphis had somehow been granted his own personal bachelor pad on the grounds despite the clear rules about students living in dorms, though I guessed it helped that his mom ran the school

board too. There were plenty of other examples of the brats having grades re-assigned or punishments reduced though. I was just glad that I was allowed to run my own classes how I saw fit.

Miss Pontus raised a hand, tucking a lock of mousy brown hair behind her ear self-consciously as all eyes of the faculty fell on her.

“Yes?” Brown asked.

“I’m just wondering about the stricter measures they’re talking about putting into place. I know we aren’t at that stage yet, but do we have a plan for enforcing lockdown if it comes into practice? I can’t see some of the students taking kindly to having their parties ended...”

She had a point there. Saint, Kyan and Blake lived to no man’s rules, especially in their downtime. If they didn’t want to adhere to lockdown regulations then we would have one hell of a problem on our hands when the time came. Plus all of the other students followed their lead, so if they made it clear that they weren’t following the rules then none of them would.

“I am confident that the staff will be able to enforce any and all sanctions which come into place as and when they’re required,” Brown replied with a tight smile. “But for now, the only rule we have to worry about is us isolating ourselves from the outside world. The students aren’t allowed to leave school grounds anyway so it’s no different for them. But now the staff will have to stay on site at all times too. Is that clear?”

A wave of agreement spilled from the lips of all the staff members, but I remained silent. I rarely left the grounds anyway so it didn’t mean much to me, but I couldn’t say I loved the idea of *having* to stay here. I don’t know why it even made a difference but somehow, the second he’d given me that order I’d instantly had the urge to leap over the gate and run for the hills. *Probably won’t get paid too well out in the hills though.*

It didn't sound like I was getting much choice in my isolation status so I took a deep breath and sucked it up just like I had with countless other shit this job had thrown my way. And as the meeting finished up, I moved to slip away.

"Monroe?" Brown called over the crowd, beckoning me close. "A word."

I fought the urge to sigh. There was a plate of spaghetti on order from the kitchens waiting for me in the staff dining room and I still needed to shower before I could demolish it. I really didn't appreciate his sense of timing.

I moved between the crowd towards him with a tight smile on my face that didn't exactly do much to mask my feelings on this summons. Not that Brown ever seemed to notice such signs. I just hadn't figured out if that was because he was thick or just an asshole.

"Can I count on your assistance if we need to rein in the Night Keepers?" Brown asked as soon as I reached him. Of course this was about those three. They'd be the key to the student body's cooperation if the time came to put more restrictions on the kids.

"They don't respond well to demands," I warned him. I was being polite. We both knew those boys would do whatever the fuck they wanted whenever the fuck they wanted and if we made ourselves too much of an irritant to them, they'd have their parents onto the school board gunning for our jobs.

My friendship with Kyan might be enough to buy me some measure of protection from their wrath but I doubted it. He was as ruthless as a starving alley cat with a cornered mouse when he wanted to be.

"I know. I was hoping you might be able to help me come up with a strategy to manage them," Brown said, a cunning glint in his eyes. "I'm

thinking that if we can present this to them right, offer them the right incentives, then they might just agree to it anyway. Besides, Bowman's own mother recently died from this damn virus, they know well enough to take it seriously."

"Sure," I agreed because I couldn't see any point in arguing. "I'll have a think about the best way to handle them."

"Have you eaten yet? We could brainstorm over dinner?" he suggested.

Oh fuck no. This is my goddamn time.

"I need to shower first," I said with a shrug. "How about tomorrow morning? I've got a free period-"

"No need. I'll head on down to the dining hall and wait for you." He clapped me on the shoulder and my jaw clenched as I fought against the urge to let my feelings on that fan-fucking-tastic idea show.

"Perfect," I replied.

Brown smiled and headed off towards the dining hall, leaving me to go on up to my apartment and enjoy my shower. It looked like that was the only part of the evening I'd be getting to myself now. Great. I'd just have to make the most of it. I'd wash my hair twice, scrub the shit out of my skin and probably jerk off for good measure.

Dammit, my life sucks sometimes.



I was wearing a black fitted dress with lace sleeves and my favourite necklace swung from my throat. My big sister had gifted it to me for my twelfth birthday. The silver pendant was circular and held an intricate Celtic knot inside it. She'd bought it on a field trip to Ireland and said it was a symbol of eternal love. Whether we were alone or apart, we would always be part of each other's lives.

My heart tugged as I missed her and decided to write her a letter. Mila was still in the shower so I moved to my nightstand, pulling open the drawer and taking out a pen and the premium parchment I used for this purpose only.

I sat on my bed, resting my back against the wall and placing a textbook on my legs. I positioned the paper on top of it, poising the pen to write the words I needed to spill from my heart.

Dear Jessica,

So, I'm here at Everlake prep. Dad didn't give in to my begging to stay with him, go figure, right?

I guess I'm getting the 'real life teenage experience' at last. I got really close to avoiding it, dammit. But it's not so bad. I've even made a friend or two already. You'd love my roommate. She's a dancer like you. And it may even be possible that she has a filthier mouth than you too.

You should see the guys here. There's these three assholes who think they own the world. It would be funny if everyone in the school didn't take it so seriously.

I'm off to be 'initiated' into their little club tonight. I know, I know...I don't jump through hoops for anyone. I can practically hear you rolling your eyes, Jess. But I'm here for good this time. A full year (thanks again Dad). So I've gotta make an effort, haven't I? And apparently this is a right of passage or something. So don't judge me too hard, okay? You know me. Whatever they get me to do, I'll come out swinging.

I miss you.

Love Tatty x

I folded the letter up and tucked it into my drawer just as Mila walked back into the room in a towel. It was almost seven already and from the looks of her, we were gonna be an hour late to the party.

"Tatuum..." She sang like she wanted something.

"What's up?" I swung my legs off the bed and she eyed my dress appreciatively.

"Firstly, you look hellfire hot. And secondly..." She bit into her lower lip. "Would you hate me forever if I met you at the party? Danny's coming over and I haven't gotten laid in like forever."

I laughed, standing and pushing my feet into my black stilettos. “Fine, but you owe me one.” I smirked and she bounced up and down on her toes.

“I owe you ten!” She ran forward, throwing her arms around me so her wet, shea and coconut scented hair slapped against my cheek. “Do you know how to get there? You just follow the path to the other side of the lake and keep walking until you see the sign for the Oak Common House. It’ll lead you to the water’s edge and then you can’t miss it, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, stepping back. Her towel came loose and dropped straight to her feet. A laugh exploded from her lips and one tumbled from mine too.

“Woops. Guess you’ve seen it all now, huh?” She snatched up the towel, but didn’t bother to wrap it back around herself as she headed to her chest of drawers and fished out some lacy red underwear.

“Just don’t screw him on my bed,” I warned her.

“Promise!” she cried. “I do not break girl code ever.”

I laughed as I snagged my leather jacket from the back of the door, slipping it on before exiting the room. I made my way downstairs and out into the woods, eyeing a group of girls up ahead of me in cute outfits, all of their arms linked as they walked along the path. They must have been heading to the party so I just fell into step behind them, trying to ignore the thrashing of my heart at going it alone.

This making an effort bullshit wouldn’t have been so bad if I hadn’t known I was going to be put through some test tonight. The Night Keepers didn’t seem like the type of boys who would teach me a secret handshake and be done with it. Whatever their initiation was, it wasn’t going to be pretty. But I was going to face it without blinking. Because that was the only way I was gonna get their attention off of me. I’d soon stop being the new girl. I just had to ride out the storm until that happened.

Once tonight was done, I was gonna do as Mila said and stay off of their radar. Which was all well and good apart from the fact that I'd spent my shower thinking about the way Blake's hands had brushed over me in P.E., how Saint's eyes had scored lines across my flesh like he'd rather be using his tongue, and how Kyan had surveyed me with an animal kind of hunger that had almost made me fear for my life. They were just...*gah*. Addictive was the only word for it. And I'd had the smallest of tastes. I had to be strong enough not to take a little more. And a little more after that...

I could see why they were practically royalty around here. But with girls no doubt regularly dropping to their knees and opening their mouths for them, they didn't need a girl like me. I was too much effort for rich boys who had everything. They were used to girls begging for it. Ones they could offer out breadcrumbs to as little or as often as they liked. And when they realised I was of a different variety, they'd race away faster than Road Runner in roller skates. The problem was, inside me was a reckless girl who was just as horny as all of those other girls, hornier probably. So I was gonna have to fight to keep her on a short leash.

I rounded the lake, slowing my pace as the group of girls pulled ahead of me. The sky was a deep purple as the last of the light trickled from the world and the sound of roosting birds sang in the dusk. The air was cold enough to send a shiver through me, but it made me feel entirely awake too. This place was a dream world, its beauty almost haunting. The trees reached up far above me as the path curved into the woodland, following the line of the lakeshore. Every hundred meters or so was a lantern hanging from a tall wooden post. Moths and fireflies gathered around them, throwing themselves against their blinding heat.

The path twisted off into the trees ahead of me so I lost sight of the girls, but it was pretty simple to find your way around this place when everything

was centred around the lake. Through the trees, Tahoma Mountain was looming, its peak draped in the final glimmer of sunlight before the world tumbled into darkness.

My heart skipped and bounced as I found myself alone in the forest. A prickle of energy ran along my limbs and made my breathing quicken. I liked the taste of danger in the air. The sense that a wolf could be watching from the trees. I'd always been drawn to the darkness. Even as a little girl, Dad said I'd never needed a night light or the door cracked open. The natural fear of it lived in me, but there was a thrill in it too that I craved.

A light to my right caught my attention and I paused, my eyes following the line of a path that led out to the incredible old church I'd seen from the far side of the lake. The entrance was dark, but the arching stained glass window to the left of it cast a hazy red and amber pattern on the ground in the shape of a crucifix. I didn't imagine many people were worshipping at this time of night, but it was clearly left open for students and faculty to come and go as they liked.

Classical music called to me from inside. I didn't know much about music like that, but that particular tune was famous. The most spine-tingling song I'd ever heard, used in countless movies to invoke shivers down the spine. Mozart's *Lacrimosa* rolled over me like a cold wind and set my pulse pounding.

I wasn't in any rush so I headed down the path with my pulse thumping in my throat. Something about this place called to me in the pit of my soul. It screamed my name and lured me in with dark promises. I didn't understand why because a church should have been a place of comfort, but this one wasn't. This one felt threatening and equally alluring. Like the devil hid between its walls and had forced God out from its depths.

I pushed the heavy, wooden door open, slipping inside and my breathing hitched at the sight before me. It wasn't a church at all, it had been converted into an incredible hang-out with plush couches and an eighty inch TV on the wall. A roaring fireplace stood to my left and the heat of it washed over my cheeks, yet somehow didn't warm me through at all. A wooden stairway led up to a balcony at the far end of the enormous space, but it was too dark to see anything up there. Doors led out of the central area and my gaze snagged on one which was ajar across the room. A series of stone steps led down to the door and the powerful music was calling from beyond it.

I wet my lips, knowing I should run, sensing it in every fibre of my being. But I couldn't ignore the tug in my gut that drew me towards that room. And I found my feet moving in that direction before I could think any better of it.

I headed down the steps, opening the door and moving into a huge stone chamber which was only lit by a dim blue ring of lighting around the floor. The space had been converted into a state-of-the-art gym, but I barely got to take it in before a weight collided with me.

My breathing stalled as I was thrown against the wall, my cheek pressing to the icily cold bricks as my hands were pulled painfully tightly behind my back. The solid chest of a man crushed me to the wall and his hot breath ran over my ear, the clean, apple scent of him like bottled danger.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" Saint's arctic voice cut into me and my mouth opened and closed with no words coming out until I forced my throat to work. The music was building to a crescendo and it felt like the climax was going to be an execution.

"The door was open." *Great answer, Tatum.*

“So you thought you’d just come wandering in to my private property?” Saint snarled, the heat of his body almost too much to bear.

“I didn’t know it was private – it’s a church!” I jerked against his iron hold, trying to calm my mind enough to snag onto my training. I jerked one hand free then threw my elbow back. He laughed as it slammed into his ribs, giving me an inch of room to wheel around in his arms. His palms slammed to the wall either side of me and he leaned in close with a wicked sneer.

“This isn’t a church, Barbie doll. It’s a temple. *My* temple.” His eyes dripped down to my outfit, scouring it like he didn’t approve, but the way his pupils dilated said he did.

I swallowed the hard lump in my throat, straightening my spine against the wall and schooling my expression. “You can’t be serious?” I scoffed.

“Deadly serious,” he hissed like a snake and I wondered if his saliva was venomous. It wouldn’t have surprised me in the least.

His chest was heaving and I couldn’t help my gaze from dropping to take in the hardened muscles of his chest and the inked words curving around his ribs. *The days are long, but the nights are dark.*

“Most women would pay good money to see me this close and this naked,” Saint growled and I snapped my gaze back to meet his. His eyes were as black as a void, sucking me in and trying to feed on everything good inside me until all that was left was the bad.

The wildest, hidden part of me was having a damn field day, soaking wet and panting for him while I battled to stop her from peeking out through my expression.

“I didn’t realise you were a prostitute, Saint,” I said. “Sounds like you’re out of my price range. But don’t worry, I don’t need to pay for a good lay, I can get that on my own merit.”

He chuckled darkly, closing the distance between us even more until he seemed to suck away every ounce of oxygen in the vicinity. “Wit will get you one place with me, Barbie. Crushed beneath my heel. And you might be able to get a good lay by licking your adequate lips and pushing up your mediocre cleavage, but you don’t get a mind-blowing fuck with a god unless you’re something special.”

His words sliced at my chest, intended to cut their way to my heart, but I got my defences up before he could touch that. I released a derisive breath and ducked under his arm. He went to grab me and I danced away from him with a laugh.

“I imagine the only one you deem special enough to fuck you is yourself. So give your right hand my regards. She’s a very lucky girl.” I winked and ran away, hearing him coming after me as more laughter bubbled from my chest. *Holy hell, why does taunting the devil feel so good?*

I made it out of the church doors and into the woods before I glanced back. Saint stood in the open doorway, his shadow stretching out into the night and consuming mine.

“You come here again and you’ll regret ever enrolling at Everlake,” he said just loud enough for me to hear and I swallowed hard before heading off down the path.

If darkness was thrilling, Saint Memphis was an ocean of it. My heart pounded harder than it had in years. There was so much about him I found repugnant. The power trip he was riding, the holier-than-thou bullshit he spewed, the goddamn church he’d claimed for himself like he really was a saint. It was disgusting. And yet a primal part of me was falling for it hook, line and sinker. She would have worshipped his body like the god he thought he was. But better than that, she would have had him worshipping at her altar too.

I finally reached a sign for the Oak Common House and turned down another track which led me to a wooden pier stretching out into the perfectly still lake. My lips parted at the sight of the huge cabin suspended above the water. A balcony ringing it was thronging with people and fairy lights strung around the railing reflected in the lake below, making it look like some kind of ethereal set plucked right out of a fantasy movie.

I headed down the pier and students eyed me curiously as I approached. My gaze hooked on Blake Bowman who was leaning back against the railing on the left, a beer held loosely between his fingers as a pick ‘n mix of girls laughed at whatever he was saying. He could have had whoever he wanted, but it was me his eyes found and they illuminated like he’d just struck gold. He was wearing a pale grey shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his muscular forearms and his dark hair was swept back stylishly in a purposefully messy way.

My lips tilted up at the blazing intensity of his stare. If Saint was ice, Blake was fire. And I didn’t know which one I preferred to die by.

I stepped forward but a large guy in a football jersey moved into my path, holding out his hand. “Hey fledgling, where’s your invite?”

I fought an eyeroll as I reached into my purse and produced the chicken bone Blake had given me and the boy crowed loudly to the sky as he took it.

“Tatum Rivers is gonna initiate tonight!” he hollered and more crowing sounded out from the party as he welcomed me into the fold.

Blake carved a path through the girls surrounding him as I moved onto the balcony ringing the cabin. The students around him backed up to give him room until we were contained within a ring of space, like an invisible forcefield lived around him. Untouchable. And yet...

His hand curled around mine before he tugged me a step closer, inspecting me from head to toe. I let my eyes roll to the sky as I waited for his verdict, not that I really gave a shit what he thought of my outfit. I wore it for me, no one else.

“Beautiful.”

“Typical,” I tossed back and he growled low in his throat, the sound setting my skin on fire.

“You didn’t let me finish, Tate.” He dragged me closer still so I entered the cage his body made and his rich and spicy cologne called to me from his skin. “Beautiful would be an insult to you tonight. Hypnotising is closer. But enslaving is the closest.”

“If I make a slave of you then why isn’t there a drink in my hand yet?” I teased and his eyes glittered hungrily.

He tugged me along, the crowd parting once more to let us through as he guided me into the cabin. Heat swept over me as I took in the most extravagant common space I’d ever seen. Couches and armchairs filled the huge room and to the right of them was a long bar with free tea, coffee and freaking chilled cucumber water. Someone had placed a couple of kegs on it too plus rows upon rows of liquor and soda sat beside them. The thump of pop music filled the air, the lights low and the chairs pushed away from the centre of the room to create an already thriving dance floor.

Blake gestured to a freckly guy standing at the end of the bar with his hands behind his back and he came running over like there was a zombie trying to chomp on his ass.

“Take her coat,” Blake demanded and the boy rushed forward to pull it from my shoulders.

“Oh that’s not – well alright then.” I let him pull the leather jacket off then he scurried away to hang it on a hook by the door. “What’s with the

gofer?" I taunted and Blake breathed a note of amusement.

"He's one of the Unspeakables." He slid an arm around my waist, tugging me against his hip as I frowned.

"You mean like in that legend everyone keeps going on about? Do you and your friends seriously call yourself the Night Watchers?" I snorted and his eyes darkened to pitch.

"*Keepers*," he corrected, sharp enough to send a delicious shiver through my body. *Oh I don't mind that tone one bit, but it would sound even better in a bedroom.* "And yeah, we have a whole flock of little sheep doing our bidding. But don't worry sweetheart...they deserve it."

I cocked a brow at him, lowering my voice. "What did that guy do then, put a pin in that big head of yours?" I teased and he smirked.

"He used a screwdriver actually. Frightful fucking mess," he joked and I released a laugh, though I wasn't entirely done being curious about his apparent servants.

He led me further into the party and my gaze caught on a tattoo which he had inked on the back of his neck as I followed him. It looked like an arrow soaring through the air towards some unknown target, a feather hanging from its shaft, caught in the wind caused by its flight. There was something captivatingly beautiful in its simplicity and I was struck with the urge to run my fingers over it.

"Nice tattoo," I commented and Blake turned his green eyes on me with a smirk.

"It's my Night Keeper mark," he said with passion flaring in his gaze. "Saint and Kyan have them too. I don't generally go in for tattoos but this is different. It's important."

I bit my lip as he turned away to lead me further into the party and my gaze trailed over the tattoo again. There was something about it that just

begged my gaze to stay with it.

He led me up to the makeshift bar and leaned in close to my ear to speak over the music. “So, what’s your poison?”

I eyed the array of liquors on the bar as my neck tingled from the touch of his breath. Eyes were swinging our way from every angle and I realised spending time with any of the Night Keepers was bound to make you a topic of conversation around here. But I didn’t have anyone to impress, so I didn’t really care who was watching me. Even when a group of girls close by pointed and glared, jealousy written in the crinkles in their pretty faces, I just smiled politely and shrugged it off.

I pointed at the bottle of dark spiced rum then to a bottle of ginger beer further down the bar.

“Dark and Stormy?” Blake asked, picking up a lime and a knife and I nodded, watching as he filled a glass with ice and poured a generous measure of rum into it. He squeezed half the lime in too before rubbing it around the edge of the glass and adding the ginger beer.

He passed it to me before sucking the lime juice off of his fingers and I sucked on my lip, part of me wanting to make sure he hadn’t missed any.

“Thanks.” I grinned.

He grabbed another beer, twisting the cap off and tossing it in the trash. “Cheers.” He held the bottle out and I clinked my glass to it, my eyes remaining on his as I took a sip. The sharp and sweet mixture crackled over my tongue, leaving the lasting taste of ginger in my mouth.

“So the teachers just let us get away with this?” I asked him, looking to the line of alcohol again.

“Most of them are happy to turn a blind eye seeing as they don’t wanna piss us off.” It was obvious by *us* he meant him and the other Night Keepers. With Saint’s dad being the governor for the entire state, I wasn’t

exactly surprised about that. But what about Blake and Kyan? What was their claim to this empire?

“So which one of your parents makes you a prince?” I asked and a faint frown lined his brow for a moment. He swigged his beer and it was gone a second later.

“My dad owns the Redwood Rattlesnakes.”

I stopped drinking, stopped fucking breathing. “You’re kidding?” The Rattlesnakes were the best. If you were from Sequoia State, you supported the Redwood Rattlesnakes no question about it.

“Nope, there’s a picture of me as a kid bouncing on the knee of Derrick Northfield after they won the Superbowl,” he said with a look that said this was completely normal to him. “Dad owns a bunch of stadiums too.” He shrugged and I shook my head at him.

“So I guess you’re the guy to come to if I want tickets?”

“You like football?” he asked, his eyes lighting up.

“I’ve watched every Rattlesnakes game with my Dad since I can remember. He’s got this beat up old cap he wears whenever we watch it.” I smiled at the memories and Blake grinned at me like he wanted to see inside my head.

“Hey asshole, is she initiating or what?” Kyan’s voice shattered my thoughts and we whipped around to where he was spread out in an armchair. Like, his body was literally taking up every inch of space. His legs were stretched wide, his arms draped over the back of it and a glass of whiskey hung in his fingers with a single ice cube floating around in it. The chair was probably having the time of its life.

“You are, aren’t you Tate?” Blake purred, sliding his arm around my waist and I didn’t mind that at all.

“I didn’t think it was an option,” I jibed, tossing back my drink for some Dutch courage. Blake smoothly took the glass out of my grip and shoved it into the hand of some unsuspecting guy. He looked pissed for half a second before he realised who’d passed it to him and he quickly bowed his head in deference.

Kyan pushed out of his chair, pointing to the door at the back of the cabin which led onto the balcony and Blake steered me after him outside. My gaze snagged on the tattoo on the back of Kyan’s neck as we followed him out. It was an arrow just like Blake’s though the head of his was a little sharper and the details on the feathers were different. But it was just as captivating, just as alluring and clearly designed to match. There should have been something silly about them having matching tattoos but there wasn’t – it was actually intimidating somehow. Like the three of them were one and the same. Part of this exclusive little club that didn’t let anyone else in. But that wild part of me was aching for an invite all the same.

My heart drummed harder as the surrounding students moved after us, their excitement clear as the chatter in the room grew deafening.

My breathing became shallow as I stepped outside into the cool night air and gazed down several feet to the mirror-like water stretching out before me.

“Where’s Saint?” Blake asked.

“He was half naked the last time I saw him,” I said and Blake stiffened, yanking me around to look at him.

“*What?*”

The light in his eyes was gone and there was an endless tunnel of darkness awaiting me in them. I peeled his hands off of me as he held on too tight, my heart juddering in my chest. “I wandered into his *temple* and

disturbed his creepy ass workout routine before he sacrificed a goat or whatever he had planned.”

Blake barked a laugh, his posture relaxing in a wave. “You went there? Fuck, you’re lucky you’re still breathing.”

I frowned at him, not really finding his tone all that amusing. He eyed my expression then lowered his voice. “Not that I’d let him lay a finger on you, Tate.”

“I can look after myself,” I said airily.

“Hm,” he grunted like that turned him on and I released a breath of laughter.

“So what does this initiation involve then?” I asked, but just as I spoke all of the lights went off in the entire cabin and we were plunged into darkness.

“You will be weighed,” Saint’s ice-cold voice filled the air and a single beam of light dissected the air above us. He was on the mother-effing roof of the cabin, gazing down at me wearing a crisp white shirt and black slacks. He had a flashlight in his grip and he swung it into my eyes so I winced from the brightness. I felt Blake slipping away from me along with the whole crowd and knew I was gonna have to face this alone.

“You will be measured,” Saint continued in a low purr. He jumped from the roof to a round of gasps, landing in front of me and making the wood beneath my feet tremble as he landed. “But will you be found wanting?”

I lifted my chin to look up at him and a satanic smile pulled at his mouth. “What do you want me to do?”

He took hold of my shoulders, flipping me around to face the water then spoke loud enough for everyone gathered to hear. “Fledglings must prove their worth. Only the most strong of heart can run with the Night Keepers.” He shoved me forward and I braced my hands on the railing, taking in a

ragged breath. “Swim to the Everlake flag and back. If you fail, drown or don’t manage it in under fifteen minutes, you will be outcast from our company and from the company of those we keep.”

He pointed out to the flag sticking up from a tiny island several hundred meters out in the lake and cold fingers encircled my heart.

Sure, I could swim. But in a freezing cold lake that looked as deep as the depths of hell itself? Er, no thank you.

I glanced at Blake who nodded keenly in encouragement then to Kyan who was smirking like he knew I was going to back out. And that was it for me. Fickle as it was, being underestimated was my fucking kryptonite. And if that beastly bastard didn’t think I could do it, then he was about to be proved severely wrong. The dark and stormy certainly helped too.

“Go on, Tatum!” Mila’s voice caught my ear and I turned, spotting her in the crowd waving and smiling beside Danny Harper. The sight filled my heart with strength and I turned to face Saint again with a smile tugging at my lips.

“Give a girl a hand?” I turned to show him my zipper and his cool fingers brushed my neck before he took hold of it, making my heart falter for a full second. He ran the zipper smoothly down to the base of my spine and I pushed the dress off of my shoulders, bending down to scoop it up. I looked for Mila again so she could take it for me with my purse, but Blake appeared, pulling them from my hands as his eyes raked over my exposed flesh. Thankfully, I’d gone all out tonight in my Victoria Secret matching black panties and bra and my tan was gleaming even in the dark. I kicked off my stilettos before handing them to Blake too. The lust in his eyes was enough to set my pulse racing. And as I looked to Saint beside him and found his eyes eating me up too, heat gathered between my thighs and sent desire licking down my spine.

I turned my back on them, pulling myself up over the railing and taking a deep breath as everyone at the party started cheering me on. The cabin was up on stilts and it was at least six feet to the water - which hadn't seemed that high until now.

Please don't hurt like a bitch.

I dove into the lake and the freezing water immediately stole my breath away. I kicked my way to the surface and as my head breached it, applause and shouts filled my ears. I glanced back up to the deck where Saint, Blake and Kyan stood shoulder to shoulder, staring down at me with shadowed features. Saint lifted his arm to check his watch and that was all the encouragement I needed as I started swimming toward the flag.

It wasn't the swim I found difficult, in fact swimming was one of my favourite exercises in the world. But the cold was gnawing, blinding. It made my body ache and ache until my limbs started to go numb.

I set my sights on the flag as the noise behind me became a din and the glow of the flashlight was left far, far behind. The thickening darkness made it almost impossible to see the flag ahead, but every now and then I'd catch sight of it, protruding toward the sky which was ever so faintly brighter than the surrounding water. The stars were out in full force too, but there was no guiding moon to help me out. The heavens reflected so starkly in the water around me that it looked like I was wading through a galaxy, the glossy waves rippling out around me eternally.

My hand finally hit the lump of rock which housed the flag and whistles and cheers sounded in response back at the cabin. I circled the earthy mass, clinging to its edge as I stole a few precious moments to catch my breath. Ice was wrapping around my bones and my lungs were labouring against the heavy air that pushed in and out of them. Even the adrenaline in my veins couldn't counter the pain.

I clenched my jaw as I gazed back at the cabin, resilience tearing through my body. Then I started toward it, moving faster than before, despite the fact that I could hardly feel each turn of my arms and kick of my legs. I willed myself to move with nothing but my mind and hoped for the best as my muscles fought to listen.

I finally swam into the ring of light cast by Saint's flashlight and smiled up at them through chattering teeth, waiting for my moment of approval.

"You're in!" Blake called excitedly and I threw my head back and whooped to the sky, causing the rest of the party to join in with me.

I headed for the shore to the right of the cabin and by the time I reached it, Blake was waiting there with Mila, Danny, Pearl and Gerald, all of them looking at me with huge grins on their faces. Blake had a huge white towel in his hands and he wrapped it around me the second I waded onto the shore. Sharp stones dug into my toes and I hissed as I made my way over them, but a second later Blake whipped me off my feet and crushed me against his chest.

I glanced up at him in surprise and I instinctively reached out, pushing my fingers into his hair. "Thank you, golden boy."

He chuckled and I smirked as we reached the top of the shore and he carried me inside. He kicked his way through a door and I found myself in an incredible bathroom with a walk in shower. The walls were wooden, but the floor was a russet and cream marble which must have been worth a fortune. He placed me down and I spotted my clothes and purse beside a large basin.

Mila raised an eyebrow at Blake. "Off you go, Bowman, the girl needs to get dressed and sort her makeup out." She popped open her purse and I threw a glance at the oval mirror, eyeing the mascara that had smeared all down my cheeks with a laugh.

“I kinda like her like this,” he growled, his expression making my toes curl up against the cool floor.

Adrenaline was buzzing in my veins and part of me wanted Mila to leave so I could lure Blake into the shower with me and continue chasing this high.

Mila wafted him toward the door and he stared at me the whole time he backed up until he shut it sharply behind him.

“Holy shit, girl, that was epic!” Mila cried the second he was gone. “They usually only make the fledglings jump in, not swim to the fucking *flag*.”

“Are you for real?” I huffed, peeling off my underwear and heading into the shower. I turned it on and flinched under the heated water as my frozen skin adjusted to it.

“Yeah, but shit, now you’re gonna be a legend around here.”

I laughed as I washed off the lake water and scrubbed it out of my hair too. “Those assholes,” I muttered to myself.

I soon stepped out of the unit and dried off with more fluffy towels, wondering if every part of campus was like some sort of luxury holiday camp.

“You’d better watch yourself with Blake,” Mila said with a meaningful look. “I saw the way you two were eye-fucking each other.” She started miming kissing the air, sticking out her tongue and grinding her hips.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Is that how you kiss?”

She tossed a hand towel at me with a grin. “I’m just saying.”

“You said you were gonna stop with the warnings,” I pressed and she sighed heavily.

“Fine. But just know this final thing, Blake is *extra* cold lately. I heard he screwed Tiffany Forsythe up at his Dad’s mountain lodge during summer

break then took off in the middle of the night in his truck. Left her there in the wilderness. Apparently animal control had to go up there and save her from a wild bear.”

“Oh come on,” I laughed. “That’s bullshit.”

“Alright *maybe* Tiffany is a bit of an exaggerator, but not that much,” Mila said, tossing her hair over one shoulder. “Anyway, I think he’s acting even more heartless since his mom died.”

My heart twinged and my brows pulled together. “He lost his mom?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “Anyway, get fucking dressed! I wanna party, girl.”

I nodded, turning away from her although I kinda wanted to ask more about Blake’s mom. I knew how painful grief could be, but I also knew everyone handled it in their own way. And I didn’t exactly know him well enough to bring it up.

I had to put my dress on without underwear and stuff the wet garments in my purse. I tugged my dress down a little lower, conscious of the air flowing between my legs.

“This isn’t a good outfit to go commando in,” I laughed.

“Don’t worry about it, girl.” She tossed me my stilettos and I put them on, figuring fuck it about the underwear. I didn’t wanna walk all the way back to the girls’ accommodation now anyway. No, I wanted to do one thing and one thing only. Party.

Mila helped me fix my makeup then we headed back into the lounge where everyone immediately started chanting my name.

Blake kicked off of the wall opposite the bathroom, moving toward me like a hunter stalking his prey and wrapping his arm around my waist possessively.

“Let’s go play a game,” he spoke into my ear, handing me another dark and stormy and I smiled in thanks for the drink.

“What kind of game?” I narrowed my eyes at him and he smirked.

“You’ll see.” He guided me over to a table where a group of people were clustered, sitting on the carpet. Kyan was lazing in the armchair again and Saint was resting on a couch while no one else dared join him.

Mila dropped down to kneel on the floor between Gerald and Pearl and I eyed the wine bottle which lay down on the table, realising exactly what sort of game this was. Blake pushed me down onto the couch beside Saint, sitting on my other side and resting his hand on my knee. Saint didn’t offer me a word of acknowledgement as he leaned forward to lift his drink from the table.

My gaze zeroed in on his Night Keeper tattoo and I eyed the lethal looking arrow with interest. It looked even more brutal on him somehow with his clean cut appearance, like it was a reminder of just how dangerous he was beneath the surface.

He sat back and sipped on a glass of something that looked and smelled suspiciously like straight vodka. *Jesus*.

“You earned the first go.” Blake squeezed my knee and I took another sip of my drink.

“Yeah seriously, Tatum, that swim was *epic*,” Pearl said, pumping her fist.

“Thanks.” I grinned, warmth filling me at the hope of making some real friends tonight.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Blake encouraged and I shrugged.

When in Rome...

I leaned forward and spun the bottle.

It whipped around fast before slowing and slowing until finally landing on Kyan in his armchair. His brows arched and my heart squeezed like it

was in a vice. Blake's hand didn't release my knee for a long moment, then he finally retracted it and prodded me to get up.

Kyan cocked his head, lifting his index finger to beckon me and I pursed my lips at the gesture. He shifted forward in his seat, getting up when he realised I wasn't going to, clearly willing to meet me half way. I gave in and stood up, stepping around the table to meet him as my pulse thrummed like the wings of a humming bird in my chest.

He looked down at me with a cold disinterest, but one of his hands fell onto my waist while the other moved to snare my chin in a vice-like grasp.

"Welcome to the pack, fledgling," he growled, the noise rumbling right through him and into me. He smelled like whiskey and sin and his earthy eyes held a violent secret in them which I longed to know.

I tip-toed up to meet him as he dropped his head, carving his knuckles up my spine so I quaked like the ground had shifted beneath me.

"I'm not a fledgling anymore," I breathed.

"No, I guess not. You're just another student at this school," he whispered low enough so only I could hear as I tasted his addictive flavour on my lips. I hadn't realised how much I wanted this until right now. He was divine to look at and I couldn't wait to feel his mouth against mine, the coarse scrape of his stubble against my skin. He drew me closer and I tilted my chin up, my eyes fluttering closed as I leaned in, my heart pounding in anticipation of the feeling of his mouth on mine.

"But I don't get hard for Everlake girls." He released me suddenly, walking away and making me stumble forward into the space he'd just been occupying.

Heat flashed up my spine and made everywhere burn with shame. I glanced back at the group around the table and Mila gave me a worried

look. Pearl was biting her lip like she was doing her best not to snigger at me and that just made me flush even hotter.

I forced out a laugh that sounded convincing as shit and I was seriously proud of myself for it. “His loss.” I shrugged, moving forward and spinning the bottle again. It rattled around onto Blake and a smirk pulled at his mouth.

My heart juddered and I became hot for a whole different reason as he pushed out of his seat. He closed the distance between us in two confident strides, a flare of possessiveness in his eyes saying I was all his. And in that moment, I felt I was.

I barely had a moment to prepare as he grabbed a hold of me and dipped me low, tugging my body flush to his as his hands roamed shamelessly down to grab my ass. I gasped and he took the opportunity to plunge his tongue into my mouth, his kiss scorching and all-consuming like a forest fire. I clutched onto his powerful shoulders, my heart thrashing wildly as I met his tongue for every stroke.

Heat built between my thighs and I fought back a moan as our desire for each other collided everywhere our skin touched. He kissed me like a soldier back from war and I soaked in his passion and let it trickle through everywhere in my being. It felt right, fucking astounding. And I let my inhibitions fly as I allowed my crush on Blake to be known. I knew I wasn’t just asking for trouble tonight. I was screaming for it.



I wound my way through the party, ignoring pretty much everyone there as I left the new girl behind and sought out some more whiskey.

There were people clustered all around the makeshift bar, but they scattered as they saw me coming. One guy even fell over in his haste to get out of my way and as I glanced at him, I vaguely remembered beating his ass last year. Couldn't remember why though. Something about books...or breakfast...maybe balls...definitely something beginning with b...or f. Whatever. Point was, the asshole ran like he might combust if I looked at him the wrong way, so I was willing to bet those injuries still stung when he was lying alone in bed at night.

I'd been told that once. Some prissy little sophomore had squared right up to me, tears glimmering in her eyes because I'd beaten the living shit out of her boyfriend. She'd looked right into my eyes, pointed in my face and said *you're the stuff of nightmares Kyan Roscoe*. I mean, honestly, it had been the nicest damn thing anyone had ever said to me. Saint hadn't appreciated it though and she'd disappeared not long after that. I was pretty sure she'd just been expelled or some shit, I doubted she was lying dead in a ditch somewhere. Though with Saint you never could be sure.

I scoured the mess of the drinks table and frowned as I failed to spot my poison.

“Where’s the fucking Jack?” I asked, raising my voice enough to be heard over the music.

One of the Unspeakables came running, his cheeks flushed as he murmured apologies and scrambled about for my damn drink.

I turned my back on the drinks table, leaning my elbows against it as I waited for him to sort this shit out for me and I looked back across the room where Blake and Saint were still playing spin the bottle.

Although, playing spin the bottle wasn’t what was happening. Saint would never allow fate to decide anything for him, let alone push him into making out with some girl he didn’t want. Hell, if the Grim Reaper turned up right now and pointed his gnarly bone finger in Saint’s face, that motherfucker would find himself impaled on the pointy end of his own scythe and we’d all have ourselves a new lord of death.

The crowd shifted as I looked across the dance floor and I was given a clear view of Blake as he fell back onto the couch, pulling Tatum down with him so that she straddled his lap as they made out.

I ran my tongue over my teeth as I watched them, the memory of her warm body pressed to mine overwhelming me for a moment. I’d felt the way she’d shivered beneath my touch, inhaled the taste of her breath on my lips. In that moment I was pretty sure I could have taken anything I wanted from her. And I’d wanted it all from her. Right up until she reminded me of what she was now. Just another cog in this place. And sure, she was as hot as fuck cog who I wouldn’t mind spending a whole lot of hours ruining. I could spend way too much time forcing her body to bend to mine and making her flesh scream with a pleasure so intense it blinded her. But I had my rules about the girls in this place for a reason. My interest never

lingered on one girl for long and I didn't need the drama of scorned exes trailing me about. Not least because these were the daughters of the wealthiest people in the country. I'd be bumping into them at social bullshit for the rest of my goddamn life. Assuming I managed to forge my own way of course.

Blake's hands shifted up Tatum's thighs as their kiss deepened and I watched hungrily as that little black dress slid up and up until-

She pulled back with a laugh, yanking the hem down but I'd caught a glimpse of that perfect round ass as he'd run his hands over it. An ass like that would look damn good with teeth marks in it.

I clucked my tongue irritably as I wondered if I should have made the other call. I didn't even know her family anyway. She clearly wasn't all that important. So maybe I could spend a bit of time breaking in the rich girl, give her a taste of what she'd be missing when she tied herself to a nice, respectable husband. Some memories that she could get herself off over when she was an arm candy housewife. And I seriously wouldn't mind knowing that a girl like her spent time touching herself over me. Besides, chances were I wouldn't even be running in these circles much longer. Not now. Not when my family's secret came out.

"Found it!" the Unspeakable announced as he brandished a bottle of Jack Daniels at me.

I turned to him as he unscrewed the cap and picked up a glass.

"I won't be needing that," I said, snatching the full bottle from his grip and bringing it to my lips.

The oaky taste of the whiskey spilled over my tongue and I pushed away from the drinks table as I headed back towards the other side of the room where Blake was working on shattering Tatum's little miss innocent act in a spectacular way.

Hell, if I wasn't going to fuck her myself, I could still watch the show for a while and get a real idea of what she'd be like.

Saint was still sitting on the other end of the couch as I approached but he got to his feet as the spinning bottle landed on him, completely ignoring the girl in question as she batted her eyelashes at him hopefully.

"C'mon, asshole, there's something I wanna show you," he said, jerking his chin to get me to follow him.

We circled the couch and Tatum looked up from her perch in Blake's lap like she felt my eyes on her.

I gave her a taunting smile before letting my eyes slide down to her hardened nipples which were pressing through the thin dress now that she'd ditched the underwear. She slid off of Blake's lap, holding a hand out to him as she made a show of not giving a shit about me one way or another. But that spark in her eyes said she gave a shit alright. She didn't like to be made a fool of and for a moment I could have sworn she had ideas of revenge glimmering in those endlessly blue eyes.

Bring it on, baby.

Saint led the way out of the room and up the stairs to the balcony outside.

"Fuck off," he snapped at a group of juniors who were hanging out here and they ran to do as they'd been told, flooding around us like a wave breaking over a rock.

The door fell shut behind them and we were left with the thumping bass of the music and an empty balcony.

"If you've brought me out here to suck my cock, then I would have preferred to do it in the warm somewhere," I joked, taking a swig from my whiskey bottle as I moved to take a seat in one of the huge wooden chairs that sat on the balcony.

Saint eyed me for a long moment, his gaze slipping over my black jeans, leather jacket and the blood red T-shirt beneath it which had a tear in it. It was fucking perfect. Saint bait. He knew it. I knew it. A hole in my shirt. Classic.

He moved to stand over me, jaw ticking, gaze slipping to my drink with distaste. He'd given up on trying to stop me drinking from the bottle a long time ago but he clearly still hated it.

"Want some?" I offered, swirling the bottle so the amber liquid sloshed over my fingers. I licked that shit off quickly. Waste not want not.

"We need to talk about Blake," Saint said, ignoring my offer as he took the chair opposite me.

"Is that so?" I asked, tipping more whiskey down my throat.

"He's not dealing with his mom's death," Saint said.

"It's up to him if he wants to bury it," I said with a shrug. "And it looks like he'll be burying it real good tonight," I added with a dirty grin.

Saint's gaze tightened at that suggestion and he blew out an irritated breath.

"A good fuck might distract him tonight, but it isn't going to make any difference to tomorrow."

"I guess that depends on how much energy she's got," I joked.

"Can you ever just take something seriously?" Saint growled, giving me the alpha vibes. But I didn't answer to him. I might have fallen in with his shit most of the time, but that was because I gave no fucks about it. Didn't make him the boss of me.

"What even *is* serious?" I asked. "I mean, we're born, we cry, we lie, we fuck, we die. The rest of it's just speed bumps along the road."

"That sounded like the world's shittiest poem spoken by the world's most boring asshole," he replied.

I cracked a smile at that. “Fine. What do you want to do about it? Hold a séance? Sing Kumbaya, My Lord every morning while holding hands in a prayer circle? Or do you wanna go really deep and ask him to talk to us about his *feelings*?”

“Fuck that,” Saint said, waving a hand dismissively. “I’m not looking to waste my time on that shit. Blake can deal with his grief himself. What he needs is an outlet for his rage.”

I sat up at that, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees as I gave this idea my full attention. Crying and grieving and moping weren’t listed in my book of interests, but rage? I was all over that baby with an aching hard on and all the moves to satisfy it.

“So what’s your plan?” I asked, because Saint didn’t make suggestions without thinking them through. He’d been back and forth over this idea with a fine-tooth comb, sounded out each avenue, thought through all the ways it could go wrong.

“I’m still working on it. But Blake’s not wired like you; beating the shit out of some asshole won’t give him what he needs. He’s going to need more than that. Someone he can destroy in every thinkable way, a carcass he can come back to again and again to tear more strips off of them.”

“That’s fucked up, man,” I said, scraping a hand over my jaw as I smiled. “So who are we picking for the sacrifice?”

Saint’s lips twitched. “That’s the bit I’m working on. It needs to be someone who won’t just roll over. Someone who will need to be broken again and again and *again*.”

“Sounds like a tough position to fill,” I murmured, my mind wandering over the fuckwits who went to school with us. Most of them were pussies who wouldn’t stand up to us once, let alone repeatedly.

“Leave that to me. I’ll find someone. But in the meantime, I need you to help me keep him distracted or he’s gonna explode in an uncontrolled way,” Saint said, catching my eye to drive the point home.

“Doesn’t sound like the worst thing in the world to me,” I replied. I’d quite like to see the golden boy go supernova and fuck shit up.

“Yeah, well some of us care about our reputations. It’s fine for people to fear us, but there can’t be evidence of us going batshit. That kind of mark stains. We need to protect him from himself.”

“If you say so.” I shrugged, swigging my whiskey again. I was getting a nice buzz going now.

“I do say so,” Saint snarled, his dark eyes flaring in that dangerous way they often did right before someone ended up in tears.

“Keep your panties on, I said I’m onboard. The dude can bury his problems in Tatum Rivers tonight and tomorrow I’ll be all over him like a Hades Virus rash. He can give me all the gory details about our new girl too so I’ve got something to jerk off over between now and the next time I can head into town,” I joked.

“If you’re so interested in her then why don’t you just go and join them?” Saint asked, rolling his eyes at me. “It’ll probably be the only shot you get anyway. After tonight, I plan on making that girl mine.”

I snorted a laugh, though it wasn’t the worst idea he’d ever had, but I wasn’t sure the new girl would be up for a spit roast on her first night here. Probably too worried about her reputation for that. Though the idea of it was weirdly alluring and I had to wonder what it would be like to share a girl with one of my friends.

“I’ll pass, thanks. Her performance is probably better in my imagination than it would be in reality,” I said, not letting my imagination linger there too long.

“I’ll let you know,” Saint said with such cocky confidence that I couldn’t help but hope she’d turn him down. There was a first time for everything, right?

We got to our feet to return to the party and I took another long drink, pulling the bottle away from my lips a moment too soon so that whiskey spilled over my chin and dripped onto my shirt.

Saint’s eyes flashed with rage and I smirked at him. Man, I loved to poke the beast.

He lunged at me and in my slightly drunk state I didn’t manage to bat him off of me before his fist closed on the front of my shirt. His fingers slipped through the hole in it and he yanked his fist back suddenly, a huge rip sounding as he tore the damn thing in half.

“Next time, turn up wearing clothes without fucking holes in them,” he snarled, stepping right into my personal space so that our chests were damn near touching. “You look like a fucking hillbilly Hells Angel!”

A laugh tore from my lips and Saint cracked a moment later, smirking too as he acknowledged my win.

“I knew it would drive you insane,” I taunted.

“Well, joke’s on you – now you really do look like shit.” Saint stepped back, a breath of laughter escaping him as he eyed my ruined shirt.

“Naw,” I disagreed, pushing my bottle of Jack into his hand so that I could take the shirt off. “You just made sure every bitch at this party is going to be panting over me all night.”

I shrugged out of my leather jacket and dropped it onto the nearest chair. Someone would find it later and make sure I got it back.

“I’m not after pussy tonight anyway,” Saint replied with a shrug. “I wanna make sure no one got any ideas about challenging us over the summer.”

I snorted dismissively. The douchebags in this school wouldn't dare stand up to us, but King Saint liked to lord it over everyone at least five times a term just to make sure.

I balled up the ruined shirt and tossed it over the balcony before reclaiming my drink from him and taking a swig.

"How long before I can bail?" I asked. Some nights I was the life and soul of the party, other nights, the party seemed to be sucking the life and soul out of me. Tonight felt like the latter and I was done.

Saint sighed. "What's the point in the Night Keepers throwing a party if one of them doesn't even stick around? Besides, if *you* think this thing is shit then what hope do we have for making sure the rest of them think it was epic?"

"It's not the party, I'm just not feeling it tonight. If I gotta stay, can I at least beat the shit out of a few people?" I grinned at the idea of that, but there was a refusal brimming in Saint's eyes.

"Remind me of the rules we set," he demanded in a tone that didn't broker any arguments.

"I can't beat the shit out of someone unless they start it and there are witnesses," I sighed.

"Good. So feel free to taunt someone into attacking you if you must, but just stick to the fucking rule. You don't need some asshole pressing charges because their precious little bottom dweller has a broken face. Again." Saint stood blocking my way back into the party and I reluctantly agreed with him. He did have a point. I'd had a few too many of those complaints against me now and there was a fair chance that the next one wouldn't be solved by me paying some bullshit fine. Not to mention the fact that paying the damn fine would be an issue for me now, too.

“I swear it,” I said, placing a hand over my heart where a tattoo of the devil himself sat on a throne in all his demon horned, cloven hooved glory.

Saint didn’t look convinced, but he turned and headed back into the party anyway. I followed him inside but as he headed off to find a drink, I turned into a side room.

The fifty inch TV was on in the corner and I moved to stand before it as a news report caught my attention. The music was too loud for me to hear what was being said, but some helpful little sausage noticed I was trying to watch it and flicked the subtitles on for me.

I tossed her a wink in thanks and she gave me a wide smile as her gaze trailed down my bare skin and she studied the tattoos on my flesh.

I left her to it and gave my focus back to the TV as I took another swig of my whiskey, reading the words a second after they spilled from the reporter’s mouth.

Emergency measures are being discussed in detail incase the Hades Virus becomes a pandemic but in the meantime, people at home are being reminded to watch out for the signs of infection and self isolate if you think you are exhibiting any of them.

The first thing that you will notice is a sudden spike in temperature with hot and cold flushes. Following that, the next stage involves a severe cough which will feel uncontrollable at times. In the final stage, patients experience a rash which appears in a swirling pattern of rose shaped red marks all over the body. If you experience any of these symptoms DO NOT GO TO HOSPITAL. You must call the helpline and isolate yourself. If the phone assessment concludes that you are likely to be infected, you will be given instructions on the closest Hades Virus treatment centre where you can go to retrieve help.

In the meantime, to protect yourself and others you must keep up good hand washing practices, use hand sanitisers and wear masks in public where possible. Refrain from touching your face or from touching others. You should avoid gatherings of more than five people. And stay home as much as-

I hit the button beside the screen to shut that shit off and turned back to the room of students. Some of them looked a bit concerned about the report on the TV and I offered them a taunting smile.

“Are any of you fuckers afraid of that shit you just watched?” I called.

There was a general cry of disagreement, but I could see the truth in their panty pissing expressions.

“Well, if you’re not then let’s go and party like the world isn’t going to shit!” I cried.

I led the charge out of the room back to the main part of the common house, plucking a wooden chair into my grasp as I went.

I carved a path through the dancing bodies for the table which held the drinks and slammed the wooden chair down before one of the kegs.

I caught Blake’s eye across the room as he danced with our new girl and beckoned him over with a jerk of my chin as a crowd formed around me. He caught on right away and brought another chair with him, setting it before the other keg as he dragged Tatum over by the hand.

I was half tempted to challenge the new girl to drink, but I thought better of it at the last moment. Blake wouldn’t be distracting himself from anything in her company tonight if she ended up paralytic and puking.

I looked through the crowd surrounding us and spotted Chad McCormack with a grin on his face. He was on the football team and was a beast of a dude, though not the sharpest tool in the shed. I pointed him out

in a clear demand and he dropped into the chair before me as Blake chose a sucker to compete against him. Of course Blake chose Greg Smithson who everyone knew was a borderline alcoholic and would clearly win in a drink off. Even when he wasn't actually competing himself, that asshole couldn't bear to lose.

I rolled my eyes at Blake before turning my attention back to the crowd. "Who's ready to drink like the world is ending?" I cried.

The crowd cheered in excitement despite the ring of truth to my words and I grinned.

"Then let's get fucked up like tomorrow might not ever come and we're all about to die!" I yanked Chad's chair back, tipping it up so that he was lying beneath the keg as I set the beer flowing straight into his mouth.

The crowd cheered wildly as Chad and Greg fought to drink as much beer as they could before they started choking on it. Chad started coughing and my smile darkened as I continued to hold him beneath the flow. He gasped and spluttered in fright but just before he could throw himself out of the chair, I flipped it back upright and shut off the beer.

He fell forward onto the floor and started heaving as he crawled away, fighting to catch his breath again. I laughed loudly, calling out for the next challenger as Blake celebrated Greg's win like it was his own.

Funnily enough, there weren't any volunteers to get into my chair but I just pointed out another asshole and he fell into line fast enough. Besides, they all knew I wouldn't actually drown someone with beer. Although, as I looked down at Gerald Holt before I tipped his chair back, I had to admit, he did look in danger of shitting himself.

I soon grew bored of the game and beckoned Danny Harper closer to take over holding my chair, heading off through the crowd looking for an exit.

Blake stayed where he was, needing to see out the game and keep up his winning streak.

Before I could slip out of a side door, I was accosted by Georgie Penfield, Pearl Devickers and Mila Cruz.

“It’s my birthday,” Georgie announced with a hiccup.

“That so?” I asked in a bored tone. I’d lost my bottle of Jack somewhere which was a damn travesty.

“Yeah. And she’s had the biggest crush on you since, *forever*,” Pearl gushed. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked way past hammered. In fact, Mila was the only one of the group who didn’t seem wasted. She looked like she was half a second away from dragging the other two away from me by their hair. *Clever girl*.

“That’s cute,” I replied dismissively. Georgie was hot in an objective way, but the way her conservative dress covered her up and her hair was oh so carefully braided told me all I needed to know about her. She was a rich girl through and through. Not nearly rough enough around the edges for me.

“Can she do a body shot on you?” Pearl asked with a hint of desperation in her tone as she shifted in front of me again to stop me from walking away.

I sighed, about to refuse but just as my lips parted to tell her to fuck off, Tatum Rivers joined their little crew, throwing her arms around Mila in excitement. She didn’t seem to notice me at first, but her gaze swivelled my way as Pearl spoke again.

“*Pleeeeeease*, Kyan?” She batted her eyelashes at me and I rolled my eyes.

“It’s your birthday and the only thing you want is to lick a shot off of me?” I asked Georgie in disbelief. The girl actually nodded and Tatum snorted derisively.

“I’ll go one better. You can all do it,” I said, my gaze slipping over the four of them before landing on Tatum.

She looked like she was going to refuse, probably because of the dickhead spin the bottle move I’d pulled. But that was okay, because I wasn’t giving her a choice.

“Tequila!” I shouted and Georgie and Pearl started giggling excitedly.

Tatum looked ready to walk away so I caught her hand in mine and twirled her beneath my arm before she could stop me.

“You can go first, new girl,” I announced.

“I’d rather lick the bottom of my shoe after stepping in dog shit,” she said, giving me the ice queen mask.

“Shit Georgie, looks like Tate here doesn’t want to play. I guess you’re not getting your birthday wish then.” I made a move to walk away as Georgie and Pearl both shot Tatum daggers. I wondered if the new girl cared about having friends. Pissing off the popular girls the moment she arrived didn’t seem like a great way to start out if she did.

I headed into the crowd but before I made it three steps, her voice called me back.

“*Fine*,” she growled. “If that’s what Georgie wants for her birthday... I’m not going to ruin it.”

The girls were all smiles again as I turned back to them, though Mila looked wary.

One of the Unspeakables had fetched the tequila like a good little doggy and I licked my fist before holding it out for them to pour salt over the back of my hand. The salt stuck and I accepted the slice of lemon into the same hand.

“On your knees then, girls,” I commanded, smirking at Tatum as she slowly sank down in a line with the other girls. Mila didn’t seem

particularly excited either but the other two looked like they might just come if they actually got their mouths on me. Which they wouldn't.

I took the bottle of tequila in my other hand and told the Unspeakable to go find me a new bottle of Jack as I strode straight up to Tatum, enjoying the view of her down on her knees before me like that.

I held my fist with the salt and lemon in front of my junk and raised the bottle of tequila to my collar bone as I waited for her to make her move.

Her blue eyes glittered with heat and I was willing to bet that Tatum Rivers damn near hated me right now. But that was okay. No one liked me besides my closest friends and even they had moments where they didn't.

Her gaze fell to the salt stuck on the back of my hand and she released a resigned huff before leaning forward and licking it off.

"Open wide, baby," I purred as she looked up at me again and I tipped the tequila straight onto my collar bone.

The amber liquid rolled over my chest and spilled down my abs before racing towards my navel. A moment before it could hit my pants, Tatum's mouth met with my flesh.

I grinned as she pushed up onto her knees, the hot pad of her tongue carving a line straight up the centre of my body as I poured way more than a single shot for her.

I tossed the bottle to some asshole beside me and he cursed as tequila spilled all over him.

I fisted my hand in her hair as I guided her further up my chest, her lips caressing my flesh as her hungry tongue sought out every drop of the tequila.

Fuck.

I was seriously considering telling all of these fuckers to leave and pushing her head back down again so that I could feel that mouth in more

exciting places and my dick strained against my fly at the mere thought of it.

I dragged her to her feet by her hair as she finished her drink and her tongue dipped into the hollow of my collar bone as she chased the last drop.

The crowd watching us were chanting her name and cheering so loudly that I could barely hear myself think. But there was definitely one thing on my mind in that moment.

“We can find somewhere with less witnesses if you wanna get back on your knees,” I breathed, tipping my head down so that only she could hear me and her teeth suddenly sank into my neck.

I flinched at the shock of it, feeling that bite right down to my dick. She was trying to turn me off, but she’d just done the complete opposite.

“Not if you were the last man on earth and we really were all going to die tomorrow,” she growled, looking up at me with her eyes flashing while she grinned for the watching assholes.

I released my hold on her hair and placed my hand on the base of her spine instead, dragging her body flush with mine so that she could feel just how hard I was for her.

“Alright then, baby, if you’re sure.”

She gasped as her hips were pressed to mine and that fire in her eyes danced with hunger. I took advantage of her open lips and shoved the lemon between them before she could say anything else.

I released her suddenly and turned away from the other girls who were still waiting on their knees. The Unspeakable had returned with a shiny new bottle of Jack for me and I snatched it without a word

“I don’t wanna play anymore,” I announced, turning away as Georgie’s lips popped open and she looked like she might just cry. “But have a great birthday, yeah?”

I strode straight out of the room without looking back, smirking to myself as I imagined the looks Georgie and Pearl would be giving Tatum right about now. She'd only gone along with that shit to make friends and now look, she had enemies instead. Brilliant.

I barked a laugh as I stepped outside and strode around the deck as I headed back to shore.

I pulled my cellphone from my pocket as I walked, ignoring the bite of cold against my bare skin. It was gone eleven, but I was hoping he wouldn't mind that.

Kyan:

Can we meet now? I need the rush.

I took the path back up towards the main campus, heading for the Cypress Gym as I waited for a reply. Asshole always took his sweet time in getting back to me.

As I crested the hill, my phone finally pinged and I drew it back out.

My dirty little secret:

Your luck's in, I needed it too and I'm already here.

Kyan:

Fuck yes. See you in five.

I upped my pace as I headed for the gym, my pulse pounding at the thought of what I was about to do and my monster raised its head with interest.

Sometimes I just felt like I was floating, drifting, *existing*. And it was a dull fucking way to live. I needed the rush of this to get me through it, to remind me I was alive and to wake me the fuck up.

I reached the huge building and pushed the doors wide, following the dim corridor past the swimming pool and heading into the training room where the boxing ring was.

Monroe was finishing up a set against a punching bag in the corner, his gloves up and chest gleaming with sweat as he worked. The dude was a machine, pounding on that thing like it was personally responsible for every shit thing in his life.

He ignored me as I walked in and I headed to the cupboard in the corner where I kept a spare supply of my clothes for unexpected visits to the gym like this. Monroe had never complained about it so I'd taken that as permission. I placed my bottle of Jack down before dropping my jeans and kicking off my boots as I switched them out for shorts and boxing shoes. The room spun a little as I leaned forward and I snorted a laugh. He'd lose his shit when he realised I was getting close to wasted.

I picked up a set of gloves and tugged them on as I approached Monroe. That was his one condition for training with me. He wasn't a pussy, but he couldn't very well get into bare knuckle brawls with a student so we had to wear the right equipment. This way, our bouts together were real lessons so we weren't technically breaking any rules. I was just having private training sessions. Though I guessed that the school board might frown on the fact that we split the takings I won from the illegal fights I took part in.

Monroe finished up his set and turned to me as I approached him.

"Was the party that bad?" he taunted, giving me that assessing look which said he could see right into my soul. Or at least like he could have if I'd had one.

“It was alright.” I shrugged. “Just didn’t give me what I needed.”

I stumbled as I moved onto the mats before him and he paused as he gave me a closer look.

“You still managed to consume plenty of alcohol by the looks of it,” he growled, dropping his fists like he was about to refuse this fight. But that shit wasn’t gonna fly with me.

“Yeah, well, maybe that’ll give you a chance to win for once,” I taunted.

He snorted dismissively and shook his head. “Sleep it off. We can do this in the morning before class if you crawl out of bed in time, or-”

“No,” I snarled and he cut me a look that warned me to back down, but it wasn’t going to happen. “C’mon, *sir*. I thought you had dreams of beating the shit out of entitled little pricks like me? You know I deserve it...”

His jaw tightened and I could see that hatred brimming beneath the surface, looking for an outlet. It wasn’t aimed at me really, but I’d happily make use of what he felt for the douchebags I had classes with. It did seem strange to me that he’d taken this job at all when he clearly hated the way we abused the money we’d all been born to, but whenever I’d questioned him on it he’d just brushed me off.

I lunged at him with a right hook and he ducked aside before slamming his fist into my gut in return.

My body sang with the flash of pain and a savage grin pulled at my lips.

“You seriously want to fight me like this?” Monroe asked, but I could tell he didn’t feel that bad about the idea of kicking the shit out of me. His monster needed this too, even if it wasn’t as hungry as mine.

“Fuck yes,” I replied, throwing all of my strength into my next punch and grinning as I caught him in the ribs. This was the only place where I felt like I really knew myself, deep in the thick of a fight was where I’d been born to live. Throwing punches felt like smashing down walls, receiving

them was like breaking chains. It was the only time I was free of anything and everything else and I was wholly, truly living in the moment.

“Well don’t come crying to me about it in the morning,” he taunted as he finally gave in.

The next attack he launched was brutal and my sluggish brain made it hard for me to battle back against the moves.

Pain bled through me again and again as his fists connected with my flesh and I bathed in it, fed on it, drowned in it. Sparks ignited in my brain and every thought in my head was electrified, urgent, angry, *real*.

This was where I died and was born again. This was what I lived for. Pain and blood and agony. It was true and it was pure and it was oh so fucking real.



Mila caught my hand, dragging me up to dance with the rest of the girls and I was soon wedged between hot bodies, the haze of rum making me feel like I was floating on air. Pearl Devickers and Georgie Penfield were giving me the cold hard bitch treatment since Kyan had rejected them. Even despite the fact I'd made it clear to them I thought Kyan Roscoe was a dickwad and an asshole. A dickhole if you will. But the sharpness of lemon, lingering tequila and a demon's flesh on my tongue reminded me that he was also going to be visiting me in my fantasies in the very near future.

I was seriously pissed at him for screwing up my hard earned friendship badges with those two girls. I was trying my best to fit into this new life. And even though I kinda judged Pearl and Georgie for being angry at me for something I hadn't even cared to do, and the fact that Kyan had been the one who ditched out on them, I still wanted them to accept me into the fold. Because I'd never been in any fold before, dammit. And I was determined to make a life here. So now I was gonna have to start from scratch all over

again. The music was too loud to attempt it now, but later, I was gonna be their best damn friend.

Firm hands snared me from Mila's grip and I was tugged against a hard body, looking up to discover that Blake was my captor. He finished a beer and didn't even have to ask as someone plucked the empty bottle from his grip and his free hand quickly landed on my waist, dragging me even closer.

He grinned cheekily at me and I grinned right back as I danced with him, unashamedly grinding against his muscular body as he clutched onto me like the world might fall away if he let go.

I tipped my head back and he dropped his mouth to my throat, a growl of desire rumbling through him as his lips raked against my heated flesh. I locked my arms around his neck, lust clawing at me and making me fist my fingers in his hair.

He was all I could think about, his presence entirely absorbing as we danced like no one was watching. I was barely aware of the world around me as I fell into the blissful lack of inhibitions my drinks had offered me. Blake was clearly unaware too as his hands grasped at my hips, my ass. He tugged me firmly against him and I inhaled sharply as I felt the rigid length of him pressing into my hip. Holy fuck he was big. And that was the second boner I'd given a Night Keeper this evening. Now I just needed to find Saint and tame his devil dick so I'd have a hattrick.

I tip-toed up to find Blake's mouth and his lips met mine with a hungry passion. I pulled him closer, meeting every stroke of his tongue and tasting all the bad things he wanted to do to me. And I had a list as long as my arm that I wanted to do to him too.

No, I wasn't going anywhere. Blake Bowman was the prize catch of the bunch. Hot as hell, sweet as pie. The kind of pie that had a few razor blades hidden in it, but still. Definitely the safest option.

“Do you wanna go somewhere more private?” I asked against his mouth.

Shit, I knew this was a bad idea but my libido had taken over. She was screaming, wild and in need of a good lay. And Blake clearly wasn't looking for anything more than sex. Neither was I. So why not?

A small voice in the back of my head reminded me that I'd have to see him at school every day after this for the rest of like, the school year. But screw it. We were both adults. It didn't have to mean anything more than this one night and releasing this burning tension that was mounting between us. Besides, Mila said he'd ghost out on any girl he slept with. So that would solve my problem of staying off the Night Keepers' radar. By tomorrow, Blake would lose interest and the rest of his friends would no doubt follow suit.

I smirked at my plan, grasping his shirt in my fist and tugging him through the crowd. Not that I needed to drag him, he was panting like a dog as he hounded after me, his hard on straining against his fly with his need for release.

His fingers slid between mine as we made it outside and he took the lead, tugging me down the pier and onto the path through the woods, turning left as a wild laugh left my throat.

“Let's race,” he said with a smirk and I raised my brows. “The loser goes down on the winner.” Heat spiralled down my spine and rushed right back up again.

“I don't know where we're going,” I laughed, but I kicked off my stilettos all the same because screw it, I loved a challenge.

His brows lifted in surprise. “You're not questioning my Ts and Cs?”

“No golden boy, I'm looking forward to you getting down on your knees for me,” I taunted and he wet his lips with such a lustful expression that it had heat spreading between my thighs.

Holy shit I have to win.

“Which way?” I turned away from him, tossing my hair over my shoulder as if this was just another rodeo. But my heart was thumping like mad at the promise that awaited me at the end of this race.

Blake picked up my stilettos with a smirk. “Just in case you decide to blame your loss on carrying these.”

I snorted a laugh. “Well you should run barefoot too, golden boy.”

He chuckled darkly then kicked his fancy-ass boat shoes off and took them into his other hand. I snatched them from him with a grin.

“In case you blame them on your loss,” I taunted and his eyes skipped with light.

“Follow the signs for the boys’ accommodation, Hazel House. I’ll be ahead of you anyway, so just follow me,” he said with a serious challenge in his tone.

“Bullshit!” I sprinted away from him and his dark laughter followed me as he took chase. I raced along the pavement, my bare feet slapping against the cold stone as I ran as fast as I could, the wind spinning around me and making my hair fly everywhere.

I ran by Saint’s Temple before Blake caught up, powering past me with a seriousness to his expression like he was out on the football pitch playing for the finals. I growled in frustration, pushing myself harder and just managing to keep pace with him. We tore around the lake in the direction of Beech House but he carried on past it while my lungs laboured and my heart screamed in defiance as he pulled ahead.

Between the alcohol and the competitive side of me which refused to lose, I managed to catch up to him, our arms brushing as we sprinted down the path side by side.

A sign to the boys dormitories caught my eye and I veered off the path to the right, racing into the trees with victory calling my name. Blake's footsteps didn't follow but a crashing in the bushes to my left made me think he must have taken a different route. *Fuck!*

My arms cut through the air as they wheeled back and forth. I was sweating, aching, hurting everywhere as the huge gothic building loomed up ahead. An exact replica of the girls accommodation with its arching windows and huge wooden door, but the plaque beside the door named it Hazel House. I nearly crashed into it as I reached the steps, resting against the wood and buckling forward as I dragged in lungful after lungful of air.

When I could breathe more steadily again, I lifted my head and hunted for Blake out in the trees with a triumphant grin. "I win!" I called.

The door I was leaning on opened and I stumbled back as Blake stood there, propping his shoulder against the doorway, his arm lifting as he casually checked his watch.

"Oh did you arrive at last? I did a few laps of the stairs while I was waiting."

"Asshole," I laughed and he smirked, beckoning me inside.

I moved closer, but didn't follow him into the building. I took hold of his waistband and yanked him toward me by it, tossing his shoes on the ground.

He reached out, pushing a hand into my hair with a serious expression pulling at his features. "As you've just met me and didn't realise I've never lost anything in my life, I'll give you a free pass on the Ts and Cs."

"That's sweet," I purred, unbuckling his belt and lowering his fly. "But I don't like to be patronised."

I dropped to my knees as I yanked his boxers down to free him and he gasped as I took him into my mouth. His thick length throbbed between my

lips and I glided my fist up every hard inch of him as I swirled my tongue around the tip. His hands knotted in my hair as he groaned.

Light was spilling out of the doorway and my heart thumped madly with the insanity of this. I loved taking risks. I loved driving boys crazy too and I knew how to bring him to the edge before pulling him back again and again.

“Tatum,” he groaned, his hands tightening in my hair as I slid him all the way in - which was pretty damn impressive thank you very much.

My knees rubbed against the icy path and a stone dug into my knee as I continued to torture him, sliding him in and out of my mouth then gently raking my teeth against his shaft.

“Fuck – *enough*,” he demanded, yanking me upright and dragging me against him. I tucked him back into his boxers and his eyes became hooded as he gazed at me.

“Don’t underestimate me, Blake Bowman,” I breathed against his mouth and he nodded slowly before tugging me through the door.

“Never again,” he promised, kicking it shut behind us and dragging me upstairs.

We soon reached the top floor and he led me down the corridor, the sound of music and video games carrying from behind the doors as we moved to a room at the far end and Blake practically carried me inside.

I got one look at the bare room with the king size bed against one wall before he yanked me off of my feet and fell back onto the mattress with me on top of him.

“Are you wet for me baby?” he asked, grabbing my hips and forcing me up over him so my knees hit the pillow either side of his head.

“Yes,” I gasped as he pushed my dress up and I had to cling to the bed post to support myself.

My hips rocked with need, but he didn't give me his tongue. His hands slid up the backs of my thighs and he ran his fingers up the middle of me. I shuddered full bodily and he groaned in response.

"Is this just for me, or for Kyan too? I saw how you looked at him tonight," he growled and I clutched the bed post harder, bracing to keep my weight off of him.

"*Blake*," I begged.

"Answer me." He slowly pushed one finger inside me, deeper and deeper until I clenched around him.

"Both of you," I admitted breathily.

"I can call him if you want him here too," he said with a cocky smirk, pushing another finger into me and making me moan loudly as pleasure scattered through my body.

Was he serious right now? I'd never been with more than one guy at once and the Night Keepers seemed like a lot to handle individually. Besides, Kyan was a dickhole of mass proportions, so hell if I was gonna let him get his hands on me. Not that easily anyway.

I looked down at Blake so my hair tumbled around us in a golden sheet. "I want you. Just you."

His eyes glimmered as a smile hooked up his lips then he placed his free hand on my right hip and forced me down onto his mouth. The heated pad of his tongue raked up the centre of me, landing on my clit and circling, circling, circling.

I cried out curses, clinging to the bed post as I held myself above him, his tongue working fucking miracles between my thighs. His fingers pumped in time with the movements of his mouth and I moaned louder and louder, sure everyone in the entire building could hear me, but I couldn't stop.

My thighs tensed and a deep, blazing heat built beneath his tongue, promising an ending so powerful I didn't think I'd survive it. My hips started to rock in time with his hand but I craved more than just his fingers, I needed the solid length of him inside me. I needed him growling my name and tugging my hair. I wanted more of his flesh on mine, giving me all the friction I craved.

His tongue flicked back and forth against my clit before he sucked and bit, making my back arch as bliss skittered through my flesh. The golden boy lived up to his name; he was good at everything and he knew it. But right now, I was more than happy to stroke his ego because I was in fucking heaven.

He chuckled as I ground against his mouth with an urgent need, the sound tumbling right through to my core. My legs quivered as I tried to keep my weight off of him while still trying to take as much pleasure from that expert tongue of his as I could.

Every part of me was clenching, tightening and he worked his hand faster as he sucked and kissed and licked and I fell, fucking tumbled into oblivion. I knew I was screaming but I couldn't stop, my nails clawing into the wood of the bed post as I fell to ruin for him.

I pushed back when I found enough strength, dropping into the space beside him as I tried to catch my breath and see straight again. I'd never come that intensely or even that quickly. He'd probably done it a thousand times to a thousand girls, but I didn't give a shit. All that practise had made him an expert.

Blake laughed loudly in his victory before rolling over and taking hold of my hand, yanking me off of the bed and spinning me around. My thoughts were still too scattered and my body too weak to do anything but

let him move me around like a ragdoll. He tugged my zipper down and took hold of the hem of the dress, peeling it off of me and tossing it on the floor.

I turned to him, biting down on my lip and his dark expression sent tingles through my flesh. He took in my naked body with the kind of heat which could have burned down the whole of campus.

“I’m not done with you yet,” he growled, a dark hunter rising in his eyes. His exterior was shiny and deceptive, but he was bad to the bone. And I knew I was seeing the real Blake Bowman right then.

I reached out, skimming my hand over the bulge in his jeans so he swallowed hard. He caught my wrist, yanking it up to his mouth and brushing his lips across the sensitive skin of my inner arm.

“You taste like a narcotic, Tatum Rivers. Why do I get the feeling you’re going to be on my mind for a long time after tonight?”

“Because I’m not like all your other conquests. And that definition won’t ever apply to me, no matter how many times you try to beat me. You’ll never win.” I took hold of his shirt, tugging it up and over his head to reveal the athletic perfection of his body. Taut abs and bruised ribs stared back at me. I brushed my fingers over the knuckle marks on his flesh, somehow knowing instinctively that one of the other Night Keepers had left them there. No one else would have dared.

I lifted my eyes to his as I bit into my lip, the tension between us growing unbearable. I was ready for round two. And this time I was going to get all of him. I was going to make sure he knew I wasn’t just any old girl. I was a queen. And he was going to learn it.

“I’m gonna try real hard to ruin you, Tate,” he said in a dangerous tone that made my blood rise to the surface of my skin. He caught my waist, throwing me onto the bed with undue force and I leaned back, looking up at

him as he dropped his jeans and boxers. He took hold of the base of his large cock, gripping my knee with the other hand.

My throat dried out and I surveyed his muscular body with lust dripping through me. I needed him inside me, I had to feel the power of this man first hand.

He yanked me toward the edge of the bed and I raised my hips as he guided himself between my thighs. My fingers clawed into the sheets as he grazed my entrance and a breathy moan left me from that touch alone.

With a forceful thrust, he slammed the full length of him inside me and I cried out, my nails clawing at his neck as he didn't give me a moment to recover before doing it again.

I met him thrust for thrust as he tried to conquer me, my body alive with energy as he claimed me over and over.

I tipped my head back and shut my eyes as I lost myself to the pleasure he delivered me, but he captured my chin and growled, "Look at me."

My eyes cracked open and the intensity in his gaze had me coming apart again. His muscles flexed and gleamed with sweat and I needed to feel it all against me.

I gripped his waist and tugged, but he didn't fall to my demand. His brow crinkled like he was resisting the call of my flesh against his and I wanted to be beyond begging, but right then I wasn't.

"Touch me," I panted and his resolve cracked as he forced me higher up the bed and pressed his body flush to mine. I clawed at his hair and groaned as my nipples rubbed against his golden body, his hardened muscles divine as they ground against my soft curves.

His mouth fell to my neck and he started painting kisses up to my jaw before finding my mouth. His hips slowed and I moaned against his tongue as we were suddenly sharing far more than a dirty one-nighter. My

breathing hitched as his body caged mine and his hands tangled in my hair as he started kissing and stroking and worshipping. I wrapped my legs around his waist as we got as close as two people possibly could and our heated breaths filled the air around us.

My body was coming apart again, slower this time like water building up against a dam. Blake started breathing my name like a prayer and I moaned his in response. In that moment, nothing in the world existed but him, me and the potent desire that lived between us.

I came apart once more, clinging to him and crying out as pleasure rolled through me in wave after wave. Blake followed me a beat later, rearing over me and pinning me in place as he spilled himself inside me with a growl of pure pleasure.

“Fuck you, Tatum Rivers,” he panted as his forehead knocked against mine. “Fuck you for being that good.”

I laughed headily, carving my fingers along his shoulder blades as the full weight of him spread over me and his laughter sounded out to meet mine.

I tugged his hair and brushed my lips over his. “Fuck you for thinking I wouldn’t be, Blake Bowman.”



I inhaled deeply as the scent of vanilla and honey blossom fluttered beneath my nostrils, groaning lightly at the satisfaction which sung in my limbs.

It was official. Tatum Rivers was the hottest girl at school and the best in the sack too. Not that I'd had *every* girl at school. But I'd had enough to be sure. And Tatum was a fucking Tom cat. I couldn't get enough of her skin on my skin, her mouth on my flesh, my body possessing hers...or *hell*, it felt like her body had been possessing mine half the time.

I was going to do that again. Like, now. Although, she was asleep which was a bit of an obstacle. What if she was the type to freak out if her beauty sleep was interrupted?

Her body curved into the shape of mine perfectly as she lay with her head on my chest, all of that long, blonde hair spilling around her endlessly.

I trailed my fingers through it as I watched her, my hand slipping down her spine and causing her to arch her back like a cat as a soft moan escaped her. Yeah, I was hitting that again ASAP.

I was hard as stone already. I'd woken up that way like my cock knew she was right here this whole time even if the rest of me happened to have been asleep.

My hand made it to her ass and I gripped the perfect roundness of it, drawing her hips against me where her leg was hooked over mine.

She moaned softly, hungrily, her hand sliding down my chest and making my skin burn beneath her touch.

She wrapped her fingers around my cock and I groaned as she moved them up and down, stroking caressing, her thumb sliding over the head in a way that made me ache.

My lips parted to ask her if she was ready for round two just as my cellphone started ringing.

Tatum's lips pouted in a way that was just too fucking cute as she pulled a pillow over her head to avoid the noise of it.

I smirked at her like a sappy fucker while she couldn't see me. This girl was...*fuck*, this girl might just have been long term material. I could see myself fucking her for weeks and weeks instead of a one off. Hell, I actually *enjoyed* talking to her. I might even *date* her.

I must have been losing the plot or still drunk or she was just so mind blowing in bed that my mind really was blown. But I wasn't sure I cared. All I knew, was that for now and tomorrow and at least for the rest of this week, Tatum Rivers was my girl. And I didn't care what Saint or any other fucker had to say about it. If I was a dog, I'd piss on her to mark her out. Or something less gross. I didn't know how to do that shit, but she made me wanna figure it out.

My jaw ticked as I looked over at my cellphone. It was lighting up through the fabric of my jeans pocket which were still on the floor where I'd dropped them. I'd have ignored it if it was any other ringtone but We Are The Champions by Queen only rang for one man. My dad. And if he was calling me at three in the morning then there was a good damn reason for it.

“Sorry,” I breathed, rolling her over onto her back and knocking the pillow aside so that I could look down at her. “That’s my dad, I need to answer.”

“That’s okay. I’d always answer for my dad too,” she said, her blue eyes cracking open as she looked up at me sleepily.

I groaned, leaning in to taste her lips again and they parted for me as I kissed her slowly, sliding my tongue over hers in lazy strokes as I tasted her desire.

I groaned into her mouth, my dick driving into her side and aching with need.

The phone rang out and I forgot about it as I moved between her thighs, the tip of my cock sliding against her pussy which was already so wet for me.

I wanted to plunge straight in but more than that, I wanted her panting my name, moaning and begging for me.

I broke our kiss as I moved south, taking her rose pink nipple into my mouth as I tugged the other one between my fingers.

She moaned softly, her hands caressing my broad shoulders as I moved lower still, savouring the perfection of her tanned skin. There wasn’t a strap mark in sight and the idea of her laying butt naked in the California sun only turned me on more.

I slipped my hand between us, running my fingers straight down the centre of her as her breath caught in her throat.

“Fuck, Blake,” she gasped and I wanted to bottle the sound of my name on her lips like that.

I growled with desire as I sucked on her nipple and pushed two fingers into her. She was so wet, so fucking wet and the moan that escaped her was

like tasting ecstasy. I was high on this girl and I never wanted to come down.

I ran my thumb over her clit and she moaned again, louder this time, not giving a shit if anyone in the next room heard us because that sound was for me. For what I was doing to her. And it just about summed up what she was doing to me too.

I moved my fingers in and out slowly, savouring the way her body tightened around me and the gasps that came from her each time I stroked her clit.

I released her nipple and reared over her, watching this perfect creature writhing beneath me, fucking my hand like she could never get enough of me. And in that moment I was sure I'd never get enough of her either.

Her eyes fluttered open and she met my gaze as I continued to drive her body to ruin. It was so fucking hot, I could see the desire there, the heat, the need. All of it aimed at me.

Her hands moved over her breasts and I wanted to watch that show so fucking much, but I couldn't look away from those big blue eyes. They were an endless sky on a summer's day full of promise and excitement and a heat so intense that I knew I'd be burned by her. But I didn't care. I wanted to burn if this was how it felt.

"Blake," she gasped again and I wanted her to say my name like that every fucking time I saw her.

"You can't be real," I breathed as I watched her panting beneath me.

I kept moving my hand, a groan of desire spilling from me as I felt her tightening around my fingers.

"More," she begged. "More, ah, *Blake*."

She came for me with a cry that almost had me spilling for her too and I growled with need as I kept stroking her through the final throes of it.

“I need all of you,” she demanded, reaching for my cock hungrily and I released a dark laugh.

“Greedy, aren’t you?”

“I can’t get enough of you,” she breathed and my brows rose as I wondered if that was true. Shit, I *hoped* it was true.

“Me either, Tate,” I growled, slowly drawing my fingers back out of her.

She shuddered as I withdrew them, the final shiver of her orgasm dancing along her skin.

Just as I was about to move on top of her, my phone started ringing again and I cursed.

Tate watched me with hooded eyes, biting down on her bottom lip while she continued to tease her nipples for me.

“Fuck,” I growled. “I *really* have to answer that.”

“Then do it. And hurry back,” she urged.

The thought of getting out of that bed almost caused me physical pain, but I had to do it.

I stood, hooking a pair of sweatpants from a drawer and pulling them on before retrieving my phone from my jeans’ pocket. It rang out again but that was fine, I needed to leave this room if I had any hope of concentrating on what my dad had to say to me and I didn’t really want to talk to him with a hard on either.

Tate watched me from the bed, lying there naked, her legs parted to give me the perfect view of exactly what I was coming back to and I groaned in frustration.

“Thirty seconds,” I swore to her as I backed up towards the door.

“I’ll be waiting,” she promised.

I growled hungrily again, pushing the fingers I’d just had inside her into my mouth so that I could taste the sweetness of her desire before I left.

Her eyes flared with heat as she watched me sucking on them and I smirked at her before backing out of the room.

I jogged to the end of the corridor and out of the front door as I tried to focus on anything aside from that goddess in my bed. Saint wasn't having her. He could fuck off. There was no chance in hell I'd let him take her. Tatum Rivers was *mine*.

I paced up and down a few times, letting the cold air on my chest draw my attention as I tried to sink my boner. It wasn't really working. That girl was so hot that I'd probably be hard all week even if I didn't lay eyes on her again.

I blew out a breath and dialled my dad's number. He answered before the first ring had even finished and my eyebrows rose at his tone.

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"Geeze, I was asleep, where are *you* at three am?" I asked in a pissy tone. I didn't need him calling me for some lecture right now, I had better things to be doing. Much better things.

"Sorry...I didn't mean to be short with you, son," he said, releasing a heavy breath.

"That's okay..." He'd been a bit like that since the Hades Virus had killed Mom. I got that he was grieving so I just let it fly. He didn't need me being an asshole on top of his grief.

"Look, it hasn't hit the news yet but it will by tomorrow-" Dad said.

"What will?"

"They figured out the source of this fucking virus," he growled.

"Oh, right." I suppressed a sigh. Dad had been determined to blame someone ever since Mom had died. He'd been suckered in by a bunch of conspiracy theorists about government cover ups and bio weapons. I was pretty sure they were just after his money to fund their nonsense research,

but I hadn't tried to stop him. He had plenty of money if he wanted to waste some of it, and if it gave him some kind of peace to believe in that bullshit then he could have it.

"I'm not talking about some theory, Blake. I'm talking about *confirmed* information. That virus was a fucking bio weapon, but it was supposed to be on strict lockdown because they don't have a cure for the fucking thing."

"You're saying the government are admitting this?" I asked, my interest piqued.

"Yes! They are because they've also figured out where the leak came from."

"Really? Where?"

"This asshole disgruntled scientist who worked in the labs. He *stole* it and sold it to god knows who, or maybe he released it himself, I don't fucking know but it clearly got out into the world."

"So they've arrested him?" I asked hopefully. I hoped they'd gotten hold of him in a state with the death penalty so that fucker could fry.

"No," Dad ground out. "Unfortunately the asshole realised they were onto him and he's gone on the run."

"Fuck," I cursed, pacing up and down as I tried to process this.

Someone, some fucking, pathetic, worthless, money grabbing *shrew* of a man had done this. Had infected the world with this poison. Had killed my fucking mom! I wanted his head. I wanted him dead and bloody at my feet. I didn't know how I'd manage such a thing, but I wanted it more than I could possibly put into words. More than I'd ever wanted anything.

I couldn't hear anything beyond the ringing in my ears and all I could see was black. No...*red*. Because rage was red and I was full up to bursting with it. Fucking *exploding* with it.

Dad was saying something else, but I couldn't hear him above the pulse pounding in my ears.

"Did you hear what I just said?" he demanded.

"No. What was it?" I ground out.

"I *said* that they haven't released his name to the public yet, but I used my sources to get my hands on it. And my guys tore through every scrap of information there is on him out there."

"And?" I asked.

"*And*. His name is Donovan Rivers, he's a scientist, obviously, but he's also a prepper, into all kinds of shit, but that's not what matters because I found his weakness. He tried to hide her away when he realised this would all come out, but he chose the wrong goddamn place to do it."

"Hide who away?" I asked with a frown.

"His daughter. Tatum Rivers. She's at your school!" He kept talking but I couldn't hear him anymore because my skin was crawling, my head was pounding and my heart was beating to a beat so powerful it fucking *hurt*.

No! No, no, no, no NO!

How the fuck had this happened? She wasn't just at my school, she was in my *bed!* I'd just made her come. She'd been looking at me like the world began and ended with me. But it didn't end with me...it ended with *her*.

Rage clawed at me, burrowing its way out of my heart and working its way through my veins, poisoning each and every part of me, consuming me. This was her father's fault. Which meant it might as well be *her* fault. This whole fucking thing, the sickness, people dying, my mom...*shit*.

"Make her life hell, son," Dad growled in my ear.

"You can count on it," I snarled in reply before ending the call.

I turned away from the dorms and ran to the far end of the path where there was a sign for a lookout point with a view over the lake to the

mountain beyond. I raced up to the top, my feet falling still at the very peak of the cliff.

I clawed my hands into my hair and roared my grief to the sky. My voice echoed on and on endlessly and I stumbled back, falling to my knees as I gripped my cellphone almost hard enough to break the damn thing.

I needed to do something about this, but I couldn't think clearly through the fog of rage and grief that consumed me.

I needed Saint. He'd know how to deal with this. He could think it through properly. I dialled his number with trembling fingers and put the phone to my ear as it started ringing and I waited.

He answered on the fifth ring and I just hoped he had the answers I needed.

I headed back to my dorm over two hours later, wondering if fate was shining on me and the daughter of the man I'd sworn to kill would still be in my bed. I'd done a good job of wearing her out last night so I had to hope that she'd just fallen asleep again while waiting for me to come back.

I'd spent the last two hours at The Temple with Saint and Kyan and we had a damn good plan for how we were going to play this now. I just needed to keep my cool for a while longer. Play the game. Keep her sweet.

And despite the bitter taste it left sitting on my tongue, I was willing to swallow it down for the sake of what we needed to do.

This part of the plan was all mine. I hadn't even told the other Night Keepers. I just told them I was going for a walk and I'd be back. And that was in part because I still wasn't entirely sure I could stomach it. But there was only one way to find out.

I headed into Hazel House and took the stairs two at a time before walking to the far end of the corridor where my room sat. It wasn't much of a personal space. My real room was in The Temple, but Saint didn't want us bringing girls back there so that was pretty much the sole purpose of my room. Just a place to take girls and fuck them. Nothing more.

My heart hammered to a war beat as I lingered outside the door, wondering if I could really play this part while so much hatred warred beneath my flesh.

But there was only one way to find out.

I pushed the door open and was equally relieved and infuriated to find Tatum still sleeping in my bed.

Her golden hair spilled all around her and she'd rolled onto her front, pulling the covers over her body, though the curve of her ass still drew my gaze through them.

Damn her. Damn her for being so fucking tempting. It was like she'd been specifically designed with my cock in mind. Everything about her drew me in. From the sexy, rough edge on her voice to the perfection of her body and those fucking blue eyes which saw into my soul.

I'd never known a girl who I even wanted to see again the next day, let alone fuck again. And yet despite everything, the sight of her laying there, waiting for me, naked in my bed had me hard as stone already. Even knowing who she was. And I hated myself for that weakness. But I could use it too.

I moved across the room to the chest of drawers which held nothing more than a few spare clothes for the odd nights I stayed here. The brilliance of it was that I could literally leave the next morning once I was done with a girl and I didn't even have to kick her out. I just went back to my real room.

But that wasn't an option now. Tatum Rivers was a thorn in my side which I fully intended to pull out.

And though I may have left this room last with my balls aching with need and a promise on her lips, I refused to admit that that was what had drawn me back.

I wasn't here because I was longing to sink into her body again. I was here because her father owed me a life. And if he wasn't going to pay with his own then I'd take his daughter's instead.

I took my cellphone from my pocket and placed it on the chest of drawers, wedging in against my wallet and quickly checking that the camera could see the bed.

Tatum murmured something behind me and I stilled, my finger hesitating over the record button.

"Blake?" she breathed and my gut twisted at the sound of my name on those lips. Why the fuck did that have to sound so good? So *right*?

"Yeah?" I asked without turning to her.

"Where did you go? I had to get myself off while I was waiting..."

I wasn't sure if that was a joke or not, but my dick twitched at the mere suggestion of it.

"Oh yeah?" I asked, trying to school my features before I had to turn to her. "And what were you thinking about when you did that?"

"Of how much I want you inside me again," she said in a husky tone which had my mind made up.

My body needed this release. And everyone knew that hate sex was the best kind of sex anyway. It just so happened that I was the only one of us in on the hate part for now.

But was I really going to film it? I pushed my tongue into my cheek. It wasn't like I had to do that for our plan to work...

“What was so important that you walked out on me for half the night?” she asked sleepily.

Ice slid through my veins as I thought about exactly why I’d been called from my bed. It was because I’d found out that her lowlife father had killed my mother and then gone on the run for it without paying the consequences. And it was clearly planned, too. Saint had paid off one of the school secretaries in our first year and he had access to all of the student’s personal files. Tatum’s entire school year had been paid up and there were legal documents filed giving custody of her over to her aunt. He’d known he was going to run. He just hadn’t known he was leaving his daughter in such capable hands.

I hit record and turned my back on the phone as I looked at her.

She’d moved onto her knees in the centre of the bed and she held a sheet up to cover her body. As I watched, she released her hold on the sheet and it slid down her curves like melting butter.

A growl escaped me as I looked at her. I still wanted her just as much as I had last night. I couldn’t deny it. But that didn’t mean I had to give her what she’d taken before. I didn’t even want to think about that. About the way it had felt to possess her entire being and for her to possess mine. But then I’d always known that the devil made the sweetest promises and wore the finest skin. She’d tempted me alright. Clearly still was. But if she wanted me mind, body and soul then she was out of luck. Because this time I was only offering her my body.

“Do you wanna try a little roleplay?” I asked her as I moved forward like a predator closing in on its prey.

“Umm...I don’t know,” she said, tilting her head so that her golden hair hid her left nipple from me.

“Do you wanna call me Daddy?” I purred.

“Daddy? Erm, no, that’s creepy.” She wrinkled her nose and I refused to consider it cute as I snorted a laugh.

“Yeah, you’re probably right about that...when you first saw me, did you know we’d end up here? Was it a foregone conclusion?” I asked, leading her on a merry dance to get her to say the things I wanted.

Tatum raised her chin, owning her actions in a move so fucking hot that it was a wonder I wasn’t already taking claim of her body. “I knew,” she breathed.

“This whole time?” I pushed.

“Yeah. I knew this whole time,” she agreed, watching me closely as the snare tightened around her neck and she didn’t even realise it.

I had what I needed. I could have stopped there. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. The heat and desire in her eyes might as well have been my own.

Besides, fuck wanting this, I *needed* it. Needed to feel every inch of her skin against mine again.

“Tell me what you want,” I said darkly, moving closer as I dropped my sweatpants and her eyes instantly dipped to admire my body.

“I want you,” she panted, her knees widening where she knelt before me like she could almost feel it already. “I want you inside me, Blake.”

And maybe a better man would have said no. But I’d never claimed to be a better man.

I closed the distance between us and she reached for me instantly, her lips pressing to mine and the heavenly taste of her washing over my tongue as she kissed me like she had last night. But this wasn’t like last night. I didn’t feel any of those things I’d imagined in my drunken stupor and I wasn’t going to let her trick me into feeling them again now.

I pulled back, gazing into the endless ocean of her eyes and she frowned slightly, reaching up to cup my cheek.

“Did something happen, Blake?” she breathed like she could see right into my soul and feel all of my grief just by looking into my eyes. “Did your dad give you bad news, or-”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I said firmly.

Fuck those eyes. She was still holding me captive in them. Still shifting through the bullshit for the nugget of pain I’d buried away deep inside me. But she would have a whole lot of fury to dig through first if she expected to find that.

“What can I do?” she asked and for a moment the question caught me off guard. It was so...sincere. Like she really wanted to help. But there was only one thing that could help me. Revenge. And it just so happened that she was the one who could offer that to me anyway.

“I want to screw you like there’s no tomorrow,” I growled. “I want to wring all of the pain and heartache and fucking rage right out of my body and yours.”

She stared at me for a long moment before drawing her bottom lip into her mouth in a way that made me need her even more.

If we could just stop talking and start fucking, I knew I could forget about this shit. Even if it was only for a little while.

“Okay then, Blake,” she breathed, a dare dancing in her eyes. “Give me your worst.”

I growled with pure hunger as I lurched forward, pressing my mouth to hers as I pushed her down onto the bed beneath me and she moaned in encouragement.

Her tongue tasted of the sweetest poison and the most bitter of lies.

Her thighs parted for me as she kissed me harder, but I could feel myself falling headfirst into her honey trap again. This felt too good, too right. And it was wrong.

I pulled back with a determined snarl and flipped her over beneath me so that she was face down on the bed and I didn't have to face the ache she awoke with her kisses.

Of course she didn't flinch, pushing her ass up hungrily as she offered me everything I could take and more.

I groaned as I lined myself up behind her, feeling how wet she was against the tip of my cock a moment before I drove myself inside her. One hard thrust right up to the base had her screaming into the pillow beneath her.

"More," she gasped as I slid back out before thrusting in again and again and again.

She felt *so* fucking *good*. Her body seemed made for mine and her cries of pleasure only told me she agreed.

My fingers bit into her hips as I pounded into her savagely, angrily, hungrily. And I cursed her beneath my breath because I needed more of her, all of her. I never wanted this feeling to end. And the rage in me fed and fed on each and every thrust, my anger growing and hardening as I fought against the way I wanted her.

"Yes!" she cried, her hands fisting in the sheets. "More!"

Harder and harder. Harder than I'd ever fucked anybody before and she met me thrust for thrust, crying out for even more as I drove myself into the perfect tightness of her body.

I slid my hand around her hips until I was riding her clit with my fingers, stroking it in time with every thrust.

Her begging gave way to screaming as I worked her over and my own voice joined hers as I couldn't help but groan in pleasure too.

I'd never felt anything like this. Like her. The girl I hated more than words could ever convey.

She screamed as she came for me and I followed her into oblivion instantly as she tightened around my length, her body trembling for what I'd just done to her. My heart was pounding, limbs trembling and my entire being felt like it had just been shattered and stitched back together by her. I'd never felt anything that came even close to that. To her.

She dropped her hips flat to the bed and I fell over her, the scent of vanilla and honey blossom engulfing me as I breathed her in.

I stayed there for a long moment, our bodies still joined and her limbs still shaking.

Perfection. There was no other word for her.

But I wasn't going to let that fool me.

I shoved off of her and got to my feet as she rolled over, pushing her hair out of her face.

"That was..." she blew out a laugh like she couldn't find words for it and I had to agree. I'd been there. I knew what it was. But I knew what she was too.

I stepped back, my jaw ticking as I pulled my sweatpants back on. I drew in a deep breath, focusing everything I had on the grief, rage and pain which darkened my soul as I forced my gaze to harden and any softness I might have been tempted to feel towards her wither and die.

"Well, thanks," I said, turning my back on her as I moved to retrieve my shit from the chest of drawers.

"Thanks?" she laughed. "Is that it then? No breakfast in bed?"

"We have breakfast in the Redwood Dining Hall," I said in a flat tone with my back to her. "And you might wanna hurry unless you plan on turning up for it in last night's dress."

I stopped the recording and pushed the cellphone into my pocket with my wallet. Tatum was silent as I gathered my shit and I turned back,

expecting to find her pouting from the bed, looking like she might just cry. But no. Of course she wasn't. She was on her feet and in her dress, fighting to pull the zipper up.

My jaw ticked as I watched her and after several long seconds I strode across the room to help. I pulled it up and she tossed her hair back before kicking her shoes back on.

"Are you on the pill?" I asked before she could step away from me. I'd been so caught up in her last night that I hadn't even thought of a condom until this moment, but I was starting to realise what an absolute fuck up that had been. If I got this girl pregnant, how the hell was I supposed to cope with that? Her dad had killed my mom.

"Yes," she said in a forced light tone. "No need to worry about that. Should I be getting myself an STI test though?" She stepped away from me and gave me an analytical look which said she thought she probably should.

"No," I growled. "I've never forgotten a condom before."

We looked at each other for a long moment which acknowledged exactly how much we'd both wanted each other for that to happen. Needed each other. But that was over now. I didn't screw girls twice and she was no different no matter how much my body wanted her to be.

"Well, Blake, that was fun," Tatum said abruptly, giving me a smile which didn't reach her eyes. "Thanks."

She slapped my cheek twice in the most patronising gesture known to man but before I could get over my shock, she was gone.

I ground my teeth and fought against the urge to go after her as the door swung closed in my face but I managed to remain where I was.

Tatum Rivers had it coming anyway. And I could wait a little longer until she got it.



Blake Bowman had turned into the predictable fuckboy I'd been warned he was. For half a second I'd actually thought he was really into me. And as pitiful as it was to admit, I'd been into him for half a second too. It was stupid. I'd played around with boys like him before. I always stayed as unattached as they did. It was easy. I'd never once found myself hoping they might wanna see me again. But this time...shit. I was pretty sure I'd just been had by the number one player in the game.

How could he fake it so well? I'd practically felt his freaking soul connect to mine. But apparently that had all been in my head. It just hadn't felt like it at the time...

I hurried out of Hazel House and walked along the path as quickly as I could.

Dammit, why couldn't I be heading off to Louisiana, Texas or the middle of nowhere in Montana today? I was gonna have to front this out. Face Blake with as cold a front as he offered me. I was glad I'd clocked onto his royal dick routine before he'd kicked me out. My fast actions meant I'd left

with my dignity intact at least. But my heart felt pretty busted up. Luckily, it was worn deep on the inside, so as long as I kept my mask firmly in place, no one was ever going to know that one of the Night Keepers had touched it.

Gah, why did he have to be so good in bed? My body was still humming from the throes of my last orgasm. I'd lost count of how many of them he'd given me, but I was certain it was a new PB.

I made it right up to the door of the girls' accommodation before my luck ran out. A group of sophomores spilled out of Beech House, their eyes widening at the sight of me. I hadn't looked in the mirror this morning, but I imagined I looked like Rapunzel if she'd been dragged behind a train for fifty miles then trampled by a horse.

I hitched on a smile, tipping an invisible hat to them as I swept through the middle of the group, my pulse rising.

"She disappeared with Blake Bowman last night," one of them whispered and I lingered on the stairs as the door slowly swung closed, catching another one answering.

"That explains the I-survived-the-apocalypse look. At least he'll be onto his next victim now, we'd better be ready girls!"

A twinge of jealousy tugged at my gut as I jogged upstairs. They were right. Blake was going to be onto his next conquest. Possibly as soon as tonight. I knew I was good in bed. Fucking mind-blowing in fact. So I had to wonder if it was just a power kick for Blake. Why settle with one girl when he could fuck his way through the entirety of campus and grow his sad little trophy display?

At least I was gonna sit at the top of it. Not that I wanted to be any kind of prize. But I wasn't going to let this knock my confidence. In fact, give it a few days and I'd go hunting for new flesh myself. I wanted the taste of

him off of me first though. Not to mention the smell of spiced cologne he'd imprinted me with, tangling with the lasting tones of the best sex of my life. Dammit, why did he have to be so good? How was I gonna find a guy to top him?

I made it to my room, slowly turning the key in the lock with the plan of not waking Mila so I could shower and slip back into bed for another half hour. I found the room empty and breathed a sigh of relief. She'd probably ended up in the boys' accommodation too last night with Danny Harper. He was legit obsessed with her in the cutest way. Wherever she'd been at the party, he'd appeared, and that had made her light up like a Christmas tree.

I stripped off, pulling on a robe and grabbing a towel and my washbag before heading to the showers at the end of the hall. There were a few girls in there, but none of them paid me any attention as I stepped into a frosted glass shower unit and scrubbed Blake Bowman off of my body. There was an ache between my thighs which I didn't think was gonna heal for days. The way he'd screwed me this morning had been brutal, the kind of rough that brought out the animal in me. And as soap slid over my body, I discovered his finger marks bruised into my hips. I released a sigh. It looked like he was gonna linger with me a while longer than I'd hoped. *Dammit.*

By the time I was back in my room, I had a headache the size of Utah setting in and I was dying for a bottle of full fat coke to take the edge off of my hangover.

Once my hair was dry and flowing down my back in soft waves and I'd hidden the bags under my eyes with concealer, I pulled on my uniform and checked the clock. I was late to breakfast, but there'd be enough time to eat. I'd make damn sure of that.

I opened up the app on my phone where I could order my meals and selected scrambled eggs on toast served with a large glass of coca cola. I

wet my dry mouth as I salivated over that then headed out of the room.

I soon arrived outside the Redwood Dining Hall and felt myself slowing as I approached the double doors. This was it. I was gonna have to pull up my big girl panties and face down every whisper about me and Blake. He didn't screw me anyway, I screwed him, so who cared?

The bigger deal was that I was gonna have to pretend like he meant nothing to me. That I was perfectly content to move on with my life and never speak to him again if I didn't have to. The problem was, I could still feel his claws in me, sinking deeper. But hell if I was gonna let anyone in the world know that.

I lifted my chin, fixing on a casual expression and pushed through the door. A hushed silence fell over the dining hall as eyes turned my way. People actually elbowed their friends to point me out. It was a little extreme. Did everyone really care that much about Bowman's sexcapades?

I located Mila across the room with her circle of friends and headed towards her, firmly keeping my gaze away from the Night Keepers' table like it didn't exist. I dropped into the empty seat beside her and a fishy smell wafted under my nose. I frowned as I looked at the weird red stew sitting in front of Mila then noticed everyone around the table had ordered the same thing.

Mila didn't look up at me, instead stirring the stew with a tension in her posture that made concern inch into me.

"Are you alright? What's with the stew? Is it fish Tuesdays or something?" It was about the last thing in the world I fancied eating even if I hadn't been hanging. The smell was turning my stomach. It was gonna ruin my eggs and toast just by being present.

Mila turned to me while the rest of the table exchanged awkward glances and a sliver of ice slid down my spine. What the hell was going on?

“I’m so sorry, Tatum,” she breathed, barely loud enough for me to hear. Before I could ask why, Saint Memphis’s voice boomed through the room. “Tatum Rivers, come up here,” he commanded.

I turned to look at him and the other two guys beside him. Blake’s expression was cold, distant and Kyan’s eyes were shadowed as he stared evenly back at me. Saint’s face was a picture of calm and that was somehow more frightening than the darkness seeping from the other two.

I didn’t move, my eyes skipping between them before I turned away from them and leaned back in my seat.

“I’m good,” I said offhandedly and I swear the whole room gasped. It was ridiculous. Had I broken some sacred Night Keeper vow by being late to breakfast or something?

“Come here, Tate,” Blake’s soft voice reached me and my heart leapt in my chest.

I turned to him again, his expression warmer now though I still sensed danger on the wind. Apparently everyone in this room had turned to stone and I didn’t think they were gonna move again unless I played along with their leaders’ bullshit.

I huffed, pushing out of my seat and heading up to their table, my jaw grinding as I looked to Blake. The closer I got, the harder his features became and something in his eyes made my blood run cold.

Saint leaned forward in his seat, a cruel smile pulling at his mouth. Whatever was going on, he was in his element because of it. So I was sure it had to be something bad.

“Have I offended the mighty kings?” I asked dryly, but my heart juddered as the three of them stood up in unison.

My knees butted against the empty chair opposite Saint as I stopped moving, trying to keep my give-no-shits mask in place but hell, inside I was

quaking. Something was wrong. Awfully, terribly wrong. And it had everything to do with me.

Saint lifted an iPad from beside his bowl of fish stew, flipping the black case open and twisting it around to show me something on the screen. A picture of my dad stared back at me. It was the one used on his lanyard for work, I'd seen it a thousand times.

My eyes tore across the headline above it and my whole world started cracking and splintering.

Virologist on the run after setting the Hades Virus loose around the world in unveiled conspiracy.

"What?" I shook my head in refusal as a laugh broke free of my chest. Was this some kind of stupid joke I didn't get?

I reached for the iPad but Saint pocketed it before I could get close.

Confusion rattled through me as I tried to understand what was happening. The words of that headline sank in as the Night Keepers glared at me like I was their number one enemy. This wasn't a joke. It was true. That article was *real*.

But Dad couldn't have released that virus. He *wouldn't* have. If they knew him at all, they'd never believe those lies.

My heart beat thundered in my ears and time seemed to slow as I stood in the wake of that news, fear blossoming in my gut. I needed to speak with him, to hear him deny it, swear he didn't-

The cold, sickening splash of fish stew hit me square in the face and I gasped, stumbling back a step as I swiped it from my eyes in disgust. Blake sneered at me, tossing his now empty bowl onto the table with a clatter and my heart juddered in time with it.

“This bitch and her piece of shit father are responsible for the Hades Virus!” he bellowed to the room and I shook my head in horror.

“No!” I insisted but Saint threw his bowl next, the thick goop slapping against my chest and seeping down inside my uniform.

I backed up into a table as my heart collided with my throat and I desperately tried to find a way out of this nightmare.

The boy sitting in the seat I’d hit pushed out of his chair, knocking me back a few steps as he and the rest of his friends stood up with the disgusting stew in their hands.

“Don’t!” I tried to dodge it, but so much of the vile substance flew through the air I couldn’t avoid it. The backs of my legs hit the Night Keepers table and I heard Saint growling, “Do it,” before another bowl was poured straight over my head.

I cried out in horror, the stew stinging my eyes and making me gag and cough from the disgusting smell. I turned to find Kyan placing his empty bowl down. There was no light in his eyes, just a void. But it was nothing compared to the way Saint was looking at me. His eyes were burning with the fires of hell, his face illuminated by the cruelty, his lips turned up in the most evil of smiles.

I hunted for mercy in Blake’s eyes, but there was nothing but a hard wall of fury awaiting me in them. I wanted to beg and plead and force them to listen. But I knew no words could save me. They’d made up their minds. I was their enemy. The daughter of the man who’d unleashed a plague on the world. But it couldn’t be true. It just couldn’t be.

“Show her what you think of her!” Blake called to the room and a rush of movement made me flinch as bowl after bowl of cold stew was flung over me.

I started running, fleeing, my heart crashing against my chest as I fought to breathe through the suffocating odour. I could hardly see through the blinding red fog and my feet hooked over someone's leg, tripping me so I fell sprawling to the ground. I did the only thing I could and curled up under the waterfall of fish chunks and sticky red sauce that washed over me, screaming and kicking as I tried to strike at anyone close enough to hit.

When the attack slowed, a new horror found me. My voice was being played through speakers all around the room, breathy and seductive. I recognised the words I'd spoken to Blake this morning when he'd come back from speaking with his father. But they'd been edited to make it sound like I was admitting something to him.

"Did you know about the things your father was doing?" Blake's voice echoed out over the speakers.

"Daddy?... I knew." It was my voice, but he'd edited the things I'd said to make it sound like I was answering questions which I'd never even heard him speak.

"And you knew he was going to do this to the world before you decided to hide away here at our school?" Blake asked angrily.

"Yeah. I knew the whole time." I was practically panting as I said that and it was so fucking obvious to me that the whole thing had been put together, but the rest of the students didn't seem to agree, booing and jeering as they swallowed the lies they were being fed. My heart felt like it was tearing down the middle and all I could see between the red stew which half blinded me was hate-filled faces and accusing glares.

That audio played over again to drive the lies home before the sound of me panting and crying out with an orgasm echoed off of the walls just to humiliate me more.

“You piece of trash!” someone shouted then a chorus of insults filled the room, drowning out the sounds of me and Blake having sex.

“Gutter whore!”

“Daddy fucker!”

“You worthless bitch!”

Worse than all of it was the icy laughter that carried from the Night Keepers’ table. I didn’t look their way as I pushed myself to my feet and stew slid off of my clothes, dripping onto the floor. I was shaking all over, my skin burning with embarrassment, shame, rage. I ran for the door again and this time I made it outside, dragging down the fresh air as I tried to fight the bile rising in my throat.

I raced for Beech House, not stopping for a second until I reached the showers on the third floor. I wrenched a door open to one of the units, tossing my phone out of my pocket before flipping the switch on and stepping under the powerful flow of water fully clothed.

By the time the pungent stew had washed from my eyes, I was crying, shock and dismay wracking through my body as I tried to process what had just happened.

I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think clearly, couldn’t process what the hell had just happened to me or how.

This can’t be real. It can’t be true.

I stripped out of my uniform and dropped to the bottom of the shower, hugging my legs to my chest as the water raced over my flesh and turned red as it washed away the stew before running down the drain. I ran my fingers over the rose-shaped scar on my forearm; if internal wounds left scars, I imagined my insides would be riddled with them soon.

I stayed there until the tears stopped flowing and the panic in my chest had started to ease. I was hated. Despised. The entire school were holding

me responsible for the virus. But surely Dad didn't do this? Why would he? We were well off, we didn't need the money. The Apollo Company had paid him six figures a month.

My breathing finally started to slow and I pulled myself to my feet, the trembling of my body finally easing a fraction. I switched the shower off, wringing out my hair and abandoning my uniform as I stepped out of the unit and a cold resilience ran over me. I wouldn't need it anymore. I wasn't staying here. I hadn't wanted to be here in the first place. If Dad really was on the run, I'd find him. Help him. He'd always been there for me and I wasn't going to abandon him now when he was thrown to the wolves. There had to be an explanation for this. The news had to be wrong.

I grabbed my phone and washed off the stew by the basin before heading to my room, having no towel to cover myself up. But no one was around and even if they had been, I didn't think I could be any more humiliated than I already was.

I took a steadying breath as I headed into my room, hurriedly pulling on a pair of sweatpants and a sports bra before tugging a black hoodie over it. I threw all of my stuff into my suitcase as fast as I could then grabbed my backpack from where I'd stashed it under the bed and filled it with the last of my things. I took the letter I'd written to Jessica from my nightstand, tucking it carefully into the concealed pocket at the back of the pack to keep it safe, then shouldered the bag. I left my school books. I didn't want any reminder of Everlake Preparatory and I could buy new ones for whatever school I ended up in next.

I tugged my suitcase along, heading out of the room and hurrying out of the building. I took my phone from my pocket as I walked in the direction of the main gate, bringing up the Uber app and tapping the button to get a lift. It started searching for rides as I upped my pace, making it past Aspen

Halls and closing in on the gravel driveway that led out of this godforsaken place.

Screw all of them. I don't need this shit. I just need my dad. That's all I've ever needed.

The Uber app failed to find me a ride and I growled as I tried again, hunting the map for signs of any cars close by. There wasn't one anywhere. I knew we were in the middle of nowhere, but this was taking the piss. I googled taxi services as I closed in on the gate, spotting Monroe standing by it talking to the guards beyond.

Just my damn luck.

Well he can't do anything about me leaving. If I wanna go, I'll go.

I clicked on the number for the top taxi firm and brought the phone to my ear. It went to an automated voicemail and I frowned as the woman spoke. "We're sorry, but due to the new regulations enforced by the Governor of State, Troy Memphis, we can no longer provide our service. We value you as a customer and hope that-"

I cut the call, my heart beating out of rhythm as I tucked my phone back into my pocket. What new regulations?

I breathed heavily, making a new plan to walk as far as I could from this place. I'd hitchhike as soon as I could and head to my dad's property in Elmwood Forest a few hours from here. I had a key, so even if he wasn't there I could hole up in the house until I figured out what to do. And with the precautions Dad had taken about purchasing it as a doomsday safe house, I knew no one would be able to locate it but us.

I reached the gate, but Monroe stepped into my way before I could open it. There was a padlock and chain holding it closed and I frowned as I lifted my gaze to meet his.

His brows pulled together at my expression then he folded his arms.
“And where do you think you’re going, princess?”

“I’m leaving. Open this gate,” I asked curtly.

“Leaving?” he scoffed. “Don’t you rich kids read the news?”

I ground my teeth, not in the mood for his attitude. “I saw the article about my dad and it’s bullshit.”

“Well, whether that’s true or not, I really don’t give a shit. But if you’d taken your head out of your bleached asshole long enough to read the rest of the news, you would know that Sequoia State is now on lockdown and everyone is required to shelter in place until further notice.”

“What?” I gasped, my heart ramming against my ribcage like it was trying to bust through it and make a break for freedom without me.

“I don’t like repeating myself,” he drawled, running a hand over his dark blonde locks. “Listen closely...boarding school students are required to stay in their schools by state law until their parents come to collect them in person. Anyone who isn’t collected will remain here at Everlake until the lockdown is lifted.”

My lungs crushed in my chest as I attempted to draw in air.

“Are you kidding me?” I snarled, trying to step past him, but he placed a hand on my arm.

I jerked away from him, not wanting anyone touching me right now, let alone the guy who was telling me I had to stay in this hell hole.

“I wish it was a fucking joke because I’m stuck here too,” he said dryly.
“So go on, head on back to class, princess.”

“And what if I refuse?” I hissed.

“Then the guards are authorised to catch you and put you back in your gilded cage,” he said, pointing at the meatheads in their black uniforms beyond the gates. Two of them even had dogs on chains. They were

supposed to be there to protect the rich kids, but now they were being used against them. Against *me*.

My heart shattered as I stared out at the long driveway that wound out of sight beyond the gates. Freedom was so close and yet so impossible to reach. As far as I knew, it was the only way in or out of campus. An eight foot wall ringed the perimeter with metal spikes on top of it sharp enough to skewer a wildebeest. If they didn't let me through this gate willingly, I was never getting out.

No. Never say never, Tatum. Remember what Dad taught you.

I turned to Monroe again as I swallowed my pride and let him see just how much I was breaking inside. Just for a second. Just in case he might be swayed to my cause.

"Please," I breathed, my voice cracking. "I can't stay here."

He eyed my expression with a taut frown then shook his head. "Those are the rules, Miss Rivers. We all have to follow them."

My mask slammed back into place as I snarled at him.

"This is bullshit," I snapped, turning my back on him and pulling my suitcase back towards the school.

My heart drummed in my ears as the world closed in around me, feeling smaller and smaller by the second.

There was only one glimmer of hope I had to hold onto. Boys like Blake, Kyan and Saint weren't going to stay here during lockdown. Their parents would surely come running to collect their precious princes. I just hoped they came sooner rather than later, because if I had to spend another second in their company, I was going to scream.



The bell rang to mark the start of class and I headed into our English classroom in Aspen Halls with Blake at my side.

He was unusually quiet, his attention on his Rolex which he'd taken off and kept twisting between his fingers.

We made it to the back of the room and I took my usual seat in the centre of the row as Blake dropped down to my right. Kyan's spot on my left remained empty and I pursed my lips as I looked at it. There was something up with Kyan Roscoe. Some new darkness in him which he'd been trying to hide. But ever since Blake had woken us up last night to tell us all about our new girl's real identity, that darkness had only seemed to grow.

When we left breakfast, he'd turned away without a word, heading back down the path towards The Temple. No doubt he'd forgotten his books or something equally disorganised, but I was willing to bet there was something else going on there too. Something I intended to get to the bottom of.

The class filled up before us and Miss Pontus shuffled papers around on her desk. No one took the seats on either end of our row. They knew better than that. Like everything else in life, this school had a ranking system

which was upheld religiously. Top dogs at the back of the classrooms, runts at the front.

Miss Pontus started taking attendance, but she was interrupted by Headmaster Brown's voice coming over the tannoy.

"Good morning students. As some of you may be aware, the Hades Virus has taken a turn for the worse overnight. The total number of live cases in the continental US has now reached over eighteen thousand and the number of dead has climbed to eleven thousand. The President has just now released a new statement on the current guidelines as for how this global pandemic is to be dealt with."

A ripple of unease ran through the class as people whispered to their neighbours, shifted in their seats and generally looked uncomfortable as fuck.

"As such, the following is now in force in the state of Sequoia: one; there is to be a statewide lockdown. No one is allowed to leave their homes or place of residence unless it is in the pursuit of essential supplies or work. For the school itself, we have decided that means we must close ourselves off from the outside world entirely. The gates are locked and will remain so until further notice. We are in the uniquely fortunate position of already being an isolated community so we believe that for now, you can all continue to attend classes. However, you are allowed to leave *if* a parent or guardian comes to the school to collect you *in person*. In that case, you will be escorted to the gate and meet them out on the drive. Once you leave, you will not be permitted back into the school until this virus is eradicated."

More mutters spilled through the room at that and I cut Blake a glance. He didn't even seem to be listening to the announcement, twisting that damn Rolex in his hand like it was the only thing that mattered in the world.

“Two,” Headmaster Brown continued. “Social distancing is now in place. There are to be no more parties, no hang outs, no Netflix and chill with your bros-” Who did this asshole think he was? And he was seriously misunderstanding what Netflix and chill meant. “As of tomorrow, you will receive new timetables and some of you will find you now have classes in the evenings and at weekends and free time during the day as we split the classes down to make social distancing easier to maintain.”

“There’s no way in hell I’ll be changing my routine,” I murmured, pulling my cellphone from my pocket with the intention of sending him an email to remind him not to fuck with my system. And he could forget about changing up what Blake or Kyan were doing too. In fact, he could also make sure that our new pet project remained in our classes as well. I wanted eyes on Tatum Rivers as often as possible for more reasons than one. And with her dad on the run, it didn’t sound like she’d be getting out of here any time soon.

I was sure a lot of assholes would run home to Mommy, but that wasn’t on my agenda. Even if Father decided he wanted me home, my answer would be no. I liked being here. Living in my Temple. Ruling this little corner of the world with my best friends at my side. I wouldn’t be vacating the throne for some fucking illness.

“The third government guideline pertains to the hoarding of food and other essential items such as toilet paper. Though as you have these things provided for you, there is no need for you to concern yourselves with that. I just wanted to reassure you that we have no shortages here and have heard nothing to suggest that our upcoming deliveries will be short either.”

Note to self: lay claim to food and toilet paper before these face-stuffing, ass-wiping fuckwits get it into their heads to do it first.

“Lastly, I just want to reassure you that although times are tough in the outside world, we here at Everlake Preparatory School still have your futures at heart and will ensure to provide you with the very best of educations through these dark times.”

The announcement came to an end and Miss Pontus embarrassed herself by clapping. I mean, honest to fuck, it was like that woman *tried* to fail at passing the social bar. She fell silent quick enough, but you could practically taste her shame on the air.

I switched my cellphone on to send that email and paused as a bunch of texts and missed calls flooded in. I didn't like to leave the thing on at all times. I didn't like to be too available to anyone. But when my dad tried to contact me like that, it was generally worth me taking note. I guessed as Governor of the State, he'd been offering me a heads up about that little announcement. Oh well. Hearing it with the common folk hadn't made much difference to me.

I scanned the messages, taking in the information that Headmaster Brown had just relayed and then some. Turned out toilet paper was practically as rare as a dragon fart these days with panic buyers doubling down on their purchases of the stuff like they expected the world to end if they didn't. That was a weird one. The Hades Virus didn't give you the shits. Hell, as far as I could tell, with the damn thing making you feel nauseous enough to lose your appetite you'd probably need *less* of the stuff, not more. But I'd be getting my hands on a stockpile all the same. Rich men stayed rich because they saw the needs of the masses and made sure they were the ones providing them, after all.

He also advised me that the mortality rates for this thing were rising rapidly. The official numbers were higher than those released to the public and rising fast. Quarantining myself was the safest option right now. And to

further that message, he informed me that he believed it was in my best interest to stay isolated at school rather than risk moving back to our house in the city. He was still having to attend official meetings and he didn't want me put at risk by his contact with the outside world. My empty heart might have been touched if I hadn't known that was about maintaining his legacy just as much as it was about keeping me alive personally. He really should have had more children to ensure that, but Mother had claimed that carrying a child was an unnecessary burden on her womb which didn't need repeating, so no siblings for me.

I considered what that meant. Riding out the pandemic here. No doubt Kyan would stay too. He only visited his family when we absolutely *had* to and he sure as fuck wouldn't want to end up quarantined with them. Which meant I just needed to ensure Blake stayed as well. The Night Keepers stuck together. Everyone knew that.

I cut one of my best friends a look and sighed at what I saw.

Blake was still twisting his watch between his fingers with that distracted look on his face.

The class had broken into conversation about the announcement and Miss Pontus raised her hand for attention like a fucking fifth grader. Strangely enough, no one paid her any notice. *Fucking lemon.*

My jaw tightened as Blake flipped the watch over again.

"Either wear it or don't," I growled and he fell still.

"Life's a really fucked up thing, isn't it?" he said without looking at me.

"How so?"

"Choices."

"Either speak or don't, I have no patience for riddles," I said.

Blake released a breath which said *he* had no patience for my shit, but that was fine by me. "I just mean that any choice we make could be the last

one. My mom booking that fucking cruise to Hawaii. My dad having to bail at the last minute because there was a problem with the team... She could have chosen to re-book when he could go too. Or he could have insisted she stay home with him.”

“There’s no point of thinking about it like that,” I said, frowning as he flipped the watch over again and I caught a look at the inscription on the back of it.

Time waits for no man, my love.

I was gonna guess his mom bought that. Blake sighed as he toyed with the watch again and I reached out suddenly, snatching it from him.

“Hey!” he snarled, leaping out of his seat with his hand curling into a fist.

But I beat him to it. I’d already dropped the Rolex onto the ground and my heel pressed down on it just enough to warn him off.

“Feel that, Blake?” I growled in a low voice. Most of the class were so caught up in their own discussions that they didn’t notice our altercation.

“What?” he snarled.

“You feel that anger? That need to hurt me because I’m threatening this piece of flashy metal?”

His muscles tensed through his school uniform until the buttons on his shirt looked like they were damn close to bursting off.

“This right here is *nothing*,” I went on, meeting his dark green eyes and making sure he didn’t dare look away from me. Blake was a weapon in need of a hand to guide it. He was nothing without it, but deadly if aimed with precision. “It’s a piece of crap with words scrawled on the bottom. That quote wasn’t even hers, it’s a fucking cliché etched on there by some asshole who couldn’t even afford to buy one of these things.”

“Give it back, Saint, I’m warning you,” Blake snarled, but I wasn’t done with him. He was looking too fucking close to exploding and that wasn’t going to work for me. That wasn’t how we did things. He needed reining in. Reminding of what was important and who was in charge.

“This watch is *nothing*,” I repeated. “And yet you feel grief at the idea of losing it. What do you feel about the girl whose father caused your mother’s death?”

He bared his teeth at me, but his gaze slid to the watch. He still wasn’t getting it.

“What do you want to do to Tatum Rivers in payment for your mother’s life?” I hissed, keeping my words for him alone as the assholes in the room pointedly looked elsewhere, though I was sure a few of them were straining so hard to listen in that they were giving themselves haemorrhoids.

“I want her crying and begging at my feet,” he hissed. “I want her beaten and broken beyond repair and to serve up her battered remains to her father on a silver platter.”

“And do you think you’ve achieved that yet?” I asked quietly, leaning forward to speak to him alone. “Do you think a bath in fish soup and bit of sex audio being leaked has broken her beyond repair? Or do you think that she’s already washed the fish off and is reminding herself about just how many times you made her come to make her scream like that for the tape?”

Blake’s jaw clenched and I smirked as I watched the rage flare in his eyes again. Grief could wait. Misery, hopelessness, sorrow, all of them could take a running jump off the nearest fucking cliff. Blake was bleeding inside. The wound he’d gained when his mom was killed was bloody and raw. It didn’t need patching up with kind words and tearful moments. It didn’t need nursing with understanding and sympathy. No. He needed to stop that fucker from bleeding. He needed to cauterise it and cut the pain off

with one all consuming flame. And nothing burned so hot as rage nor as sweetly as revenge.

“It’s a damn shame you didn’t get any video to go with that recording,” I said slowly, watching as his eyes flashed with the lie he’d told. I’d known he had more than audio, but I hadn’t pushed him to use it. “No girl wants a video of her being fucked shown to everyone she knows, even one who wears her sexuality like a shield.”

“You want me to post that video?” he asked, his lip curling in distaste. He knew I knew and I smiled darkly as we acknowledged each other’s bullshit.

“No,” I replied. “We can do better than that.” And I wasn’t going to admit the fact that a small part of my reasoning for that was selfish. Because Tatum Rivers might have been the spawn of that virus-toting assbiter Donovan Rivers. But she was also the most exquisite creature I’d laid my eyes on in a long damn time. And someone of her caliber wasn’t destined to have the bottom dwelling masses jerking off over her naked flesh. If her body was going to be on show for anyone, it would be us. And us alone.

“How?” Blake demanded, desperation lacing his tone.

“Is your head in the game?” I snarled, because I had a new plan. A real fucking diamond of a plan for our fallen angel, but I wasn’t sharing it with him until he was ready. Until he was in the right head space. Which meant I wanted his rage, his anger, his thirst for vengeance and nothing else.

Blake’s gaze slid to the fucking Rolex beneath my heel and I damn near growled with frustration.

I pushed myself to my feet, driving my heel down with all my strength and the sound of breaking glass cut through the air like a gunshot.

Blake roared at me as the demon in him finally rose its head again and he tackled me with the force of a charging bull.

I laughed as his knuckles slammed into my stomach, my ribs, my chest and the pain of the blows poured through me like rain.

I didn't even try to fight back for once, letting him have this, letting him unleash a drop of the endless ocean of rage which writhed inside him now.

As his eighth punch landed, he was suddenly hoisted off of me and I barked a laugh as Coach Monroe wheeled Blake around and threw him back down in his chair.

"Do we have a problem here?!" Monroe bellowed and for half a second Blake looked like he was considering punching him in his frowning face.

"No, sir," I said loudly, as I got to my feet and straightened my blazer. "I just fell down and Blake was trying to help me back up like a good friend."

"Is that so, Bowman?" Monroe demanded.

He knew it wasn't true, Miss Pontus knew it wasn't true, every fucker in the room right down to the big ass fly buzzing around the light fittings knew it wasn't true. But that didn't matter. Everyone knew the only truth which ever really mattered was the one spoken by the most powerful person in the room. And ninety nine times out of a hundred, that asshole was Saint Memphis.

"Yeah. Saint's a clumsy fucker," Blake growled, folding his arms as he leaned back in his chair.

He had a petulant look on his face like a little bitch but the fire in his eyes was back, just like it had been last night. And I was ready to stoke that flame whenever he needed me to for as long as it took to burn that grief right out of him. Because fuck letting him drown in pain when I could help him bathe in vengeance.

Monroe gave us a long look which said he hated us and everything we stood for which was tough luck for him because the whole world stood for

what we did. Money was power. And we were money. Cut me open and I'd bleed green...or gold...or fucking platinum.

He was obviously satisfied that our brawl had come to an end and he stalked away with a contemptuous snort, pausing at Miss Pontus's desk to speak with her. No doubt he was checking she hadn't just pissed in those big Bridget Jones panties of hers. She sure as shit hadn't come wading in to try and stop us and I was willing to bet she'd been doing her Hail Marys with vigour, just praying for a miracle to come save her from having to deal with us. And there he was, her Viking warrior come clad in sweatpants to save the day.

The look our English teacher was giving Coach told me she'd be more than willing to drop the Bridget Jones's for him, but it didn't look like he was taking the bait.

Monroe gave her one of those bullshit smiles he reserved for the rest of the staff then turned and beckoned to someone outside the door.

Tatum Rivers stalked into the room with her jaw tight and her hair devilishly un-styled. She was wearing a clean uniform, but she hadn't taken care over the way it sat and there wasn't a scrap of makeup on her tanned skin. I normally hated seeing people like that, with less than zero effort put in to anything at all about their appearance. But something about her being dressed like that was captivating. She looked fierce in her disregard for the social requirements – not like she was trying to act like she didn't give a shit, but like she genuinely gave no shits.

“Miss Rivers seemed to have forgotten what time class started, so I took it upon myself to help her find her way here,” Coach Monroe said in a firm voice which told me he'd gone banging on her door to drag her here. And the look of venom Tatum shot him as she lingered by the door said she didn't appreciate that at all.

My little Barbie doll had dusted herself off and picked herself up and come back swinging. Hell, it had barely been an hour since we'd torn her apart in front of the entire school and here she was, that chin lifted in defiance and war flashing in her eyes.

I was going to enjoy breaking her so much more than I'd ever even imagined and my pulse spiked as I waited to see what the hell she'd do next.

Kyan swept into the room before I could find out, damn near bowling her over. Blazer missing, sleeves rolled back, tie loose. *Fucking dickwad.*

His gaze drank in the sight of our new girl and his lips twitched as he recognised the backbone in her too. He looked at her like I imagined a wolf would eye a juicy caribou and she ignored him as surely as if he wasn't even there.

"I like her," he said as he dropped into the seat on my left.

"Keep your dick in your pants, the only thing you need to desire from her is her destruction," I snapped.

I was pissed at him for being late. And dressed like that. And...was that a pair of fucking biker boots? I swear my fucking eye twitched so hard it was in danger of popping out. Only Monroe's presence saved Kyan from me ripping those disgusting things off of his fucking feet and launching them out of the nearest window. Coach was the only fucker on staff who would punish me for acting out and I didn't need the drama of that today.

The barest hint of a smirk danced around Kyan's lips and I wanted to know exactly what he was so fucking happy about. Probably the boots stunt. Fuck him. Sometimes these games he played made me seriously consider cutting him from the inner circle. But if there were only two of us left in the Night Keepers, we'd be playing pretty loosely with the term

circle. In all honesty, we were more of a triangle as it currently stood anyway.

“Take a seat, Rivers,” Monroe commanded as she continued to linger. The only empty seats in the room lay to either side of our lineup and even without someone telling her the rules, Barbie was bright enough to guess that they weren’t up for grabs. “NOW!” Monroe barked, making her flinch. I liked that. That little flash of fear followed by even more outrage.

I licked my lips as Monroe pointed her toward the desk beside Kyan, and Barbie raised that chin higher as she actually dared to walk towards it. She wasn’t even going slow, stalking towards the desk with every intention to claim the damn thing. My dick twitched and I ran my tongue over my teeth as I watched her coming for us.

Blake was glaring at her like he’d set her alight with his gaze alone if he could.

My face was a mask like always, but my heart was thrashing harder with every step she took. I devoured that wild look in her eyes, that freedom which promised to never be tamed. And I wanted to tame her more than I’d wanted anything in a long time. I wanted to bind her and chain her and bring her to heel and stamp out that determined glint in her eye, replacing it with nothing but devotion. If I hadn’t been sold on my plan before that moment, I was now. Tatum Rivers was the breath of fresh air I’d been craving, the challenge I’d been needing and the bet I was going to win with myself.

Monroe called his victory too soon, leaving the room with a sharp look at us before she made it to the desk. The door snapped closed behind him and Miss Pontus eyed us warily as she smelled trouble brewing.

“I’ve got it,” Kyan murmured before either Blake or I could claim responsibility for this issue.

And in all honesty, right now, he was the best man for the job. We wanted her scared and Kyan tended to achieve that with the least effort.

He let Tatum walk all the way to the desk before standing suddenly, blocking her way into the chair behind it.

“You lost, baby?” he purred as he towered over her and her jaw ticked as her gaze dragged over him.

“I was told to take a seat beside the biggest asshole in the room so I’m pretty sure I found the right place,” she replied coolly.

A lot of the sheep in the class sucked in a breath like they thought Kyan might rip her damn head off. But despite popular belief, that wasn’t how he hunted. Especially when his prey looked like her.

“Naw,” he replied casually. “You’d wanna sit next to Saint in that case.”

I would have bristled at the insult if it hadn’t been the truth.

Tatum’s eyes skipped to me and I cocked my head as I regarded her with interest, waiting for her next move.

“You look like shit, Saint,” she purred. “What happened, did your house elf forget to iron your uniform today?”

My jaw locked tight as her insult hit the mark and I fought the urge to look down at the roughened state of my uniform following Blake’s attack. It needed fixing and she’d already figured out how much that must have bugged me. But I wasn’t going to let it show. I might have had a low level obsessive compulsive disorder, but that only made it easier for me to spot the weaknesses in others too.

“Actually, I set that fucker free a long time ago. The little asshole kept walking in on me when I was jerking off,” I replied coldly.

Her eyebrows arched but before she could come back at me with some pretty insult, Kyan lifted the desk in question off of the floor and heaved it over his shoulder. He snagged the chair in his other hand and Tatum’s full

lips popped open as he carried the whole lot straight towards the front of the class at a casual pace.

“Please be careful with the furniture, Mr Roscoe,” Miss Pontus warned in a high pitched voice which the entire class ignored.

“The Unspeakables sit in the front row,” Kyan said casually as he walked past the very row he was talking about. “But, *you*-” He slammed the desk down on its feet so close to Pontus’s desk that it must have been touching it. “Can sit in front of them.”

I allowed myself a smile at that. Sometimes I wanted to kill Kyan for his lamentable choice of clothes and lack of decorum. I mean, honestly, what was with the fucking *boots*? But when he did shit like this, it was easy to remember I loved that fucker like he was my own brother. This was perfection and he knew it. I could tell by that smirk he hid beneath his thumb as he rubbed at the corner of his mouth.

My Barbie doll was still standing beside me, lips pursed with rage as she glared at Kyan.

I couldn’t wait to earn some more of those hate filled looks for myself soon. And if I got my way, it really would be soon. Who was I kidding? I *always* got my way.

She tossed her long hair and stalked away, acting like social ostracism meant less than fuck all to her. And maybe it did. If her daddy was fucked up enough to release that virus into the world then who knew how depraved his golden girl was? And if I was honest, I was hoping she was pretty damn depraved.

She fell into the seat at the front of the class, refusing to look at Kyan as he leaned over her desk, dominating it until she was forced to acknowledge him.

“Aren’t you going to thank me?” he asked her, his voice dangerously low.

“*Thank* you?” she asked, her upper lip peeling back. “Well I suppose that from here I have a good chance of hearing everything the teacher has to say...and as a bonus, I don’t have to suffer through the choking stench of your aftershave.”

“Do I look like I wear aftershave, baby?” Kyan teased. “This godly smell is all natural.”

“Perhaps you should take a bath then?” she hissed.

Kyan’s hands landed flat on her desk and he leaned right forward into her personal space.

“Wrong answer, baby,” he growled, the threat in his tone enough to make several of the other class members cower down in their seats.

Not Tatum though. As Kyan stalked back towards us, she only straightened her spine further, refusing to bow to the pressure of our gazes on her back.

“She needs to feel the pain her father has given me,” Blake growled, speaking the first words he’d uttered since she’d walked into the room.

“She will,” I promised, my gaze fixed on her unruly blonde hair as I pictured fisting it in my fingers, knotting it up and making her scream for me.

“How?” he demanded as Miss Pontus finally started the class and the other students began to murmur about Macbeth as she set today’s work.

“Is she going to become one of the Unspeakables?” he asked, pressing for answers as Kyan leaned closer to listen in too.

‘I’ve been thinking about that,’ I said, deciding to reveal my plan to them. Every moment I spent in her company only confirmed that my infatuation with her still wasn’t waning. I needed an outlet for that desire.

One that I could use again and again and again until I'd gotten her out of my system.

"I say we fall back on the legends that gave us our name," I said, eyeing the assholes in the row before us to make sure they weren't prying.

"The Night People?" Kyan asked, raising an eyebrow as that idea intrigued him.

"Yeah," I said. "One legend in particular, the one that includes the sacred stone."

Kyan blew out a breath of surprise and Blake turned to me fully with pure hunger in his eyes. Hell, he might have needed this more than I did. We used that legend as a threat all the damn time, but we'd never gone so far as to implement it before.

"You want to make her touch the sacred stone?" Kyan asked, his eyes lighting up with that idea.

"And bind herself to our desires and eternal wishes," I purred.

I didn't know why the three of us had taken such an interest in the legends of the Kotari tribe who had once lived on this land, but we had. And there were more than a few tales amongst them that could be turned to our advantage when we wanted them to. But we'd never used the sacred stone legend before. The one which stated that a sacrifice who touched the stone and swore themselves in debt of the Night Keepers would be forever bound to do their bidding. And if there was one girl I wanted bound to do my bidding for all of time then it was definitely my very own Barbie doll.

"That legend says the sacrifice has to *choose* to have their soul bound to the Night Keepers," Kyan said, waving a hand like he was dismissing the idea. "She'd never do it."

"That's where you're wrong," I hissed, my gaze still fixed on Tatum as she leaned forward to write something down. "She'll swear it. She'll

fucking beg for it by the time I'm through with her."

"How?" Blake asked, his eyes lighting at the idea.

"We make her life unbearable unless she agrees," I purred. "She'll have no choice but to lay her soul at our feet."

"You really think we can make her bow?" Blake asked.

"I do."

"Well, I'll believe it when I see it," Kyan announced.

"Then be prepared to see it."

Kyan snorted a laugh and I smiled as my gaze stayed rooted to our target, our enemy, our Tatum.

She already belonged to the Night Keepers.

She just didn't know it yet.



This day was already the longest one of my life. And as lunchtime scraped around, I knew it was time for me to face the dining hall again. Except this time, I was going to be ready for the Night Keepers' horse shit. In fact, I was gonna order up a gift basket of Viking goodies including a longsword and a war horn for Mr Monroe. Because as much as I hadn't wanted to come back to class, or this damn school for that matter, I now had him to thank. Because now I'd seen how much I got under those three demon boys' skin. I itched at them like a rash that needed more than a course of antibiotics to fix.

I was here to stay. Not by choice, but screw it. I might as well make the most of the one weapon I had against them: I hardcore bothered the fuck out of them. And the more defiant I was, the more angry they seemed to get.

In truth, my plan was probably insanity. Baiting the Night Keepers was an extreme sport in itself. And I knew the more I pushed back at them, the more hell they'd rain down on me. But bowing wasn't in my nature. I

wasn't made to sit at the feet of preppy assholes who thought they owned the world. I was made to rule them.

I didn't know if Mila was avoiding me or not, but she hadn't been waiting for me in the hall outside my morning classes like she had on day one. That hurt more than I wanted to admit, but as I walked up the tree-flanked path to the Redwood Dining Hall, I spotted her lingering outside the door. She was combing her fingers through her mane of hazel hair and when she spotted me, her eyes widened. I thought she was about to bolt, but she did the opposite. She rushed toward me, throwing her arms around me and crushing me to her chest.

I was so taken aback, it took me a second to remember to hug her in return.

"Are you okay?" she asked and my heart melted at her words. The hardness I'd been offering the world all morning softened and I tried not to fall into the pit of hurt inside me. She *cared*. She was probably the only one in this whole school who did.

"I'm alright," I promised.

"I didn't throw my stew," she said with a sniff, stepping back with honest-to-god tears in her eyes. I'd never had a close girl friend besides my sister, but I'd always wondered what it would be like. I'd gravitated towards boys in my past schools. Dad said it was because Mom had left when I was young and I'd never needed anyone other than Jess to be my bestie. He also said I was too much of a Tom boy because of him. But that wasn't quite the truth. My mum ditching out on us had left its mark on me, sure. But being raised by a man hadn't made me any less of a woman. I was the way I was because of a thousand reasons. Some of them because of her, most of them not. It was funny really, she probably thought leaving would mean she had no influence on my life. But the absence of someone *was* an influence.

Abandoning your three and six year old daughters and workaholic husband had to have an effect. But she was never going to define me.

“Thank you, Mila,” I breathed, squeezing her arm.

Her eyes glittered as she pulled herself together and she glanced over her shoulder as if she expected someone to be behind her. It angered me that she was afraid because of the three muske-turds. I could see she was tough, but maybe she’d had a point before. The Night Keepers didn’t take kindly to being messed with, however strong you were.

“I’m not gonna say I told you so,” she said, breaking a smile and I released a dry laugh.

“If there was ever a time it was due, it’s now. But *I’m* not gonna say I regret it.”

“Are you crazy? You are gonna fall in line, right?” She gripped my hands and squeezed so hard it hurt. “Please tell me you’re going to be sensible, Tatum? If you do as they say, they’ll lose interest, they’ll-”

“Stop,” I cut her off, a frown tugging at my brow. “They’re just boys, Mila.”

“How can you say that after what they did to you?” she breathed.

My throat thickened as I pulled my hands free of hers. It wasn’t like I wanted to become their new chew toy. And the shame of what they’d done to me just a few hours ago was still burning through me. But bowing wasn’t the answer. Screw that. I’d die first.

I eyed Mila with a sigh, knowing there was no point in having this argument so I changed tact. “I’m glad you’re still talking to me...” A beat of silence passed between us. “My dad didn’t do it, you know. And I didn’t know anything about this, Blake edited that tape to make it sound like I did.”

“I know, I could tell,” she said with a firm nod then lowered her voice. “Have you spoken to your dad?”

“No,” I said quickly. I’d tried calling him several times, but it hadn’t even gone to voicemail. The call didn’t even connect. And my heart couldn’t take what that meant. “I just know.” And I wasn’t going to let any other asshole in the world convince me otherwise. Not until I spoke to him and heard the truth from his lips. He was always in my corner and I was determinedly going to be in his through this.

She nodded, but didn’t look convinced. “Come on, let’s get some food.”

I followed her inside, wondering why she was risking her neck for me. I was tempted to distance myself from her just to save her from the Night Keepers’ wrath, but being cut off from the only real friend I’d made was probably just what they wanted.

I drew my shoulders back as I followed Mila into the hall. Eyes immediately fell on me and I ignored them as I headed across the room towards Mila’s usual table. Her friends were there already and Pearl shrank in her chair like I was the Swamp Monster come to drag her back to my lair.

“Tatum Rivers!” Blake’s customary holler from the Night Keepers’ table reached me and I ignored it despite the fact that ice ran down my spine.

“Tatuuuum Riveeeers!”

I clenched my jaw, moving toward the empty seat beside Mila as she sat down. I was almost there. Two feet. One. A heavy arm fell over my shoulders and the scent of gasoline and shattered hearts told me that it belonged to Kyan.

“Looks like you’re lost again, baby. Let me escort you to your seat.”

I tried to jerk out of his hold, but he clamped me to his side with the full force of his muscles and I growled as he guided me away from Mila. My friend stared after me in dismay and I gave her a thumbs up as I fought not

to look like a lamb being led to slaughter. If anything, I was a wolf being chained. But caging a wild animal didn't make it any less wild. And they were going to find out how hard I could bite soon enough.

"I don't need an escort, Kyan. Especially if you're the male prostitute kind. And judging by your shady no-sex with high school girls rule, I'm gonna assume you spend your time pleasing dusty vag for cash."

I jammed an elbow into Kyan's ribs before he could respond and managed to slip away, using a move I'd learned in my self-defence classes to escape. I turned back the way I'd come, but he yanked me to his side again with a low growl of warning that sent adrenaline pouring into my blood.

I tipped my chin up to gaze at the hard lines of his face, the way his hair was falling out of its man bun and the swirling chaos in his eyes. But there was one thing I hooked onto beneath the rage and the hate I saw in his expression. Lust. Just like when I'd bitten him at the party, he was turned on by the way I fought. And that was a weakness I quickly scribbled down on a mental notepad in bold letters.

"Do you wanna continue to eat in this school?" Kyan asked in a dangerous tone that made my heart judder.

The threat was serious. The only place I could get food here was this dining hall. And if the Night Keepers had the power to cut me off from that source, I'd be screwed. I could go to Headmaster Brown, but I didn't imagine the Night Keepers looked kindly upon people telling tales on them. No, food and water were a must.

Holy hell, how did my life come to this so fast?

"Yeah. So long as there's no fish stew on the menu. I filled up on it this morning." I smirked up at him like I gave absolutely no shits about what they'd done to me and his brows arched ever so slightly.

“You’d better watch yourself, baby,” he said in a tone that had heat seeping through to my core. “Saint might decide that’s the only thing you get to eat. The Unspeakables have a limited menu as it is.”

My heart pounded against the base of my throat at that name and he pushed me toward a table which was a sizeable distance away from the rest of the students, placed in the darkest corner at the back. By the toilets. There were fifteen people sat around it, some of whom I recognised as those who’d been running around after the Night Keepers at their party.

Oh, fuck my life.

Kyan dragged me right up to them as my pulse pounded against my eardrums. Some of them looked to me with wide eyes while others bowed their freaking heads to Sergeant Dickhole.

“Plague will be sitting with you from now on,” he told them, then turned to glance back at the room. “Tatum Rivers no longer exists. If you have to address her, you will call her Plague!”

My mouth fell open and he left me with that hydrogen bomb going off in my face, strolling away to re-join the other Night Keepers. Saint was giving me that smile again. Like he wasn’t even close to done with me. I flipped him the finger and the entire table of Unspeakables gasped like I’d just whacked him over the head with a baseball bat.

Saint was half way out of his seat when Kyan whispered something in his ear and he slowly sank back into it with his jaw ticking. The three of them huddled closer and the way they started talking in hushed voices made my skin prickle with unease.

I huffed as I dropped down into a free seat at the end of the table.

“Hi Plague,” a girl to my right said. She had mousy brown hair and freckles dotting her cheeks. She was a small girl, but that was by no means

the continuing trend around the table. There was a guy at the far end who was the size of a damn tank. And he'd been one of the head-bowers!

"It's Tatum," I corrected her firmly and her eyes darted to a guy across the table on my other side for guidance. He had copper hair and a handsome, quirky sort of face. The others looked to him too and I guessed he was their leader or whatever. Though honestly, this Unspeakables bullshit was really going too far. Saint, Blake and Kyan were really embodying this whole Night Keepers legend thing *way* too much. They couldn't just go around making people do their bidding because they'd pissed them off somehow. It was ridiculous.

"You're Plague," the guy said with a dark frown. "Whether you like it or not I'm afraid." He gave me a pitiful look and I ground my jaw.

"If anyone at this table calls me Plague I'll beat their head in, got it?" I demanded.

They all shared anxious glances and I had the feeling I was sitting at a table with a bunch of field mice.

The leader gave me another sad look and I glared back at him.

"I'm Bait," he said, his tone softer. "We don't wanna upset you. We're on your side."

I nodded stiffly, not liking being banded in with these people who'd clearly had their backbones surgically removed by the Night Keepers.

"I'm Freeloader," the freckly girl said, offering me a friendly smile.

"What's with the weird ass names?" I asked, bringing up the menu app on my phone. This day was enough to give me stomach pains as it was, but if I didn't eat, I was gonna feel even worse.

"We have to relinquish our names as a commitment to making up for offending the Night Keepers," the big guy at the end of the table said in his deep tone. "If we serve them well, they'll forgive us and let us be part of

society again. But in the meantime, we're named after our crimes. So I'm Punch."

My heart lit up at that name and a smile pulled at my mouth. "Does that mean you punched one of them?" I asked excitedly.

Punch's eyes darted left and right like he expected a cat to come up and pounce on his little mousey head. "Yeah," he breathed.

"Which one?" I asked, leaning forward in my chair. "Was it Saint?" I asked hopefully. *Man* his face would look so good punched.

Punch swallowed hard enough to make his whole throat bob. Then he shook his head.

"Kyan?" I asked, leaning even further forward. "Tell me you floored the cocky bastard."

Everyone around the table was shifting uncomfortably and Punch lifted his napkin to dab at the sweat collecting on his forehead. He shook his head once more and I barked a laugh.

"You hit Blake?" I guessed and he nodded.

"I used to be on the football team. We got in a fight..." he whispered.

"And I used to be a cheerleader," a girl beside him said. She had long auburn hair and a model worthy face, her eyes wide and darkest blue, glistening with tears.

"At least you used to be cool, Deepthroat," Freeloader said with a pout. "I've always been at the bottom of the pecking order."

"Oh boohoo. That just means I had a lot farther to fall from grace than you did," Deepthroat said with a huff and I just had to freaking ask what she'd done to earn that name.

"Why Deepthroat?" I arched a brow and she pursed her lips as the others exchanged glances.

"I just offered Kyan a blowjob, that's all," she said firmly.

“Well, that wasn’t *all*, was it?” Punch muttered.

Bait waved a hand to hush them and curiosity burned through me.

“Enough. You know we’re not supposed to talk about our previous lives,” he said firmly.

I turned to Bait with my lips parting. “Come on, that’s insane. Besides, they can’t even hear us over here,” I said in disbelief.

“Y-you n-never kn-know wh-when they’re l-l-listening.”

I glanced at the pale-faced guy who’d spoken. He was the smallest person at the table; his blazer was two sizes too big for him and even his lanky black hair looked oversized for his head.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“S-squits,” he stuttered.

My heart tugged at how royally screwed up this guy clearly was. He looked like he was about to spontaneously combust at any moment.

“Squits?” I wrinkled my nose. “What did you do?”

Squits glanced at Bait who shook his head then he stared down at his lap and didn’t look up again.

I pursed my lips, glaring at Bait. “He already has enough people telling him what to do, don’t you think?”

Bait’s brows lifted and he retreated into his seat a bit. “Sorry I just...it’s the rules.”

“Screw the rules,” I growled. “What happened to you, Squits? And do I really have to call you that? What’s your real name?”

“We can’t tell you our real names,” Freeloader said in a hushed tone.

Holy shit these kids are messed up.

Squits lifted his head, wetting his lips and glancing at Bait again who said nothing this time.

“I had an accident at o-one of their p-parties,” Squits said, his face turning a nasty shade of red. “I-I’d eaten a bad b-burrito...they h-had to pay a cleaning crew to c-come and c-clean the c-common house.”

“That’s it?” I scoffed. “I mean, yeah that sucks. But you didn’t exactly *mean* to do it. If anything, the burrito is to blame.”

“I-I-” Squits tried but Bait spoke for him.

“He shat on Saint’s favourite coat,” Bait breathed.

“A hand-stitched Dior, single-breasted cashmere coat,” the whole table murmured in unison.

I burst out laughing and everyone stared at me like I’d lost my mind. But I legit couldn’t breathe. “That’s too fucking funny, Squits.”

“It’s *not* funny,” Bait said firmly, waving his hand at me to try and quiet my laughter.

“They’re looking!” Freeloader exclaimed.

“Be quiet, Plague,” Punch begged of me as I wiped tears from under my eyes.

“Oh man, I wished I’d been there to see his face,” I said as Squits gazed at me like I’d just thrown Saint onto the table and started feasting on his flesh. Which wasn’t a bad idea come to think of it. He would definitely give me indigestion though.

I decided I needed to hear everything they’d done to the Night Keepers ASAP, but it was clear Bait was gonna be a stickler for the rules. They all were, but they were also designed to respond to the authority in my tone. So if I cracked Bait, I’d crack them all.

I turned my attention to my menu app and frowned as half of the usual foods were missing. “What the hell? Where’s the fresh pasta? And the burgers? And the pizza.” *Oh god, not the pizza.*

“We get limited options,” Bait told me, his brow creasing. “You can have soup or salad. They have all kinds of stuff under their heel in the school. Admin, kitchen staff, the janitors...”

I gaped at him like he’d just told me the world was ending. Sure, I liked the odd salad or soup from time to time. But *every* day? No...

“What about fries?” I hunted the menu but came up short, lifting my head to find everyone shaking their heads mournfully. I slammed my palm down on the table in anger. “Screw this.”

My day was bad enough without being denied junk food if I wanted it. And after the morning I’d had, I needed something cheesey and greasy in my stomach to sate me. I rose to my feet, rounding toward the kitchen but Bait suddenly dove in front of me like he was taking a bullet.

“Sit down,” he pressed, placing a hand on my arm. I glared at his hand and he quickly removed it like my gaze had burned him. “Please, Plague. They’ll come over here. They’ll punish us all. That’s how they get the newbies to fall in line.”

I glanced over his shoulder to the Night Keepers who were rising from their seats. I glowered at them before shifting my attention back to Bait.

“You’re not the one they’ll hurt for this,” he rasped and my heart twisted at his words. It was sick, twisted and most definitely effective.

“Alright,” I breathed, stepping around him and turning toward the girls’ bathroom. I glanced over my shoulder, spotting the three assholes dropping back into their seats and my shoulders relaxed. I wasn’t going to be a whipped bitch by any means. But it looked like my dining hall experience was decided for now.

I had a better plan than fighting my menu choices though – which admittedly was the bitterest of pills to swallow. They took away pizza dammit. Freaking *pizza*. But one good thing had come out of it. I’d just

found myself a small army of Night Keeper haters. I just had to reinstate their backbones and make them rise up together. Which was clearly gonna be *way* easier said than done. But I always did love a challenge.

The never-ending school week finally ended and I was mentally exhausted as I headed back towards Beech House after dinner on Friday. Saint, Blake and Kyan had ensured I was firmly outcasted, making me sit at the front of every class I shared with them until the students in my other classes refused to sit within two seats of me too. Everyone but Mila was treating me like the name they'd given me. Plague. I'd even heard Pearl and Georgie talking loudly about how they'd always had the feeling there was something wrong with me. And now a rumour was circulating that I'd spilled tequila on Kyan Roscoe's chest at the initiation party and licked it off before he could stop me. It was taking everything I had to keep it together, but every morning I woke up, I fixed my mask on tight and refused to let it crack until I could be alone again.

A group of students skirted around me on the path and tossed the name Plague at me like it was fucking hilarious. If they hadn't moved in packs, I would have thrown a few fists to shut them the hell up.

As I walked, I tried calling Dad for the millionth time this week, but his phone was dead. Wherever he was, I knew he was protecting me by doing this. But it cut my heart to ribbons to know he was out there all alone with the whole world turned against him. By Wednesday, I'd cracked and read the entire news article about him.

I was at war with myself over the evidence they'd presented. CCTV footage had shown him leaving the Apollo Company in California three

months ago. Several Hades Virus samples had gone missing that night and his was the only access pass to have been scanned in that evening.

What were you doing that night, Dad? Please tell me you aren't responsible for this...

The air swirled around me and a rumble of thunder in the distance made my heartbeat quicken. The world felt alive tonight, nature prickling with tension as it awaited the oncoming storm.

I gazed across the lake to Tahoma Mountain rising right into the clouds. Lightning flashed high up around its peak and the hairs raised on the back of my neck. The sky was deepest blue, colouring the whole world in that same forbidding tone. Sometimes, I almost believed the legends about this place. If there was any location in the world that they could exist, it would be here. And the idea of the Night People really lurking in the forest made me up my pace in the direction of the dorms.

I was looking forward to getting out of my school uniform and into something comfy. Then I could spend the evening with Mila and some mindless Netflix show. I was so grateful that she hadn't disowned me like the rest of the student body. I didn't know why though. On the surface, I knew people had a reason to hate me. The Hades Virus was becoming an ever-present threat in the world; it had killed thousands upon thousands of people already. But *I* wasn't to blame for it. *And neither is my dad, dammit.*

I could feel my rage rising again and pushed it down into the pit of my belly. Dad had taught me how to survive the end of days. And though I was sure this wasn't the apocalypse, I could still draw on the gifts he'd given me. The tools he'd taught me to keep a level head, the way to contemplate a problem without getting emotional about it.

Survival came down to one thing ultimately. Choices. And if you made the wrong ones, it would cost you your life. So when it came to the Night

Keepers, I wasn't going to act irrationally. I had to face my enemy with as much cunning as they showed me. Had to hunt for weaknesses and exploit them to my advantage. I had to be patient, mindful. I could never give them the reaction they wanted, because if they saw me breaking, they'd start picking at those cracks. They'd rip and claw their way into my being until I was consumed by their cruelty. So I could never, *ever* let them find a way in.

I headed up the path into the trees, the world darkening around me as the storm drew closer. A few girls up ahead started running and laughing as they jogged inside, anxious to escape the storm before it broke. Electricity crackled in the air so fiercely, I could taste it on my tongue. My instincts told me to hunker down and I was more than happy to comply as I hurried up to the entrance to Beech House.

Just as I reached the door, strong arms surrounded me and I yelled in alarm as I was hauled backwards into a solid chest. Panic tumbled through me as a black linen bag was dragged over my head.

I swung a fist and my knuckles smacked against a firm body. Blake cursed and Kyan's dark laughter filled the air right by my ear. I started kicking and thrashing as fear encircled my heart. I couldn't let them take me, I couldn't give in.

Strong hands captured one of my wrists and I slammed my heel down onto a foot with a yell of determination. Kyan growled as I threw my elbow back into his gut, but another hand caught hold of my free arm a second later.

"Hold her still," Saint's cold voice sliced through me and I fought even harder, thrashing like a bobcat in a snare as I sensed him closing in on me.

No no no no.

Kyan clamped my hands together and a second later I felt a zip-tie locking around them. Kyan released my hands and I immediately swung my fists forward, smacking into another body.

Saint snarled and adrenaline pulsed through my veins as I felt the heat of bare skin and I slashed my nails down it with a cry of defiance.

“You fucking bitch!” Saint snapped.

His hot breath washed through the bag as he grabbed hold of my throat. I waited for him to choke me as Kyan held me still and his fingers tightened as I was held at Saint’s mercy. A true fear found me as I wondered how far these bastards would go. If Saint really had the balls to hurt me.

“Dude,” Blake growled. “We need to go before the storm breaks.”

Saint shoved away from me and his footsteps pounded off into the trees. I hated that I was shaking. I despised that he’d rattled me. But Saint Memphis was unpredictable, heartless and had all the makings of a psychopath. It wouldn’t have surprised me if he’d been the type of kid to capture the most beautiful of butterflies in jars, shaking them until they were dead.

Kyan’s grip on me firmed and he guided me forward, whispering in my ear as we went, “Behave tonight or you’ll regret it.”

“Is that a threat from you or from Saint?” I hissed.

“Both,” he snarled.

“Ha,” I laughed hollowly, forcing strength into my voice. “You’re just the muscle, Kyan. Saint’s the brains. You just do what he says like some leashed dog.”

“Shut your mouth, Plague,” Kyan snapped, shoving me along.

My foot caught on a root and I threw my bound hands out to catch myself with a gasp, but Kyan caught my waist, dragging me upright again as my breathing steadied out.

Thunder crashed in the distance, drawing ever closer and making my heart pound wildly in my chest. The rain hadn't started yet, but it wouldn't be long now.

We walked on and on along a winding trail and Kyan's grip on me never wavered. Part of me wondered if I should bother to scream for help, but somehow I knew no one would come. And if I screamed, the three of them would know I was afraid. I couldn't allow that.

We travelled up a hill then down the other side of it and the sheerness of the path beneath my feet made me slow my pace.

"I won't let you fall," Kyan hissed. "Just move."

I had about as much faith in him as I did the leader of North Korea. So I was gonna take my damn time thank you very much.

"Hurry the fuck up!" Saint's voice carried back from afar.

"Just carry her!" Blake called and Kyan whipped me off of my feet, throwing me over his shoulder and making me gasp in alarm.

My bound hands bumped against his ass which was as hard as a brick wall of course. I yelled as his hand pressed to the backs of my bare thighs to hold me in place, firmly under my goddamn skirt.

"Don't touch me, asshole!" I bashed my fists against his ass again and he chuckled wickedly, ignoring me as his calloused hand remained clamped against my skin.

The ground soon levelled out and the wind around me was definitely blowing my skirt up, baring my panties to the world. I cursed each of their names a thousand times as Kyan strode along, the sound of waves lapping against the shore filling the air and tangling with the howling wind.

Without warning, Kyan dumped me on the ground and I fell into soft sand, rolling onto my knees as I tried to gather my bearings. The hood was ripped off of me and I took in the huge beach and the giant rock protruding

from the sand in front of me. It tapered to a point over six feet above my head and was covered in strange carvings.

The lake lapped against its base as the wind made the choppy water splash across the beach. The three Night Keepers stood shoulder to shoulder in front of me, dressed in I-shit-you-not full black capes clipped into place with silver clasps around their necks. Their chests were bare, marked with red and white handprints and their entire faces were decorated with red and white paint too like they were living up to the legends they claimed to be. I smiled at the sight of the bloody scratches I'd left on Saint's chest and his eyes darkened to pitch.

"You have got to be fucking with me?" I called over the wind.

My hair whipped around me in the maelstrom and I turned to look for an exit route, finding Tahoma Mountain looming behind me. The clouds had descended, covering over half the mountainside, the sheer height of it towering beyond the perimeter wall. I felt tiny in its shadow, freaking minuscule, but turning back to the Night Keepers made me feel even smaller.

Saint strode forward with a dark grin on his face and I lifted my chin to look up at him, raising up on my knees as I tried to stand. He placed a hand on my head to keep me down and I shook him off with a snarl.

He pinched my chin between his finger and thumb, holding my gaze as a stone cold hate unfurled in his eyes.

"This is the sacred stone." He pointed to the hulking rock behind him and I gave him a blank look.

"And?" I demanded. "Did you drag me all the way out here just to stare at a stupid boulder?"

He gripped my hair, yanking me to my feet and making me yelp in pain. I lunged for him like a rabid dog and he kicked out my legs so I slammed

onto the ground on my back. My skirt rode up over my hips and Saint's gaze dropped to my little black panties.

He dropped down to a crouch as I sat up, ready to fight him with everything I had if he dared lay a hand on me. He reached out for my skirt and yanked it back down to cover my thighs and my breathing steadied.

"You look afraid, Barbie," he purred. "Do you really think we'd force ourselves on you? You're the least desirable thing I've ever seen."

"Tell that to Blake," I said loud enough for the other Night Keepers to hear. "He fucked me like the sky was gonna fall if he stopped."

My cheeks heated as I felt Blake's eyes on me, but I kept my gaze firmly on Saint's, hunting for a flash of jealousy. One ounce of it would give me something to hook onto. Some tiny ray of hope that this monster craved me like his friends did.

Saint reached into his pants' pocket and produced a knife, making my heart fall entirely still. For two whole eternities, I stared at him, readying to fight for my life before he snatched my wrists and severed the zip-tie. I released a slow breath, keeping my features schooled so he couldn't see how frightened I'd been.

Saint laughed as he got up, kicking the sand so it sprayed over me. "Blake fucked you before he knew you were a *plague*, Plague."

I looked over at Blake, finding his jaw ticking as he glared at me. "I'd cut my dick off before I ever touched you again." He spat on the ground and my heart twitched from the ice in his words.

"Then why did you come back after you spoke to your Dad?" I asked, painting a twisted smile onto my face. "You wanted that recording of me, sure, but you didn't have to screw me to get it, did you?"

Blake's hands curled into fists as his friends looked to him for a response. "It was the only way," he said firmly and I laughed loudly enough

to rub it in. Because I had him pegged now. And so did they.

“*Enough*,” Saint snapped.

I pushed myself to my feet, standing before them with fury in my heart.

“What do you want?” I demanded, knowing that if I ran they’d only catch me. Besides, running was a coward’s move. And I wasn’t going to let them see me blink.

Thunder crashed in the sky right above us and the wind dragged my hair out behind me and made their capes dance in the air. I would have laughed at their ridiculous outfits if they hadn’t somehow made them look so damn terrifying.

“This place is a burial ground for the bodies which were left in the lake by the Night People,” Saint said in a dark tone. “Bones still wash up from time to time...”

I shuddered, wrapping my arms around myself against the biting cold as Saint went on.

“They left this stone here as a warning of their power,” he growled. “And the legend of the sacred stone states that anyone who touches it willingly and gives the oath must become Night Bound to us. That means their soul will be owned by the Night Keepers along with their mind and body,” he explained and I looked to the rock with a grimace. “When you touch it, you’ll do our bidding, every single thing we want you to do, without question. Forever. You’ll be *ours*.”

I shook my head with a snort of dismissal. *No chance, assholes*.

“You’re going to touch it,” Kyan threatened and Blake nodded his agreement.

Lightning flashed through the sky, the jagged line of it carving a path all the way to the other end of the lake. The rain was about to fall, I could sense it in the most primal part of my being.

I glanced between them and tried to ignore the fear clawing up my spine. Something about the way they looked right now made them seem more animal than man. “There’s just one problem with that, douchebags. Saint said *willingly*. Which is never going to happen.”

The three of them closed ranks, walking towards me like devil hounds on the hunt for blood. I steeled my nerve as I lifted my chin and prepared to face them, refusing to budge an inch.

“Fine, don’t touch it,” Saint said in a deadly tone; his smirk said he wasn’t going to let me go. “The alternative is far worse.”

They continued closing in until they formed a triangle around me and their dark shadows seemed to consume every lasting bit of light in the sky.

“We’ll tell the whole school to fuck with you,” Blake growled and I glanced toward him with my heart thumping madly against my ribcage.

Kyan yanked my hair to get my attention and I turned to him with my teeth bared. “We’ll make every day insufferable, unliveable. Far worse than it’s been this week.”

They tightened the circle and Saint pinched my cheek, forcing me to look at him next and making my heart lurch into my throat. “You’ll have no friends and anyone who even glances at you too long will be severely punished for it. You’ll wish you were an Unspeakable, you’ll beg us to let you join them again.”

Their triangle closed even tighter so their bare chests were crushing me in the middle. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t think straight. And I suddenly didn’t know which choice to make.

“Do you care about that pretty little roommate of yours?” Saint purred, making my heart clench for her. I couldn’t let him hurt Mila. Not because of me.

“And do you want the full, uncut version of our sex tape aired to the whole school?” Blake growled. “Do you remember how you begged me for it?”

“Shut up,” I snarled, but my voice was somehow lost to the wind and fear hammered harder against my chest.

I shut my eyes as I tried to block them out as they continued to whisper all the awful things they were going to do to me if I didn’t agree to this.

I hooked onto my dad’s teachings and dug deep for that inner place of peace he’d taught me to cultivate. A place no one could touch. Somewhere I could go when the world seemed impossible and the stress was too much.

I took one breath, two.

They were pulling at my clothes, my hair, trying to make me listen but I blocked them out. Forcing them from my private, inner space. I wouldn’t ever let them in there.

I have to make the right choice.

The right choice means survival.

The right choice means I’ll have a chance to beat them.

So which path will offer me that?

If I refused them now, they’d destroy me quickly and painfully. If the entire school worked against me, I’d never have a chance to get closer to the Unspeakables and find strength in their ranks. I’d lose Mila. I’d lose my sanity. But was the alternative really any better? Letting them *own* me? The thought was repugnant.

Ragged breaths dragged in and out of my lungs and I opened my eyes, finding Saint leering at me. And there it was, just for a second, desire blazing from his inky irises. He wanted me, but he wanted me weak. He craved me like this, losing control. Giving in to his demands. And this time, I was going to have to let him have it. I was going to agree so I could buy

myself enough time to find a way out. But even though the decision was mine, it still felt like bowing. Like breaking.

The ice in his eyes was as sharp as knives. He was a starved creature who needed pain to thrive. And mine was a delicacy he wanted to take his time over, chewing on it piece by piece.

Tears pricked my eyes as I felt the weight of his victory crashing over me. Of all their victories. I was boxed in. A fox at the end of a farmer's gun. And it felt like the lowest point of my life.

"What are the rules?" I breathed, fighting to make sure my bottom lip didn't tremble.

Saint reached out, brushing a lock of hair behind my ear and it felt anything but soothing. He licked his lips as he savoured this moment, grazing his fingers down my cheek, leaving a freezing trail in their wake. "There's only three rules..."

"You're either doing something *for* us," Kyan supplied the first.

"Or you're *with* one of us," Blake gave the second.

"Or you're with *all* of us," Saint hissed the last and a biting chill ran down my spine. "So do you agree, Barbie?" he asked in an almost loving tone, but I wasn't fooled. I doubted Saint's heart was capable of any warm emotion. It was a lump of ice, kept at fifty below zero at all times.

"I won't do anything sexual for any of you," I snarled, looking between them and pressure built in my chest as I waited for their response. I was gonna scream or cry or catch fire. And some shattered part of me wished for the last.

"Like I said, Barbie, we'd rather fuck a hand grenade than you," Saint purred. "But if you want it, you can have our word that none of us will fuck you until you want us to."

"Why would I want you to?" I sneered.

“Because I get the feeling you’ll learn to like being our pet,” he said, the glint in his eyes giving away just how much he desired that.

“There’s no fucking chance of that,” I snapped.

“Just give us an answer,” Blake demanded suddenly, his anger slipping past his defences. “Yes or no. Do you agree to be ours?”

I nodded and the second I did they stepped away from me, moving behind me instead so I was angled towards the sacred stone. A tremor ran through my body just as thunder boomed above, sending a shockwave right down to my core

I glanced over my shoulder as Blake took his phone from his pocket and started filming me.

“We’re live,” he muttered to the others, but I caught the words on the wind. This video was now streaming to every student on campus via social media. *Holy shit.*

Saint waved me forward and my legs felt leaden as I walked toward the rock, my fate, my doom.

As I reached it, a violent ripple of energy ran through me as the wind picked up once more. Close up, I could see the markings on the rock more clearly. At the top were four painted men with a different intricate arrow beneath them. Three of them were the same as the tattoos I’d seen on the Night Keepers and I shuddered to think what their group would look like with a fourth Keeper amongst them. Above the carvings was a fifth figure and an arrow hung above them with five decorated feathers attached to it. Something instinctive told me this was the Night Bound, the legend I was about to embody.

I turned to face three boys before me with a shaky breath. They were cast in shadow, their capes billowing behind them as scowls twisted their features into something truly evil.

“Tatum Rivers, do you swear to devote yourself to us and spend your days working to please us?” Blake spoke over the storm and the answer got stuck in my throat.

Can I really agree to this?

Give myself to them?

Promise to do everything they ask? Anything they ask?

One heartbeat, two, three, four.

Blake was about to lower the phone when I forced the word out. “Yes,” I choked. It tasted like poison on my tongue.

The three of them smiled in unison like their dark souls were somehow connected to one another’s in that moment.

“And do you swear to obey our every word?” Kyan growled and I managed to nod, though my neck felt stiff, like my body knew I was betraying it.

“Do you swear to follow the rules, to be bound mind, body and soul to the Night Keepers. And *only* us?” Saint’s voice ripped into my ears. He wasn’t smiling anymore, he was leering like a monster, looking like my darkest nightmare brought to life.

“Yes,” I rasped, my tongue heavy, my heart hollow.

“Touch the sacred stone,” Saint commanded. “Prove your promises and become Night Bound to each of us as Keepers.”

My fingers curled up instinctively, trying to fight the decision I’d made. But it was already over. The dice had landed, the deal was done. And I felt tears running hot and fast down my cheeks as the weight of that truth sank into my veins.

I reached out to the rock, hesitating a final second, my last scrap of defiance fading away. I pressed my palm against the cold stone and adrenaline poured through me like a vat of liquid nitrogen spilling into my

blood. Lightning flared above me and thunder clashed so loudly in the heavens, I winced. The rain came half a heartbeat later and rushed down on us like a tsunami.

I retracted my hand from the rock, my fingers icily cold as I curled them into a fist and tried to ignore the tingling scattering through my palm. *What the fuck?*

I knew the legend wasn't true. I knew it was just ghost stories and fairy tales, but I'd *felt* something when I'd touched that thing. Like my soul had shifted inside my body. And maybe it was just the freezing cold and the raging storm, but somehow, I felt like they really did own me now. And that terrified me more than anything I'd ever experienced in my life.

Blake stopped filming, tucking his phone away as he glared at me with victory in his eyes. There was so much hate in them too, I could feel it as powerfully as the storm against my flesh. How was this the same guy who'd kissed me so passionately a few nights ago? Had made me laugh and been so full of warmth it had burned right through me?

I felt worthless as I waited for the first axe to fall. The first command to hit my ears. I lifted a hand to wipe the tears from my cheeks, wishing I'd had the strength to keep them from falling.

What do they want from me? What are they going to demand?

"If you break the rules, we'll ruin you," Saint warned, a manic flare in his gaze. It was almost like he *wanted* me to go against him. "You and any friend, acquaintance or fucking mosquito who takes a liking to you."

I nodded, pressing my lips together and continued to wait for whatever bullshit order they were going to give me.

"What do you want?" I growled when they said nothing, just stared at me like I was a piece of meat on their plate they were deciding whether to eat or not. My eyes skipped between the three of them. I knew I'd agreed to

play along, but what the hell did they want from me out here in a thunderstorm?

“Stay here on the beach until we come back for you,” Saint said simply, his lips tipping up into his infamous psycho smile. He directed the other guys ahead of him, but Kyan lingered on the beach as Saint and Blake swept past him.

“You’re gonna just leave me here in the rain?” I called in horror. “For how long?” My heart drummed to a war beat in my chest at the idea of staying out here. I was soaked through already in only my uniform. Not even a coat.

None of them answered, but Saint looked to Kyan and snarled, “Come on.”

Kyan gazed at me for a long moment and I was caught in the intensity of his eyes, seeing the hesitation in him to leave me here.

“Kyan, please,” I breathed just for him, wondering if there was any decency in the guy before me.

“Now, Kyan!” Saint snapped and Kyan dropped my gaze and turned away from me, heading after them into the trees.

I shivered as the rain blew around me, soaking me through in moments. The last of the light was draining from the world and I felt my own light fading with it. It was unbearably cold already and the beach was so exposed, I couldn’t see anywhere to hide from the downpour.

Thunder boomed overhead once more and adrenaline washed into my blood. I dragged in a breath as I hunted for somewhere to take shelter. I spotted a small tree where the beach rose up towards the mountain, blowing in the tempest and I ran over to it. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to give me a bit of cover as I dropped down to sit beneath it, hugging my legs to my chest.

My shoulders shivered as I stared out at the dark lake, its surface a myriad of ripples as the raindrops pelted it. I fought the shadow of fear that was looming over me. Because if I was going to stick to the Night Keepers' rules, then they could leave me out here all night.

Tears rushed hot and fast down my cheeks as fear cleaved my heart apart.

I missed my dad. I hated that he was gone. I hated that I didn't know where he was. And I hated that I had no explanation, nothing to cling onto except the belief in my heart that he was innocent. But most of all I hated that he'd left me behind. And now the world was falling to ruin and I had no one here to face it at my side.

I shuddered, closing my eyes and falling back into that safe space inside me, telling myself over and over again, *I made the right choice. I made the right choice. I made the right choice*, until the cold wasn't so sharp and the fear in my heart loosened its claws.

I was a survivor. And I'd survive this. I had to.



We sat around the fireplace in The Temple, drinking heavily while Saint blasted some seriously intense classical music which he announced was by a guy called Antonio Vivaldi. He sat with his eyes closed as he leaned back in his enormous wingback chair which we'd nicknamed his throne, a glass of stupidly expensive neat vodka dangling from his fingertips as he bathed in his victory. *Our* victory.

Blake was dancing before the fire, laughter tearing from his lips as he stumbled over his own feet. We'd all torn our wet capes off when we got back here and none of us had bothered to put shirts on as we stayed close to the raging fire and let it dry us and warm us through. We looked like savages with the paint still marking our skin and I couldn't really disagree with that description.

Thunder crashed outside, loud enough to be heard over the deep base of whatever the fuck this next song was. I'd never admit it, but living with Saint had kinda made me love this classical shit. There was something so pure and intense and *real* about it. It really got my blood pumping and my mind firing. Sometimes, when I was beating a guy's head in, I could hear the crash and bang of cymbals and the pure rhythm of one of his favourites

in my head as my fists pounded in time with it. There was a beauty to it alright. Not that I'd ever tell Saint that.

Rain pelted against the stained glass window which dominated the room and I looked up at it as lightning lit the sky again and illuminated the crucifix, giving me a brief view of the roiling clouds beyond the red and orange panes that made up the huge crucifix.

I tongued my cheek, lifting my bottle of Jack to my lips but only taking the smallest of sips.

"How long are we leaving her out in that?" I asked. It had been hours already and I was starting to wonder if she could actually survive out there much longer.

"All fucking night if I deem it so," Saint replied cockily.

"Naw," I said slowly. "She'd die out in that all night. Girl was barely dressed as it was."

"So let her die," Blake said bitterly, chugging down even more booze as he threw his head back and sang to the classical music. It didn't have words so we were gifted with him replicating the bum, bum, bums. I doubted he really meant it though, he was just too wasted to think straight and I could practically see his grief shining out of his eyes despite the display he was putting on.

"Seems a bit easy," I commented, ignoring that twist in my gut at his words.

If they hated Tatum Rivers this much just for being related to some asshole, then I wondered what they'd think of me if my secrets ever came to light? There were shadows in me that ran deeper than my bones and secrets I didn't even dare whisper alone in the dark. If they knew the truth, would their love for me fall apart and give way to hatred? They were certainly

more inclined to hate than love. All three of us were. There was a beauty in that. But a rot too. Hate could drive the purest of things to ruin.

I wanted to believe I was their brother. More than just a brother. That our bond went soul deep. Far further than blood. But was it really so simple? I only knew I needed them far too much to test it. Without the other Night Keepers, I was nothing. Less than nothing now. My name didn't even mean shit anymore.

Hell, when they found that out they might cut me out of our circle of three. And I had secrets far more ruinous than the decision I'd made about my family this summer.

No. I wouldn't be telling them any time soon. And that knowledge made me feel a little uneasy about what we were doing to Tatum Rivers.

We'd done shit to plenty of people before. Far worse shit than commanding them to stand out in the freezing rain all night. But they'd deserved it one way or another. There was always something that I could point to and say this right here is why. But Tatum? She hadn't done shit to anyone. Only been born of a scumbag. And I could relate to that. If we were going to be punished for the crimes of our fathers, then I was destined to burn in hell for all of eternity and then some.

But there was no point in me saying that to Saint and Blake right now. Blake was angry and grieving and rightfully so. And as fucked up as it was, I preferred to see him dance in victory than try and stop him from taking things too far with the new girl. If her sacrifice was required in order to right the wrong that had been done to him, then that was fine. I'd end her myself if I believed it would bring him relief. He'd gone above and beyond for me far too many times and I was overdue a repayment.

And Saint...well, Saint needed power like a whore needed sex. He needed to bring everyone around him to heel. He had to feel the weight of

his enormous balls dragging him down as everyone else bowed to the top dog. He wasn't like me and Blake in that regard. We'd been broken by life and the people who'd brought us into it in one way or another. Saint had been born broken. Like there was some vital piece missing from him. And because of that emptiness, he was consumed with hunger and a need to fill that hole. He fed on the pain and suffering of others because he struggled to appreciate other people's emotions at all. Most emotions were hard to label, hard to feel if they weren't your own. But pain? Real, honest agony of the heart? He could almost taste it when he dealt it out to someone. I swear if demons existed, Saint would be one that devoured souls.

I sometimes wondered if he'd ever find what he was hunting for. Ever satisfy that hunger. Or if it would eventually consume him too. Not on my watch though. All the time Saint needed victims, I was happy to provide them. I had a talent for it. For sniffing out someone twisted and dirty enough to warrant the attention of the Night Keepers. That was how I'd first figured out what Monroe was, though of course I hadn't ever used it like that against him.

Sad as it was, our Coach was the third and final person in the world who I truly counted as a friend. Who truly knew me. He saw my monster and helped me feed it. And I saw his too. So did the others, even if they wouldn't acknowledge it. That was why they never pushed back against his rules, let him set the laws in his classes and on the pitch. I wasn't even sure Saint realised that he allowed Coach to tell him what to do so much. But he did. He fell into line at the blast of a whistle like the rest of us.

And why? It wasn't like there was any difference between his position and those of the other teachers; Saint could have put him under his thumb a long time ago if he'd had a mind to. One way or another. I doubted he could have intimidated Monroe into submission, but he used his money and

influence like a weapon just as often. His mom ran the school board, he could have taken his job from him. But he didn't, he played ball with him. Because whether Saint had noticed or not, there was a fourth monster in this school and we gravitated towards him just as we did to each other. It was only his position as staff that kept him from connecting with us fully.

Thunder boomed overhead again and I swear the walls of the fucking church shuddered at the might of the storm.

There was no shelter out on that beach. Nothing at all aside from that rock.

If Tatum Rivers was still out there, she was soaked through and risking hypothermia. And if she wasn't, then I could only imagine what Saint would do to her in punishment.

She'd sworn an oath, promised herself to us, given herself freely. Even if her eyes had burned with pure loathing the whole time. And I didn't hate the idea of owning that girl. Of making every little decision for her, having her at my beck and call. There was a rush to be had there.

The deal made it clear that sex was off the cards and I was glad about that. I didn't want a girl sucking my cock because she had to. I wanted her on her knees and begging for it because she just needed to taste me so fucking much that it burned her up. I wanted her to feel like she'd die if she didn't find out what it felt to have my flesh grinding against hers or my name spilling from her lips in ecstasy.

Saint pushed out of his throne with a devilish smile on his face as he retrieved his vodka from the coffee table.

"Drink it from the bottle," I urged, catching his eye and smirking at the disgust the mere idea of that brought to his chiselled features. He made a move to pour the vodka into his glass and I spoke quickly before he could, "Or are you too chicken shit to take your liquor like a big boy?"

“Fuck you. Why don’t you drink from a glass? You could at least *pretend* to be civilised sometimes,” he growled in response.

“Deal.” I snatched the glass from his hand and poured a healthy measure of Jack into the bottom.

Saint visibly shuddered as he raised the bottle of vodka to his lips. Even the fact that the thing had cost him the best part of two hundred dollars couldn’t help him to stomach the reality of what he was doing.

I hooked my cellphone from my pocket and snapped a photo as he tipped his head back. Luck was firmly on my side and lightning flashed through the stained glass window behind him just as I took the shot. His dark skin was still painted with the shit we’d used to scare Tatum, and he bore mine and Blake’s handprints either side of his heart.

“Fuck,” I said as I looked at the photo, impressed with my own skills. “You really do look like one of the Night Keepers in this.”

“Where?” Blake demanded, tripping over his feet as he came to squint at the screen.

“Wow, I’m not even a girl and I’m wet for you in that, Saint,” he joked, panting like a dog.

“Take one of me!” he demanded, flexing his muscles as he stood before the fire and I did just to shut him up. His eyes were half-mast and he had a dopey as shit smile on his face that would have really damaged his reputation with the girls if they saw it. I couldn’t wait to send him a hundred copies of it one after another in the morning while he nursed his hangover.

“Don’t post that shit of me necking vodka like a hillbilly,” Saint warned, pointing at me like he thought I was heading straight to social media to tag ourselves like a bunch of thirteen year old girls having a slumber party.

“I don’t post anything online,” I reminded him, rolling my eyes. Sure, I had an account and people were constantly posting photos of me and

tagging me in shit, but I didn't interact on it. Ever. I basically only had it so that I could use messenger to contact my so-called friends who lived down in Murkwell whenever there was a fight night coming up.

No, I wasn't posting that shit anywhere, but it was about to become my new screensaver for sure. I quickly saved it, snorting a laugh as I imagined Saint's face when I casually left my phone where he could see it in class tomorrow. He was gonna lose his fucking mind.

I strolled away as Saint went in hunt of another glass, cursing me for stealing his in a voice that slurred just a little. The two of them were getting lit, but I was finding it hard to chase my buzz.

I dropped my untouched glass of Jack on the dining table and placed the bottle down beside it as I abandoned my drinking habit for the night. I was only ever three kinds of drunk. Bloodthirsty drunk. Party animal drunk. Or self destructive drunk. Right now I was on the path to number three. And number three came with a real ass eater of a hangover and a dollop of self hatred thrown in. I didn't like the sound of that for my future so I cut myself off.

The wind changed so that the rain hammered against the stained glass window and I pouted like a little bitch as I watched it sliding down the glass.

Saint had stayed on his feet, tipping his head back to roar at the vaulted ceiling like a motherfucking beast. Blake followed his lead and I moved to join them with a smile that was only half forced.

"I am the dark in the dead of the night!" Saint yelled, cupping a hand around his mouth.

"Hear me roar!" I shouted alongside Blake. It was some bullshit we'd come up with as kids which liked to resurface whenever Saint flipped the switch past hammered to wasted.

Blake started laughing, draining his drink before dropping down into Saint's throne with his eyes hooded.

I moved closer as Saint continued to jump about to the classical insanity that was assaulting our ears and I couldn't help but love him even more than usual as I watched him cutting loose.

Blake watched too, the smile slowly slipping from his face until all I could see was his pain.

"Fuck my life," he murmured like he didn't expect anyone to be listening and my gut twisted sharply at his words.

"C'mon, man," I said to him, offering a hand as he looked up at me with a hollow expression. "Time to sleep it off."

Blake let me heave him to his feet, dropping his glass into his chair as he threw an arm around my shoulders and I half dragged him to his room at the back of the building. We passed down a short hallway where there were two doors waiting for us.

I swung Blake through the first door into his room and crossed the huge space which he'd decorated in blue tones. There were trophies everywhere and photographs of him winning all kinds of shit. It was kinda sad really because no one saw this room but him and us. His dad had been a little too heavy on the *winners always prosper* shit as he was growing up and it had given him an addiction to competing.

I dropped him on the bed and he laughed as he looked up at me. "You gonna have your wicked way with me Kyan?" he joked. "Can you be gentle though 'cos I've never been with anyone as big as you..."

"In more ways than one, baby," I replied, grabbing my junk as I laughed at him.

Blake chuckled as his eyes fell shut and I headed into the Jack and Jill bathroom that connected our bedrooms. I'd seen that dude naked more

times than I could count after accidentally forgetting to lock both doors. It had gotten to the point where neither of us bothered to lock them now and we just averted our eyes.

I headed into my room and grabbed a gym bag from behind the door. My space was a lot less interesting than Blake's. It was pretty bare aside from the heap of school work which sat on my desk. I had no plans to complete any of it really. I got good enough grades and I liked to think of homework as optional.

There was a limited edition guitar leaning against my wall too which might have been interesting if it was mine. But it wasn't. I'd taken it from some asshole busker who'd pissed me off with his pop bullshit. Dude was crying when I took it. That shit was still funny.

The walls were white and the bed unmade. I didn't see any particular need for the room to be anything more than practical so I hadn't done anything to decorate it. It was as empty as my heart.

I headed to my closet and pulled out two pairs of sweatpants and two hoodies, stuffing them inside the bag before moving back out to find Saint in the living room.

"I'm gonna go and get our girl," I announced as I walked into the room.

Saint was nowhere to be seen so I took the curving staircase up to his bedroom on the balcony.

I could hear the shower running in his en-suite so I headed through to it, tapping the control panel on the wall to quiet Mozart for a minute.

"I said, I'm going out to get our girl," I called over the sound of running water as I stood by the open door.

"You worried about her?" Saint called back with a dismissive snort.

"I think a little thing like her won't last the night out in that storm and I wanna play with my new toy tomorrow, not discover she died from

exposure before I even got a chance to try her out,” I replied in a voice that didn’t broker options.

“Fine. Go get her, make sure she’s not dead and tell her I expect her to be waiting outside The Temple at six am,” he replied.

“You don’t even finish your workout until half seven,” I replied, wondering how drunk he was.

“I said I want her waiting at six, I didn’t say I’d be ready for her then,” he replied darkly.

“Fine. Catch you later.” I whacked Mozart back up to full blast so he could have his power shower or jerk off over the brass section, or whatever the fuck got him so hyped about this shit, and left him to it.

I hooked the bag over my shoulder, not bothering with a coat, instead just heading back out into the storm with my chest bare so that I could get a taste of the pain we’d given Tatum for the last four hours.

A shiver danced along my skin and I was drenched through within ten minutes of leaving The Temple. We really were assholes.

I smirked to myself as I upped my pace, taking the paths through the forest as I headed for Sycamore Beach where the sacred stone stood.

My heart was thrashing with excitement as the thunder tumbled overhead and I closed in on the pale rock which stood out even in the dark.

I slowed as I approached it, frowning as I failed to spot Tatum anywhere.

Anger licked along my spine as I frowned at the space around the rock, wondering if she’d even stayed out here at all or if she was really so deluded that she thought she could get away with disobeying us.

What part of us *owning* her was failing to compute?

I whirled around, meaning to march all the way to her fucking dorm and show her exactly what happened if she was disobedient when my gaze

snagged on her where she was taking shelter beneath a tree at the edge of the beach.

I released a breath to calm the monster which was pacing beneath my skin and stalked towards her.

She was sitting on the ground, her knees drawn up to her chest with her arms wrapped around them. Her long hair was plastered to her, covering her face as she bowed her head into the small shelter her body could offer.

I stalked towards her, the sand shifting beneath my feet before I came to a halt standing over her.

“Get up, baby,” I growled.

Shivers wracked her body as she lifted her head with aching slowness to look up at me. Water clung to her lashes, dripping like tears beneath those big blue eyes. Hell, there were probably real tears mixed in there too.

Her lips parted, but no words came out and for a moment I wondered if we’d broken her so soon. That wasn’t how it was supposed to work. She was supposed to keep bouncing back, fighting, denying us, driving us all crazy as fuck. At least that was what *I* wanted from this. Saint probably did want her broken and Blake just wanted to punish her for his grief.

“Come on, baby,” I said, offering her my hand, my tone almost touching on soft. I was a damn guardian angel right now, come to rescue her from the dark. Those assholes just got drunk and would have left her out here, but not me.

She hesitated for a long moment before extending a trembling hand to me.

I reached for her, her ice cold fingers completely enveloped in mind. I couldn’t say I remembered holding hands with a girl before now. And this wasn’t how it tended to look in the movies either. Usually there were goofy smiles and blushes and *feelings*. But here I was, the monster who’d done

this to her, standing in the rain and offering to let her live like it was some great act of kindness. Unfortunately for her, kindness didn't come into it. I was just being practical. What was the point in owning a girl if I didn't look after her too? She was mine now. Which meant I wouldn't let bad things happen to her. At least not bad things like dying. And she could rest safe knowing that no fucker in this school would so much as look at her, let alone hurt her unless it was one of us.

I pulled her to her feet and she fell against my chest as her frozen legs failed to hold her up.

"I got you," I promised, catching her beneath her thighs and sweeping her into my arms. I swear to all that was holy, this really was like one of those movies. Didn't they always go running to each other in a storm? I mean, I'd taken a casually paced stroll and she'd just waited beneath a tree, but aside from that, this shit was the same. Fucking poetic.

She curled against me, freezing fingers pressing to my skin and I found I didn't mind that at all. Sure, she was just using me for my body heat, but I was still the hero in this. And I couldn't say I'd ever played any part aside from the villain before this moment.

I walked quickly, heading up the long path which circled the campus as I took the most direct route to the Cypress Gym.

Monroe had gotten me a key cut sophomore year after he realised it was safer to trust me with access to a punching bag at all times than to risk me using the other students' faces whenever I lost my shit. Which was incredibly often.

Tatum stayed silent aside from the chattering of her teeth as we ascended the hill and I carried her all the way to the gym with the rain still hammering down. I managed to hook the key from my bag as we arrived

and I unlocked the building before carrying her inside and locking it again to make sure we weren't disturbed.

The scent of chlorine assaulted me as I walked down the dark corridors towards the pool.

Tatum peeled herself away from my chest as she looked around with a frown.

"W-why are we here?" she asked and I was pleased to hear her voice.

"Gotta warm you up," I said. "And I thought it would be nice for us to get better acquainted. Seeing as you're mine now and all."

She didn't dignify that with a response, but I felt her posture tighten at my words. *Better get used to it, baby.*

I knocked open the door to the pool room and the low, blue lights they left on in here overnight filled the space.

Tatum was still shivering in my arms, but it was already less than it had been.

I skirted the pool and headed for the hot tub and sauna on the far side of it. They shut the sauna down overnight so it was gonna have to be the tub.

I set her down on the tiles beside the huge round tub and casually flipped the lid off of it. I hit it a little too hard and the damn thing fell into the pool beyond it. But never mind, that was someone else's problem now.

"Do you need me to undress you too?" I asked, cocking a head at our girl as she shivered in her homemade puddle.

"No. You can just go," she said firmly, folding her arms over her chest and pushing out those lips like that might make me more likely to leave.

"Naw, I'm good here," I replied, bathing in the hatred that flared in her eyes. There she was. That wild thing I'd spotted the first time I'd laid eyes on her. "Take your clothes off and get in the tub."

She scowled at me and I stalked forward to stand over her, making her tip her head back to look up at me.

“I thought the deal was no sex?” she demanded.

I coughed out a laugh at the balls on her. “No worries, baby, I like my women hot, not cold. We can keep our underwear on if you think you can’t contain yourself if we skinny dip.”

“We?” She arched an eyebrow at me and I offered her a taunting grin as I kicked my socks and shoes off before dropping my sweatpants and getting into the hot water.

It felt fucking amazing and I’d only been out in that storm for fifteen minutes. She was going to come when she got in here. No question.

I moved to the far side of the ten seater tub, setting the bubbles running and sank down onto one of the seats, resting my arms on the backs of the chairs either side of me as I waited for her.

Tatum was still sitting in her puddle and I blew out a breath as I fought against my anger.

“Look, I get that you’re all cold and shit,” I said. “But you agreed to our terms. We give the orders, you get the fuck on with it. Eagerly. Though in all honesty, I’m down with you speaking your mind just as much as you like to me. Call me any and every name under the sun, I thrive on that shit. But...” I levelled her with my darkest look and was satisfied when she recoiled a little. “Don’t. Keep. Me. Waiting.”

I beckoned to her and though her eyes flared with fury, she shrugged out of her blazer then quickly pulled the tie and shirt off. If it had been a strip show it would have been a pretty shit one, but I had to admit the end result was worth a second look as she finally stood and pushed her skirt down her thighs before stalking towards me in her lacy black underwear.

She was shooting me daggers, but frankly that only made her look hotter.

Tatum dropped into the hot water, a shiver visibly rushing along her skin as she suppressed a groan of relief. I had this shit locked down. Seriously, Blake and Saint were never getting a puppy. They had no fucking idea how to look after another living thing.

“Are you satisfied now, asshole?” she hissed and I offered her a wide smile.

“Perfectly.”

She didn't seem to think that deserved a response and instead sank right down into the hot water until she was completely submerged.

I waited way longer than a full minute for her to emerge again and I surveyed her with interest as she blinked the water from her lashes and drew in a deep breath.

The bubbles fell still as the timer on them ran out and I was gifted a view of her near naked body through the clear water. I couldn't deny that I wanted her. There was something seriously fuckable about that girl and it wasn't just her looks either. She had the kind of smart mouth that made me want to silence it and the kind of wilful spirit that had me imagining up all kinds of ways I'd like to tie her up and punish her.

“All warmed up?” I asked, my voice rough around the edges as my slightly drunken brain got all excitable.

“I'm frozen through, douchebag,” she snarled, clearly taking my permission for insults seriously and I had to say I liked that.

“I could warm you up real good,” I offered, eyeing her hungrily for a moment as I wondered if she'd take the bait.

“How?” she asked, mistrust in her big blue eyes.

“Just spread your legs and say the word,” I growled because I was an asshole and I could.

Her thighs clamped together like she thought I'd force them apart, but I'd never take a girl by force. That wasn't my style. Yeah, I wanted to dominate her, own her body and make her ache in every possible way. But I wanted her screams to be those of pleasure and to hear her begging for every inch I gave.

"Don't worry, rich girl," I said, my gaze skimming over her perfectly fuckable curves dismissively. I loved that I could wear my mask so tightly. No fucker ever got a read on what I was thinking unless I let them. Not even Saint. "I don't hunger for uptight pussy. You're not even half wild enough for me."

"I'm wilder than you could ever imagine, you self-obsessed fuckboy," she snarled and I wondered if she was hoping to make me hard with that statement or if it was just a pleasant side effect.

"Don't give it to me softly, baby, go all in," I dared her.

Her lips pouted with uncertainty and I reached out to start the bubbles up again.

"Come on, don't pull any punches, tell me exactly what you think of me," I challenged.

My armour was platinum-made and my insides were dead and empty anyway, so I wasn't worried about getting my feelings hurt, but I *was* interested in what my new pet thought of me as an owner.

"Honestly?" she asked, sensing a trap.

"Give it to me. Every deep, dark, sordid thought you've had about me and the conclusions you've come to."

She licked her lips like she was savouring the taste of those words and I watched her unblinkingly, captivated by this creature I now owned and wondering if she might just continue to surprise me.

“Well, on first impression, I would have assumed that you were some kind of low rent gang banger from the shittier side of town,” she began, eyeing me for a long moment to check I wasn’t going to lose my shit and I arched an eyebrow at her as I waited for her to get to the good bit. “You wear everything with a superior kind of I-don’t-give-a-shit attitude, but that’s actually the complete opposite of your feelings. Everything about the way you look and dress actually screams *look at me*, especially considering the company you keep and the money you have. You dress and act the part of a delinquent, choosing the role of the dangerous bad boy but when push comes to shove, you’re just riding through life on your multimillion dollar trust fund. You may act like you’re so dark and dangerous and empty on the inside, but the only reason you’re empty is because you’ve had everything in life *so* fucking easy that it just got plain old boring. And now you’ve been wearing that empty, dark, mask for so long that you don’t even know how to take it off anymore and you’re not sure who you are without it, or if you’re even anyone at all. Which I’d wager you aren’t.”

Silence hung following her words and I looked into her big blue eyes as I bit down on my tongue to stop myself from reacting to her words, from trying to rebuke them or refuse them or showing her that they’d held even the smallest drop of truth. And who gave a shit if they had? So what if she could tell I was empty inside? It wasn’t like I tried to hide it.

I let her stiffen up as she waited to see if I’d flip on her for several seconds before I finally barked a laugh.

“Not quite, baby, but keep on guessing for next time. One or two of those potshots got close to the mark even if you didn’t score a bullseye,” I teased, as I pushed her words from my skull and pointedly forgot about them.

Tatum bit her lip on a reply, her gaze sliding over my features for a long moment before she accepted that I wasn't gonna lose my shit.

"Do I get to do you now?" I asked.

"Do I actually get a say?" she ground out.

"Sure you do, baby, this is just a conversation between...well I would say a bitch and her owner but I feel like you might take offence."

"Fuck you," she hissed.

"Thanks for the offer, but I don't think you could take the heat, rich girl."

"Fine. Let's hear it then, if you think you know so fucking much about me," she said, folding her arms and pushing her tits up in the process.

I made no attempt to hide where my gaze had landed and she snarled as she sank further beneath the bubbles to cut off my view of the goods.

I rubbed a thumb over the corner of my mouth to hide my smirk at her reaction and decided to keep playing this game. There weren't many people who could actually hold my attention for this long and I was beginning to wonder how much longer she'd stay interesting.

"Let's see then..." I dragged my eyes over her and grinned as I began. "You grew up well off but not with the kind of money most of the kids here had so you're used to a good enough quality of life, but not so good that you're an entitled brat. Mommy ditched out on you early on so you spent your formative years looking up to Daddy who was a few screws loose of the whole package if we're to believe the newspaper articles about him. I also read about *all* of the different labs your daddy was employed in all over the country which means you moved from place to place a lot. That explains why you make friends easily but keep your emotions out of it. With a single male role model, you learned the way to talk to men better than women and as you grew into that body – which is fucking sensational by the way – you figured out that you were pretty much the complete cock

charming package. That meant that in the last few years, you've worked over several guys, taking just enough from them to satisfy you without giving much back in return so that when you up and leave there's no wounds to worry about healing. It also explains why you're going to be so damn hard to break in. You've grown a thick skin and you know how to shield yourself just as well as you understand how to dust yourself off after a kicking and come back fighting. How did I do?"

"You missed the part where I was trained in kickboxing and advanced self-defence," she said cockily. "And despite all of those showy muscles you're so proud of, I'm pretty sure I could put you on your ass one on one."

I gave her an honest to fuck, *real* smile. No smirking, no taunting, no bullshit at all. The kind of smile no one but Blake or Saint had earned from me in years. "Well, fuck, baby," I purred. "That sounds like a date."

"In your dreams, mutt," she snapped.

I laughed at that and ran my tongue over my bottom lip, remembering the paint on my flesh as I tasted it. I dragged a thumb across my jaw and glanced at it as it came away red. Tatum followed the movement with an assessing expression.

"I can't believe you all painted yourselves up like a bunch of fucking make-believe playing kids," she growled, her tongue getting real loose now that she realised I didn't mind it.

"Scared you good though, didn't we?" I taunted.

Tatum pursed her lips, her gaze slipping over the paint on my body like she was searching for an answer in it.

"Why?" she asked in a low voice. "I get why you all hate me. I just don't get why you want me to be yours? Is it just so that you can humiliate me? Destroy me? What?" Her voice broke on that last word and I decided to give her what she wanted. At least in part.

“Because we’re monsters of a particular kind,” I breathed, watching her across the water. “And we feast on things that others don’t understand.”

“Like pain and suffering?” she breathed.

“Yes.”

Silence fell between us as she processed that and I watched her as she watched me. I could see that ache in her too, that need for something... more.

“Come here,” I said in a low voice which held no room for argument.

“You promised no sex,” she growled and I snorted a laugh.

“You need to get your mind out the gutter, baby. I gave my word along with the others. None of us will force you to do anything like that. That’s not the kinds of monsters we are anyway. Now, come here.”

She slipped off of her seat and slowly moved through the water towards me, her breasts lifting above the surface as she walked so that I got a view of her pink nipples through the black lace. It was a test, she wanted to know if I was going to keep my word or not. But she wouldn’t be disappointed in that. My word was law. Same went for all the Night Keepers. There wasn’t a single thing in this world which would make us break it.

She hesitated as she came to a halt before me, standing between my open legs as her gaze drifted over the paint on my flesh again.

I reached for her slowly, grabbing her perfectly round ass I lifted her to straddle my lap and she gasped in surprise, bracing her hands on my shoulders.

My dick twitched as those pink nipples brushed against my chest through the lace.

Tatum’s big blue eyes found mine and I could see an ocean of uncertainty in her gaze.

“You have to do everything we say,” I reminded her, leaning forward so that our breath mingled as I released my grip on her ass and laid my arms over the edge of the hot tub either side of me again. “But it doesn’t have to be all bad.”

“You are all bad,” she replied. “Bad to the bone, every one of you.”

“Rotten to the core too,” I replied darkly. “Now, wash this paint off for me, baby.”

Her eyes widened and her gaze dipped to take in the paint once more.

“I don’t have a sponge,” she said, defiant as always. And I hoped we wouldn’t succeed in breaking that. There weren’t many things that lingered on my conscience, but that definitely would.

“Then improvise,” I said simply.

A long moment passed before she reached up to my cheek, cupping my jaw in her wet hand as she used her thumb to wipe the paint away.

My heart pounded to a dark and steady rhythm as she worked, my skin tingling beneath her fingertips as she moved them over my face.

She shifted forward in my lap to get her balance and my cock was suddenly wedged right between her thighs. I was hard as fuck which really shouldn’t have surprised her but she gasped like a virgin all the same.

“You said-” she began, but I cut her off.

“There’s a beautiful girl sitting in my lap and touching me while wearing transparent underwear,” I growled. “My dick’s gonna get ideas about that whether I give it permission or not.”

Tatum bit her bottom lip as she looked at me like she’d expected an apology. *No luck there, baby.* I’d never apologised for anything in my life, let alone getting hard for a perfect creature like her. But I was keeping my word. I wasn’t going to lay a finger on her unless she asked me to.

“Okay.” She started wiping paint from my other cheek and I watched her as her long lashes kissed her cheeks while she looked down.

When she rubbed through the line of paint which ran over my lips, a growl of desire escaped me.

Her blue eyes lifted to mine for a moment and she shifted in my lap just enough to make my balls ache. There was no way that was an accident. The little rich girl had just figured out how she could torture me in payment for my part in her misery.

Both of her hands slid down my neck achingly slowly and she started to wipe the paint from my pecs. Her touch was firm as she slid her wet hands over me, exploring the curves of my muscles as she shifted in my lap again.

My heart was pounding and I clenched my fists where they rested on the edge of the hot tub to stop myself from reaching for her.

The bubbles timed out and the water fell still around us, leaving her breasts above the surface once more and I damn near groaned at the sight of her hardened nipples pressing through the lacy fabric.

Fuck. My. Life.

This was testing my resolve to the maximum, but I refused to back down. I needed to keep my word. It was the one thing I had that wasn't layered in shadows and bullshit.

Tatum noticed what I was looking at and shifted in my lap again, grinding against the hard ridge of my cock in a way that told me she'd know exactly what to do with it if this situation were different.

“There's an inked up demigod sitting between my thighs with a cock as hard as stone,” she breathed in a dark tone. “My nipples are gonna get ideas about that whether I give them permission or not.”

“Touché.”

Her hands slid beneath the surface and my gaze returned to meet hers as they trailed down my abs, wiping the rest of the paint off as she went. Her fingertips made it to the waistband of my boxers and I really did groan. But before I could consider whether or not my word meant shit, she was gone, climbing out of the hot tub like we hadn't been five seconds away from me fucking her 'til sunrise.

"I've warmed up now," she said in a cool tone which didn't even acknowledge what had just happened. "Can I go back to my dorm or do you have more demands to make?"

She pulled on the hoodie and sweatpants I'd brought for her without removing her wet underwear and tied her wet hair in a knot on the back of her head.

I stood slowly, climbing out behind her with water running over my body and my boxers clinging to my cock so that she could see every single inch of it as she turned back to look at me.

"I can walk you back," I offered.

"Is that a command?" she asked icily.

"No."

"Then I'll pass." She grabbed her dripping wet school uniform from the floor and stalked away from me without so much as a glance at my dick and I blew out a breath which was part frustration and part laugh.

There was a warrior living in Tatum Rivers' flesh, and I for one was glad we hadn't destroyed her.



I woke the next morning with a nightmare curling around my body like a wraith. And no matter how hard I tried to push it away, it held onto me with razor sharp talons. I'd been swimming in the lake then something had grabbed my ankle from below and dragged me under and under, my lungs burning, aching. But when I'd thought my last breath would come, I stayed alive. Suffering at the bottom of the lake, but unable to get free.

I shuddered as I slipped out of bed, finding Mila sitting cross legged on her covers staring over at me. She was already dressed in her uniform and her hair was woven into an intricate braid that must have taken her a long time to perfect. I'd been so exhausted from last night, I'd slept past my alarm and I groaned as I rubbed my eyes.

Flashes of the beach awaited me the second my eyes closed and my heart thumped out of rhythm. The three of them staring at me with their painted bodies and demonic smiles, the raging storm, the icy cold that had drilled into my bones, the tears which had tracked down my cheeks. Then Kyan had come like a monster out of the lake, but he hadn't hurt me like I'd

expected. I wasn't in the least bit fooled by his act of 'kindness' though. He just didn't want his pet to die. Then he wouldn't have anything to kick when he needed an outlet.

"Tatum?" Mila asked like she was scared of me. Or *for* me maybe. I couldn't be sure.

I gave her a half smile as I dropped my hand from my face. "Yeah it's me. Not a zombie. Despite this." I gestured to my general appearance. My hair was sticking up everywhere in my periphery and I had no doubt my eyes were red and dark circles hung beneath them. Turns out, you don't sleep well after you sell your soul to the devil. Or *devils* as the case may be.

She didn't crack a smile and my heart twisted uncomfortably. She would have seen the video. Shit, no doubt Blake would have made sure every student at Everlake saw that video. I tried not to let in the shame as I thought of how scared I'd been, how broken. I still felt that way in part. Still felt shattered and small. But in the cold light of day where I couldn't see any of my new owners, the flame of my strength was rekindling. It didn't blaze yet, but I was sure as hell gonna stoke it until it did.

I wasn't going to be ruined by three boys with a small dick complex. Although, that didn't quite fit the bill from the out of this world sex I'd had with Blake, and from the swell of Kyan's monster cock between my thighs last night. Taunting him had restarted the fire in me, it had given me an inch of control back. Something I was going to latch onto with an iron grip, and shit, I was gonna use my teeth to hang onto it too, because I was *not* going to fall apart, no matter how much it felt like I was about to.

"Did they hurt you?" Mila asked, not having to mention the sacred stone or me willingly pressing my hand to it and agreeing to be Night Bound. I would have laughed at those words before yesterday. I wanted to ridicule that stupid legend, but now I realised it didn't matter if there was any truth

in it or not. The Night Keepers had brought it to life. Given it flesh and breathed air into its lungs. If enough people believed in something, whether it was true or not, it gave the leaders of that faith power. That was what made the Night Keepers truly dangerous.

“Not physically,” I said, though leaving me out in that storm was arguably an indirect punch in the face. I would have preferred the quick, sharp pain of a physical attack though. Hours in the rain was worse than bruises and reddened flesh, it had left its mark on the inside. The type that scarred for life.

I cleared my throat as Mila’s face paled.

“You should head to breakfast,” I urged, partly because I couldn’t stand that look on her face. Like I was a victim.

“I can wait ‘til you get dressed and we can walk together?” she offered, but I shook my head.

“It’s okay, you go ahead,” I encouraged, painting on a smile. I knew the guys would only threaten her if I went against their rules, but if she was seen walking around with me, she was going to be thrown into the firing line of the whole school regardless for being seen with the virus girl. And Mila was too sweet to be dragged down with me. Besides, I’d still be able to see her here in our room.

Fuck, they’re winning already.

Mila headed to the door, lingering by it for a long moment. “I’m staying, you know? There’s no flights coming out this way from New York because they’ve all been grounded. So my parents can’t come for me.”

I nodded, giving her a genuine smile, a hardened piece of my heart softening at her words. At least I wouldn’t be totally alone all of the time.

She stepped out of the room and I forced myself to my feet a beat later, grabbing a towel and heading for the shower. It was pretty empty, but the

few girls in there ran out of the room screaming *Plague!*

I gritted my jaw, stepping into one of the shower units. *Well at least I can have the whole bathroom to myself, bitches.*

I was soon dressed for the day with my makeup and hair done, working hard to not only look put together but to look fucking awesome. My eyeliner made my bright blue eyes pop and you couldn't even see a glimmer of that girl who'd stood on the beach last night. At least there was one good thing about psychological wounds. You couldn't see them on the outside.

I was running late again, but there was one more thing I needed to do before I faced down the world.

I headed to my nightstand, taking out a sheaf of paper and grabbing a pen, pulling off the cap with my teeth.

Dear Jessica,

Things got bad. Those boys I mentioned? Well they're the devil incarnate.

Last night, they pushed and pushed until I gave in to them. I was so scared, Jess. And now I'm so fucking ashamed. Because you wouldn't have let them do it, would you? You wouldn't have agreed. And you'd be so disappointed with me now.

I stopped writing as a fat tear dropped onto the page. I hastily wiped it away but it smeared some of the ink and I sighed as I carried on.

I wish you were here. No, scrap that. If I'm wishing for stuff, I wish I was with you. And Dad...

Did you hear about Dad? You don't believe those lies about him either, right?

That's why everyone hates me, Jess. But if he could, he'd tell us to fight our enemies without fear. That fear is just a tool to aid our survival. And maybe he's right. Maybe I'll find a way to wield it, Jess. But right now, I feel so lost. And so alone. I'd give anything to run away this time. I'd trade every other awkward moment I'd ever had to escape this one. Maybe I'm paying the price for all of that avoided shit at once?

I guess nothing in life is free.

Love you Jess. And I miss you more than ever.

Tatty x

I folded up the letter, dropping to the floor and pulling my backpack out from under the bed. I placed it carefully into the pocket at the back and as I took my hand out of the bag, my fingers grazed the gun Dad had given me. I wet my mouth as I took it into my grip for a moment, feeling the solid, comforting weight of it in my palm. The Night Keepers probably felt like this constantly. All powerful, unstoppable. But they didn't need guns to feel this way when they embodied a loaded weapon all on their own.

I pushed it back into the depths of my bag and my fingers hooked on the self-defence keychain my dad had given me as a going away gift. I blew out a laugh as I took it into my palm. The face of a black metal cat hung from it with huge eyes which I could slide my middle and index finger through. The pointed ears were sharp enough to pierce flesh when it was used as a weapon.

I pushed the bag back under my bed, standing and hooking the chain onto my room key. I didn't plan on stabbing any students on campus, no matter how appealing the idea was for some assholes in particular, but it

was a reminder of my dad. And the fact that innocent-looking things could be deadly.

With that little piece of him in my palm, I headed out of my room with more confidence. I strapped on my mask and buried my pain deep, deep inside me where no one could find it unless they dug it out with a spade.

The air was icily cool outside, the storm having left a beautiful, crisp blue sky in its wake. I breathed in the fresh air and drew comfort in the fact that no matter how hard a storm raged, it always blew itself out eventually.

It wasn't long before I reached the Redwood Dining Hall, clenching my jaw as I walked inside.

Eyes swung to me and I ignored them as usual, fixing my gaze on the Unspeakables. I had a feeling I wasn't going to make it past the Night Keepers today without being forced to acknowledge them, but I was gonna make them call my name if they wanted something.

"Plague!" Blake hollered predictably and I turned to him, raising my brows and waiting for him to give me an actual command. If he wanted me to come over there, then he was gonna have to spell it out.

"Here, now," Saint growled before Blake said another word.

I strode towards them at a snail's pace, taking in the three fuckwits who now laid a claim to me. I scanned them as they continued to eat their breakfasts. You could tell a lot from the way a person ate. Blake poked at his obviously stone cold pancakes, gazing at me with an emotional kind of hatred blazing in his dark green eyes. Saint sliced everything up on his plate like it had personally insulted his mother and bitch slapped his puppy across the room. Although, if I ever saw that guy with a puppy, I'd be calling animal services faster than a snow cone melting in hell. Kyan was eating his greasy cooked breakfast with just a fork, but looked like he was about to abandon it in favour of using his hands and teeth.

There were three words which described each of them right now:
Emotion. Control. Disregard.

I halted in front of their table, ignoring the violent pounding of my heart as I gave them my least-fucks-given expression. They could own me all they liked, but I was determined to never let them see me break again.

“Well? What the fuck do you have to say?” Saint demanded and I frowned, coming up short.

“Um...you look like a very well dressed little Night Keeper today, oh holy one?” I mocked and his eyes flashed with fury.

He rose from his seat, his freaking knife in his grip. “You were supposed to be waiting at The Temple at six am this morning,” he snarled. “You’ve already broken the fucking rules.”

“What?” I balked. “Unless you sent me a psychic message – which, trust me, I’m sure your freaky psycho mind is capable of doing – I was never told to be there at six am. And you said I only had to do what I was told, so...” I shrugged innocently and Kyan cleared his throat.

“Er, dude?” He looked to Saint. “I totally forgot to tell her about that. My bad.”

Saint’s jaw ticked as he glared at his friend and a laugh got caught in the back of my throat. It managed to escape and Saint shot me daggers, seeming unsure of who to aim his rage at.

My gaze skipped to Kyan and for a moment I remembered straddling him in the hot tub, the way he’d groaned as I washed his body. He shot me a wink while the others weren’t looking and my lips parted. *Did he purposefully save my ass from the six am bullshit?*

“Fucking idiot,” Blake muttered and I noticed he was stabbing at his food as he narrowed his eyes at me. I tried not to be rattled by that, but for a

second he looked scarier than Saint. Like he wanted to be driving that blade into *me*.

“Get on your knees,” Saint suddenly demanded of me, loud enough for the entire room to hear.

Girlish giggles reached me from the table just behind me and my cheeks flushed hot as I stared at Saint. I couldn’t do it. My knees physically would not fucking bend for this asshole.

“Get. On. Your. Knees,” Saint growled dangerously.

I gritted my teeth, knowing I had no choice as I forced myself down before them, my calves pressing against the hard floor. My neck flared with heat and I half expected food to be thrown on me again, but as I stared defiantly up at Saint, he just smirked.

“This is how I want you every morning, outside The Temple at six am,” he demanded and excited chattering filled the air.

I had to bite my tongue on the insults that were dancing through my mind as I nodded my agreement.

Saint grinned as he beckoned me back to my feet and I was more than happy to comply.

“Now, go sit down,” he directed, pointing over at the Unspeakables.

“My pleasure.” I gave him a mock curtesy, lifting my skirt almost high enough to flash my panties before hurrying away to the table, somehow getting away with that.

I dropped down in the same spot I’d filled all week and the Unspeakables stared at me with wide eyes.

Freeloader patted my arm and Bait gave me a sad sort of smile. They didn’t need to mention the fact that the Night Keepers owned me now. Even more so than *they* were owned. But I was never, in all my fucking life, gonna end up looking like these beat down Barrys.

I ordered my breakfast – my choices consisting of plain porridge or a fruit bowl. So I opted for the fruit and just thanked my lucky stars that grapes and bananas hadn't been stolen from me along with pizza. *Oh hell no, did I just express gratitude for what the royal fuckwits deigned to offer me?*

Anger rolled through my chest and I slammed my phone down more firmly than was necessary, making every one of the Unspeakables jump. And that made me even madder, because they must have been like me once. I mean sure, maybe not *all* of them. Some looked like they'd been hiding from their own shadows for most of their lives, but Punch didn't. Punch looked like he'd once been a machine of a guy who didn't need to take shit from anybody. But there he was down the table, throwing cursory glances over at the Night Keepers while he spooned porridge into his mouth with a look like he was chewing cardboard.

And Deepthroat had the look of a prom queen who'd had her crown broken into pieces and stabbed into her gut. She must have been one of the popular girls once, breezing through life without a care. Now, her mascara was slightly smeared and her eyes reddened like she'd been dabbing tears from them not long ago. It made me angry for her, for all of them.

"You're so lucky, Sneak," Freeloader said to the redheaded girl beside her with a look of longing.

"Yeah, I wish my parents could come for me," Bait said with a heavy sigh.

My ears pricked up as I looked to Sneak, my heart slowing for several beats. "You're leaving?" I asked and she looked to me with a shy nod, tucking a lock of crimson hair behind her ear.

"My mom's taking a few days off work to drive all the way from San Francisco," she said, her eyes shining with tears of joy. "She won't be

coming 'til next week, but when she arrives, I'm gonna be *free*."

The Unspeakables gazed at her in desperation and my breathing hitched as a plan clicked together in my mind.

"Would she give me a ride out of here into the nearest town?" I asked her in a whispered tone and everyone stared at me in surprise.

Sneak frowned. "Well yeah, I'm sure she could take you to Murkwell. But the guards won't let anyone out unless their own parents come for them."

"I know that." I drummed my fingers on the table as I tried to work out the kinks in my plan. "But if I can get past them, she'll take me?" I hung on her next words, the possibility of escaping this place filling me with so much hope, I almost whooped with joy. But this plan had to be seriously covert. In fact...I glared around at the Unspeakables ringing the table in suspicion. I was gonna have to make sure none of them told on me like good little underdogs.

"Yeah of course. I'll help anyone who wants to go," Sneak said, a small smile tugging at her mouth.

"Great," I practically squealed. "Who's with me then?" I demanded of the rest of the table and they all shrank back into their seats like they wanted to turn to vapour. Squits looked like he was about to live up to his name again. But Bait was frowning like he was considering it.

"Bait?" I pressed and he glanced at me then over to the Night Keepers, worry flashing through his gaze.

"I dunno..."

"Come on." I reached out to rest a hand on his and he glanced up again in surprise. He smiled awkwardly, pulling his hand free and running it down the back of his neck.

“Well...okay. I’ll do it. I can head to my sister’s place in Oakville,” he breathed and a grin tugged at my mouth, my heart pounding with excitement.

I pointed around at the rest of the table with a glare. “If anyone rats us out, I will gut you. Freaking *gut* you. Like a tuna. Or a seabass. Got it?” I used my firmest tone, but kept my voice low so no one could hear me beyond our table. The fact that it had been shoved to one corner of the room was actually coming in handy now.

“Got it,” they all agreed and some of them even shared smiles like they were thrilled by the idea of me and Bait getting one over on the Night Keepers.

“Right, we just need a distraction to get the guards out of our way,” I whispered, my brows pulling together as I tried to think of something that could work, adrenaline thrumming through my veins.

“Well, um...” Punch started and I looked up, my lips parting.

“Don’t hold out on me Punch,” I said, my hands curling into fists.

He swiped his napkin up to dab his forehead, breathing heavily. “Well I...I have some firecrackers in my room from my old pranking days.”

I slammed my hand down on the table again and everyone leapt in their seats. “*That’s* what I’m talking about Punch. You fucking legend. Can you bring them to me?”

A small smile tugged at his lips and he nodded slowly. “Okay, I can do that. When?”

I chewed my lip as I thought about it. I had no idea when the Night Keepers were gonna call me to their side so I had to be flexible. “Give me your number. I’ll text you a time and place when it’s safe.”

“Okay.” He nodded quickly, reaching into his pocket, tapping something on the screen then passing it down the table to me.

I copied his number onto my phone as victory sang in my veins. I was gonna screw the Night Keepers over so hard. I'd be free of this place by next week. And those fuckers would wake up looking for me outside their precious Temple the day after my escape only to find no one waiting there on their knees. Just my laughter calling to them on the wind. *Note to self: get Saint's phone number so I can ring him and laugh manically down his ear until his head blows up with his defeat.*

I sat back in my seat and bathed in the glow of the Unspeakables all sharing grins. I could feel how much they wanted to see a blow struck against their masters. And I was more than happy to deliver it.

I was going to run to my dad's house in the Elmwood Forest, find a way to contact him then run off into the sunset with him like Thelma and Louise. Except we weren't gonna die like they did, we were going to find a way to clear his name and then we were gonna fucking *live*.

I breezed through classes the following week, not caring when the Night Keepers made me carry their shit or pick up stuff they threw on the floor at my feet. I nodded my head, I bit my tongue, I obeyed. I even turned up at The Temple at six am every day and knelt there like the most pious nun in the world. And I was happy to play the good girl for a little longer because the day had finally come. Tonight, I was gonna escape this hell hole and by tomorrow I'd be far, far away from those ménage à twats. Sneak had told me her mom was gonna arrive at nine pm, so I just had to hold out until then.

When school ended, I headed back towards Beech House with no ass wipes calling my name or demanding I do a single thing. So that meant for

the first time in a long time- but for who knew how long - I was free. Saint and the rest of the Powerpuff dicks had been sure to take my phone number pronto though, so they could track me down whenever they wanted to summon me.

I took out my phone, shooting a text to Punch and asking him to meet me around the back of the girls' accommodation in ten minutes. I hurried up the path towards the door, pausing and opening my school bag, pretending to rummage through it as girls filed past me into the dorms. I didn't want anyone to see me acting shady just in case they called the Night Keepers with a tip off, hoping to win the chance to suck at least one of their royal cocks.

Some of them looked my way and hissed the word *Plague*, but most of them ignored me like I didn't even exist. I wasn't sure which I preferred.

I waited until there was no one around before darting behind the brick building, following a dirt path around to the back of it and leaning against the wall as I waited for Punch.

I kept checking my phone; he'd seen the message but there was no reply. My foot tapped anxiously as I waited, the time ticking onto ten minutes then slipping on by.

"Come on, Punch. Pull through for me you big pussy." I muttered to myself.

I shot him another message, grinding my jaw as I begged him to show up.

The sound of breaking twigs and a hulking beast moving through the trees around the corner caught my ear. I breathed in deep, certain that only three things were big enough to make that noise. Punch, a Night Keeper or a freaking T-rex.

Punch rounded the corner in a black hoody and sunglasses - like, was he for real?

“Dude, I could tell it’s you even if I only saw your shadow. You’re pretty distinguishable.” The guy must have been nearly seven foot and was as wide as a damn bus. Gah, I wished I could have seen him punching Blake. I bet he hit the ground. But what the hell did Blake do in retaliation to this dinosaur to break his Jurassic spirit?

Punch shrugged, taking off the glasses and pushing back the hood. He glanced around like he expected the birds to rat on him and I rolled my eyes as I strode over to him.

“Do you have them?” I asked hopefully.

He reached into his pocket and held out a handful of firecrackers and a lighter. I near enough jumped for joy as I took them, because this was better than any Redwood Rattlesnakes ticket I’d ever held in my hand. This was my ticket to honest-to-shit *freedom*.

I lunged at Punch before I could stop myself, wrapping my arms around his huge frame and squeezing him tight. This week had been awful. Scrap that, it had been unbearable. And Punch was helping me to escape, something I couldn’t even begin to express my gratitude for. Especially after being shunned by nearly everyone else in the school. It almost brought me to freaking tears. “Thank you.”

He pressed me back with a serious look on his face, dabbing at his forehead as he got that sweaty look again. “Get out of here, Tatum Rivers,” he whispered, his eyes searing into my soul. “Get as far away from those guys as possible. Because if you don’t...no one will be able to save you from them.”

My throat thickened at his words, fear trickling into my blood. I nodded firmly, promising it to him, myself. “Come with us,” I urged, but he shook

his head.

“I’ve got nowhere to go,” he said, tugging at his collar as if he was too hot. “My dad’s in Cabo for the rest of the year. Besides, I’m not exactly built for stealth.”

I snorted a laugh and he cracked an actual grin.

“Plague! Get your fine ass out here in the next ten seconds!” Kyan’s voice sounded from the front of the building, sending a bolt of adrenaline into my veins. *Holy fucking shit!*

“Go that way.” I shoved Punch toward the trees and he lumbered off into them at the quickest pace I’d ever seen him move.

“Ten - nine - eight!” I heard all three of them start counting and cursed my damn luck.

I dropped down to the ground in a panic, digging a hole and shoving the firecrackers and lighter into it before pushing some leaves over it and poking a stick into the ground beside it. It was inconspicuous at a glance and it would have to fucking do.

I wiped my hands on the inside of my blazer as their counting filled my ears and made my lungs labour.

I had no excuse. Nothing which could cover me being back here. My brain worked to come up with something, *anything* to explain my whereabouts.

“Three – two-”

I ran around the edge of the building, stumbling to a halt in front of them and they took me in with dark frowns.

“Why the fuck were you back there?” Blake demanded, folding his muscular arms across his chest. I had a momentary flashback of being crushed in those arms while his mouth chased mine for kisses and my body

reacted before I could help it. His usually clean look had been replaced by a line of stubble and a darkness in his eyes which just made me...*gah*.

Stop eye-fucking the asshole, Tatum.

I cleared my throat, twisting a lock of hair between my fingers as I shrugged innocently. "I went for a walk, is that a crime?"

Saint's eyes narrowed like he didn't buy it and he strode forward, snatching hold of my hands and turning them over. I'd gotten most of the mud off of them, but not enough for the Lord of Cleanliness not to notice.

"Been playing in the dirt, have we Barbie?" he asked, ice dripping through his voice.

"I fell," I said, forcing a blush and I damn well managed it too. Kyan's eyes dropped to my knees and I glanced down, finding them muddy as hell and seriously helping out my case.

Thank you universe!

Kyan snarled, stepping forward. "Either that or you've been on all fours for someone in the woods."

My lips parted and a dark laugh fell from my lips. "Careful Kyan, for a minute there you almost sounded jealous."

"He has a right to be," Saint hissed, swerving his head into my line of sight to make me look at him. "You're *ours*. You're not allowed to touch anyone else and no one is allowed to touch you. So if you've broken the rules I'll-"

"I fell," I snapped, unblinking. "Everyone in this school has been ignoring me on *your* orders, who do you think would risk taking me out into the woods to fuck me, huh?"

A beat of silence passed as they all gazed at me, a hungry look in their eyes telling me they'd all be more than happy to volunteer for that position.

"Apart from all of you, apparently," I taunted, unable to help myself.

“Shut your mouth,” Saint hissed. “If I find out you’ve been so much as dry humping a tree, I’ll make you regret it.”

“Wow, you really know how to sap the fun out of life, don’t you devil boy? Tree humping is my favourite activity,” I deadpanned and Kyan snorted a laugh, earning him sharp glares from Saint and Blake.

“What? That shit’s funny.” He shrugged, a smirk dancing around his mouth and I couldn’t help but return it.

Saint caught my chin, forcing me to look at him again and his frozen touch cut a path through my flesh. “You’ve got work to do, Barbie doll. Move.”

He caught my hand, turning and tugging me along behind him. His fingers locked around mine like a vice and I wondered if he’d ever held hands with someone before – discounting any dead bodies he’d dragged along to their graves.

I didn’t argue. I needed to keep up the obedience act for the rest of the day. Hope burned in my heart like a beacon at knowing I only had a few more hours before I could make it out of here with Sneak and Bait. I just had to hold out a little longer.

Saint led me down the path ahead of the other guys, taking a right turn as we walked along by the lake. From a distance, we probably could have been mistaken for a couple taking a leisurely stroll. But up close, you’d see the murder in Saint’s eyes and the tension in my posture. There was certainly no romance here. Unless you counted Saint’s ongoing love affair with cruelty.

He turned suddenly to the left, making me stumble as he took me down a small track onto the narrow lakeshore. The stones shifted beneath my feet as he dragged me along then paused at the water’s edge. A shiver ran down

my spine as I remembered the other night and my fingers involuntarily tightened around Saint's hand.

He turned to me with a vicious smile, releasing my hand in an instant. "Scared, Barbie?"

"No," I said immediately, my spine straightening as I felt Blake and Kyan closing in behind me. You should never turn your back on a wild animal, and right now, it felt like I was about to be pounced on and torn limb from limb by two of them.

Saint laughed hollowly then reached into his blazer pocket, taking out a deck of cards. He slid them out of the pack, shuffling them between his fingers and I swallowed as I waited for him to explain what we were doing here. He liked to torture me with menial, bullshit tasks, and I suspected I was about to be faced with another one.

Blake's breath fluttered against the back of my neck and the heat of it sent a wave of warmth rushing down my spine.

I wanted to step forward to gain some distance from him, but I knew doing so would reveal how much he was affecting me. And I couldn't let that happen.

"You're going to play a game," Saint said and I folded my arms as I waited for him to go on, my heart clenching tightly in my chest. "It's called fifty two pick up." He turned to the water, holding the edges of the pack between his fingers until the deck bent and the cards exploded from his hand, over half of them scattering in the water. They immediately started floating away and for a second my lungs wouldn't work.

"Pick them all up and return the pack to me at dinner," Saint snarled, invading my personal space and lowering his head so he was nose to nose with me. I could almost smell the charred lump of coal that took the place of his heart. "If even one is missing, you'll be punished. And I'm not

beyond putting you over my knee in front of the entire school, Plague. Remember that.” He shouldered past me, making me stumble back into Blake who immediately shoved me forward again, and I slipped on the wet stones and crashed to my knees. My skin split in several places and I hissed as pain spiked across my shins.

A thousand curse words wrapped around my tongue and I battled with all the might of an army to stop them from spilling out.

Keep quiet. Obey. Buy your chance at freedom!

I heard them walking away and glanced over my shoulder as they made it up to the path. Saint straightened his blazer as he headed off and his two lapdogs followed.

The second they were out of earshot, I let my tongue run wild, calling them every colourful insult I could come up with as I shed my blazer and kicked off my shoes.

Assbaguettes, cocksnorkels, muffwaffles, twathats.

I had to go after the cards furthest out in the lake first or I’d end up swimming to try and find them. And after the dream I’d had last night of drowning in this dark water, I was not gonna let it get to that.

I left my shirt and skirt on the shore then stepped into the water, gasping at how fucking freezing it was.

I growled under my breath, forcing myself to move deeper and deeper as my legs became more and more numb. I snatched cards out of the water with violent swipes, clasping them in one hand as I started counting them in my mind.

The only thing that kept me going was my plan for tonight and I pictured being in Sneak’s mom’s car, holding the vision in my mind’s eye.

Tomorrow they’re gonna find out I’m gone and be humiliated. The whole school will know I got away. That I was undefeated by the so-called Night

Keepers.

When I'd plucked forty three cards out of the water, I waded back to shore, shivering and frozen to the bone. I picked up the last of the cards on the beach, stacking them together and breathing a sigh of relief as I finished the task they'd set. It had taken me ages and more than one student had stopped to gawk at me or take photos. They'd all received my middle finger and as many cuss words as I could fit into a sentence before they made it out of earshot. I may not have been able to throw shit at the Night Keepers, but every other dickwad in this school was fair game.

I pushed my feet into my shoes, shrugging on my blazer and balling up the rest of my clothes in my hands. I was dripping wet and didn't see the point in putting it all back on. I was going straight to the shower where I'd stand under a burning hot stream until I could feel my body again.

Tonight, Tatum. Just hold on until tonight.

I let Mila head to dinner before me then spent the next fifteen minutes frantically packing a bag. There was no way I could bring my suitcase tonight, but I was willing to abandon clothes in favour of my freedom.

I put the essentials into my backpack then headed out of Beech House, waiting until the coast was clear and jogging around to the back of the building. I hung my pack up in a tree out of sight then hurried back to the path with my heart in my throat.

Luck was on my side, because no one was around and my plan was coming the hell together. I'd left a note for Mila tucked inside her English textbook to say goodbye. I didn't wanna tell her the truth and get her in trouble with the Night Keepers if they thought she knew. And she wouldn't

open that book until third period tomorrow. By then, I'd be long gone. And that note would serve as evidence that she never knew a thing about my escape plan.

I made it to the Redwood Dining Hall with a goddamn skip in my step, but had to school my features into downtrodden misery as I pushed my way inside.

That's it Tatum, keep giving them the sad eyes and they'll think you're just a poor little bird with a broken wing, unable to fly. But I was gonna fly bitches. And I was gonna kick a few heads on the way out too.

I'd put on a short little black swing dress that showed off my cleavage - and my scraped up legs - and my feet were clad in white canvas shoes. Not the sort of outfit anyone would suspect me to run anywhere in. But guess what losers? I was going to run into the night like a fox in the shadows. I'd also parted my hair into pigtails to finish off the innocent yet hot look I was going for, aiming to distract hard tonight.

I didn't wait to be summoned, I strode on up to the Night Keepers' table and tossed the deck of cards down in front of Saint. It was still wet from the lake and made a plap sound as it hit the surface. He didn't like that at all.

Saint shoved his plate away from it with a snarl, looking up at me with his teeth bared. He looked like he was actually going to take a bite out of me and some dark part of me wondered what that would be like. *I bet I could bite him harder.*

"Count them," he ordered Kyan, clearly not wanting to touch the deck.

Kyan fished the cards up, counting them out one at a time while his eyes remained on me. On my tits to be specific. And I didn't mind that for once. I was wearing this dress as a distraction after all. Anything to keep them from seeing a single flicker of my plan gleaming in my eyes. The push-up bra may have been a step too far. But the way Kyan wet his lips said it

wasn't. I swear he wasn't even really counting as he finally placed the last card down and announced it was a full deck.

I turned to walk away to join the Unspeakables but Saint banged his fist down on the table, making my heart jolt. "Don't walk away unless you're dismissed, Plague."

Laughter trickled through the room and heat licked up the back of my neck.

Blake grimaced at me, leaning back in his seat. "What's with the outfit? Did you dress up just for us, Plague? Because I'd cut my dick off before I put it inside you."

"Again," I added and his eyes flared angrily. He opened his mouth to rebuke me but came up short because, well, it was the truth. And no one could argue with that.

I balled my hands and waited for my dismissal but it never came.

"Come here," Saint said suddenly, patting his hand on the table.

I frowned, unsure what he meant.

"Climb up here and sit in front of me," he growled and my heart lurched into my throat.

I hesitated half a second longer before climbing onto the table then lowering myself down to sit in front of Saint. I let my bare legs hang either side of him and gazed at Lucifer sitting between my thighs, making my skin prickle all over.

He took out his phone, tapping something on it before placing it back in his pocket. He took hold of the back of my right calf and I gasped as he lifted my foot up and hooked my shoe off, placing my bare foot on his right thigh as he tossed my shoe on the floor. I tried to will my heart beat to stop pounding so wildly, sure he was going to hear it if it didn't stop.

He lifted my other leg, repeating the process and positioning my left foot on his other thigh. My skirt was high enough up my legs that one dip of his head would give him a view of my panties and it made me feel uncomfortably exposed. I felt his muscles flex beneath the soles of my feet and something about that sent heat surging between my thighs. Shit – *no*.

His right hand was still on the back of my leg and he closed his thumb over my calf bone, skimming it up to the cuts on my flesh. I sucked in a breath at the sting of pain and his mouth curved into a satisfied smile.

I sensed Kyan shifting in my periphery but couldn't break Saint's gaze, stuck in his Venus fly trap eyes like a helpless little insect he was about to digest.

A waiter suddenly appeared, rushing over and placing a bowl down beside me. The guy freaking bowed then hurried away again.

I glanced into the bowl where three perfectly stacked yellow balls of ice cream sat inside it. Lemon. Bitter. Just like Saint.

"Feed me," he whispered, his breath somehow cold against my skin. My nipples hardened beneath my bra and a deep squeeze in belly told me I was in trouble. Despite his hateful interior, his exterior was so perfect, so alluring. From his raven eyes to his sculpted features. An artist would have had a field day for that face alone. But that body...

Saint broke my gaze and clarity came rushing back in. I internally tackled the part of me that was panting for him and threw that bitch against the wall, locking her in cuffs. *Keep it together, idiot*.

I turned, picking up Saint's bowl of ice cream and a spoon, feeling eyes on me from all around. But as Saint leaned back in his chair like a king in a throne, the world around me faded at the edges. I fought the urge to curl my upper lip back then dipped the spoon into the ice cream, carving off a piece of it and holding it out to his lips. He closed his mouth around it,

simultaneously pressing his thumb down on one of the cuts on my leg. A deep throb of need resounded between my thighs in response to the flash of pain. *Dammit, why was that so hot?*

I focused on my breathing as I continued to spoon feed him and he continued to prod at my wounds with every bite.

“Hurry up, dude, we have football practise,” Blake growled. They’d clearly finished their meals before I arrived.

“We’ve got time,” Saint said firmly and I spooned more into his mouth, awaiting the kiss of pain, but this time his hand slid an inch up my leg and his fingers caressed the smooth skin on the back of it.

I locked my jaw and refused to let him see the electric rush his hand sent through my skin. His fingers continued to circle and his hand moved even higher to brush the back of my thigh.

His eyes danced with the game, a smirk tugging at his lips. The bastard knew how he was effecting me and I hated my treacherous body for giving in to his venomous touch. But two could play at that game...

I slid my feet higher up his thighs and let my legs widen as I got closer to his dick. He gave me a hard stare, not blinking as I held another spoon of ice cream up to his lips. My toes curled, pressing into the tops of his muscular thighs at the same moment that he took a mouthful and swallowed.

His fingers curled around the back of my knee and his nails suddenly dug hard into my skin.

I gasped, my mask breaking and Kyan and Blake swung around to look at me.

“Close your mouth, Plague,” Saint growled, dropping his hand from my leg in an instant. “You’d better not be leaving a wet patch on my table.”

I scowled at him as rage tore through me and all rational thought abandoned me. I lifted a spoonful of half melted ice cream to his mouth, tipping my hand so it slopped down his immaculate shirt instead.

“Oops,” I said innocently, giving him my biggest eyes as his face turned to stone. “I guess I was just so busy getting wet for you, Saint, my hand just *slipped*.”

He stood up abruptly and my heart leapt in alarm as I looked up at him. He wasn’t amused, not even a little bit.

“Lick it off,” he snapped, stepping forward so my legs were pushed wide around his. A tremor rushed through me as he leaned forward, making me lean further and further back until his hands pressed to the table either side of me. “*Now*.”

I knew everyone in the room was looking. I knew I was about to be degraded beyond belief. But I also knew refusing this was impossible. So if I had to do it, I was going to do it in a way that would hopefully rattle this monster.

I reached up, sliding both hands behind his neck to support myself and his eyes widened at the brazenness of me touching him like that. A little thrill danced through me knowing my fingers were touching the Night Keeper tattoo on the back of his neck like it should have been forbidden or something. He was all I could see as he surrounded me and I knew I had his full attention. A feat I doubted anyone achieved on a regular basis.

I leaned up, drawing him closer in the same movement and dipping my head to the ice cream on his chest. I ran the full pad of my tongue over it, taking my time as I made my way along the trail of yellow that ran up to his collar.

He stepped closer to me almost imperceptibly, widening my thighs even further and driving my skirt up my legs.

I kept running my tongue across his collar, but didn't stop there, my heart tumbling in my chest as I ran it right onto his throat and tasted the devil himself. He was sin embodied and I couldn't deny how good the scrape of his stubble felt against my tongue.

A growl rumbled through him that almost could have been sexual and I lifted my hips, wanting to feel if he was aching for me. Before I could get close to grinding against his crotch, he ripped my hands off of his neck and I fell onto my back on the table with a loud thump.

Laughter exploded through the air and as heat rushed to my cheeks, Saint dropped smoothly back into his seat. He lowered a hand between his thighs, subtly tugging at the material, clearly giving himself more room and a smile dragged at my lips. *Victory.*

Kyan was suddenly on his feet, hauling me off of the table and yanking my skirt down where it had slid right up my thighs. His grip was almost bruising as he pulled me against him and I looked up into his eyes, finding a sea of darkness awaiting me there.

"Let's go to practice," Blake insisted, getting to his feet.

"Fine. Bring her with us." Saint rose too and I frowned as my stomach grumbled.

"I haven't eaten yet," I said, but I wasn't sure why I bothered because clearly none of them gave a shit.

"Well you shouldn't have been late," Saint said bluntly then headed past Kyan before Blake followed, shooting me a glare.

Kyan pushed me towards my shoes and I kicked my feet into them before he tugged me back to his side.

"You'd better start working on your smile, baby," he purred. "You're going to be our cheerleader at practise and I wanna hear a whole lot of pep from you when you shout my name."

My eyes narrowed on him as I yanked my wrist free of his grip. “Okay, *baby*, I’ll be sure to cheer on Sergeant Dickhole at the top of my lungs.”

“That’s the spirit.” He smirked. “But don’t tire yourself out too much.” He shoved me ahead of him and I huffed as I stumbled into a chair. “You’re gonna be up late washing all of our football jerseys afterwards.”

I turned away from him as my heart soared in my chest and I fought the smile that was trying to burrow its way into my cheeks. *Well that sounds like the perfect opportunity to run away from this school, Sergeant Dickhole. So thank you very much.*



I waited for the football team to quit the showers before heading into the locker rooms to take one myself.

My blood was up after that practice. It had been a good session and I always loved playing alongside my team. Not least because it meant I could tackle the little shitheads and body slam them to the ground without needing any excuse at all. In fact, they actually *wanted* me to do it to help them improve their game.

That meant that three times a week, I could knock Saint Memphis and all of the other pretentious brats on the team onto their asses and the jumped up little fuckers *thanked* me for it.

I scrubbed soap over my flesh vigorously, standing beneath the flow of hot water and tipping my head back so that it could run over my face and down my body.

My cock twitched as the water raced down the length of it and I groaned in frustration. It had been too fucking long since I'd gotten laid. This place was like a damn bubble. Once we were up here for the term, that was it. No escape. I was surrounded by students and staff. And despite Miss Pontus's clear interest, I couldn't see me getting what I needed from her. She was

semi-attractive, could have probably been a solid prospect if she knew how to dress and present herself. But even then, she was too meek for me. Too nice. I needed a girl who could rile me up and rattle my cage. One who would challenge and fight me and bring me to my knees from time to time. And that wasn't easy to find in the real world let alone up here in the middle of fucking nowhere.

I blew out a breath laced with sexual frustration and shut the shower off, grabbing a towel so that I could dry off and firmly thinking of anything other than the aching need in my body. I was above jerking off in the fucking school locker rooms.

I pulled on a clean pair of boxers and sweatpants before kicking my sneakers on too and running the towel through my blonde hair. I needed a shave, but that was a problem for tomorrow...or maybe the next day. Whatever, stubble looked good on me so I didn't give a shit. I might even let it grow into a beard just to have something to do.

I dumped my dirty clothes into the laundry shoot and headed back down the deserted corridors to my office. I had assessments to finish up and I wanted them done before the weekend so that I could spend some time doing things I actually enjoyed. Though now that we were locked up in this god forsaken place, I had a lot less options.

I pushed my office door open and moved to my desk, sitting down with a barely suppressed groan. When I'd made my decision about the way I was going to insert myself into this world and had subsequently taken this job, it'd seemed so simple. Come and live in the middle of nowhere, teach a bunch of fuckwits how to take part in team sports despite the fact that they're pre-programmed to be self-serving, cutthroat little assholes. Then use my position to get closer to the prick whose father destroyed my life, cosy on up to him, destroy his life in kind. Easy. Except it wasn't. These

kids weren't just normal kids. They thrived on secrets and game playing, they were conniving, manipulative, even borderline psychotic on occasion. And they were suspicious of *everyone*. I guessed growing up around these kinds of people would do that to you, but it made getting close to them hard fucking work.

I'd made headway in my time here, but it wasn't nearly enough. And now the little fucker was in his final year. I needed to up my game and fast or I was going to lose this shot. And I'd worked too damn hard to do that. I'd sacrificed too much. I knew I was close to something, I just couldn't quite figure out what.

I leaned back in my chair as my laptop booted up and sighed as I tried to think of some new angle, some different way to come at this. But it felt like I'd already exhausted all of my options.

A soft noise caught my ear from somewhere beyond my door and I frowned, wondering who the hell would still be here. I'd seen the football team leave as I was still packing up the sports hall after our session and no one else had any reason to be lingering in the gym this late in the evening.

The login screen appeared in front of me and I quickly typed in my staff access code before loading the CCTV feed for the building.

I clicked through the cameras one by one, eyeing the empty sports hall, corridors, dance studio and fencing hall before finally spotting my intruder on the feed for the store room. Tatum Rivers was standing at the back of the room using the sink intended for washing down muddy boots to clean a bunch of football jerseys.

Though as I looked closer, she didn't seem to be doing a very good job of it.

I sighed irritably, pushing myself to my feet as I headed down the corridor to the store room so that I could go and tell her to get the fuck out.

I pulled the door open and the princess gasped as I strode into the storage space, passing nets of basketballs, stacks of cones, racks of baseball bats and lacrosse sticks until I reached her.

“Explain,” I demanded in a hard tone.

The princess bit into that full bottom lip of hers, fiddling with the knot she’d tied in the hem of her black dress and tugging the whole thing down an inch, drawing my gaze to the tanned skin of her full breasts for a moment. My attention snapped back to her blue eyes instantly. I might have been horny as fuck tonight, but that didn’t mean I was going to be letting my eyes wander to a student. Especially not a rude little brat like her.

To make matters worse, her gaze shifted down my bare chest too and she looked for a moment too long for it to be a cursory glance.

“I, umm...I’m just washing a few of the guys’ jerseys for them,” she said, batting her eyelashes innocently.

“Cut the innocent act, Rivers,” I growled at her. “I don’t know who you manage to fool with that shit, but I know trouble when I see it and everything about you screams trouble.”

Her long, blonde hair was tied in pigtails as if she’d been working the innocent angle all day and the sigh that escaped her told me she wasn’t done, despite my warning. But I was the kind of kid who had pulled the girls’ pigtails at school then dragged them behind the bike shed for a make out session, so she’d gone for the wrong look to get away with anything around me.

“I’m sorry, sir. I was just finishing up though, I promise to be gone in five more minutes, if you’d just-”

I strode around her, nudging her aside so that I could look down into the soapy water where three jerseys had been submerged. She was up to something alright.

I hooked the closest jersey out, holding it wide so that the name Memphis was visible in dark green against the white background. Except it wasn't a white background: it was pink.

"Last chance to give me the truth. If you're meant to be doing such a great job of cleaning these jerseys then explain to me exactly why you're attempting to ruin them?"

Tatum's lips popped open in a perfect little O as her gaze flickered uncertainly. "Whoops...I must have accidentally dropped my lipstick in there, somehow..."

"Mmmhmm." I reached forward to drain the water from the basin and hooked the other two jerseys out so that I could see the names on the back of them too. Roscoe and Bowman. "Well you've either got a death wish or you seriously think you're clever enough to get away with this shit."

"I-"

"Let's cut the bullshit, I'll be having the truth from you one way or another. And just so you know, lipstick isn't gonna be much of a problem for laundry to remove so this master plan of yours sucks ass. It will literally do nothing to those boys aside from aim their anger at you."

Tatum's jaw was locked tight and it was clear she had no intention of saying anything else. I released a frustrated sigh.

"My office, now." I pointed her towards the door and she strode away from me, swaying her hips in a way that forced me to look at her ass in the short black dress she'd chosen to wear.

For the love of fuck, why did she have to come strutting around here tonight of all nights?

Tatum headed to my office and I took a detour to toss the jerseys in the laundry shoot. By the time the Night Keepers saw them again they'd be as

good as new and Tatum Rivers could thank me for saving her ass. Though I got the feeling that wasn't what was about to happen.

I headed into my office and fell still as I entered, finding her in my chair, slowly spinning it around in a circle.

"What are you doing?" I growled.

"You said to come and wait here," she replied, that innocent bullshit act right back in place. "I didn't know how long you'd be and I'm tired."

I closed in on her slowly as she remained sitting in my chair. There was something going on here. Something she was trying to distract me from.

I flattened my palms on the desk and leaned forward slowly, my gaze roaming over her features as I tried to pick out what she was trying to hide.

"Why were you in there with the Night Keepers' jerseys?" I asked in a low tone.

Her lips parted on a lie and my scowl deepened as I forced her to reconsider. Tatum blew out a breath, fingering one of the pigtails as she made the right choice and offered me the truth instead.

"Blake told me to wash them."

"Why? We have laundry service, there's no need for anyone to be hand washing anything. And if you were doing him some great favour then why were you making such a fucking mess of it?"

A frown furrowed her brow and something hopeless flared in her eyes for a moment before she hid it away again.

"I thought you were friendly with those boys?" I asked slowly, watching her reaction carefully. She wrinkled her nose at that suggestion and I frowned because she'd definitely been pitch side during practice, cheering their names like she was hoping to be their latest groupie.

"Look, I'm not asking you for your input in my social life, okay?" she said. "It was just a joke, a terrible one apparently. If you're going to punish

me for it, can we just get on with that? Why don't you just give me detention with you tomorrow, and we can call it quits?" She'd spent her last one with me running laps of the sports hall until she damn near busted a lung so I had no idea why she'd be looking for another one, but it made me even surer she was trying to hide something.

"What the fuck makes you think you can dictate your own punishments?" I snarled.

"Well, I'm sitting in the teacher's chair so I thought that gave me some authority," she deadpanned.

A breath of surprised laughter escaped me and her lips twitched too. "You're a real piece of work, Rivers."

"So I've been told."

"Tatum?!" Saint Memphis's voice echoed down the corridor outside and the colour drained from her face in a heartbeat. "Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

"Don't tell him I'm here," she gasped, dropping beneath my desk without waiting for me to agree.

Fuck that.

I rounded my desk and glared down at her as she curled into the gap beneath it and looked up at me with a plea in her eyes.

"Get out of there," I snarled.

"Please, just tell him you sent me back to my dorm," she hissed.

"Tatum! Where the fuck are you?" Saint yelled, the anger in his tone clear that time.

I glanced between the girl hiding beneath my desk and the open door which led to the corridor where Saint was hunting for her. I didn't know what the hell was going on here, but I did know that if given a choice

between throwing Tatum to the wolves and fucking up Saint Memphis's plans, there really wasn't much choice to be made.

"You'll be giving me the full truth of this when he's gone," I growled in a low voice as I dropped into my chair and rolled it forward to conceal her.

I left my legs wide and she huddled in the space between my thighs as I made an effort not to think about how close her face was to my dick right now. Honestly, it was like the fucking universe was conspiring to get me fired tonight or something.

"Memphis!" I bellowed. "What the fuck are you doing roaming my corridors and screaming at the top of your lungs?"

Heavy footsteps sounded in the corridor and a moment later Saint himself shadowed my door. Seriously, the kid was huge, all three of the Night Keepers were. They were thick with muscle and nearly as tall as me which at six foot four was saying something. I didn't know if they were given protein shakes instead of breastmilk as babies or if drinking from solid gold chalices their whole lives were the reason for it but whatever it was, these boys had become men before their time. And they had the anger of men in them too.

"Sorry, sir," Saint said, somehow making sorry sound a lot like fuck you. "I left something here earlier, I was just looking for it."

"What?" I demanded as if I hadn't heard him calling Tatum's name.

"Just my shiny new toy," he said with a shrug, but his eyes lit like he was high on something and I didn't think for a moment he'd been taking narcotics.

"And why were you calling out for Rivers?"

A small, cruel smile pulled at his lips and I was suddenly glad I'd hidden her from him. I had no reason to feel protective over the girl but Saint and his friends were vultures and if they decided to circle someone, you could

bet your ass they'd keep on pecking at the carcass until there wasn't a single scrap of flesh left.

"I caught her trying to wash your football jersey in the store cupboard," I said in a flat tone. "I informed her that we had a perfectly serviceable laundry service and told her to get the fuck out. A message I'm happy to extend to you too."

"Is that so?" he asked, his gaze narrowing like there was some issue with my story.

Tatum shifted beneath the desk, her shoulder brushing against my knee and my heart leapt at the idea of him catching her under there. Which was a joke really. I was the teacher and he was the student, but there was something about this whole situation that had my blood humming. It felt good to be doing something I shouldn't. Even something as minor as this. I was so caught up in rules and regulations all the damn time, that I hardly ever got to just have fun.

"Problem?" I asked him, arching a brow.

"It's just...we were waiting outside for her, so she can't have left," Saint said, his gaze narrowing suspiciously.

"What do you want me to say, Memphis?" I asked with a sigh. "I caught your little friend here making a nuisance of herself and I told her to fuck off. About as clearly as I'm telling you to fuck off right now. So unless you're looking to come back here for detention tomorrow, I'm gonna suggest you hightail it out of here."

"Fine. I guess I'll just call her then." Saint reached into his pocket for his phone and I damn near leapt out of my skin as Tatum's hand landed on my thigh and she squeezed in warning.

"Why are you standing there to make this call?" I snarled at Saint as his eyes narrowed. It took me a moment to realise what he was looking at and

he hit call on his cellphone half a second before the bright pink monstrosity Tatum had left on my desk started ringing with the name King of the Fuckwits flashing up on the screen.

I contained my amusement at that as I picked the phone up and tossed it in my top drawer.

“Looks like she was in here after all,” Saint said, assessing me carefully as he cut the call again.

“I found that out by the pitch,” I said in a bored voice. “Unless you think I’ve got her on her knees beneath my desk?”

I arched a brow at him as I dared him to keep pushing me.

“No offence, sir, but my girl wouldn’t suck your cock for all the money in the world.”

“Watch your tone with me, Saint,” I growled. “Don’t forget I’m your teacher.”

“I didn’t mean any offence,” he said, raising his hands innocently. “Only that she knows exactly who she belongs to and she isn’t stupid enough to go near anyone else.”

“What do you mean *who she belongs to*?”

Saint offered me a taunting smile and moved closer to the desk with his hand held out. “I can take her phone back for her,” he said, ignoring my question.

“If Miss Rivers would like her cellphone back she can come and claim it herself. I won’t tell you to fuck off one more time.”

He glared at me and I glared right back, ignoring the fact that he was using his position above me to try and intimidate me. The day I was intimidated by the King of the Fuckwits would be a pathetic day indeed.

Eventually, Saint nodded and backed off. “Okay, well if she shows up around here then send her my way, would you?”

“I’m not your message boy, why don’t you get Bowman or one of your little followers to track her down if you’re so desperate to see her?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll have the whole school hunting before long. We’ll find her.” He smirked at me before heading out of the door and closing it behind him.

Tatum sighed in relief and moved to climb out from beneath the desk but I rolled my chair forward, shushing her as I glanced at the CCTV and spotted Memphis lurking in the corridor right outside the door.

My new position closer to her meant that I could feel her shoulders brushing the inside of my thighs and her breath fluttered over my hand which lay in my lap. Why the fuck did Memphis have to mention the idea of her sucking my cock? I wasn’t blind, Tatum Rivers was an exceptionally attractive girl, but I was her teacher and I absolutely refused to look at her that way. But with her down there between my thighs, the mental image kept creeping in and the adrenaline rush I was riding from hiding her from him was making me feel reckless. Couple that with the fact that I’d been feeling the ache in my blue balls tonight anyway and I was finding myself in a damn compromising position.

Memphis finally gave up and strolled away, heading out of the building and I rolled my chair back, casting a frown at Tatum as she crawled out from beneath the desk.

“Thank you,” she breathed and I caught the glimmer of fear in her eyes before she locked it down. “I just don’t want to deal with that asshole right now.”

“That asshole is rarely alone in his tormenting games. You wanna tell me what he meant when he said you belong to him?”

“I...” Those big blue eyes widened and for a moment all of the bullshit she liked to give off was gone and she was looking at me like maybe there

was a chance I might actually be more than just another asshole. It made me wonder how many people she'd had in her life who she could even rely on. And with everything that had come out in the news about her father, I was willing to bet she didn't have a whole lot of people to ask now.

"Sit down," I urged in a tone much softer than I usually used, offering her my chair again.

Tatum glanced at it then shook her head, making a move to dart past me.

I reached out and caught her waist, my fingers slipping across the soft material of her dress as I pushed her back and made her perch on the desk before me.

Her breath caught as she looked up at me, her hands landing on my forearms like she was going to push me off. But she didn't. And for a beat too long, I didn't release her either, the feeling of her body beneath my hands drawing me in.

I swallowed against the inclination to stay there and released her, placing my hands on the wooden desk either side of her instead, boxing her in and holding her captive as we remained like that, eye to eye.

"Tell me," I growled, no room for negotiation.

"They...the Night Keepers are angry at me for the things the newspapers are saying about my dad," she breathed eventually.

"You don't believe he did it?" I asked.

She shook her head, tears brimming in her eyes along with a hint of doubt. "I know him, I love him, I can't believe he'd do something so awful, so..." A sob escaped her as a tear fell and my thumb swiped over her cheek to catch it before it could drop between us.

Tatum looked at me like she knew I shouldn't have touched her like that and like she was hoping I might do it again. *I seriously need to take this down a notch.*

“If they’re bullying you because of-”

“They aren’t bullying me,” she replied in a quiet voice, blinking to still the tears before they could turn into a flood.

“Then what? If you don’t want me to take it any further than this room then I swear I won’t. But I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

She only hesitated for another moment but I could tell that her walls were crumbling. She needed to tell someone what was happening and I was the lucky fucker who’d landed on the job.

“The Night Keepers took me down to that old rock with the carvings at Sycamore Beach,” she whispered, like the words alone might summon the demons who haunted her. “And they threatened me, threatened my friends, promised to do all kinds of unspeakable things to me. Unless...”

“Unless what?” I growled.

My grip on the edge of the desk was punishing and I could feel myself losing control as I waited for the words to leave her mouth. Because I could already see it. See how Saint and his asshole friends had done something to her just like his father had done something to me. Something so big that it changed everything, *ruined* everything and yet so small to them that all they did was laugh about it if they even thought of it at all.

“They made me promise to be theirs, mind body and soul,” she breathed, her gaze never shifting from mine.

“Be theirs? How? What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, not liking the sound of that at all.

“I belong to them. I have to do anything they say, *everything* they say.”

“Are they forcing you to have sex with them?” I growled, gripping the desk so hard I was surprised the fucking thing didn’t break. If it was true, I’d hunt the three of them down myself right now and show them all the ways that you could use a baseball bat outside of the field.

“Not that,” she said quickly. “But everything else. I have to do things like hand feed them and wash their football jerseys...”

I ground my teeth as I fought my temper back under control, shoving away from the desk as I paced away from her and pushing a hand through my dark blonde hair as I stalked back and forth a few times.

Tatum watched me, her gaze burning me as I prowled like a mountain lion, but I couldn't help it. The anger that resided in me because of my lot in life, the injustice, the hopelessness, the endless thirst for vengeance that had damn near consumed me more than once was rising up to drown me. I needed a minute. Just a minute.

I finally blew out a breath and turned back to her.

“Fucking with their football jerseys was a dumb move,” I said finally and she pouted as the walls slammed back down behind her eyes.

“Great. Thanks. I'm *so* glad I shared my problem with you.” She turned and stalked towards the door but I caught her as she yanked it open and knocked it closed again, leaning an arm against it above her head to hold it shut as I looked down at her.

“You didn't let me finish,” I said in a dark voice.

“Go on then,” she challenged.

“It was a dumb move because they told you to wash them. They'd know it was you the second they turned up with pink shit all over them. Besides, they won't give the slightest crap about stained jerseys. You need to hit them where it hurts if you want to strike back at them...and I just happen to know all of their weak spots.”

“You want to help me?” she asked sceptically.

“Yeah. My problem is that I can't get close enough to use all the shit I've got on them. I need someone on the inside to make use of all the things I

know. And you need to know all the things I know if you want to strike back at them. We can work together,” I said fiercely.

Tatum blew out a laugh like she thought I was insane and maybe I was. But I still meant every word.

“Why?” she asked, cutting to the quick of it. But I wasn’t ready to trust her with that just yet.

“I have my reasons,” I replied.

“Not good enough. I need to know why a teacher cares about the Night Keepers this much?” she demanded with that rich princess tone to her voice which set rage flooding through me.

“Not the Night Keepers. I want Saint Memphis,” I replied. “His family destroyed mine and I intend to return the favour.”

“What did they do?”

“That’s all I have to say on the subject. Do you want my help or not?”

Tatum looked up at me like she was aching to agree, but I could see the refusal growing on her full lips.

“I’ve had time to read over your transfer file since your last lesson with me,” I said, changing tact.

“What?” she asked in confusion.

“I see that you won medals for kickboxing in your previous school. I happen to be a qualified teacher if you want to start up private lessons for extra credit?”

“What’s that got to do with anything we just said?” she asked, a tiny frown crinkling the skin between her brows.

“You come and train with me three times a week starting tomorrow night. When we’re there we can train and swap information on Saint and his band of merry assholes as well as figure out ways for you to hurt them too.” It was probably better that I didn’t mention the fact that I had a similar

arrangement going with one of those assholes already. I'd first offered to train Kyan up with the aim to get closer to Saint, but I had to admit that my relationship with that particular Night Keeper had changed since we'd begun. I almost looked upon him as a friend. Alright, not almost, he *was* a friend, one of the few I could lay claim to and the only one anywhere near here. Not that it would hinder me in my mission to bring the Memphis family to their knees.

Tatum looked up at me for the longest time like she was hoping I might just be the answer to all of her prayers, but there was a hardness creeping into her gaze too. A fierce kind of independence which clawed and screamed at her not to rely on me for this. To deal with it on her own.

"Thank you for helping me hide," she said with a slight shake of her head. "But I have my own plan to escape this fate and I don't need your help."

I tried to ignore the sharp twist in my gut that came with her rejection and as she reached for the door handle, I realised that I wasn't going to convince her by trapping her here with me. That was exactly what those assholes were doing to her. Caging her in.

"You can call tonight your detention," I said slowly, accepting her decision. For now. "You don't have to come back for one. But if you change your mind about the kickboxing lessons by then I'll be waiting in the martial arts room in the Cypress Gym tomorrow night at seven. Do you know it?"

"Yeah, I know it," she replied, her jaw tightening with some other secret.

Sometimes I thought that this school had so many skeletons in its closets that we were doomed to be overrun by the walking dead sooner or later.

I moved away from the door, letting her pull it open and frowning as she made a move to leave.

“Oh.” She paused, looking back up at me from beneath her long lashes and for a moment I thought she was going to change her mind. “Can I have my phone?”

“I should keep it,” I replied, ignoring the disappointment that spilled through me. “I’ll give it to you when you come to see me tomorrow otherwise Saint will realise I was lying to cover for you.”

“Tomorrow...right.” She hesitated for another moment and I waited to hear what she was going to say. “Thank you, for listening and giving a shit. It’s nice to know not everyone in this place is a complete asshole.”

I snorted a laugh. I was most certainly a complete asshole, but maybe I was having a day off for once.

“There’s a window in the back corner of the dance studio,” I said before she could make a move towards the main exit. “It will put you in the trees just off of the path that leads back to Aspen Halls. Just in case they’re still out front.”

A sad smile touched her lips and I felt like an asshole for not offering to do more to help her right now.

“Thanks,” she said and with that she was gone.

I closed the door and headed back to my desk with a frown in place. I wasn’t sure if she’d take me up on my offer come tomorrow or not, but I planned on making sure she did sooner or later. This was the opportunity I’d been waiting for. The thing I needed to set my plans against Saint Memphis and his family into full swing.

I was going to bring them all to their knees. And I’d do it with Tatum Rivers beside me. Because despite what she had to say about accepting my help for now, she was going to get it whether she wanted it or not.

The look she’d given me as she admitted what they were doing to her had cut right into my soul. I’d seen that look in the mirror a few too many

times. So Tatum Rivers had just earned herself a knight in shining armour. Though I had to admit that my armour was more than a little scuffed in places and my reputation tarnished by more than just blood. But that only meant I fought all the harder for everything I had and everything I laid claim to. And as of now, that included her.



I ran through the trees, taking the path Monroe had gifted me. He'd saved my ass. More than he could ever know.

If the Night Keepers were out looking for me, I was gonna have to lay low until it was time to meet the others beside Aspen Hall. *Thank fuck I planned that before I had to abandon my phone.*

My heart tugged knowing I was going to be cut off from contact with Mila, but I had her full name, and when this shit blew over, I'd be able to track her down online.

Male laughter carried from out by the lake and I stilled on the woodland path as I listened. A couple of jocks started talking about girls and my shoulders relaxed. It wasn't them. They weren't here. They weren't on my scent.

I didn't have a watch to check the time, but it had been nearly half eight by the time I'd left Monroe's office. That meant I had thirty minutes to get back to Beech House, dig up the firecrackers, get my bag and head to the gate.

Easy.

My breathing grew heavier as I jogged on. The path through this part of the woods was narrow and wasn't lit at all but that was only doing me a favour, keeping me hidden in the shadows.

The air was getting cold and a chill swept along my bare legs, making my cuts sting. Those bastards were done hurting me. I just had to pull this off and they'd never touch me again. And the idea of that brought a smile to my lips.

I can do this.

The track soon curved back towards the main path by the lake, but I couldn't risk going that way so I headed straight on into the trees instead. My white canvas shoes were soiled by the mud, but at least they wouldn't draw any attention if anyone was looking for me.

A prickle ran up my spine and sweat collected on my brow. The darkness thickened between the trees, the moonlight barely able to penetrate the thick canopy above.

Come on Tatum, keep going. Eyes on the prize.

I ran on with determination driving every muscle in my body.

The sound of girls chatting reached me up ahead and I slowed my pace, picking my way across the ground, careful not to make any noise. Dad had taught me how to move like this on our woodland cabin trips. I could move like an animal slipping through the undergrowth, never making enough sound to draw attention.

I reached the edge of the trees and dropped down to crouch beside a pine, gazing through a holly bush to the front of Beech House. The glow of the porchlight illuminated five figures beneath it. The Night Keepers were standing outside the door like sentinels and the two girls in front of them were twirling their hair and flirting their little hearts out. Part of me wished

the guys would accept whatever sexual favours those girls were no doubt offering, because that would buy me the time I needed to run.

Blake was pretty much the only one responding to whatever they were saying, while Saint stood like an angel of hell, gazing straight down the path, waiting for me to appear. Kyan was leaning against the wall, playing with something in his hand, looking bored out of his mind.

I wet my lips then withdrew into the trees, turning back to make a large circle around the building. I finally reached the back of it and wished I knew the time, because I was sure I was cutting it close.

I located the tree with my pack, reaching up and hooking it out of the branches before shrugging it onto my shoulders. Without the light of my phone to hunt for the stick I'd left in the ground, it was impossible to see it in the dark.

I dropped down to my knees, cursing as I brushed my hands across the ground in my hunt for it. I bit into my lip so hard I was sure I was gonna draw blood.

Come on, where are you you piece of shit twig? I am not gonna fail my mission because of some dead piece of foliage!

My hand brushed it and I mentally apologised for insulting the twig, praising its damn existence instead as I snatched it out of the ground and started digging with my fingers.

I pulled the firecrackers from the soil, stilling as Blake's laughter reached me. It was freaky how he could flip his charm on and off like that, switching between the laughing golden boy to a psycho asshole in the blink of an eye.

They were so close. So freaking close. I couldn't breathe for a long moment, suddenly trapped in a vision of what they'd do to me if they found me.

Fear slid along my spine and brought on a tremor in my body. I was so fucked if they caught me. It didn't even bear thinking about.

Move, Tatum.

I got to my feet, heading back into the trees and having to cut a wide arc past the boys' dorms in the direction of Aspen Halls. I was no longer cold, my body burning from the running and the adrenaline flooding my veins.

Water was seeping into my shoes and I was starting to regret my choice of footwear as I nearly slid down a hill from the lack of grip on them. My heart free fell in my chest and I dragged in a lungful of air, reminding myself they weren't on my tail. They were waiting back at the dorms and they had no reason to come hunting the woods for me.

I took another steadying breath and carried on, heading down another steep bank and spotting the glimmer of lights up ahead beyond Aspen Halls.

Sneak was standing by the gates with her suitcase and I cursed as I realised I must have been really close to being late. Lanterns lit the driveway, but the lawn flanking it was dark and that was what I'd have to use to get close to the gates.

I reached the edge of the trees and hurried across the path into the shadow of Aspen Halls. A *psst* caught my ear and Bait stepped out from behind a stone water fountain in the courtyard.

He hurried to my side with a pack on his shoulders and a look of worry in his eyes.

"Are you alright?" His gaze slid over my clothes and I realised there were leaves in my hair, half a thorny branch hanging from my dress and my shoes were so caked in mud that it was impossible to tell they'd once been white.

"I'm good." I waved him off, pushing a hand into my hair and pulling out some leaves before peeling the thorny branch off and tossing it on the

ground.

Bait visibly swallowed, glancing over my shoulder towards the gate. The crackle of a guard's radio caught my ear and adrenaline made my heart flutter.

"Are you ready?" I asked him and he nodded firmly, strength filling his gaze.

"What's the plan?" he asked.

I took the firecrackers and lighter from my pocket, looking over at the wall stretching out either side of the gate.

"When Sneak's mom shows up, I'm gonna cause a distraction. As soon as the guards move, you run and get in that car. Don't wait for me," I said firmly, praying on everything I was that this was gonna work. Dad had taught me to always bet on myself. Because if I didn't have faith in *me*, then no one else would. And this was the ultimate test.

"Okay," Bait breathed then he moved forward and wrapped me in a hug. "Thank you for this, Tatum."

The use of my name brought a smile to my lips and I drew away with a nod. "No worries. You can pay me back in the free world."

He chuckled and I bobbed on my heels, readying to run the moment I had to.

The seconds ticked by and Sneak glanced back in our direction from time to time, though I wasn't sure she could actually see us here in the shadows.

Headlights flashed along the drive beyond the gate and I pressed back against the wall, holding my breath. A shiny silver car pulled up to the gate and I could just make out a guard leaning down to the window to talk to the driver.

I bit my lip as he moved forward to unlock the gate and let Sneak leave.

I ran, not wasting another second as I powered across the dark lawn, making a beeline for the wall. I clutched the fire crackers in one hand and the lighter in the other, feeling more alive than I had in days.

I reached the wall, clicked the lighter and held the flame up to the fuses.

One more click, two.

Come on you piece of shit!

They caught in a burst of sparks.

One glance to my right told me Sneak was buying us time, dropping down to tie her shoelace.

I gazed up at the top of the spiked wall and launched the firecrackers beyond it. Then I turned towards the gate as Sneak stood and started tugging her suitcase out of it.

Bang bang bang bang!

The firecrackers went off like a rattle of gunfire and a guard shouted beyond the wall. The pounding of footsteps on the gravel told me they'd fallen for it and I raced along the wall towards the open, unmanned gate. Hope bloomed in my chest like a garden of wildflowers. I was so close. So freaking close.

Bait was tearing down the drive, throwing caution to the wind and his shoulder brushed mine as we made it through the iron gates together.

Sneak was already in the car. Her mom was turning it around, but then she took one look at my muddy clothes and the apocalyptic look on my face and her foot hit the gas. I saw Sneak shout something as her mom tore off down the drive in her flashy Audi and my throat locked up.

Every single fibre of my being screamed *no!*

“Hey!” a man barked behind me and I grabbed Bait’s sleeve, tugging him along, having no other choice but to run. The drive out of here was

flanked by the wall on one side and a huge hedge on the other. The only way was forward, but we were in plain sight.

“Faster!” I commanded Bait and we tore down the gravel at a tremendous pace.

The thundering of two sets of footfalls pounded after us and my heart screamed at me to move quicker.

“Stop! You can’t leave!” a guard barked.

“Fuck you!” I cried, pushing my legs harder. Bait was panting heavily, falling a few steps behind me, but I could still hear him following.

We made it to the end of the drive and found ourselves at a T-junction as we reached the road. Opposite was a thick woodland rising up a hill and I knew our only chance was to get ourselves lost.

“We have to split up,” I shot at Bait.

“What? Where the hell are we even gonna go?” he panted.

“Anywhere,” I tossed back, determined to escape this place. Once the guards gave up on us, we could hitchhike to Murkwell. I’d fucking walk if I had to.

The sound of dogs barking made my heart freeze over. We couldn’t waste another second.

I dragged Bait into the woodland and shoved him to the left.

“Go that way!” I demanded and he gave me a look of horror before sprinting away into the darkness.

Fuck fuck fuck!

My mind reeled as I thought over everything my dad had taught me. But against dogs, my only hope was laying a false trail. And I didn’t have the time for it.

My muscles burned and my legs ached as I climbed the hill as fast as possible, the sound of the dogs growing ever closer. Flashlights whipped

through the trees and I knew the guards weren't far behind their hounds.

Bait yelled in the distance and a dog howled, the sound echoing up to the sky.

"One down!" a man shouted.

No – *Bait*.

My heart twisted, but there was nothing I could do except keep running and pray for a miracle.

Somehow, I made it to the top of the hill but my heart slammed to a screeching halt as I found myself high up on ridge, a sheer cliff dropping away down the other side of it.

I gazed left and right, weighing up my options just as a dog burst out of the trees. I screamed as he threw his huge paws up on me and barked loud enough to make me wince. I shoved him back to the ground, my heart thumping wildly.

Two guards burst from the foliage and I lifted my hands in innocence, feeling like I was being goddamn arrested.

"Listen, just fucking *listen*," I demanded and they slowed to a walk, but kept coming. They were both huge, built like brick shithouses. The dog continued to bark at me and the noise made my thoughts rattle as I tried to focus. "I can't stay here. There's three boys in that school making my life hell. They're gonna torture me if you take me back. Just let me go, say you didn't find me."

The redhead to my right released a dry laugh. "We know exactly who owns you, *Plague*."

Ice-cold fingers gripped my heart and they felt awfully like Saint's.

"No," I breathed in horror.

"And I ain't risking my job for some blonde chick who's father fucked the whole world in the ass," the other guy added with a scowl.

For a moment, taking my chances with the cliff almost seemed like the better option than letting them take me back. But they came at me anyway, snatching my arms and holding me between them.

My heart ached as they dragged me back down the hill then all the way along the road. I could have kicked and screamed and fought, but I knew it was pointless. I couldn't run now they knew I was out here. The dogs would always find me. I was screwed. And as they led me back through the school gates, terror pulled and tugged at my insides.

I'd failed. Screwed up the one chance I had of escaping this place. *Well, Sneak's goddamn mom had.*

The most terrifying thing was, the Night Keepers were going to punish me for this. And it wasn't going to be pretty.

I spotted another guard guiding Bait off to the right of the lake and called out to him frantically.

He glanced back, his face pale and his eyes full of fear.

I wanted to apologise, but I couldn't manage to get any words out as my escorts hauled me down the path to the left. I knew where I was going long before we arrived there.

Haunting classical music rose into the air from The Temple like a warning of what was waiting for me inside.

I was soon thrown to my knees in the porch of the church and I fought the urge to tremble as one of the guards knocked on the door.

My mouth was too dry, my heart beating too fast. I couldn't breathe or think or manage anything but kneeling on that frozen ground, awaiting my fate. I was covered in mud and bloodied scratches. My desperation to get away was written all over me. And now they'd know just how much I wanted to be free of them, how far I'd go, how afraid I'd been all along.

And I was sure this night was about to be the longest one of my life. Even worse than the storm on the beach.

I stared at the ground beneath me as the door yanked open, refusing to look up as their three shadows fell over me.

“She got out the gate,” one of the asshole guards said.

“I see,” Saint said in a breath of a whisper, so much danger in those two words that I couldn’t take it.

“Thanks for returning our property,” Kyan said and I heard the guards walking away.

Saint’s shiny shoes appeared beneath my nose and I felt as small as an ant about to be crushed under his heel.

“Did you really think you could escape us, Plague?” he asked, his voice level and yet as sharp as a razor.

“Yes,” I admitted as my heart thrashed even harder.

“And what do you think now?” Saint purred.

I stayed quiet, pressing my lips tightly together.

“Get her inside,” Saint demanded, walking away and Kyan and Blake’s strong hands hauled me to my feet.

I didn’t look at either of them, my jaw grinding. I was furious with myself for screwing this up, but most of all I was furious at them for making escape so impossible.

“Here,” Saint directed and I was thrown onto the flagstones at his feet. I was kneeling before the old stone altar at the back of the church. Saint was leaning back against it like this place was built to worship him instead of God and fear trickled deep down into the root of my soul.

“Up,” he demanded of me and I pushed myself to my feet, wetting my horribly dry lips as his eyes scraped down my appearance. “You must be thirsty,” he breathed, reaching out and taking hold of my hand. His fingers

closed around mine like a vice and he tugged me to one side of the room where a large stone font stood. My muddled reflection gazed up at me as Saint held me before it and I hated how much fear I could see swirling in my eyes. I couldn't find a way to mask it in that moment; my layers of bravado had been stripped bare by my failure and the horrifying reality that there was no more hope. I was theirs. Wholly, fully, completely. There was no way out.

Saint's other hand slid into my hair and I had half a second to drag in air before he shoved my face down into the water. Panic bloomed in my chest and I grabbed the sides of the stone basin, shoving backwards in a desperate attempt to get free. Saint was terrifyingly strong and he pushed my head in farther until all of my hair was submerged with it.

One second, two, three, four, five -

He yanked me back out and my scalp screamed with pain as I spluttered and coughed.

His mouth pressed to my ear and made my gut knot with tension. "In the name of the father, the son and the holy spirit. Hallowed be thy fucking name."

He shoved my head back under the water and fear took me hostage as he held me down, longer and longer. My ears popped and my lungs burned.

I was going to die. This psycho was going to fucking kill me.

A stream of bubbles burst from my lips and I was suddenly dragged free of the font. I hit the ground on my ass, my mind spinning, my thoughts splintering and breaking. I was half aware someone was shouting and it took me too long to realise it was Kyan.

"-don't want a fucking body on my hands, idiot," he snarled.

"Don't be such a drama queen," Saint laughed.

I scrubbed the water from my eyes as I dragged down lungful after lungful of air. Someone touched my arm and I yelled in fright, throwing a fist out on instinct and cracking them in the side of the head.

“Fuck,” Blake snapped and I bared my teeth at him, daring him to lay his slimy hands on me again.

I scrambled backwards until my back hit the altar and I tugged my knees to my chest, staring at the three monsters before me.

Water soaked through my clothes from my hair and I didn’t know if my trembling had become shivering, but suddenly my teeth were chattering and goosebumps were rushing across my flesh. For half a second I thought, *I have a gun in my bag*, before realising the implications of that thought were insane.

They couldn’t kill me. They might have been callous enough to do it, but that wasn’t what they wanted. They wanted me chained and bound, forced to submit. And I couldn’t see any possible way that I was going to avoid that fate now.

“Put her in your bathroom,” Saint commanded. “And clean her the fuck up. I don’t want that muddy bitch making a mess of this place.”

Blake didn’t approach me this time. Kyan walked forward and I hugged my legs closer to my body as he closed in on me.

“Get up,” he demanded and when I didn’t he dropped down and gathered me into his arms. I stiffened as he held me against his chest, refusing to look at him as he carried me down a corridor, passing through a bedroom into a large, windowless bathroom. It was immaculate with pristine white marble tiles and a huge shower on one side with a claw foot bathtub in the centre.

He dropped me to my feet, moving across the room and locking the door on the other side and pocketing the key as he headed back to the other exit.

He lingered in the doorway, pointing at the walk-in shower. “Get every inch of mud off,” he growled. “If there’s one fleck on you when I come back, you’ll pay for it.”

I clenched my jaw, saying nothing as he slammed the door and the noise made my whole body jerk. A key turned in the lock and I sank down to my knees, my heart tearing right up the middle. The tears came, but I pressed my hands to my face to stop them from being heard as more and more of them fell.

I thought I was strong, but it turned out I was made of glass. And they’d finally hit me hard enough to make me shatter.



To say I woke up would be suggesting I'd slept. And I was damn sure I hadn't. Not knowing she was on the other side of that bathroom door.

We'd gone through her bag and tossed the clothes and toothbrush inside for her, but that was it. She'd screamed a bit, thumped on the doors, the shower had run and then it had gone eerily quiet. Almost like she wasn't in there at all. But she was. I could practically feel her there. I'd imagined her breath fluttering against my cheek all night long, her whispers in my ears, her false smiles and pretty lies...

In my fitful attempts at sleep, I'd spent the night constantly dipping in and out of dreams which were pretty fucking distracting and all focused around one girl. Tatum Rivers. One minute I was fantasising about fucking her like I had after the initiation party. Her body hot and wet for mine, her screams of pleasure as I thrust deep inside of her and brought her to ruin. The next minute I was imagining how it would feel to wrap my hands around that slender neck of hers and squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until she stopped kicking beneath me.

Worst of all was when the fantasies blurred and I imagined fucking her while choking her. Listening while she begged for more while clawing at my arm hard enough to draw blood. I wanted to do that to her on some

deep, primal level where the demon in me resided. But only if she wanted it too. I wanted her begging me to hurt her while I pleased her. I wanted her to accept that she needed to be punished for the crimes of her father and fall to her knees before me, begging for me to make sure that she paid.

I'd never ached for anything the way I was aching for that. And I didn't know if it was just a product of my grief over losing my mom or if it was a depravity which had always lived within my flesh and had only been brought to light now, in my darkest hour.

I'd always struggled to comprehend why Kyan said he needed pain to feel true pleasure. But I was starting to get an understanding of where he was coming from with that. Everything I had now was coated in a layer of pain and the only outlet I could find for it was when I was transferring it onto someone else. Someone in particular.

I sat up in the darkened room, hearing Saint's morning music echoing up from the crypt as he abused his body through exercise.

Sometimes I had to wonder about the three of us. On the surface, we were the luckiest sons of bitches I knew. We had money, influence, power. Every material thing we could ever ask for and girls begging us for a taste of our bodies on a daily basis. But we were the most fucked up people I knew too. Three monsters who dwelled in darkness while gilded in gold.

I'd always been the one to pull us back to the light before. But now... Well, now there was no light. Only endless night and the scent of blood on the air. And I found that I was just fine with that.

Saint may have been a controlling, domineering motherfucker but he knew a thing or two about the way to channel bad emotions. He'd been doing it for a long fucking time after all. And if he thought that forming all of it, every feeling of grief, heartache, pain, betrayal and abandonment I had into a cold, hard ball of rage was the way to deal with it then I wasn't going

to argue. I could even admit that it was working already. The only feeling I was having trouble moulding into it was lust. That fucker couldn't be sated by rage alone. But it sure kept good company with it when it wanted to.

I pushed myself upright and moved to draw back the curtains, letting in the light of the pale sunrise so that it spilled over my flesh.

I pulled a pair of sweatpants on and released a long breath as all of the roiling emotions in me fought to be heard and I smothered them with anger.

My hand curled into a tight fist and I crossed the room, taking the key from my nightstand before unlocking the bathroom door and throwing it wide.

Tatum was curled up in the porcelain claw foot tub that dominated the centre of the space. I guessed it beat sleeping on the marble tiles, though if I hadn't switched off the underfloor heating last night that might not have been the case.

She was sleeping in a sweatshirt and her panties, her arms curled beneath her head as her brow pinched with some nightmare. Or maybe she could just tell on a subconscious level that her nightmare was standing over her. Her bare legs caught my attention for a moment too long and that treacherous desire I felt for her slithered beneath my skin.

But that was okay, I could accept it. I wasn't going to waste time pretending that she wasn't hot. Or that I didn't want to fuck her again. There was no point lying to myself about that. But it didn't mean anything other than that. Her flesh called to me on a base level, but her soul could rot for all I cared.

The scent of vanilla and honey blossom lingered in the air from her skin and I remembered the way it clung to me for a full day after I'd had her. That smell was a form of torture in itself, pointing out the weakness of my flesh.

I growled beneath my breath and reached out to set the cold water running in the tub.

Tatum shrieked as she jerked awake, leaping from the bath and slipping in the puddle of water as she did so. She fell towards me, arms whirling in panic before she slammed straight into my bare chest.

I caught her and she looked up at me in surprise as I offered her a dark smile before dropping her onto her ass on the cold tiles.

She scrambled backwards until her back hit the door to Kyan's room and she stared up at me with undisguised fear and hatred brimming in her eyes.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" she breathed. It wasn't an accusation or even an insult, more like a genuine question as she tried to figure out how a man could become as twisted as me.

"Many things," I said as I stalked closer to her, enjoying the way she cowered against the wood. "But top of the list right now, would have to be *you*."

I stood over her for a long moment as she panted beneath me, her blonde hair spilling everywhere, looking almost like it had after I'd spent a night buried in her body.

I folded my arms over my chest, my eyes narrowing as I assessed her. Was she finally starting to get the message or was she only just starting to fight back against the rules she lived by now? Not that it mattered. We'd break her in sooner or later. I was just glad to be along for the ride.

"Get up," I commanded and she scrambled upright until she stood before me, her back pressed to Kyan's door.

I stood there for a long moment as she refused to utter another word, looking at me like I was the worst person on Earth.

Try, one of the worst demons in hell and you might be getting closer, sweetheart.

I turned my back on her abruptly and moved to take a piss.

Tatum gasped behind me, but she didn't actually say anything.

“Complain about it and I'll get a pot and make you hold it for me every time I need a piss. Maybe even when I need a shit, too,” I growled and she looked at me for a long moment like that was the worst thing I'd threatened her with. But if she believed that then she was deluded. Things were going to get a lot worse than holding a piss pot. Her gaze fell to her toes as I relieved myself and I was in part glad that she was learning to keep her mouth shut while disappointed that I didn't have a reason to punish her.

I shook my dick off then dropped my sweatpants and got in the shower, ignoring her entirely as I washed myself. I would have jerked off just to piss her off too if I could have done it without thinking about her. Even knowing she was in the room with me while I was standing here naked was enough to send blood flooding to my cock like the animals trying to crowd on to Noah's fucking Arc.

I shut the water off with a curse, drying myself quickly before pulling my sweatpants back on and moving to brush my teeth.

All the time, Tatum watched me with a kind of numbness in her eyes and tension lining every inch of her skin. She knew I was just prolonging the agony, extending the torture until she couldn't take it anymore and practically begged me just to do whatever it was I was going to do. But I hadn't quite decided on that yet. In fact, I'd barely given her any commands since she'd sworn herself to us. At least not any that mattered. Because when I did, I wanted it to be perfect, fucking poetic in its brutality. I wanted her to feel it like a sucker punch, just the way I had when my dad had told me who she really was.

I spat a wad of toothpaste in the sink and finally turned to look at her again.

“Are you just going to stand there in a soaking wet hoody?” I asked as she shivered slightly in the wet material.

“I didn’t know I had permission to take it off,” she murmured and I shrugged, wondering if I liked this whipped version of her or not.

“If I don’t tell you otherwise, you can do whatever the fuck you want,” I said.

Tatum pulled the wet material off of her, dropping it to the tiles with a splat. She stood before me in a pair of white panties and a grey crop top with her hardened nipples pressing through it.

She took a towel from the rail and used it to dry herself off before wrapping it around her body like it mattered if I saw it all again.

“Where are the others?” she asked in a flat tone and I wondered if the idea of spending time alone with me was worse to her than facing us as a group.

“Saint’s working out but Kyan’s still asleep.” I smirked as that gave me an idea and moved across the room to his door. “In fact, you can wake him up for me.”

“What?” she breathed.

“You heard me. He has trouble with alarm clocks so I have to wake him up every morning, but today *you* can have the pleasure.” I opened his door and led her inside, stepping onto the grey carpet and glancing around at the bare space. My gaze landed on Kyan where he lay fast asleep in the centre of his super king with a sheet hitched up over his waist and his hair loose of its usual topknot and I grinned to myself.

“Go ahead,” I said, pointing her toward him.

Tatum hesitated for half a second before she did as I said with that dead look in her eyes, padding across the carpet on bare feet until she was standing over Kyan as he slept.

I fought to keep the smirk from my face as I watched the show.

“Kyan?” she asked tentatively and he didn’t shift and inch. “Kyan?” a little louder that time which made him roll over and mutter one of his infamous sleeping bullshit quotes.

“I can stick the pineapple up your ass or down your throat, either way them prickles are gonna hurt like a bitch,” he mumbled and I snorted a laugh.

“It’s not working,” Tatum said with a frown.

“He’s a deep sleeper. Give him a shake,” I urged, that smile tugging at my lips again, though luckily for me she hadn’t noticed as she turned back to Kyan with a small frown.

Tatum reached out to give him a shake and Kyan lurched at her so suddenly that she screamed. *That* got a reaction at least.

His hand locked around her throat and he flipped her over him like she weighed nothing at all, knocking the towel from her in the process before slamming her down into the mattress beneath him. His hair fell forward to curtain his savage expression and he damn near snarled at her as he pressed a hunting knife to her chest right above her heart.

Tatum whimpered in fright as Kyan blinked away his demons and I couldn’t help but start laughing. She looked like she’d almost pissed herself and her gaze flickered uncertainly between the knife poised to kill her and the man who just might do it.

Kyan panted heavily as he took in what was going on, easing back an inch as he pulled the knife away from her.

“Why the fuck would you touch me while I’m sleeping?” he growled.

Tatum lips parted, but no words escaped her and he relaxed his grip on her throat so that she could talk. “Blake said-”

Kyan's brown eyes flipped up to me half a second before he launched the hunting knife at me.

I cursed, throwing myself aside as the damn thing spun through the air and buried itself in the fucking drywall halfway up to the hilt.

"You're lucky I didn't kill her, you fucking idiot," he snarled, shoving away from Tatum as he got to his feet and leaving her panting in the bed as she tried to get over the shock of having a two hundred pound asshole damn near stab her to death for waking him up.

"You sleep with a knife under your pillow?" Tatum asked, her eyes wide with fear which was slowly morphing into fury as the fire in her ignited for a moment again. "Who the fuck does that?"

"Someone with more enemies than they can easily count," Kyan growled, getting out of the bed and hunting for an elastic to tie his hair out of his face.

"You're insane," Tatum gasped. "All of you. Fucking *insane*."

"Glad to see you're finally catching on," Kyan muttered as he found what he was hunting for and grabbed a hairbrush too. He dropped into a chair at the side of his bed by the window and released a heavy breath as he tried to banish his anger.

"C'mon, Plague," I said, "Let's go and see if-"

"Come and do my hair, Tatum," Kyan cut me off, his voice a deep growl which dared me to challenge him as he cut me a look which said he was hoping I would so that he could throw a few punches too. He really hated being woken up and I'd known he was going to flip, but I had to admit that the knife had been a new addition. *Fucking Rambo wannabe*.

Tatum looked between us in confusion and I rolled my eyes, giving in to Kyan's request. If he wanted someone to vent his rage on then I was happy for it to be her over me.

He beckoned her closer and she pushed to her feet slowly, seeming to retreat back into that non-responsive shit she'd been giving me since I'd woken her up. She headed to retrieve her towel from the floor so that she could cover up again, but Kyan grunted irritably.

"Leave it," he growled and Tatum straightened like she'd been expecting that, still not saying anything as she headed over to him instead.

I leaned back against the wall with my arms folded to watch the show. The moment she got close to him, Kyan reached out and snatched her off of her feet, grabbing her by the ass as he lifted her up to straddle his lap in one swift movement.

Tatum steadied herself by gripping his forearms, but gave zero reaction to being planted in his lap. Kyan studied her for a long moment as he seemed to notice the change in her too.

"What's up, baby?" he asked her. "Cat got your tongue? Or do you just find yourself exactly where you want to be?"

"I'm where *you* want me to be," she muttered and that was it.

Kyan scraped a thumb over his stubble as he studied her.

"You're not even going to call me an asshole?" he asked, like he actually wanted her to do that.

"I will if you tell me to."

Kyan huffed, cutting me a glare like he blamed me for his toy not playing the way he wanted her to and I just shrugged.

"She's been acting like that since I woke her up. I think we finally broke her," I said and it kinda pissed me off that I didn't like the idea of that more. I hadn't gotten nearly enough from this transaction to sate my monster and I wasn't sure how much joy I'd be able to claim from her now if she just fell into line so easily.

“Naw,” Kyan said, gripping her ass even tighter as he slid her down his thighs until she was sitting right over his cock. “You just need a minute to catch your breath, don’t you, Tatum? You’ll be calling me all the names under the sun again soon, won’t you?”

She remained silent and his face darkened before he slapped her ass hard enough to leave a hand print.

My eyebrows shot up and she flinched at the sting of pain, taking the hint to reply. “Yes, asshole,” she said but there wasn’t much bite to it.

Kyan rolled his eyes and lifted the brush and elastic from his lap, passing them to her so she could start working on his hair.

She didn’t even look uncomfortable and my brows arched as I wondered if that was because she didn’t care anymore or because she was happy enough to be in Kyan’s lap.

Tatum pushed up onto her knees as she began brushing his hair back to tie it up, putting her tits right in his face in the process. The hint of a smirk on Kyan’s face let me know he didn’t mind that at all and my frown deepened. He’d expressed his appreciation of her body a few times now, but it seriously wasn’t his style to get involved with anyone from school. So I couldn’t figure out what the point of this little game was. Was he just aiming to disarm her or was he really into it too?

“Are you getting hard for our little pet there, Kyan?” I asked him, deciding I might as well just ask him outright.

“I dunno. Am I, baby?” he asked Tatum as she finished tying his hair for him and sat back to look at him.

She pursed her lips and dropped her gaze to his crotch.

“Yeah,” she replied like she didn’t give a shit about that either. Which was pretty fucking cold, ignoring a dude’s hard on right to his face like that. Though Kyan’s gaze dropped over her like he gave no shits about that.

“Looks like you’re about to make a mess in your pants there, Kyan,” I taunted. “Do you get that turned on doing your own hair too?”

“Yeah. I come in my pants every time I finish tying it. To be honest, Tatum, you should be offended that I didn’t do that for you.”

I snorted a laugh but she gave us nothing.

Kyan stood suddenly, gripping Tatum’s ass again as he lifted her with him before throwing her down into the middle of his bed so hard that she bounced. She gasped as her blonde hair tumbled all around her and she lay on her back looking up at him with a faint blush lining her cheeks.

“You want me to tie you to the bed and fuck you ‘til you can’t see straight, Tatum?” he asked in a rough voice which I was guessing was aimed at getting a real reaction from her.

“And what am I supposed to do if she says yes?” I growled before she could reply. “Just stand here and watch you?”

“Naw, I bet Tatum can give real good head too. You think you could handle both of us, baby?” he asked her as she scrambled backwards up the bed like she was thinking he might really mean to go through with that offer. But she was in luck there, we might have been dark creatures but none of us got hot for girls who didn’t want us in return.

“I’d sooner drink from the fucking toilet than screw either of you,” she hissed and Kyan grinned as he got the reaction he’d wanted.

“See, Blake? Didn’t I say rich girls don’t know how to fuck?” Kyan said, turning to me with a smirk on his face that said he was pleased with himself for riling her again. “She couldn’t handle one of us, let alone both. Our girl might be hot, but I’m still pretty sure that the fantasy of her I’ve got going in my head would far surpass reality. So with that in mind, I’m gonna go use said fantasy as material to jerk off over in the shower.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said as Tatum remained in the imagined safety she’d found in the far corner of the bed. “She could barely keep up with me when I pity fucked her after her initiation.”

“Fuck you,” Tatum snapped, unable to let that lie slide and I smirked at her, glad to have made her bite. “You were the one begging for more and panting like a bitch in heat the whole time.”

Kyan laughed darkly as he hesitated by the bathroom door to see how this argument would play out.

“Let’s see which one of us was screaming for more, shall we?” I taunted. “I do have a video of the event after all.” I cocked an eyebrow at her in challenge, just waiting for the tears, the begging and pleading for me to delete the video and never let it see the light of day again.

Tatum lifted her chin, her eyes flaring with the challenge for a moment before her gaze emptied out again and she just shrugged. “Fine,” she said eventually, like she didn’t even care and I damn near choked on my surprise. “Let’s see it.”

Kyan chuckled darkly as he leaned against the wall, clearly settling in for the show to see which one of us would balk first. But if Tatum Rivers thought it was a good idea to compete with me in a game of chicken, she was about to find out exactly how often I lost. Because the answer was *never*.

Challenge accepted, bitch.

I headed back through the Jack and Jill bathroom and snatched my phone from my nightstand before heading back into Kyan’s room. He had this spark in his eye as I reentered the room, like he thought I might be the one to chicken out here, but he was wrong about that. Because I didn’t lose. Couldn’t. Never learned how.

I picked up the remote on his chest of drawers and flicked his TV on before pairing it with my phone and giving Tatum one last chance to ask me to stop. She'd need to do better than that though. I'd want her begging on her knees, offering to suck my cock and give me the entire contents of her trust fund before I'd even consider backing out now.

But she didn't beg. Hell, she didn't even blink, just sat there in silence as she waited for me to do my worst.

I ran my thumb over the video on my phone, skipping the talking at the start and pressing play just as I reached out and flipped her over.

The fifty inch screen suddenly lit up with an image of the two of us fucking and the first sound we were all gifted was that noise she made the moment I'd slammed my cock inside of her.

She screamed in time with every thrust of my hips, begging for more and more on the video and I found myself staring at the footage of the two of us going at it like the world might end if we stopped. My throat tightened and my dick swelled as I watched it for a long minute, appreciating just how fucking hot she looked.

I tore my eyes from the screen and looked to Kyan to see what he was thinking. His face was a mask as he watched the video, but his eyes flared with an intensity I'd rarely seen in him as he drank it all in.

Tatum's cries got louder and louder and my voice added to hers as I cursed and blessed her in the same breath, clearly having the time of my fucking life. We both kept making more and more noise until the unmistakable sound of her coming filled the room and I groaned as I followed her over the edge. I smirked victoriously as I turned to look at her, ignoring the fact that I was hard as stone and Kyan's suggestion of a three way was sounding a thousand times more tempting then it had a moment ago.

“Pretty sure you were louder,” I growled, shutting off the video.

“Shame I was faking then,” she said in an dead tone which was complete and utter bullshit. I’d felt the reaction of her body just as keenly as my own.

Kyan laughed loudly and I snarled with anger.

“Whatever you wanna tell yourself,” I replied, refusing to fall for her trap.

Instead of bothering to bite back at me, Tatum just closed her eyes and started moaning as she pushed her hands into her hair. She was panting too, my name slipping between those pink lips of hers as she got louder and louder, sounding a lot like she had on the video but not the fucking same at all.

She stopped as suddenly as she’d started, giving me a blank look as Kyan started laughing.

“Well, if you want me to give it a go, you can come join me in the shower, baby,” he said as he knocked the bathroom door open and headed inside. “Fair warning though – I bite.”

His dark laughter was followed by the sound of the shower starting up and I grunted with frustration as I took the other door from his room back out into the corridor, snapping my fingers at Tatum to make her follow me.

“Get dressed and make yourself presentable,” I commanded as she trailed behind me into my room.

“Okay,” she muttered before moving through my bedroom into the bathroom to get changed.

When she appeared again, she’d pulled on a pair of leggings and a tight T-shirt with a knot tied in it to reveal her naval and I frowned at her as I realised she didn’t have a uniform here.

Saint emerged from the gym in the crypt just as I was about to call him and his eyes fell on Tatum in disapproval.

“Go back to your dorm and get your uniform on,” he snapped at her. “Then paint your face and tame that fucking hair. My property doesn’t turn out looking anything less than perfect and I warn you not to test me on that. Then pack up all of your clothes and other shit and leave your suitcase outside your dorm. I’ll get one of the Unspeakables to drop it off here later. If you’re not waiting for us outside the Redwood Dining Hall when we get there in fifteen minutes, I’ll personally see to your punishment.” He crossed the room and opened a drawer in the wooden unit beside the door, pulling out her room key and shoving it into her hand.

Tatum didn’t even reply, just turned and walked away without a word. The moment the door closed behind her, Saint’s gaze fixed on me.

“Problem?” I asked.

“Not yet. But she needs to be watched carefully. She hasn’t got a hope in hell of getting out of the school grounds again, but she can’t be trusted. She had a fucking gun after all.”

We hadn’t said much on that subject yet and I guessed we didn’t need to say much about it really. She didn’t have it anymore, so that was the end of it.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have let her leave on her own,” I said, glancing back at the door and wondering if all of that weird behaviour this morning had just been a cover to get us to think we’d won so that she could just try to run again.

“Don’t worry about it,” Saint replied dismissively. “I’ve got the whole student body watching her. I sent out a group text to tell them her route and they’ll let me know if she deviates from it.”

I snorted a laugh at that. “Of course you did.”

“Get dressed and tell Kyan not to be late today. I have plans for breakfast.” Saint turned away from me to head up to his bedroom on the

balcony and I wondered if his plans included Tatum hand feeding him again or if he'd spent the night coming up with new ways to torture her.

Within ten minutes, the three of us were leaving The Temple and walking up the hill to the Redwood Dining Hall, passing through the crowd of the other students as they scurried out of our way. Sometimes I kinda didn't notice it, but other days I couldn't help but appreciate how awesome it was being us. I mean, fuck being one of the bottom feeders. The view from up here was just fantastic.

I smirked as I noticed Tatum standing on the path ahead of us, her eyes on her feet as she waited like a good little girl.

"I preferred it when she had more fight about her," Kyan muttered.

"You prefer everything with more fight about it," I quipped and Kyan cracked his knuckles as he chuckled in agreement.

"I'm not going to count on this being a permanent state just yet," Saint put in. "She's too ballsy to just bow down this soon. We've brought her low, made her feel helpless, stupid even. But broken her entirely? I don't think so."

My lip curled back as I considered that. I hadn't gotten much satisfaction from the way she'd been acting this morning, but it was better than nothing.

And it was the least Donovan Rivers' little girl deserved in payment for what my mom got. She couldn't even have a burial. There was no one there to hold her hand when she died. She was alone. I never even gave her a proper goodbye the last time I'd seen her. I was on the phone to Saint and I'd just kinda waved when she held her arms wide to hug me. That was it. The last hug I ever could have had with my mom and I'd brushed it off for nothing. Because I took her for granted. I assumed she'd always be there for me. I mean sure, everyone kinda knows that you'll probably outlive your

parents eventually, but not while I was so young. I thought we'd had all the time in the world left together.

But I guessed that was life. One moment you're skipping along thinking everything's just great, and the next thing you know you get sucker punched out of nowhere and everything you thought you could rely on is just gone. And what do you have left? Rage and outrage. Injustice and hopelessness. Nothing and everything. It's all gone but there's still so much here too. It's just that none of it looks the same anymore.

My jaw tightened and my gaze locked on the girl whose father was to blame for all of my suffering. Was seeing her brought so low enough for me? Like fuck it was. I'd barely scraped the surface.

"Plague," I barked without thinking it through and her head snapped up as she looked at me with those big blue eyes which tried to pry right into my soul. But I'd sold my soul to the devil a long time ago and I guessed he'd just waited until now to come and collect. "Pick someone out of the crowd."

"What?" she asked me in confusion.

"Pick someone at random. *Now*."

She flinched the tiniest amount at my tone then pointed at Pearl Devickers.

Perfect.

"Punch her," I said.

"Fuck yes," Kyan growled as Pearl's mouth dropped open.

"What?" Tatum asked as Pearl backed up.

"What did I do?" Pearl asked, giving me the pleading doe eyes.

"Nothing, sweetheart. Not to me, anyway. But I guess you pissed off Plague here because she just picked you out."

Tatum opened her mouth to protest and I grabbed her arm, gripping hard enough to bruise as I pulled her against me and growled into her ear for only her to hear. “Either you punch Pearl Devickers in her smug fucking face or I’ll personally beat the shit out of every guy in your little Unspeakable gang, starting with the asshole who tried to escape with you last night. Bait, wasn’t it?”

I shoved Tatum away from me and she looked how I imagined she would if I’d just pissed on her.

“Five,” I growled. “Four, three, two-”

“Sorry,” Tatum gasped before she swung her fist straight into Pearl’s face like a pro and knocked her flying into the mud.

Kyan whooped with laughter and Saint’s eyes flashed with excitement. Pearl scrambled upright with fury etched into her features as blood poured from her nose, a scream tearing from her lips as she launched herself at Tatum.

Before she could get close to our girl, Kyan stepped between them, practically snarling as he looked down at Pearl.

“Did you hear any of us say you could lay a hand on our property?” he demanded.

Pearl stumbled to a halt as she tried to rein herself in and Tatum looked like she didn’t even know what the fuck was happening. My heart was pounding with the thrill of it. Of wielding this power over her and the rest of the school too. It was intoxicating, addictive, exhilarating.

“She punched me!” Pearl screeched.

“Yeah. And she looked hot as fuck doing it, too. Doesn’t mean you can lay a hand on her though,” Kyan said casually, using his bulk to completely block Pearl’s view of Tatum.

“And that goes for the rest of you assholes,” I added in a loud voice. “She’s our girl. Which means anyone who has any ideas about trying to hurt her better forget them. Anyone considering trying to fuck her had better maintain a nice, healthy relationship with their own right hand. Because *none* of you have permission to even talk to her, let alone touch her, unless you want to answer to us.”

“She’s our property,” Saint added darkly. “And I will personally collect my pound of flesh from anyone here who disrespects that.”

A heavy silence fell among the crowd and Tatum looked like she was wishing the ground would just swallow her whole. But there wasn’t much chance of that. Every single eye in the surrounding students was trained on her with either hate, rage or envy.

I just hoped that Tatum hadn’t been too attached to the idea of having any friends here at Everlake Prep. Because sadly for her, I just ensured that would never happen.

I strolled forward and threw my arm around her shoulders as I directed her towards the Redwood Dining Hall.

“Looks like it’s just you and us now, Cinderella. I hope you’re not too disappointed with your not so charming princes,” I said, leaning down to speak in her ear. “Welcome to your new life in hell.”



I headed into the dining hall flanked by the Night Keepers as Freeloader and Punch opened the doors for us. Punch gave me a look of horror before quickly bowing his head and my gut knotted as I dropped my eyes to my feet.

I'd watched a documentary on training wild horses once. The mustangs fought, bit and kicked, but their new owners continued to push at them day after day. Until eventually, they dropped their heads, walked up to their master and nuzzled them. Just like that. It had looked beautiful from the outside, but maybe they knew it was the only chance of living a semi-bearable life. Or maybe their spirit had been crushed to dust and scattered to the wind. Until all that was left was obedience.

I hadn't been an obedient child. Hell, I'd never been an obedient anything. But like those horses, I'd been corralled, tethered, caged. And there were only two choices: continue to weather the pain, or take the path of least resistance. So which was it for me? Well...

Like I said, I knew what broken looked like. I could slip into the mask of it as easily as wearing my resting bitch face. Alright, maybe not *quite* as easily. But in the dead of night, curled in those asswits' bathtub, I'd realised something. I'd been devastated, brought to my knees, brought to fucking tears. But I hadn't been *broken*.

I'd spent hours in the dark, looking for a crack of light. And I'd found one. A sliver. Something I could clutch onto just enough to draw me back from the brink. The one thing they all wanted from me was compliance. And yet, whether they realised it or not, they also found compliance boring. It was why they ignored the Unspeakables. It was why it pissed them off every time I dropped my eyes like a good girl and answered to their beck and call. The joy was in the breaking. So broken I would be.

But they wouldn't get bored that easily, so I had to protect myself too. I retreated into that quiet place inside me, fleshing it out and hardening it, ensuring they couldn't touch it. That was where I'd stay. So that once this was over, there would still be a part of me left to grow. It was like planting a daffodil bulb in the earth, keeping it safe until the winter was over. This was my winter. And survival was key.

The Night Keepers moved to their table, dropping into their seats and I waited for them to dismiss me, fixing my gaze on the ceiling. My knuckles were aching from the punch I'd landed Pearl, but the pain was a strange kind of relief after the night I'd had.

"I said- *Plague!*" Saint snapped and I blinked out of my stupor, turning to him. "Are you fucking deaf?"

"No," I replied simply and his eyes narrowed.

Kyan was looking at me with a taut frown and I knew it was bothering him that I wasn't talking back anymore. That bullshit he'd pulled in his

room to get a rise out of me had proved that much. He wanted me alive and kicking. Torture was no fun for the torturer if their victim didn't react.

If I kept this up, I estimated that they'd tire of me after a week or two. Maybe they'd loosen my leash and let me go back to my dorm if I bored them enough. It was the saddest fucking plan I'd ever come up with, but right now it was all I had.

"Go and fetch Bait," Saint snarled, pointing at the table of Unspeakables.

That got my attention. My heart jolted and I wet my lips as I headed across the room towards my friend, hating myself for ever asking him to run with me. If they punished him, it was on me. And of course they were going to punish him.

He rose from his seat before I even reached him, walking toward me with creases in his brow. He had bloodshot eyes like he hadn't slept, like he'd been up all night waiting for this moment to come. And now it had and I was so very fucking sorry for it.

"Bait, I-" I started but he shook his head firmly.

"Don't blame yourself," he said gently. "You gave me a chance, Tatum. I owe you everything for that."

I nodded, not feeling any less shitty about it as I turned to walk at his side in solidarity. An air of excitement filled the room as the rest of the students perked up to watch and I tried to ignore the fluttering of my heart.

We slowed to a halt in front of the Night Keepers' table and it felt like everyone in the room was holding their breath as they waited for what was gonna happen next.

"Did you bring it?" Blake demanded of Bait.

He nodded, reaching into his blazer pocket and taking out an electric razor. He placed it down on the table and Kyan leaned back in his chair with a smirk, settling in for the show.

My heart beat wildly as I thought of that razor being used on me. But they wouldn't take my hair, surely? Saint had said himself he didn't want me looking like shit.

"Pick it up, Plague," Saint commanded in a cool tone.

I swallowed as I reached for it, taking the surprisingly heavy lump of machinery into my grip.

"Now kneel before our girl, Bait," he hissed and Bait dropped to his knees without a moment's hesitation.

My heart pounded out of tune as I stared down at him. But this was okay. Shaving a guy's head wasn't the end of the world. He'd survive it.

"Slice a nice little line down the middle, baby," Kyan instructed and I jerked around to look at him in alarm.

I opened my mouth to protest when Bait said, "Do it," through his teeth.

I clenched my jaw as Kyan laughed and Blake banged his fist on the table, starting up a thumping tune as everyone joined in around the hall.

Bait lifted his head to look up at me and guilt clutched my heart.

"I'm sorry," I breathed before turning the razor on so a loud buzzing filled the air.

As gently as possible, I pushed it through the middle of his thick copper hair, running it right over the crown of his head and all the way down the back. The loose hair tumbled around him, the bald strip glaring up at me and making me grimace while laughter clashed against my ears from around the room.

My hands were shaking, my ears were ringing and I was struck with the desire to be sick. I knew that it wasn't really me doing this to him but it was my hands, my actions causing my friend to become the centre of ridicule for the entire school and shame washed through me as I was forced to endure it.

“Up,” Saint commanded and I frowned as Bait got to his feet, bowing low to the Night Keepers. Anger roiled in my gut. He looked ridiculous and that was just what they wanted. Him humiliated.

Bait took the razor back from me, tucking it into his pocket as the laughter continued filling the air.

“If you ever try to run from us again, it won’t be your hair that gets cut,” Saint hissed. “Do you understand me?”

Bait nodded quickly, his cheeks turning bright red as every eye in the room fixed on him.

“Dismissed,” Saint snapped and he ran back to the Unspeakables’ table without a backwards glance.

I turned to look at them as anger rose in me on behalf of my friend. A stream of curses came to my lips and were about to pour from them and break right through the mask I’d been hiding behind. Kyan sat up straighter in his chair as he realised I was about to go off like a damn rocket and I choked back the words at the last second. Swallowing them down down down into the very pit of my stomach.

Fucking jumped up, heartless assholes. I’d beat every one of your heads in with a mallet.

I dropped my gaze to my feet and shut my eyes too because this was harder than I’d thought. Wearing a bitch mask was way easier than wearing a *little* bitch mask. I forced my warring emotions back into that safe space inside me and my breathing started to even out.

It’s not worth it, Tatum. You’ve got to let them get bored of you.

“Sit down,” Saint ordered, pointing to the seat in front of him.

My brows arched and he had to say it again before I moved and sat in the seat he’d pointed out. I did not wanna be stuck looking at the kings of shitbagsville while I ate.

“I’ve ordered your food for you,” Saint said and my jaw started to grind.

Kyan gave me that hopeful look again and I dropped my hands into my lap, digging my nails into my palms. The pain gave me something to focus on while I kept my tongue in check and nodded vaguely, making Kyan sigh in irritation.

Our table was served first and they all had predictable meals placed in front of them. Blake with his syrup-swamped pancakes and cherries, Saint with his eggs and avocado on toast, and Kyan with his fried *everything*.

My plate was put in front of me last and I looked down at the single leaf of lettuce staring up at me. My lips pursed and hell, this shit was getting harder and harder already. How was I gonna manage not blowing up like a volcano for weeks?

And what if they didn’t get bored? What if they kept this up so long that I snapped and showed them just how unbroken I was after all.

Gah, I wanna stuff this lettuce leaf down Saint Memphis’s throat!

Kyan snorted a laugh and Blake grinned darkly, placing his knife and fork down as he waited to see how I was gonna react.

Saint smiled, viciously slicing his toast into two perfect halves and slicing through his eggs and avocado in the process. “Eat up, Plague. We wouldn’t want you going hungry, now would we?”

I snatched up my lettuce leaf, tearing a piece off it with my teeth and Kyan licked his lips at my savagery. I simply couldn’t help it in that moment. Deprive me of anything, *anything* but food. Hanger was real. And I was it.

“Use your knife and fork, Plague. You’re not an animal,” Saint demanded and god help me, I wanted to punch him as hard as I’d punched Pearl. No, harder. Definitely fucking harder.

Keep your cool, Tatum, dammit!

I picked up my knife and fork with a false smile and started cutting into the remains of the lettuce leaf.

I didn't know how long I was going to manage keeping myself in check, I already felt like a kernel left on the fire. I wasn't built to comply. But even if I pulled this off and they got sick of me, the best I could probably hope for was joining the Unspeakables and living on the outskirts of the community for the rest of the year. And that was the absolute best case scenario. But it still had to be better than this.

I sat out by the lake after dinner, throwing pebbles at the water and watching the ripples stir the still surface. I'd stashed a change of workout clothes in my bag after I'd gone back to my dorm this morning so I didn't have to go to The Temple any time soon. My black leggings and black and white crop top had been perfect for the run I'd taken to expend the searing energy in my limbs.

The fact that they'd gone through my bag last night was something I didn't wanna dwell on too much. But I was hoping they'd just swiped out the top layer of clothes for me and left the bag alone. Because if they'd found my dad's gun, surely they would have said something? And then there were my letters to Jessica...but I didn't see why they'd be interested in those. I had ones in there from her too and I cared about them even more. They were little pieces of her I could carry everywhere with me. And I didn't want the Night Keepers' greasy hands on them.

After a day of being ignored, ridiculed and humiliated, I was starting to wonder if I really could handle biting my tongue much longer. It had only been a day and I was fit to bursting with rage. Part of me was happy about

that. It meant the Night Keepers hadn't left any permanent damage on me. And that had to be cause for celebration. Or it just meant there was a lot more of me to break, depending on which way you looked at it.

The most excruciating thing of all, was the lack of food. For every meal today, I'd been served with a single lettuce leaf and a glass of water. And each time, the Night Keepers looked at me like they were waiting for me to speak out, to refuse it, to demand a full meal. But I bit my tongue and chomped through the tasteless crunch of lettuce like a pet rabbit. By dinner, I even thanked Saint for my wonderful meal. That might have been overkill come to think of it. But he'd frowned like I was pissing him right off so I hoped he was getting the message.

A run had probably been a bad idea. I was feeling a bit light-headed. But I wasn't going to survive a few weeks of this if I didn't have an outlet for my rage.

Saint hadn't given me any direction after dinner, and I'd decided I wasn't going to return to The Temple until they beckoned me. I didn't wanna be stuck in their company for more hours than was absolutely necessary. But I imagined they'd soon come up with more creative ways to torture me. So this was just the quiet before the storm.

I still didn't have my phone back from Mr Monroe so I had no idea what time it was. But as I thought of it, the memory of his offer suddenly struck me like a heart attack.

I was on my feet before I'd even really made the decision, quickening my pace to a run until I was flat out sprinting in the direction of the Cypress Gym. How had it taken me this freaking long to remember his offer? After everything that had happened last night, I'd completely forgotten about it. But now, holy shit, I had an ally that could actually damn help me!

I raced up the wooden steps that led into the gym, pushing the glass doors open and jogging into the corridor. An open door to my left gave me a view into the huge gym and I hunted the space for Monroe; there were a few students working out, their machines looking out over the incredible Olympic sized pool through a glass window at the far end of the room. The state of the art equipment was fitted with screens and not even the Plague walking in made anyone take notice.

I spotted Monroe marching out of a room to my right and an actual smile ripped into my face.

“Sir!” I hurried toward him and he offered me a scowl, shouldering the gym bag he was carrying.

“You’re late, Rivers. Don’t waste my fucking time.”

“No, wait.” I caught his arm, squeezing tightly and giving him an anxious look. All of my hopes were pinned on him in that moment. He could be the answer to my prayers.

“I don’t have my phone. I didn’t know the time.”

His brows knitted together and he nodded stiffly, reaching into his pocket and taking my phone from it. He held it out for me and I took it with greedy fingers, muttering a thanks.

“Come on then,” he growled, turning around and leading me back towards the room he’d vacated.

I hurried to follow him, my heart thumping a whole new tune as he led me inside and the door swung shut behind me.

Training mats were laid out on the floor and a row of expensive looking gear was hanging on the walls. From shields to gloves, hand straps and fighting sticks. On the far side of the large room was a boxing ring with a row of belts displayed on the wall behind it.

Monroe tossed me a pair of gloves and I strapped them on, relaxing at the feel of something so familiar to me. It had been a while since I'd trained, but the familiar keen rush of blood to my muscles swept through me and it felt like awakening from the depths of a nightmare.

For the longest moment I just felt...good. Ecstatic even.

Monroe picked up one of the padded strike shields and held it in front of him as he moved to the centre of the mat.

"Let's see what you've got then, princess," he said in a tone that suggested he expected to be unimpressed. I didn't care about impressing him, but I sure as shit was gonna take an opportunity to vent this rage living in my bones.

I moved toward him in a flash, throwing the first punch with a yell of anger. Then another and another, working hard to free the tension in my body. I stepped back, aiming a fierce kick at the centre of the pad and forcing him back a step. I didn't even care to look at his face, I just focused on that red target and pictured Saint's face, Blake's, Kyan's.

I threw punch after punch before landing front kicks, side kicks then finishing it with a roundhouse. If it really had been those boys I'd been attacking, they'd currently be laying on the floor in puddles of their own blood. Which was the kind of image which brought a twisted smile to my lips.

Laughter tumbled from Monroe's lungs as he tossed the shield across the room. "Holy fuck, princess."

I shrugged, leaning forward as I panted. My vision was darkening and I just needed a second to steady my heart. My stomach felt so hollow, it hurt. And the thought of how many days this could go on for was like thirty percent terrifying... Alright, sixty.

Monroe directed me over to the water fountain at the side of the room and I stood up, feeling a bit better as I headed over to get a drink.

“So you know how to throw fists and kicks at a shield, but how do you fare against an opponent, Rivers?”

I turned to find Monroe strapping gloves on and his shirt firmly on the fucking floor. My mouth dried out as my gaze dipped to the perfection of his damn body and the tattoos clinging to his flesh. He had an angry tigress amongst the artwork of his chest and I pinned my gaze on her, liking the fire in her eyes.

“Oh I know how to face an opponent, sir. You’ve just gotta find their weakness.” I strode after him as he climbed up into the boxing ring and I pushed myself up after him. We moved to stand opposite one another and adrenaline slid through my veins as a smirk tugged at my features.

He mirrored it, giving me a dark look and a tingle raced beneath my flesh. “Good. Because I’m going to sharpen you into a deadly blade against those boys, princess. I’m going to offer you every single weakness I’ve dug up on them. Are you ready for that?”

Hell yes! I nodded eagerly then lunged as I threw the first punch. My fist slammed right into the tigress and I grinned as I bounced back onto my heels as he came at me in retaliation. He jabbed my side with the lightest of blows and I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t you *dare* hold back on me, Monroe,” I growled. “I came here to fight. So *fight*.”

His eyes danced with light and he came at me again with power this time, slamming his gloved fist into my arm. I was ready, wincing at the blow, but not slowing as I brought my knee up and drove a kick into his gut with a cry of effort.

He fell back with a wild laugh and the sound echoed right through my body, making my veins hum with life.

“The winner will be whoever gets their opponent on the ground,” he said, his voice full of vigour as he came at me again.

It felt good to fight a real man. A man who gave me a fighting chance. Who didn't manipulate and threaten his way into controlling me. He was an equal opponent and I thrived on every punch and kick he threw. I even relished the pain he delivered because it was fairly given and I delivered it back just as hard.

We were soon bruised and sweating, dancing around each other as our fight carried on, neither of us managing to uproot the other.

Darkness flickered at the edges of my vision again, but I blinked it back, forcing myself to focus.

I kicked and punched over and over, but my lack of food was taking a toll. Monroe aimed a kick toward my gut and as I brought my arms up to defend myself I stumbled back, nearly losing my footing as my vision darkened. He didn't waste a second of the advantage, running at me and freaking football tackling me to the ground.

His full weight slammed on top of me and an oomph left my lungs as the air was forced from them.

“Shit, are you alright?” he asked, gazing down at me with an intense stare.

I nodded then started laughing and fucking laughing.

I was more than alright. I was freaking divine. Here in this room, I felt invincible, untouchable. And that also got me hot as hell as Monroe shifted his god-like body over mine.

Our breaths mingled and the burning heat of our flesh pressed together, taking my mind down a filthy road. The sinful look in his eyes said his

mind was following the same path and that did all kinds of twisted things to my body.

“You’re something, princess,” he muttered, almost to himself.

I fell still beneath him, drinking in the look on his face that didn’t hold any hate in it. It was real nice not to be looked at like a disease for once. It was so very nice, so....

Darkness claimed me and I fell into its peaceful grip for who knew how long.

Someone was suddenly shaking me and I wet my dry lips as my eyes fluttered open. *Did I just pass out?*

“Tatum!” Monroe said urgently and as my eyes found his, I reached up instinctively, wanting to run my fingers over his face, realising a second too late that my hand was still gloved. He had such a lovely face though even with a fat glove butting against it.

I froze as I realised I was acting like a crazy person and my stomach broke the silence, growling pitifully loudly for him to hear.

“You need to go and see the nurse.” Monroe helped me sit up and I shook my head.

“I’m fine,” I said firmly.

“You’re not fine-” he started in a growl, but I cut over him.

“I haven’t eaten. They didn’t let me,” I revealed, my cheeks suddenly warming. I didn’t know why it was so embarrassing to say it. Maybe because it felt like a show of weakness that the Night Keepers had this much control over me.

Monroe’s face hardened into something truly furious. He was like a scorned god and I half expected him to pull a golden triton from his ass and race off into the night to defend my honour. I smirked at that mental image

and he frowned sharply, suddenly getting to his feet and striding off to the other side of the room.

He returned a moment later with three protein bars and dropped down in front of me, holding them out.

“Eat,” he commanded, with no room for refusal. It was the first order I’d received all day that I was actually thrilled about.

I pulled off my gloves, tossing them aside then snatched one of the bars, tearing open the wrapper and taking a huge bite out of it. It was sweet and nutty and tasted like the best fucking thing in the world. I consumed the bar within three savage bites, giving zero fucks about manners or decorum or any other bullshit thing Saint would have punished me for flouting. When I finished it, I found Monroe watching me like I was a wild creature he wanted to lure into his man cave. And hell, I wanted to pad my way right into it and curl up by his fire.

He offered me another bar and I took it just as eagerly, eating it with just as much barbarism as the first. By the third, I managed to slow down enough to eat it like a semi-tame girl, but I still finished it in under a minute.

When I was done, Monroe reached out and wiped a crumb from the corner of my lips, making me fall entirely still as I stared at him.

He pushed it into my mouth and I tasted the salt of his flesh, sending a delicious heat rolling down my spine. He retracted his hand, seeming unsure of why he’d done that, and I really wanted to know the answer too. Monroe was untouchable. Which was all the more frustrating because he was also delectable. And by the way he was looking at me now with the power of a hurricane in his eyes, I wondered if he thought I was too.

He blinked suddenly and the spell was broken. He rose to his feet, heading across the room and grabbing his water bottle from the floor,

tipping his head back and pouring it down his throat. It gave me a long moment to stare at the tightened muscles of his huge body and heat blazed between my thighs at the sight. Shit, he was like a warrior. Some sort of beautiful being plucked right out of a Greek myth.

By the time he finished drinking, I was on my feet, looking disinterestedly at my nails, refusing to let him see how much I was inwardly drooling over him.

“So...” His tone darkened and I lifted my head, nodding to acknowledge what we were about to discuss. “I know each of the Night Keepers well enough to rip them apart.”

His tone sent a shiver darting along my flesh. “Say that again,” I half groaned and his eyes flashed with heat.

“Rip. Them. *Apart*,” he gave me what I wanted and I let my head fall back as a full groan fell from my lips. He released a wicked laugh then pointed to the mat. “We can talk while we stretch.”

“Sure,” I agreed then bent over to touch my toes, hoping to make him look at me. Because screw it. If the Night Keepers weren’t going to let anyone touch me, I could at least fantasise about my hot P.E. teacher from time to time. And I was more than happy to give him some reasons to fantasise about me too. Though when I glanced at him, he was pointedly not looking. And I guessed it had been stupid to think a teacher would want me like that.

I soon dropped down to sit and stretch my legs and Monroe joined me on the floor. “Tell me everything,” I asked of him and he drew in a long breath.

“I’ll start with Kyan as I know him best,” he said and I nodded eagerly. “I train him here pretty regularly. Fighting is about the only thing he’ll dedicate his full attention to. He’s a thrill chaser. If he sees some shiny new way to get a high, he’ll jump at it.”

I nodded, releasing a bitter laugh. “Like chaining a new pet?”

“Yeah,” Monroe growled, his jaw ticking before he went on. “As for his weaknesses? He’s only got one.”

“What’s that?” I was all ears, half tempted to crawl over to Monroe and curl up in his lap like I was listening to the best bedtime story of my life.

“He’s... lonely,” Monroe revealed and I frowned in surprise. He almost seemed hesitant to say it like he felt some loyalty to Kyan and I wondered if those sessions they spent together had bonded them more than he wanted to admit.

“Are you sure?” I questioned. “He’s got his friends.”

Monroe nodded firmly. “Yeah, but he’s constantly trying to fill the void that lives in him with fast motorbikes, bare-knuckle fighting and dirty fucks.”

My mouth dried out at that last one and I couldn’t help my body from reacting a little. Kyan may have been my enemy, but I could bet he was one hell of a lay.

I nodded slowly, stashing all of that information away for later. “What does that mean for me?”

“He needs a girl who can fill that space, he just doesn’t know it yet,” Monroe said, his gaze dripping down me.

I scowled, my walls slamming into place. “I’m not going to screw him if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“Trust me, I’m not suggesting that, princess,” he purred in a deadly sort of tone that reminded me Monroe had a darkness of his own living in him. “But if you get him hooked on you, make him fall for you until he’s begging, he’ll be putty in your hands. All he really wants is for someone to see something in him besides the violence and bullshit, something worth

more than that. If you can be that girl then you'll be the one owning him, not the other way around."

I couldn't imagine Kyan on his knees like that, but the possibility set my pulse racing. "He's not an easy nut to crack."

"*You* can crack him, princess. I've seen the way he looks at you," he said with venom in his words like that enraged him. "You've just got to find a way to pick them all apart from the inside. If you get Kyan to want you, *really* want *you*, you'll get him to fight for you too. He'll stand up for you against the others, he has too much of a noble streak in him not to."

"Pfft, how is he noble?" I scoffed.

"Just trust me."

I rolled my eyes, but decided to drop it, desperate to get onto more juicy details about my enemies. "So what about the others?" I asked.

"Blake wants to be the top dog instead of Saint because he's so competitive. He carries a lot of rage lately since his mom died and doesn't handle his emotions well," Monroe explained.

"I noticed," I muttered and he nodded seriously.

"She died from the Hades Virus, you know?" he asked with a dark look. "That's why he wants to blame you for it. Because of your father."

My breathing stalled as I stared at him, Blake's hate for me suddenly seeming so much more understandable. Not that the virus was in any way my fault, but if he needed to blame someone within his grasp, I guessed it would be me. And in some twisted way, it at least made more sense why his hatred toward me burned so fiercely. But grief was like an endless tide. And if you built a dam against it, it was eventually going to break through and pour out all at once. Which was exactly what he'd done, and now I was laying at the bottom of that dam, receiving the full brunt of his rage whether I was culpable or not. It didn't matter, so long as someone took the fall and

helped him ease that pain. I'd been there too. I'd taken it out on my dad, the world. But I'd never built a wall against it, so my grief had spilled in a steady flow. The way Blake was dealing with it was brutal. Destructive. Both to him and me.

"Don't underestimate him," Monroe continued. "Blake Bowman is volatile when he's angry. I've seen him send more than one guy to hospital during a football match. And that's just through his desire to win. But you can use that against him. He won't say no to any challenge which is why he's been butting heads with Saint for years."

"Really?" I asked. I hadn't seen them fighting before, but Monroe clearly knew them better than me.

"Yeah," he said. "Bowman wants to be top dog. He doesn't like losing at anything, including social hierarchy. Being second to Saint eats away at him constantly until every now and then he rises up and clashes with him."

"So I need to make them clash?" I whispered excitedly.

"Yeah, and the way to do that is through fucking with Saint's need for control," Monroe said and I swear I was getting so wet for him over the way he was talking that I was surprised he hadn't noticed me panting yet.

"Go on," I encouraged, biting on my lower lip. His gaze dipped to my mouth for half a second before he dragged his eyes back up to mine like a good teacher. I kinda wished he was a bad one though.

"You need a way to get into The Temple."

I laughed dryly. "Well they're making me live there so that's easily done."

His eyes brightened with that news and I kinda wanted to punch him for it. "That's brilliant, you'll be in the perfect position to strike at them. I imagine Saint keeps the place a certain way. And from what I know of Blake, he's a messy fucker and that would drive Saint to insanity. If you can

figure out what Blake does regularly to piss him off, you could do some of those things too...”

“And get him blamed for it,” I finished with a grin.

“Exactly. Generally with Saint, if you can get him feeling out of control, you’re gonna break down their entire little Bermuda triangle of bullshit.”

I nodded keenly, but my heart leapt as the door flew open. Blake strode in with fury in his eyes and my heart thrashed fearfully against my chest.

“What the fuck, Bowman?!” Monroe jumped to his feet and Blake slowed to a halt, folding his arms as his eyes slid to me on the floor. I was mid-stretching out my right calf, gazing up at him in horror. *Holy shit, what if he heard something??*

“I’m here to pick up, Pl- Tatum,” Blake said simply.

I rose to my feet as his gaze slipped to me.

“We’ve been looking all over for you, sweetheart,” he said, his voice overly sugary and I scowled at him, more than happy not to bother with the compliant bullshit now that I had a bunch of ammo lined up against him. And I couldn’t wait to start firing it.

“She has kickboxing lessons with me three times a week,” Monroe growled. “And if you ever walk into my training room uninvited again, I’ll have you in detention for the rest of the semester, Bowman.” Monroe’s muscles were rippling and the sweat gleaming on his body drew my gaze for a hot minute. He was going to bat for me and hell that made me gooey inside. I wished I could show him how grateful I was...

“You didn’t mention that, Tate,” Blake said to me with a firm stare.

“Didn’t I?” I asked with an innocent shrug.

“Rivers will be training with me. I think she’s got a shot at the regionals and fuck if I’m missing out on the opportunity to train an athlete like her,”

Monroe said simply then turned to me with a sharp stare. “You’re either here three times a week, or you’re in detention with me instead.”

“Okay,” I agreed and Blake snarled.

“Fine. Come on.” He held out his hand for me and I had to laugh. I was not gonna play the little whipped puppy anymore.

“Thanks for the lesson, sir,” I said earnestly to Monroe then breezed past Blake until I was out of the room and he was running to catch me.

His arm curled around my shoulders and he yanked me in close to his body, making my breathing quicken as the scent of him surrounded me. Spiced cologne and a bottled threat.

“I want your school schedule written out by hand tonight. One copy for each of us.”

“Okay, I can colour code it too if you give me some crayons?” I offered with a smirk. “Would you like me to write down my bathroom habits too? I’m a morning pooer-”

“Shut up,” he snapped, glaring down at me. “Got your backbone reinstated, I see, Cinderella.”

“Clever boy.” I reached up to scruff his hair like a dog and he snarled, locking his arm around my shoulders again and guiding me along the path.

“Let’s see what Saint makes of that then,” he growled.

“Yeah, he is the top dog after all.” I nodded in agreement. “You couldn’t go making any decisions on your own, I suppose.”

“We make our decisions together,” he snipped.

“Sure you do,” I said airily and he cut me another glare. Part of me wanted to bring up the tension stifling the air between us. I wanted to ask him about his mom, to try and soften the hatred he felt for me. But something told me now wasn’t a good time. I needed to catch him in a better mood. Though lately, I never saw any of the easy-going guy who’d

made my heart beat faster and brought a smile to my face when I'd first arrived at Everlake Prep.

We soon arrived back at the church and my heart thrashed a little harder as he guided me inside.

Kyan was sprawled on the couch playing some zombie video game and Saint was standing in the kitchenette like the ghost of a dead soldier.

"Here she is." Blake shoved me forward, making me stumble several steps ahead of him. "Monroe's training her in kickboxing. Says she has to attend lessons three times a week."

"Did you forget to mention that, Barbie doll?" Saint hissed.

"Well...no. I didn't have my phone." I shrugged, not telling them that I now did have it. Although it was probably sticking out in the pocket of my slim-fitting sports leggings fairly obviously.

"Well now you do." Blake patted my hip where it was sitting before shouldering past me and dropping down into an armchair. "And if you ever miss a call from us, you can expect to pay for it hard, Cinders." He snatched up a control and joined the game Kyan was playing. "Saint will be your wicked step-mother and me and Kyan will play the role of your step-sisters. I reckon we can fit you up that chimney to give it a good sweep – it probably hasn't been done in a century."

"Yeah and if you do a poor job, we could set a fire while you're working and see if you make it out the top," Kyan tossed in with a smirk and I scowled, opening my mouth to retort when he released a yell as his character was munched on by a zombie. It was a shame one didn't burst in the door and really take a chunk out of Kyan.

I was left to the mercy of Saint which I imagined he had none of. But I wasn't afraid this time. Not now I was refuelled, full of ways I could start fighting back. Man, if he wasn't a teacher, I would have given Monroe one

hell of a thank you blowjob. I wouldn't just blow his dick either, I'd blow his fucking mind.

"Here," Saint demanded and I walked towards him at a slow pace. "You must be hungry, Barbie."

My brows lifted and I wondered if I was going to get an actual meal. He swiped up a glass of water and a plate of pasta from the counter, holding it out for me to take. *Holy shit.*

Saint smiled darkly as I took them, gesturing to the dining table just beyond the kitchenette. I turned and headed to it, placing down the pasta and water, dropping into a seat.

Saint moved to stand behind me and my neck prickled from the closeness of him. "I want you to stay fit," he purred. "You can use the gym here when none of us are in it. And you can have your lessons with Monroe to keep that fine ass of yours in shape."

"Thanks," I said dryly and Saint's fingers combed through my ponytail.

I picked up the water, my mouth still dry from the workout and I tipped my head back to drink the whole thing. The second it washed over my lips, it burned. I'd taken in a whole mouthful, realising it was vodka far too late and I spat it everywhere, dropping the glass and making it roll across the table, pouring across the mahogany.

Saint yanked my ponytail so hard, my neck snapped back and I was forced to look up at him with my heart thumping wildly against my ribcage. "If you ever disappear like that again, I won't feed you vodka, I'll feed you fucking arsenic."

"Fuck you," I spat, unable to fight it back. I'd wanted to say those words all day. I'd wanted to scream them while clawing his eyes out.

He yanked me out of my seat then threw me down on the table face first, pressing his weight over my body to crush me to the wood.

“Want to say that again, Barbie?” he growled dangerously.

“I want to say it at least a thousand more times,” I admitted and Saint’s laughter suddenly filled the room. He released me and I pushed myself up, ignoring the bruising ache in my hips as I found Kyan and Blake looking at me from across the room with hope in their eyes.

Saint sailed towards them, turning and perching on the edge of the couch. “We didn’t break her,” he spoke to them like I wasn’t there.

“I knew it,” Kyan growled with a hungry smirk that said he couldn’t wait to start pushing my buttons again.

And game on fuckwits. Because I couldn’t wait to start pushing a few buttons of theirs.



My phone rang and I jerked upright, glancing over at the nightstand where the screen was illuminated in the dark. Whoever said there was no rest for the wicked had certainly been right about that.

Am I really lucky enough to be rescued from my daily torment?

It was four thirty, I'd been waiting on that fucking alarm to pull me from the dark at six am and fate had done me one better.

I rolled towards my cellphone, glancing at the caller ID to make sure that it wasn't some cock-hunting sophomore who'd managed to get a hold of my number somehow and decided to try her luck at offering me a wake up blowjob. That shit had happened before more than a few times, though after I'd had those girls expelled it seemed to have broken the curve. Most of them had caught on to the fact that Blake was the only one of us who might be tempted by that shit. I hunted my own prey and told them exactly what time of day it suited me to have my goddamn cock sucked and Kyan just kept his pursuits off campus. Luckily for me and the universe, the person calling me was one of a very select few who could get away with that shit during the night.

“Father,” I said in greeting as I connected the call, wincing a little at the rough edge to my voice from lack of use.

The half second of hesitation let me know he’d heard it and was less than impressed. *Be prepared for all eventualities, Son, and life will never figure out how to kick you in the ass.*

“Son,” he replied curtly, his tone letting me know he was in his office. Late night work, or I guess *early* morning work, only ever took place when *absolutely* necessary and the fact that he was taking a moment to call me let me know that something important was happening. “It’s time to consider a supply run. The Hades Virus is spreading rapidly and the public are panic buying at an alarming rate. The stores are failing to re-stock and there are certain items which are becoming increasingly difficult to get a hold of.”

“I have storage space here, I can easily gather supplies,” I agreed instantly as I knocked the covers off of me and stalked downstairs.

“Good. Toilet paper stores are running particularly low and the manufacturers are having trouble keeping up the supply chain.”

“Got it.” I made it to the fridge and drew out a bottle of water so that I could banish the damn roughness in my voice.

Father hesitated and that was enough to make me fall still. That man was the king of the pregnant pause. He could use a simple lull in conversation to make you feel a thousand different emotions at will, but this time I could have sworn that it was a genuine sign that he was unsure about what to say next.

The sound of a door closing came down the line and I fell still, wondering what could possibly be so damn important that he didn’t trust his staff to hear it.

“Listen to me, Saint. This thing, this virus, it’s getting worse before it gets better. A lot worse. I suggest you prepare the means to keep yourself

isolated for an extended period of time just in case you need to.”

“I can stock The Temple with everything we need,” I assured him.

“If you plan on letting others join you while you quarantine yourselves, pick carefully. You don’t need to be carrying dead weight through this.”

“I never do.”

“Good.”

“Have the CDC got any news about a vaccine?” I asked him. We’d be on the front line to receive one once it was produced at least. Money could certainly guarantee that much.

“Slowly. Too fucking slowly. Stay safe, Son, the future of our family lies in your blood.”

“You too, Father.”

That was the closest anyone in my family ever came to implying love for each other and we didn’t express even that much all that often. This virus situation really was getting bad.

The line went dead and I pursed my lips as I moved to the drawers beside the front door and pulled out a lighter and a firecracker. I headed down the short corridor to Blake’s room at the back of the building first, pushing his door open and looking in at him where he slept in the middle of his huge bed.

“Wake up,” I snapped. “We have work to do.”

Blake cursed as he pushed himself upright, scrubbing the sleep from his eyes as he called out to ask me what work, but I was already heading down the hall to open Kyan’s door.

I lit the fuse and tossed the firecracker into his room before pulling the door shut again and striding away.

I made it back to the kitchenette before the thing exploded and Kyan’s curses poured through the building.

He burst out of his room and ran at me with the clear intention to beat the living shit out of me for that prank but there was no time for that shit.

“Suck it up, Kyan,” I snarled. “This is important.”

The rage in his eyes flared as the bloodlust called to him but through pure force of will, he managed to fall still. He stood in the centre of the corridor, muscles flexed and hair spilling into his eyes as he panted with the desire to rip me a new one and waited for my explanation.

Blake appeared behind him and I set my water down on the counter. “We need to go and secure supplies in case of a shortage,” I said in a tone that brokered no arguments.

“Now?” Blake asked.

“No. I just woke you up in the middle of the fucking night to say let’s do it tomorrow,” I deadpanned.

“Alright, asshole, I’m just asking. No need to get your cock in a knot over it.”

Kyan snorted a laugh at the joke, I did not.

“Are we locking Tatum in the bathroom while we’re gone or bringing her?” Kyan asked, scrubbing a hand over his face in an attempt to wake himself up more thoroughly.

I hadn’t given much thought to the situation yet, but I guessed it made sense to bring her. “Get her up, tell her she’s coming with us but not why, we’ll need the extra man power and I don’t wanna outsource this. Let her piss herself thinking we’re taking her out to kill her until we get to the kitchens. But do it quickly – we leave in three minutes.”

“Done,” Kyan turned and stalked back to his room and I met Blake’s gaze as he lingered.

“Your dad thinks the Hades Virus is gonna make it all the way out here?” he asked.

“My dad thinks it’s practical to prepare for the worst and be pleasantly surprised if it doesn’t come to pass, rather than hope for the best and be left standing with your jaw wide if everything does go to shit. Now hurry up, we’re down to one minute.”

He turned and walked away from me and I hurried back upstairs to pull on sweatpants and a black hoody. I never dressed this casually unless I was working out, but I didn’t have the time to worry about that now. I didn’t even do my fucking hair. The world really must have been coming to an end.

When I made it back downstairs, I found them all waiting for me. Kyan had given Tatum one of his hoodies to wear. It fell down to her mid thigh over her leggings and had the words *Paradise waits for no man* scrawled across the black fabric in pink lettering. There was some move being made there. He hadn’t given that to her out of the kindness of his heart. He didn’t even have a heart. Whatever the fuck he was playing at could wait though. I didn’t have time for it right now.

I moved to the side of the room and lifted one of the flagstones to reveal the safe hidden beneath it, quickly entering the code and opening it before pulling out the set of master keys for the entire campus. This had been a prize that took some getting, but through a series of blackmail letters and a few nice, honest bribes, I’d managed to get members of the cleaning staff to duplicate every single key on campus. Just in case.

I threw the keys in my pocket and locked the safe again before hiding it once more.

“C’mon.” I led the Night Keepers out into the dark where a crisp frost coated everything and we started jogging for the Redwood Dining Hall.

The only sound in the still grounds was that of our pounding feet and heated breaths which sent little clouds of vapour billowing around us.

The others kept up with me and I changed our pace to a run, glancing up at the starlit sky as the moon shone down on us.

We made it to the dining hall and I led everyone around back to the kitchens and store rooms. There were two thousand kids attending Everlake Prep, not to mention the staff. So they kept a hell of a lot of supplies onsite to feed us. Though that number had dropped significantly now that a lot of the students had taken their chance to run home to Mommy and Daddy. At last count, we were down to about a thousand - half the usual amount of students.

I quickly unlocked the doors and led the way into the darkened space.

The huge kitchens sat before us but I ignored them, turning left towards the store room and hesitating by a rack of keys which hung on the wall.

“You two go and pull a few carts around to load up,” I commanded, pointing at the keys. The staff here used golf carts with trailers to transport stuff from the delivery point at the main gate and take it around campus so we could use them too. “Barbie, you’re with me.”

If Tatum Rivers was afraid of being left alone with me in the dark, she didn’t mention it and she dutifully followed me further into the building as Kyan and Blake left to get the carts.

I opened the double doors at the end of the short corridor and flicked on a light to illuminate the huge room. There were stacks and stacks of all kinds of tins and containers everywhere, labelled to show what kind of food they held and I hesitated as I looked at it all, realising one small issue with my grand plan. I had no fucking idea how any of this shit was put together to create something edible.

“What are we doing here?” Tatum breathed, giving in to her need to ask at last.

I smirked as I realised I had her to myself for the first time, but I didn't have time to indulge in any of the dark and sinful things I wanted to do to her.

"Gathering supplies," I growled. "I've been advised to prepare for a period of complete lockdown and luckily for you, you'll be in the house with all the food."

"You think we'll have to lock ourselves in The Temple? The four of us?" she asked and I didn't miss the horror in her tone at the thought of that. And who could blame her really, I wouldn't want to be locked up with three bored demons for days on end if I was her. Who knew what cruel and terrible things we might do to her?

"Tell me, Tatum," I said, turning to pin her in my gaze and ignoring her question as I asked one of my own. "Are you one of those society brats who never has a clue how your food makes it onto your plate or did your daddy want to instil a sense of independence in you by encouraging you to cook for yourself?"

She frowned for a moment before it all clicked together for her.

"I'm guessing you're the brat who just let it appear in front of you?" she challenged.

"Too fucking right I am. And I intend to remain that way. So?" I closed in on her until she was boxed in against a wall of toilet paper and her sweet breath fluttered over my lips. But mixed with the usual scent of vanilla and honey blossom which clung to her, was the scent of cheap whiskey and leather which Kyan always reeked of. I growled beneath my breath as I realised the point of the hoody and Tatum's breath caught at the sound.

"I can cook," she answered my question and I wondered if she thought that would make me leave her alone. But I was hooked on her now, this girl had caught my attention and I didn't see it wavering any time soon. So any

hope she had of that was built on a foundation of sand which I would send crashing down at every opportunity I could.

“Good,” I replied. “Then it looks like we’ll have an in-house chef for the foreseeable future. Though I warn you, I can get quite unpleasant if my food isn’t up to scratch.” I reached out and caught a lock of her blonde hair, twisting it around my finger as she looked up at me.

“You can get quite unpleasant over a lot of things,” she murmured.

“Mmm.” I didn’t disagree with her. I was a venomous creature at the best of times and vicious at the worst.

I shifted closer to her again until her back was pressed to the mountain of toilet paper, still twisting that lock of hair around my finger.

“I’ve been wondering something about you, Tatum Rivers,” I said in a dark tone which commanded all of her attention.

“What’s that?” she asked, seeming equal parts intrigued and repelled as she looked right into my eyes.

There weren’t a lot of people who could hold my eye like that and I smiled at her. It wasn’t friendly. There was more poison in my smile than in a Black Widow spider, but I gave it to her all the same.

“I want to know if you taste as sweet as you look...”

She inhaled sharply at that, her lashes fluttering as her gaze fell on my lips like she was almost tempted to let me find out.

I tugged on the lock of her hair, letting it uncoil as she gasped again and my thumb traced the curve of her lips. They parted for me and my smile darkened as I moved my other hand to the hem of Kyan’s fucking hoody.

“I thought this wasn’t part of the deal,” she said, her breath hitching as I painted my fingers up the outside of her thigh, pushing the hoody up over my wrist as I went.

“So tell me to stop,” I replied, my thumb catching on her bottom lip as I dragged it down. “Or are you curious too?”

My other hand made it to the waistband of her leggings and I skimmed my fingers along to the point just below her naval.

“A kiss from you would be laced with venom,” she said coolly, shifting her head back an inch so that my hand slipped from her mouth.

“I wasn’t offering you a kiss,” I replied, holding her eye as I moved my other hand, running my thumb down the seam of her leggings that dipped between her thighs.

The hint of a moan escaped her as she sucked in a breath and my thumb rode right over her clit.

I didn’t wait for her to reply, or take control by shoving me off of her. I pulled my hand back as quickly as I’d touched her, caught the hem of Kyan’s hoodie and ripped the material upwards, forcing her to raise her arms as I dragged it over her head.

I yanked the fucking thing off of her and she scrambled backwards as I knotted it in my fist, knocking into the toilet paper packages and sending them all tumbling to the floor.

“I don’t want you reeking of another man,” I warned her as she looked at me like she really could see the monster lurking beneath my skin. The T-shirt she wore beneath the hoody was her own so she was in luck – she wasn’t going to have to walk around in her bra for the duration of this little mission.

I turned and strode away from her as I heard the carts pulling up outside, using my keys to open the loading doors at the far end of the store room.

Kyan smirked at me as he spotted the hoody which was still clenched in my fist and I tossed it in his face. “You start dressing our girl in your clothes regularly, we’re going to have a problem,” I growled.

“Yes, boss,” he replied, tossing me a salute to go with the asshole smirk and I was damn tempted to punch him.

I threw a glance at the space in the back of the cart instead and turned back into the store room to gather supplies as he left to get another cart.

“C’mon then, Barbie, if you wanna avoid pissing me off, I suggest you start pointing out all the things in here that you’re going to need to keep me fed in the way that I like,” I called and Tatum gritted her teeth as she moved to follow my orders.

“Fine,” she ground out and for once, I let someone else tell me what to do as I followed her directions, piling up the carts with all manner of tinned and dry food as well as some fresh stuff that we would be able to use in the days to come.

Once Kyan and Blake were helping too, we made fast work of piling everything we needed onto the carts. I insisted on taking the entire fucking stockpile of toilet paper too. If that was gonna become currency then just call me the bank of Saint Memphis. If anyone wanted to wipe their asses they’d be coming to me to trade in gifts and favours and I couldn’t fucking wait.

By the time the carts were stacked and the store room shelves were looking suspiciously empty, the sun was just beginning to spill over the edge of the horizon.

All four of us were coated in a layer of sweat and I’d long since ditched my hoody. Delivery personnel were seriously under paid for doing this kind of work all day. *Must suck to be them.*

Blake gave me a hand as I locked up, leaving Kyan to look after our girl while we checked we hadn’t left any evidence behind in our rush to gut the place.

People talked about preppers and hoarders like they're a bunch of vultures, circling a fresh kill and just making the scene of the death worse. The news was full of stories of people fighting it out over a pack of toilet paper like their entire fucking life depended on wiping their ass until it shined and there was an unnatural addiction to dried pasta taking place too. But what they always forgot about vultures was that the lions had to come and make that kill in the first place. And though the Hades Virus panic may have been a little late in coming to Everlake Prep, we'd just drawn first blood. And I was sure that carnage would soon follow as the vultures flocked to find the carcass picked clean.

Once I was sure that no one could irrefutably point the grand theft toilet paper back to us, I locked up the doors around the front of the building and circled back to the carts.

"Do you think Headmaster Brown is gonna know it was us?" Blake asked me with a smirk that said he was looking forward to the carnage this would create.

"He may have an inkling," I agreed, my own lips curving up in amusement.

"Priceless. I can't wait to see him lose his shit. I bet his face gets all red like a beetroot and his fucking beard sets fire."

I snorted a laugh at that mental image as we headed around the back of the building to meet the others.

I fell still as I rounded the corner and spotted Barbie perched in Kyan's lap as he showed her how to drive the fucking thing. His tattooed arms were tight around her waist and he guided her hands with his as he placed them on the steering wheel like she couldn't figure out how to steer it for herself.

"Why do I get the feeling Kyan really is considering breaking his no rich girls rule with her?" Blake muttered and I glanced at him as his lip peeled

back like he was disgusted, but that look in his eye was pure, unchecked jealousy.

“Do you really care that much?” I muttered as Kyan’s dark laughter reached us. *What the fuck? He hardly ever laughed and only with one of us. Not some fucking girl.*

“I just don’t think the bitch deserves any orgasms,” Blake grumbled and I bit down on a laugh at that as we continued to watch them while they seemed utterly oblivious to any other fucking thing in the world.

“Well be sure to tell Kyan to be selfish when he fucks her and maybe she won’t get any out of the transaction,” I teased.

“Maybe I should,” Blake muttered. “Because it sure looks like they’ll be at it before long.”

I scowled as I watched them, a prickle dancing beneath my skin that started out as an itch but soon began to build into a burn. Barbie didn’t seem in as much of a hurry to get away from him as she had been from me and my jaw ticked.

She leaned back against his bare chest and he placed a hand on her knee as she shifted her foot to the accelerator.

“The thing has no gears and only two pedals,” I growled as I closed in on them with Blake one step behind me. “She doesn’t need a ride on your dick to help her figure out which one means start and which one means stop.”

“If she was riding on my dick we wouldn’t be stopping any time soon,” Kyan joked, tossing me a look that said he believed he could have her if he wanted to. But the look in Barbie’s eyes said he could fuck right off. Mostly. “At least not unless she used the safe word.”

“I find it hard to believe that any word would keep me safe around the three of you,” Tatum growled before turning her gaze on me. Her blue eyes looked like chips of ice in the pale light of dawn and she fixed me with a

look that said she hated me right down to her core. “And if it bothers you so much that Kyan keeps ordering me into his lap then why don’t you just order *him* not to? Because that’s how your little threesome works, right? When it comes down to it, you’re in charge and the other two are just your little bitches.”

Kyan’s hand moved from her knee to her throat in less than a second and he yanked her back against his chest as his grip tightened enough to silence her.

Tatum tried to throw an elbow back into his gut, but Kyan had been brawling since before he’d been crawling. He took the hit with nothing but a dark smile before slamming his arm around her chest and crushing both of her arms to her sides.

My heart leapt as I watched her struggling against him, helpless in his arms and he locked her down with his strength, his grip on her throat just tight enough to stop her from moving.

“Tell me I’m Saint’s little bitch again,” Kyan growled in a low voice that made a tremor of excitement run along my skin.

I fucking loved it when he got like this. I swear, I could practically taste violence coating the air surrounding him and I inhaled deeply, letting it infect me too. Blake looked like he wouldn’t mind it at all if Kyan really did choke her out and he shot me a pissy look too. He hated it when people pointed out the fact that I was in charge, but it wasn’t my problem if he couldn’t handle it. And deep down he knew it was the truth no matter how much he might have wanted to rebuke it.

Tatum stayed silent but if she thought that would be enough to protect her, she was fucking insane.

“I just gave you an order,” Kyan said menacingly, his lips brushing the shell of her ear and making her shiver. It was mostly fear, but I didn’t think

that was all it was. Our little pet had her lips parted, and her chest heaved in a way that said she liked this a bit too. Maybe more than a bit.

She still didn't speak though, her gaze locked on me like she thought I might step in to save her.

You'd be better off begging the devil to come help you, Barbie doll.

"Place her hand on the dash," I said in a low voice as I moved around the cart and pulled a tin of tomatoes from the back of it. Blake laughed darkly and a cruel smile twisted his mouth as he moved closer to the cart to get a front row seat to the show.

Kyan's eyes flashed dangerously and he shifted forward suddenly, crushing Tatum between him and the steering wheel before releasing her throat and snatching her wrist into his grasp.

"Stop!" Tatum yelled as she thrashed and kicked, trying to break free as Kyan forced her hand down on the dash before me. She kept fighting and the smirk on Kyan's face said that he didn't mind her bouncing about in his lap like that.

"You were just given an order, Plague," I said, loud enough for her to hear me over her continued screams. "Are you sure you want to ignore it?"

"C'mon Cinderella, be a good girl and do as you're told," Blake taunted.

I raised the tin above her hand, my muscles tensing as I gripped it tightly.

"Last chance to do as I ordered you," Kyan warned, his grip on her unrelenting as her wild eyes fixed on the tin in my hand.

I swung my arm back, adrenaline sweeping me away on a tide.

"You're Saint's little bitch!" she shrieked as I slammed the tin down with all my strength.

The dash cracked with a bang that even sent bits of plastic flying as the tin slammed into it right beside her hand and Tatum's scream of terror sent an electric current zipping through my body all the way to my toes.

I whooped with excitement and Kyan laughed like a fucking hyena.

“Good to see you got there in the end, baby,” he cooed, lifting her out of the cart as he got to his feet before dumping her back down on her ass behind the wheel.

“You’re insane!” she yelled. “The lot of you are fucking *insane!* You belong in a goddamn psych ward, or better yet a super max!”

“Tough luck, Barbie, people like us don’t get punished for being the way we are – we just use it to rule the fucking world,” I taunted, giving her a feral grin before tossing the tin of tomatoes into her lap.

Blake laughed wildly, whooping with excitement as he ran and leapt into his cart.

Tatum glared at me as she fought to catch her breath, that wild look in her eyes turning me on so much that I was almost tempted to kiss her.

She’d probably punch me for it, but that would only get me harder.

I forced myself to look away from her as Kyan leapt into the next cart, still howling with laughter like he’d never stop.

“Let’s get back to The Temple before the rest of the assholes on campus wake up and realise all of the food is gone,” I said with a wicked smile.

“We need to fill the crypt with this stuff where no one will ever find it. Then I wanna build a fucking throne out of toilet paper right by my window where they can all see me sitting in it as they hunt the forest for leaves that are soft enough to wipe with.”

Blake spun his cart in a few doughnuts which almost made some of the toilet paper on the back of it topple out before tearing away down the hill towards The Temple. Kyan slammed his foot on the accelerator and shot away down the hill after him and I blasted the high pitched horn to make Barbie follow on next. She had the tin of tomatoes gripped in her fist and I

got the impression she was imagining what it would feel like to cave my head in with it.

“Murderous is a good look on you, Barbie,” I called and she had the nerve to flip me the finger.

Luckily for her, I was chasing a high right now though so I just flipped her off right back and laughed as she sped off after Kyan.

I’d never realised that I was fated to be the king of toilet paper, but if that was my destiny in life then I’d happily sit up on my Charmin throne and lord it over everyone.

We made it back to The Temple and I quickly opened the doors as we began to unload the carts. This work really would have been better suited to a few Unspeakables, but I had two very good reasons for not wanting that. Firstly, I didn’t want anyone on campus knowing where we were hiding our stash. And secondly, I absolutely refused to allow anyone inside The Temple aside from me and the other Night Keepers and Rebecca the maid (who I didn’t count because I was still pretending she was just a ghost who cleaned shit as I never saw any sign of her)...and Barbie now too. Although I had to admit that I didn’t hate the addition of her presence as much as I would have expected to.

I carried a crate of tinned beans inside and she followed me with a box of dried pasta in her arms. Kyan and Blake were already heading back out to grab more and a smirk caught on the corner of my lips as I decided to let our little pet help me out with storing the food.

“Follow me,” I snapped at her, not bothering to check that she was as I headed for the door to the crypt and made my way straight down the stairs.

Tatum’s footsteps followed me as we descended into the cold space beneath the old church and I crossed through the gym as I strode straight towards the archway which led into the catacombs.

A few of the other students had asked me from time to time if I found it creepy to be sleeping above all of these dead people down here and my answer had been simple. *I'm not afraid of the dead, I bet my heart is colder than theirs.*

I led Tatum through the stone archway and the light from the room behind us gave us just enough to see by as I drew her further into the echoing space.

There were old prayer chambers located here before the catacombs began and I led the way into one of them before placing my box down. The space was big and cold, like an old school refrigeration system. And best of all, it was completely out of sight so no one would ever know about the food we hid down here.

I stepped back as Barbie placed her box down beside mine, my gaze lingering on the curve of her ass as she bent over. I wasn't sure if it was intentional or not, but every move that girl made just screamed sex to me. I swear she could have been clipping her toenails and she still would have been able to make me hard.

"I want to show you something," I said in a low voice as she straightened and turned back to me.

Her face was in shadow now and I liked the way the darkness kissed her golden skin.

"Okay," she replied like she didn't give a shit either way and I smiled menacingly as I turned and led her further into the darkness of the catacombs.

She didn't voice any complaint, but I could feel the heat of her body almost touching mine as she moved closer to me. Didn't she know that demons only thrived in the dark?

We continued along the short stone passage which housed the prayer chambers and came to a recess carved into the wall where the wax of old candles still clung to the brickwork and a hook held a set of heavy metal keys.

I picked up a flashlight which sat in the bottom of the recess and flicked it on, illuminating the wrought iron gate which blocked the way on.

“Legend has it, that before the catholics came and stole this land to bury their dead, the Kotari tribe used to use it as a burial ground too,” I said in a low voice as I stepped forward to unlock the gate and motioned for her to go ahead of me.

“The settlers did a lot of fucked up things like that when they came here,” she murmured, her chin held high as she fought the urge to be afraid of this place.

“They say that that’s why the ghosts down here are so restless. They’re caught in an eternal war for the place they were laid to rest in. This is holy ground and sacred land, but being both makes it its own special kind of hell. That’s why you can hear them wailing down here, begging for the torment to end.” As if on cue, the wind whisked through the passages, creating that soft, haunting whistle which plagued this place. During a storm it sounded like the catacombs were screaming sometimes, if the wind hit the caves at the far end of this labyrinth just right.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Tatum said defiantly as I gave her a little nudge to make her turn into one of the burial chambers.

A large stone coffin sat in the centre of the space, the name Thomas Smith carved into the side of it. He’d died in Murkwell at the ripe old age of seventy two and had been the mayor back when there used to be a town here instead of a school.

“No? How about the devil then?”

She scoffed lightly just before I flicked the flashlight off and plunged us into darkness.

Tatum gasped and my heart leapt at the thrill of not being able to see her but I lunged forward, aiming for the spot where she'd been and finding her warm body just where I'd expected to.

I shoved her back against the coffin and her hands gripped my biceps as she cried out, the sound echoing beautifully in the caves surrounding us.

"So brave, Barbie," I purred as I pinned her to the coffin with my hips and her grip on my arms tightened.

I kept one hand on her waist while the other still held the flashlight and her breath fluttered over my lips as she panted in fright. I could almost taste the sweetness of her mouth in the space dividing us and despite the fact that I couldn't see a thing, I felt so aware of her body that I was sure I could lean in and find her lips without any effort at all if the notion took me.

"There are worse things than darkness," she growled, her grip on my arms tightening so that her nails dug into my flesh.

"Not when it's inside of you," I purred.

"Do you get off on frightening people?" she demanded and I was guessing she could feel the swell of my dick driving against her, but the way she was parting her thighs made me wonder if she really minded that as much as she was trying to make out.

"I get off on testing people. On finding out what they're made of and exactly what it takes to break them."

"Some people will never break," she growled.

"No," I agreed, reaching up to brush my hand along her cheek and smiling to myself as I found it exactly where I'd expected. We might have been hiding in the dark, but my awareness of her was too sharp to allow for mistakes in that. "But everyone bends." I pushed forward suddenly, forcing

her back so that she fell onto the coffin, her back arched as she was forced to bend her spine and part her thighs further to allow for the movement.

“Saint!” she cried out and though it was a warning and not encouragement, I couldn’t help but enjoy the way my name sounded as it echoed off of the walls in the dark.

“There’s a way out down here, you know?” I said in a low voice. “Though there are so many tunnels and passages that it’s not easy to find it. But if you tried really hard, you’d come to a second gate. And beyond that, there’s a cave which opens up down by the lake.”

“Why are you telling me that?” she panted beneath me, her hands pressed to my shoulders like she was going to push me off but she hadn’t tried to yet.

“Because if you ever want to take your chance at running from us then I thought you’d like to know how... Of course, monsters hunt best in the dark, so if you do attempt it, you’d better be prepared for what happens when we catch you.”

Tatum sucked in a breath and I clicked the flashlight on again, stepping back as I looked down at her.

She shoved herself upright again, her cheeks flushed beneath the scattering of freckles which lined them and her blue eyes dropped to the thick line of my cock as it pressed against my sweatpants.

“Tempted?” I teased her and her gaze snapped straight back up to meet mine.

“Fuck you,” she growled.

“Not yet, Barbie. I want you begging for it before I hate fuck you and so far you’re only panting.”

“As if I’d want to get anywhere near your-”

“Stop fucking around down here,” I snapped. “We’ve got supplies to unload.”

I turned and headed away from her with the only source of light and she soon scrambled after me rather than be left down here in the dark.

I locked the gate again and hung the key back on the hook, but I pocketed the flashlight. If Barbie wanted to try running that way, she could do it in darkness. And I had to admit that I was kind of hoping she’d try it. Because I’d really liked the way her body had felt against mine while I couldn’t see a thing down there, and I wanted to hear a lot more of her screams echoing through those tunnels too.



I stood in the kitchenette, making all of them breakfast while Saint worked out, Kyan went for a run with Blake then all of them showered. I'd spent nearly an hour building a freaking throne out of the toilet paper in the centre of the church on Saint's command. And though it admittedly looked pretty good *thank you very much*, it was also fucking ridiculous.

By the time the Night Keepers were dropping into seats on one side of the dining table in their uniforms, I already had their food plated up. Dad had taught me and Jessica to cook when we were younger. He always had to work long and peculiar hours so sharing mealtimes had been pretty rare. And apparently I'd bitched about more than one nanny's cooking when I was a kid.

I wasn't a snob or anything, I just knew how I liked my food. And I'd been more than happy to get in the kitchen and learn to make it for me and my sister. Apart from anything else, it was a survival skill too. In the wild, Saint Memphis and his pals would have lasted less than a week. I, on the other hand, would have thrived hunting out natural resources and living off

of the land. That was true power when it came down to it. Something none of them could claim if they were ever thrown into the wilderness with nothing but their two hands to fend for themselves. *I must remember to make that my next birthday wish.*

Even though I had my plan to take them down, I still had to play along with their rules in the meantime. Kyan liked to flirt, but I didn't think I was making much headway with getting under his skin. I didn't really understand why Monroe thought I could get to him when he clearly kept his heart in an iron cage. It probably took part in its own illegal fighting games while it was in there too. But I was still determined to try and crack him. I just didn't know how I was going to manage it.

One good thing had come out of the four am madness; that little mission to fetch food and toilet paper had shown me just how Saint reacted when the ground got shaky beneath his feet. At the slightest whiff of a supply shortage, he'd taken nearly everything for himself. The school was going to be living on tinned soup, potatoes and beans for the foreseeable future until another delivery came in. And when they ran out of toilet paper in their rooms and the school bathrooms, there was gonna be a flood of followers showing up here to offer god only knew what in exchange for some.

Saint had ensured he remained a king while the rest of the world fell to ruin around him. It was people like that who thrived in world-wide disasters. He'd no doubt come out the other end of this richer and more powerful than he'd been before. And that was the sad truth about life. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

I considered spitting in their food, but figured that wasn't really my style and at least one of the little psychos would probably like it. I didn't want any piece of me in their mouths anyway. Though sometimes, the darker part of me had filthy daydreams about each of them raking their tongues across

her flesh. But that was just in my mind. No way in hell were those fantasies going to manifest.

I placed Blake's pancakes down followed by Saint's eggs and avocado on toast, then Kyan's greasy fried everything. I'd arranged his fry-up into the shape of a smiley face with streaky bacon eyebrows and a runny egg for a nose. He seemed to like my humour, so maybe that was a way to win him over.

He barked a laugh, before grabbing his fork and digging in. I smirked as I handed them all coffees, having learned their preferences already. Blake drank his black while Kyan had his with a load of milk and three freaking sugars. Saint had a triple shot of espresso of course- he probably needed the overdose of caffeine to keep his dead heart beating.

When I was done, I headed around to the other side of the table and waited to be dismissed.

"I hope you like the broken glass topping I added to yours, Saint," I said sweetly. "Oh sorry, I meant salt. I get those two things confused sometimes."

Kyan laughed through a mouthful of food while Blake ignored me and Saint glared evenly at me over his plate.

"You think you're funny, Barbie?" he asked coolly. "Because humour will only get you one place with me. Bent over my knee with my hand against your ass. Now sit down and eat your own breakfast."

My heart lurched and heat spilled through my body at his words. I tried not to blush, but shit, that image had been kinda hot.

I frowned as I thought of his command. I hadn't even bothered to make myself anything despite the fact that my stomach had been growling at me for it. The pasta Saint had offered me last night had turned out to be laced with vodka too so if it hadn't been for Monroe's protein bars, I probably

would have been coping a lot worse right now. As it was, I had a fair bit of resolve left so I sashayed my way to the fridge and plucked out a crispy lettuce leaf, fighting a grin.

I walked back towards their table, running my tongue up the leaf and moaning like it was my favourite food in the world. I took large bites of it, swallowing it down as I dropped into my seat, making a show of how much I was enjoying it.

When I was done, I found them all looking at me like starving men and I was surprised the table hadn't risen a few inches, propped up on their boners. *Holy shit, those crazy assholes seriously enjoyed that.*

"Delicious." I smacked my lips together and Kyan snorted as he drank his coffee.

"You're one crazy bitch," Blake commented and I offered him a blank look.

"Takes one to know one, huh Blake?"

"You'll start calling each of us master as of *now*," Saint cut in icily, a cruel flare in his eyes.

I breathed out slowly, trying to keep my anger in check before nodding. Blake sniggered, leaning back in his seat and sipping his coffee with victory in his eyes.

"Of course, *master*," I put too much emphasis on the word, mocking Saint, but he clearly liked it anyway. Dammit.

"By the way, Cinderella, your Fairy God Mother showed up here last night," Blake said offhandedly, taking a long drink of his coffee as he smirked. "She was a real fighter but I managed to stuff her in a bag and drown her in the lake."

"Damn, I've been tending to my pumpkin patch all week waiting for her to arrive," I played along instead of rising to his shit.

He leaned his elbows on the table, making his muscles flex beneath his school shirt in a way that I couldn't ignore. "Guess there'll be no royal ball for you to attend, Cinders."

"I've got a couple of royal balls you can tend to," Kyan chipped in and a laugh escaped me. Even Blake's mouth pulled up at the corner for half a second before he vanquished it from his face. For a moment, I'd seen a glimmer of the guy I'd been addicted to at the initiation party. His eyes locked on mine and his throat bobbed before he drained his coffee and took out his phone, giving his full attention to the screen. My heart tugged and I realised I actually missed the fun, golden boy I'd known for half a second.

"Enough chit chat. Go and fetch a banana," Saint instructed me sharply and I slipped out of my seat, grabbing one for him and placing it down beside his plate. Before I could escape, he caught my wrist, yanking me down to sit on his knee and dropping his hand onto my thigh.

He pulled me closer into the arc of his powerful body and my heart thrashed wildly against my chest as he brought his face near to mine. He reached out to brush a lock of hair behind my ear, but it wasn't tender. He was trying to perfect my imperfections, tidying back the stray hairs and eyeing my makeup for blemishes. Seemingly satisfied, he jerked his chin at the banana.

"Peel it," he demanded.

I picked it up, clearing my throat as I caught Kyan's eye and saw the flash of jealousy in his gaze. I realised I could use this to my advantage despite the fact that being this close to Saint made my skin prickle and my blood burn with hate. But he was a sinful temptation I could pretend to want easily enough, and maybe it wasn't *all* a pretence, because as I met his inky gaze, heat gathered between my thighs.

I peeled the banana, placing the skin down on the table, expecting to feed him like I had the other day. Instead, he took it from my hands and pressed it to my lips, his hand inching up my thigh at the same moment.

I inhaled sharply and he pushed the banana between my lips, leaning in close to my ear. “Eat,” he commanded and it wasn’t like when Monroe had said it. This was as much of a threat as it was a command. I closed my mouth around the fruit and Kyan continued to glance this way. Apparently he liked what I was doing so I even let out a little moan of delight at how good it tasted. And in fairness, it did taste fucking good. I wasn’t normally a noisy eater, but it was worth the overreaction as Kyan’s expression grew fiercer.

Saint’s hand slipped beneath my skirt and my legs parted for him instinctively as he pushed the banana deeper into my mouth. *Oh shit.*

I was losing my cool, my heart fluttering and my breathing quickening. But maybe that was a good thing because it looked like Kyan was losing his cool too. His fists were balling and the simmering shades of gold in his eyes said he wanted to drag me out of Saint’s lap into his.

“You need to stay healthy, Barbie. You eat when we eat. And you eat proper food.” Saint spoke as if *I’d* been the one to decide I wanted to eat nothing but three lettuce leaves yesterday and that pissed me off to my core. I closed my legs, trapping his hand between them and his gaze darkened to midnight.

I finished the banana and swallowed it down, keeping him in my gaze. “Thanks for breakfast, your assholiness.”

He tugged his fingers free from between my thighs then whipped me over in his lap before I could do a thing to stop him. My heart soared into my throat as he flipped my skirt up so my ass was pointed right at Kyan and he spanked me hard enough to make me yelp.

I looked up at Blake through a curtain of hair and even he looked fucking surprised. The sting of Saint's hand resounded right through to my core but it was nothing to the second time his hand slammed against my flesh. The bite of pain made me gasp but a burning sweetness followed, driving up between my legs and hell it felt *so* good, I started panting.

Saint flipped my skirt back down to cover my no doubt reddened ass cheeks then pulled me upright. I scrambled back onto my feet, pushing my hair back out of my face, unsure what the fuck to do with myself. I was flustered and hot, humiliated and turned on all at once.

What the hell just happened? And why did I like it?

Saint stood from his chair so suddenly that it clattered down onto the floor. I fell into his shadow and he gazed down his nose at me, his eyes hardening like frost. "You talk to me like that again and you're gonna get spanked. Every. Time. Until you *learn*. Do you understand me?"

My lips parted wordlessly. My ass was still burning from the clap of his palm and my body was starting to ache with need.

"Got it," I breathed, faking a lip quiver so he'd think I was scared. But I was sure I was going to misbehave again. Like soon. Real soon. Because shit, apparently I liked being spanked. But I wasn't gonna let him know it, or he'd make sure to never do it again. And if that was how he decided to punish me going forward, then I was gonna be bad more often.

"Saint Memphis!" a booming voice made my heart lurch and I turned towards the front door as Headmaster Brown threw it open and strode into The Temple. Which, from the furious look on Saint's face, was not acceptable. Brown pointed an accusing finger at him, striding forward at a fierce pace. "You've gone too far this time, boy!"

Kyan and Blake were on their feet in less than a second and the three of them swept forward to intercept the Headmaster.

My heart pounded excitedly in my chest. I was about to see the shady bunch get put in their box at last!

“What can I help you with, sir?” Saint asked, a dangerous edge to his tone that was almost imperceptible.

“You know exactly why I’m here,” Brown snarled.

I drifted closer, drawn by the drama while hoping Brown was about to toss them all in detention for the rest of the year.

Saint folded his arms and the three of them shared looks of confused innocence.

“No, actually,” Saint said icily. “I’m very unclear as to why you barged into my home without an invite, *sir*.” His tone was totally lacking in respect and as Brown glared between the three of them, I could tell who had the real power in this room. But surely they had to listen to the Headmaster even if they didn’t want to?

“Unclear huh?” Brown growled. “Well let me make this a whole lot clearer. Last night, someone or *someones*-” He glared between all three guys. “-broke into the storage parlour and took not only most of the food supplies, but all of the toilet paper too.”

“Well I do hope you catch the culprit, sir,” Kyan said, rubbing his thumb against the corner of his mouth to hide his smirk.

“*You* are the culprits!” Brown roared and not one of them flinched. In fact, Blake even yawned, heading away and leaning back against the couch, clearly done with the conversation.

Brown’s finger swung towards the huge toilet paper throne beside the stained glass window. “What is that then, huh? Are you going to accuse me of being delusional as well as stupid?”

Saint pressed his shoulders back, emphasising the inches of height he had on Brown and to his credit, the Headmaster didn’t even balk. “I’ve had

that toilet paper throne for ages, haven't I guys?"

"Ages," Kyan and Blake agreed then Saint shot me a look over his shoulder, beckoning me closer.

Kyan circled around to herd me into the conversation, sliding his hand into mine and keeping me close. "Tatum will tell you."

Brown was turning a nasty shade of red as his eyes swung to me and my throat thickened. Lying straight to the headmaster's face was just another way for the Night Keepers to control me. They were gonna take me down with them if this went south. But what choice did I have?

"Ages," I agreed and Brown shook his head with a snarl.

"You'd better put every last item back by the end of the day, or so help me Mr Memphis, I'll-"

"You'll what?" Saint strode forward until he was nose to nose with Brown. My heart clenched at the danger in his tone and I instinctively squeezed Kyan's fingers, drawing his eyes to me. But I couldn't look away from the headmaster. I could sense Saint's threat everywhere, my body was alive with it. But Brown didn't seem to notice. There was a power in the Night Keepers which lingered on the air at all times but when they unleashed it in full force it was totally captivating, enthralling and damn terrifying too.

Brown lifted a finger to point in Saint's face and a ripple of tension passed through the three of them. They were connected in that moment, unified against him. And I knew the feeling.

"I'll call your father, how about that?" Brown hissed. "Let's see what Governor Memphis has to say about his son acting like a spoiled brat who was never taught to share."

Saint suddenly grabbed hold of Brown's extended finger, bending it backwards so hard I gasped in horror. Brown roared in anger and pain,

stumbling back as he tried to get free of him. “Firstly, never, *ever* point your grubby little fingers in my face,” Saint snarled, twisting Brown’s finger sharply so he cried out once more. “And secondly, what do you think the most powerful man in the state would do to someone who called his son a liar?”

My jaw dropped as Brown yelped once more, our headmaster sweaty and red as he tried and failed to get his finger free of Saint’s grip.

“I imagine well-paid jobs are going to become really rare soon, *sir*. And with my mother being on the school board, it wouldn’t be hard for her to tug on a few puppet strings,” Saint hissed. “Which side of the wall do you want to be on when society crumbles?”

“You little shit!” Brown yelled and Saint released him with a tsk.

Brown hugged his hand to his chest, trying to get his composure back, but he looked like a far smaller man than he had when he’d walked in. I was shocked into silence as I stood there, having no idea what to do.

“It’s your choice,” Blake said in a cold voice, moving forward to rub shoulders with Saint again. Kyan pulled me forward too, lining me up beside him. Brown’s eyes slid to me, his features twisting as he marked me out as one of *them*. I wanted to scream that I wasn’t, that I hated them as much as he clearly did. But I’d only be punished for it. And I didn’t think I’d enjoy it this time.

Brown clenched his jaw, his eyes whipping back and forth along the four of us. “This isn’t over. Mark my words.” He turned and stalked out of the building and a ragged breath escaped my lungs.

Saint adjusted his tie then walked straight back over to the breakfast table to finish his meal, acting like he’d never been interrupted. Blake slid onto the couch to watch TV and I stood there, realising my hand was still

locked in Kyan's grip. I glanced up at him under my lashes and he mouth twitched at the corner.

"We look after our own," he said in a low voice. "It's cutthroat, baby, but it's how we survive. We're extending that to you, so you'd better remember to offer the same courtesy." He released my hand and I was left in the wake of his threat. Or had it been a reassurance?

It struck me that the Night Keepers did have a survival plan after all. They were the type of beasts that could make the most powerful of people quake in the night. And it only worked because they were so unquestionably unified. If you were their enemy, so fucking help you. I knew that better than anyone. And somehow, I was sure the worst was yet to come.

I made it through a relatively painless day at school considering the fact that most people simply ignored my existence. The Night Keepers threatened anyone who even looked at me for too long, so I at least didn't have to worry about getting called names anymore. For reasons beyond my comprehension, they didn't want anyone abusing their precious little pet but them.

My phone buzzed as I made it to the lake, hoping to steal an hour or so to myself in the Hemlock Library. But fate was not on my side.

King of the Fuckwits:

Come to The Temple. It's time to learn the rules.

I clenched my jaw, sending him a squid emoji just to mess with him. He couldn't get mad at it; it was harmless. But I knew it would piss him off all the same.

I headed back to The Temple, dragging my heels until I pushed through the door and prepared myself for another evening in hell.

Kyan and Blake were sprawled on the couch playing video games again. They didn't even look up as I entered, but the two of them raised their hands and pointed toward the upper level where Saint's room was located.

"Thanks underlings," I taunted, breezing past them and feeling their resulting glares following me.

I headed up the wooden stairway and my heart started to pound out of rhythm as I reached the top. This space felt sacred, off limits. And being summoned here was just another power play. The first thing I knew as I reached the balcony was that Saint dominated this room.

The exposed, grey brick walls were bare and a huge circular, stained glass window cast the enormous bed before it in blue and green light; a tree was featured in the ornate image, a juicy red apple hanging down enticingly from a branch to seemingly perch above Saint's head.

Everything in the space was immaculate. From the rack of vinyl beside a freaking old school record player to the single nightstand and organised dark wood desk.

Saint stood at the end of the bed in a smart shirt and slacks, his hands clasped behind his back and his body haloed in light like he was an angel. It was a twisted kind of joke that didn't amuse me in the slightest.

My gaze fell on my suitcase which was parked at the side of his room beside a closet.

"This transition has been sloppy," Saint spoke, breaking the silence but increasing the tension in the air tenfold.

I put on a mask of indifference, stepping further into the room and brushing my finger over the record player as if checking it for dust. I frowned at my hand then wiped it down my blazer.

“Tut tut, you need a cleaner.” It was spotless of course, but Saint’s right eye twitched as he glanced over at the record player with a glimmer of doubt in his gaze.

He cleared his throat, continuing with whatever the hell he’d been saying. “You haven’t been given clear guidelines of how this is going to work. So I’m going to set that straight right now.”

My ears pricked up as I looked to him, slowing to a halt and folding my arms. I left a good few feet of room between us; I didn’t wanna get too close to this snake in case it decided to bite.

“You will now wait outside the crypt at six am sharp, every day. No exceptions. You will kneel outside the door and say nothing until I address you after my workout.”

I bit down on my tongue, rage burning hot inside me like lava. “What’s the point?”

“The point,” he said in a level yet sharp tone. “Is to learn obedience, structure, routine.”

“Right.” I rolled my eyes and his glare nearly scolded me.

“At seven thirty am you will make breakfast for each of us. It will be on the table by eight. No sooner, no later.”

I tongued my cheek, wanting to refute every single order he gave me. But I was going to be forced to do this one way or the other. I had to go along with this bullshit until I could pick apart their little gang one thread at a time. It wasn’t my usual style. Patience was a virtue and all, it just wasn’t one I’d been gifted with. But for these fuckers’ downfall, I could wait a millennia.

“By eight fifteen you will be in the shower,” he went on. “And at eight thirty sharp you will come up here in nothing but this robe.” He turned to his bed, picking up a white silk robe lying there and handing it to me on the hanger.

“What?” I breathed, a flicker of concern running through me. “I’m not coming up here in *that*.”

“Yes you are,” he growled, his tone allowing no room for an argument. “If I wanted to fuck you, I’d have you come up here in a lot less, Barbie.”

My spine straightened as I snatched the robe from his hand, tossing it over my arm. I’d be making sure that it got good and creased by the time he saw me in it.

“Then what?” I snapped.

“Then...” He smiled, jerking his head to make me follow him as he headed to the closet across the room.

I stepped after him out of sheer curiosity and as he pushed the door to the closet open, my breathing hitched. I even entered his personal space and inhaled his brimstone scent as I surveyed the large room. On the left were Saint’s clothes - smart suits, sweatpants, shirts and perfectly ironed uniforms with folded ties and even folded freaking boxers.

On the right, the entire space had been filled with beautiful designer clothes. Dresses and tops of silk, lace, cashmere. Then the finest denim jeans, harem pants, shorts, skirts, workout gear. I recognised some of my own clothing from my suitcase, but most of it looked new. There were uniforms too, perfectly ironed, just like his. But there was one addition to them. Beneath the Everlake crest, threaded there in gold were the words, *Property of the Night Keepers*.

My upper lip curled back at the words and my neck prickled as I felt Saint closing the space behind me. He toyed with a lock of my hair and I

shuddered as he pressed a finger to my spine, running it straight down the length of my back. Goosebumps exploded across my skin and I despised myself for the physical reaction I had to his touch. The wildest part of me couldn't help but get hot for Saint Memphis. He was the ultimate bad deed. And she wanted to commit it hard. Not that I'd ever freaking let her.

My gaze fell on the underwear at the far end of the long closet and I scowled.

I stepped toward it with my jaw falling slack. The most lavish lingerie I'd ever seen filled the shelves. It was all delicate, sexy, fifty shades worthy.

"This is too far." I spun around with fury in my heart. "I have my own clothes. I'll wear your stupid uniforms if you want, but *this* stuff." I gestured to the incredible array of things. Sure, if I'd been gifted them under any other circumstances I would have been thrilled. But I wasn't going to let this asshole *dress* me.

Saint's eyes turned to pitch and I was suddenly very aware of being alone with him in here. He strode toward me and I pressed my back to the wall in an attempt to put as much distance between us as possible. But he kept coming.

"I decide what's too far and what isn't," he growled, his voice driving shards of ice right into my soul. "You're going to be the best dressed Barbie doll in the world. *My* doll."

A lump rose in my throat and for a moment I wondered what had happened to this guy to make him like this. To need to control everything and everyone around him. The money he must have spent to get me these things was absurd. And why he felt the need to do it was so beyond my grasp, it was as if we were different species.

"Why?" I blurted, sure he'd never answer, but I couldn't fight my curiosity. "I don't understand."

His brows rose ever-so-slightly and he drew in a slow breath. “I like things a certain way-”

“But *why*?” I cut over him and his eyes flashed dangerously, but there was a dark kind of desire there too that made my thighs clench together.

“It’s just how I am,” he said simply.

“Liar.” I gave him my cheek, staring at the row of shirts to my right which were coordinated from white through ivory to every shade of grey, all the way down to black. He had a *real* colour fetish it seemed.

His shadow surrounded me and he caught my jaw, turning me back to look at him. His fingers were firm, but not painful and the look in his eyes was full of something very almost human.

“Control is power. Without that, what’s the point of life?” He seemed to want a genuine answer to that question and my brow furrowed as I tried to concentrate. With his fresh, apple scent and icy touch making my thoughts blurry, it was difficult to manage. But I did.

“Enjoyment? Compassion? Friends? Family? *Love*?”

He tsked, half rolling his eyes at me. “Most people in this world will stab you in the back and claw their way over your dead corpse to take everything you own. Most of your so-called friends would do it in a heartbeat. Your family too. There are a minute number of people in life who you can truly rely on, your job is to figure out who they are fast then learn how to be the most powerful one amongst them to keep them in check.”

I gave him a look of pity because if that was really what he thought life was about, we were never going to understand each other. And he was never going to be happy. Not that I was too bothered about that part. At least the bastard was miserable, though he probably didn’t even realise it.

He released my chin, running his hand over his short hair as he kept himself perfectly composed. I wondered if he ever let his inhibitions slip. I

couldn't imagine what that would look like. He was as rigid as the tin man and just as heartless.

He headed back into his room and I turned to the lingerie, picking up a little black thong. Sure, it was hot. I mean, I wasn't exactly complaining about the quality of this shit. I loved wearing stuff like this. But I never wore it because someone told me to, I wore it to feel good. Was he going to expect a freaking catwalk in it? Because there was no chance in hell of that happening.

"Come out," he called and I cursed him under my breath as I exited the closet and found him leaning on the balcony railing.

I moved to his side, my eyes falling to Kyan and Blake on the couch below. They didn't seem remotely interested in this side of things. Kyan liked the thrill of telling me what to do and me fighting back before I did it, but he didn't get off on controlling me down to the colour of my freaking underwear. No, that special weirdness was just Saint's style. And Blake? Well I didn't think he cared what they did with me so long as I ended up hurt by it. He wanted me bleeding and I imagined if I ever got too comfortable in this place, he'd soon make sure that didn't last.

Saint's hand fell to the base of my spine and I worked hard to keep my breathing even as he moved closer. "You will return here after classes every day. If you have work to do, you can do it at my desk up here."

I shook my head, turning to him sharply enough to knock his hand off of my back. "How am I going to concentrate on my work with three hell hounds breathing down my neck? I need some time to spend in the library. Some *space*."

His lips became tight. "If you prove your obedience, you can earn yourself privileges like that. But for now, you will return here as soon as classes are out and remain here unless one of us says otherwise."

I ground my teeth together, the sound gnawing at my ears.

“Stop grinding your teeth,” Saint instructed sharply and my hands tightened around the railing.

“If I stop grinding them, a lot of insults are gonna pour out, Saint, is that what you’d prefer?”

“What did I say about using our names?” he hissed and my pulse spiked as I glared at him.

Part of me wondered if he’d spank me again and that part was also down on her knees, flipping up her skirt and begging for it. *Shit – no. Don’t let this sadistic beast into your fantasies.*

“Sorry, master,” I said dryly. So dryly my mouth felt like a cactus was growing in it. It did not feel good to use that word. It felt like cutting off a piece of my soul and handing it to him.

He smirked, nodding his head in approval and that felt like a slap to the face.

I am not made to bow.

“When is your waxing next due?” he asked casually as if that was a perfectly reasonable thing to ask a person.

“None of your damn business,” I said indignantly.

“Your business is now my business,” he snarled and I pursed my lips as he fixed me with a warning stare that made my heart beat wildly.

“I got laser hair removal back in California,” I said through my teeth.

“Good,” he said, his eyes brightening – and by brighten I mean they went from a soul-filled pit of hell to the inky swirl of the River Styx.

“Any other personal questions you have no right to know the answer to that you wanna air?” I asked lightly, though my insides were knotting and fraying.

“How often does your hair need dyeing?” he asked, apparently wanting this information more than he wanted to rise to my tone.

“This is natural,” I said, tossing my hair over my shoulder. “And you will not be cutting it, or dyeing it, master.” I threw in the last word just to soften the demand I’d just made. I knew if he wanted that, he’d force it. But I would fight tooth and nail for my hair. It was more than just hair, it was my identity. It was the one thing I shared with my sister.

He fisted a hand in that identity suddenly, yanking until I yelped and forcing me even closer to him. “I’ll do whatever I want to it, Barbie. But luckily for you, I happen to like it like this. So long as you keep it clean and styled.”

I fought to keep my features still as he tightened his grip in my hair, trying not to let him see my pain.

He released me suddenly and I battled the urge to rub the sore patch on my scalp. He was a hair-pulling asshat. Had he never grown out of playground games? But maybe he knew pulling someone’s hair was demeaning and effective in belittling them.

“I want a full list of the wash products you require. I like how you smell, I want you to stay that way. Do *not* use any of Blake or Kyan’s shower products,” he commanded and I nodded my agreement at that one. I didn’t wanna smell like any of them anyway.

“And just to be clear, when we said you belong to us mind, body and soul we meant it. Which means that your body belongs to us. As such, *no one* is allowed to touch it without our permission.”

My lips popped open. “So you’re gonna make sure I’m miserable and can’t even get laid to take the edge off?”

He chuckled darkly. “Oh you can get laid if you want, Barbie doll. Just take your pick of which hate fuck you’d like to receive from us first.” His

eyes glittered like a night sky and my upper lip peeled back in disgust.

I stepped closer to him, invading *his* precious space for once. “I might play along with your little game, *master*, but the day I come crawling into any of your beds will be a cold day in hell.”

His eyes lit with my words like I’d struck a match against the coarse exterior of his blackened heart. “You won’t just come crawling, Tatum Rivers, you’ll come begging, aching and soaking.” I opened my mouth to dispute that claim, a rush of anger burning through me, but he looked away with a bored expression. “You’re dismissed,” he wafted me away like I was some homeless person begging for money. Not that I’d personally treat a homeless person like that, but Saint no doubt would.

I lingered there for a long moment with rage eating me up, then took a breath and headed toward the stairs.

It occurred to me that Harry Potter had had it easy in comparison to the Lord Coldemort who was currently making my life a misery. At least Harry had had friends. And Dumbledore. *Man, I wish I had a Dumbledore.* I supposed Monroe kinda counted. He was like a hot Dumbledore you wanted to *Slytherin* to bed with and suck his Elder wand.

I paused before I headed downstairs. There was one thing I really wanted to get back out of everything they’d taken from me. My backpack had that freaking gun in it plus my letters to Jessica. I couldn’t see Saint giving it to me for anything less than one thing. The lowest card I could play and yet the most powerful one girls had against boys. My period.

“Um, master?” I asked sweetly, that word tasting sour on my tongue.

Saint narrowed his eyes, not swallowing my bullshit.

“Is there any chance I could get my backpack? It’s just...my tampons are in it and-”

He held up a hand to stop me right there with a sharp frown. Yep, as predicted, even Saint Memphis wasn't going to mess with a woman's time of the month.

"Kyan, give her her fucking bag back. She's got her period," he called down to the room.

Kyan jumped up like there was a fire under his ass and I jogged downstairs as he took it out from a locked cupboard.

He held it out to me with his brows pulling together and I rolled my eyes as I snatched it and hurried away towards the bathroom between his and Blake's room. *Haha idiots.*

I pulled the door shut behind me then dropped to my knees, pouring out the contents and hunting for the gun. The smile on my face died a violent death as I found it missing.

Dread seeped through the pores of my skin.

One of those assholes had it. But which one? And why wouldn't they have freaking mentioned it?

I tried to figure out the answer, but came up short. What were they going to do with it? They wouldn't hand me into Headmaster Brown, he'd expel me and that would only be a good thing for me. But then again, they could hold onto it until they were done with me. Then give me up and get the police involved. Bringing a gun onto school grounds could get me time in juvie. Was that their end game?

Holy shit. What the fuck do I do?

My breathing grew ragged as I stuffed my hand into the secret pocket at the back of the bag and a sigh of relief escaped me as I found the letters.

I zipped them back in safely, planning to write another one as soon as I could tonight. I had so much to tell Jessica. I just wished I could send them to her for real...

My heart knotted and for a moment it felt like panic was going to claim me, but I shut my eyes, focusing on my breathing until I got myself under control.

A fist hammered on the door, making me jump and I zipped my bag up, tossing it in the bath tub – AKA my bed - and moved to unlock the door.

Blake stood there with a fierce expression on his face, his eyes sliding over me as his upper lip peeled back. “We’re going for a walk. Follow me.” He turned his back on me, striding away and I frowned as I followed.

We headed through the church towards the door before Saint called after us, “Where are you going?”

“For a walk,” Blake snapped.

“You bring her back soon,” Saint growled.

“She’s ours. Not yours,” Blake shot at him then caught my arm and dragged me out the door.

My heart jack-hammered against my ribcage as he led me down the path alongside the lake, the dappled sunlight falling over us through the trees.

“How long will Saint let us stay out for?” I asked, putting a little fear into my voice for added effect.

Blake glanced down at me with a grunt of irritation. “That’s up to me, not him.”

“Oh, right. But he’s the boss, isn’t he?” I fluttered my lashes innocently and he pressed his shoulders back, his features twisting in irritation.

“No, he’s not the fucking boss. We’re a team.”

“I see,” I said like I didn’t see and I sensed his posture growing even tenser. “So where are we going?”

“For a walk,” he snarled and I suddenly realised why he’d brought me out here. It definitely wasn’t out of a desire to spend time with me. He was proving a point that I was his as much I was Saint’s.

Quiet fell between us and I gazed out across the stillness of the lake, watching swans and ducks circling on the calm surface. The scene was picturesque, the late afternoon light glittering on the surface and making it look like liquid gold.

“Let’s go this way.” Blake caught my arm, yanking me down a side trail that led into the woods. My pulse sky rocketed faster than Apollo 11 to the moon as we left the main path, way out of sight of other people. Blake felt like a bomb about to go off and the tension spilling from him made my palms start to sweat.

My instincts were to try and defuse it so I cleared my throat and lifted my chin to look at him. “Hey...Blake?”

He glanced at me with a dark glare and I felt like I was in the headlights of an oncoming car.

My mouth opened and closed for a second before I forced out the words, refusing to be a chicken shit. “Things have really changed between us, huh?”

He grunted, continuing to walk and upping his pace. I upped mine too so I could keep at his side. My dad often descended into moods when he was mad about something, and I knew how to coax him out of them with gentle words. I wasn’t sure if the same would apply to Blake, but I was damn well gonna give it a try. I’d felt a genuine connection between us before and apart from anything else, I wanted an explanation for why he hated me so personally now. Even if my dad *was* responsible for the virus, which I was still absolutely refuting, that didn’t make *me* culpable.

The hardest thing about this was that I was going to have to be honest and face the consequences if Blake threw that truth back in my face. But him and his friends had done far worse to me than that. So it was worth the risk.

“I thought there was something real between us before...stupid as that might sound,” I said tentatively and he blew out a hollow laugh.

“I played you from the very start. You looked like a good fuck. Shame you were below average.”

I pursed my lips, refusing to let that crap fly. I could take the bullshit insults, I could even take the punishments, but that was just a bare faced lie. “Horse shit. Guys can’t fake it in bed, I know how much you enjoyed it. Especially when you dominated me.”

He shot me a look, fury flaming in his eyes. I swear if I touched him right then I would have gotten third degree burns. My heart pounded madly from the intensity of his expression and something about me was suddenly drawn to that fire in him. I wanted to reach out to see if I really would get burned. I wanted to feel the full raging force of his passion. And for half a second, it looked like he wanted that too. But then he turned away again and kept marching up the track, his shoulders stiff and his muscles bunching.

“At least admit you liked me before you found out who I was,” I demanded. “Come on, Blake, we got along. We had fun. I *liked* you.”

He came at me fast and I threw up a hand to shield myself, my palm slamming against his chest. But he was like a freight train as he shoved me back against the wide trunk of a tree and my heart leapt into my throat.

“I hate you!” he roared in my face, spittle peppering my cheeks. The roiling depths of his hatred blazed through every part of his flesh, shining there like diamonds. It made me shrink and my heart crush. I knew they all hated me and yet I’d never felt the pure intensity of that hate from one of them until now. “I hate that I touched you, *hate* that I fucked you. I hate myself for ever wanting you,” he spat and I realised I wasn’t breathing, I was holding my breath, waiting for him to hurt me. I could feel how much

he wanted to by the way he was leering at me, the way his palms were slammed either side of my head and his arms were straining against the inside of his sleeves.

Words fluttered to my lips and I feared saying them, but I had to. I *had* to.

“It’s not my fault your mom died,” I whispered as fat tears slipped from my eyes out of nowhere. I didn’t know if I was hurting for me or for him.

He roared again and I flinched as his fist came at me, bracing for the impact of knuckles against flesh. But his fist collided with the tree beside my head. Then he shoved me to the ground and I scrambled backwards, watching as he punched and punched and punched. His knuckles splitting, bleeding, staining the bark red.

“Stop!” I cried as he lost it, hitting and hitting until I feared he was gonna break bones. “Blake stop it!” I screamed. I didn’t know why I cared, but I did. I stupidly did.

I got to my feet and caught his arm, trying to pull him back.

He shook me off with a snarl, but he finally stopped hitting the tree. Blood coated his hands and he stood there panting, looking murderous as he glared at me.

I took a shaky step forward, reaching out as more tears spilled from my eyes. I knew his pain. I’d felt it, drowned in it. And I wanted to heal it for him because I’d always wished someone would come along and do the same for me. I placed my palm against his heart and felt the powerful thrum of it against my skin.

He swallowed, unmoving as he stared at me, his dark green eyes flickering with a thousand emotions. All of them bad.

“Don’t let this make you into a monster,” I breathed as a tear dripped from my jaw to land on the dead leaves at my feet. The wood was so quiet,

I heard it hit the ground.

Blake pulled away from me, shaking his head. “It’s too late for that, Cinders. It already did.” He turned, heading away into the woods and I knew he didn’t want me to follow.

The world seemed to lighten around me as he disappeared, his presence as heavy as a shadow. I reached up to wipe my tears away, drawing in a shuddering breath before turning back down the path.

Blake would probably be gone a while so I didn’t head back to The Temple. I went back to the main path and sat on a bench that overlooked the lake. I watched the trees bow in the wind and the lake ripple. I listened to the mournful tune of a hawk as it swept across the still water. And I let my heart break for Blake Bowman. Because his hate was dipped in so much pain, that it hurt me too.



Tatum swung her foot around and caught me in the side just beneath my ribs, knocking the air from my lungs in the process.

I backed up and she lunged forward, her gloves striking my chest, once, twice, three times before I managed to switch from defence to offence and throw a punch into her stomach.

The grin on her face told me I'd fallen for her trap a moment before she twisted with the motion of my strike, making it into the space on my left. She was so damn quick that I couldn't defend against her kick to the backs of my knees even though I saw it coming.

She was fucking brutal in her strikes and my knees buckled.

Tatum followed with a blow to my gut before leaping on me and taking me to the floor.

I slammed onto my back with her straddling my hips and she grinned down at me in triumph, tendrils of blonde hair slipping from the knot she'd tied it in to hang down around her face.

I panted beneath her, trying to look pissed about her taking me down and failing as she pressed her gloves down on my chest to brace herself.

My gloves fell to rest against her thighs and a breath of laughter escaped me. “I don’t teach many students who can match me,” I said as I studied her blue eyes. “Whoever taught you was damn good.”

“My father wanted me to be the best in everything I could be,” she replied, her voice husky as she tried to catch her breath. “I had private training in all kinds of weird and wonderful things. But kickboxing was the one that I stuck with the longest.”

That should have pissed me off. Of course the little princess had the best training. Daddy used his wallet to make sure she did. But somehow I didn’t mind it so much in this instance. The super rich were always so wasteful with their money, so dismissive of it despite how much it meant to everyone else. Being in the top two percent often made their children feel so entitled, so *special*, like their shit didn’t stink just as much as the next guy’s. But with this, at least he’d been spending his money on giving her skills. Something real and not dressed up in bullshit.

“You could think about going pro,” I said, not that I thought for a minute that she would. This kind of thing was a hobby to someone like her. She didn’t need to go pro when she didn’t need money. It was just another shiny little badge to add to her dowry when she was auctioned off to the highest bidding asshole as a trophy wife.

“Do you really think I’m good enough?” she asked, surprising me as her eyes glimmered at the idea.

“Yeah,” I replied, my glove shifting slightly where it sat against her thigh. I wasn’t really touching her. The thick padding of the boxing glove was more than a big enough barrier between us, but I could feel the transfer

of the movement against my knuckles just as surely as she could feel it on her leg.

“Then maybe we should be having more of these sessions,” she said slowly, cocking her head a little to see if I might want that. And despite the fact that I’d already had to rearrange my schedule with a bunch of other students to fit in these sessions and I absolutely had no spare time to up her training schedule, I found that I did want that. I *really* wanted that.

“I can try and find some extra time...maybe on the weekends?” I suggested before I could stop my mouth from running away with me. I’d literally never offered a student a portion of my free time before. That was my own. But this wasn’t just about her training. It was about Saint Memphis too. That was what I cared about. And if it got her out of his clutches a little more often as a bonus then I was even more prepared to do it.

“I’d really like that,” she said, a genuine smile gracing her full lips.

She was still straddling me. We’d both caught our breath, I’d clearly lost our bout, there was no reason for us to be in this position. I should have been telling her to get up, but I didn’t.

Tatum shifted a little like she was thinking the same thing, her back arching as she pressed down on my chest through her gloves like she was about to stand. But she still didn’t. And for a moment, I didn’t feel like I was looking at a student, I was just looking at a girl. A girl with blue eyes which beckoned me to dive into their depths and full lips which were toying with a smile. A girl who was wearing a push-up sports bra that I’d been trying not to notice for the last hour and a girl who was currently sitting with her thighs spread over my hips.

I shifted forward suddenly, sitting up and sliding her back before she got a hint of where my mind had just wandered to from my dick swelling

between us.

That would be just what I needed. A student telling the headmaster that I'd tried to dry hump her during a training session. *Nice job, asshole.*

I pushed her back until her ass hit the mat between my thighs and we were sitting looking at each other with too much expectation hanging in the air between us.

I knew what she wanted from me. She wanted some magical solution to her troubles with the Night Keepers and I really wished I could offer her that. But the only thing I could really do was support her in this plan to bring them down. And I also knew that what I was pushing for would only throw her further into their net too. But the problem with those boys was that they were like a dog with a bone. There was no way she was escaping their teeth unless she pulled them out one by one.

"Have you made any progress with them?" I asked, not needing to say who I meant.

She drew her legs back off of mine and crossed them beneath her as she thought about that.

"Maybe. It's hard to say for sure. I can't get anywhere with Blake anyway. He hates me with a venom so toxic it infects me even without me getting close. He's just hurting so much that he's blinded by it, consumed by it and I'm afraid of what will happen when all of that pain comes to a head."

"Yeah, I've seen some of that myself." Blake's game on the football pitch had been suffering lately. He was growing hot headed, losing control and suppressing his grief. The way he was acting could only really end one way. Badly.

"The worst part about it is that I feel like such an idiot for buying into his charm before all of this. I was even warned about it. Mila told me what

would happen if I hooked up with him, but I-

“You and Blake were together?” I interrupted her, my tone sharper than I’d meant it to be. “As in, you fucked him?”

Her lips popped open as if I shouldn’t have said that. And *fuck*, I definitely shouldn’t have said that. But I was surprised, she seemed like a smart girl, I just hadn’t expected her to join the queue waiting to screw the Night Keepers’ fuckboy.

“Are you seriously judging me for getting laid?” she growled, those blue eyes flashing in warning.

“I’m not judging you for getting laid,” I snapped. “Everyone likes fucking, princess, it’s what we’re built to do. I’m judging you for choosing *Bowman* when you could have had your fucking pick.”

Her lips parted as a blush touched her cheeks beneath her freckles and the look was so fucking cute that I couldn’t quite manage to stay mad at her. When the innocent act wasn’t being faked, she really could pull it off.

“I just thought I’d be ghosted afterwards,” she managed to say, dropping her gaze to her red boxing gloves as she pulled them off. “I didn’t realise he’d turn into an actual psychopath and start acting the way he has been. I mean, *Christ*, when we were together that night he was funny and sweet and generous and *so* fucking-” She cut herself off and glanced up at me like she’d just realised she was telling her teacher about how it had felt to be screwing someone and that blush only heated beneath her freckles.

“At what point did he suddenly change then?” I asked, as my mind absolutely didn’t linger on the word *generous*. Because I really doubted that she meant he’d paid for her drinks all night. I was gonna guess that reference had more to do with the things he’d done to her body when they were alone together. Things that had made her pant and beg and scream- I

realised she was talking again and bit down on my tongue to cut off those fucking ideas.

“The next morning...he got a phone call in the night from his dad and disappeared for hours. I fell asleep when he was gone but when he came back he was just so...*hateful*. I didn’t realise it at first, but after we, um...” She blushed again and I could hazard a good guess at what they’d done. Not that I gave a shit. “Anyway, afterwards he basically said thanks and can you fuck off now. So I did. I put it down to him having gotten what he wanted from me and assumed we’d leave it there and forget all about it.”

“But he didn’t?” I asked, pushing even though I could tell she didn’t really want to tell me. But I wanted to know. It didn’t really make any difference to my plans either way, but I wanted to hear it from her lips. I wanted more ammo to stoke my hatred of these spoiled, entitled pricks who thought it was alright for them to use people and throw them away like it didn’t matter at all.

“When I went to breakfast after I’d gotten changed in my dorm, he and the other Night Keepers had found out about my dad.” Tatum studied her gloves like she couldn’t bear to look at me as she told this story and my blood heated as I forced myself to listen to it. “They got all of the students to throw fish stew all over me. And Blake also...played the audio of us having sex for everyone to hear...”

I pushed myself to my feet with a snarl of rage, pacing away from her as I threw my gloves into the corner of the room.

“He filmed you without your permission?” I growled. “And he distributed it? He can be prosecuted for that, he could go to juvie, he could-”

“He didn’t distribute it,” she said, looking up at me from her spot on the floor like she was surprised to see how angry I was. “He just cut some of

the audio around and played it on loudspeaker to make it sound like I'd known about my dad and the Hades Virus. I guess he'd tricked me into saying certain things he could use for that. No one else has a copy as far as I know."

"So he didn't actually video you?" I asked, finding some relief in that at least.

She bit her bottom lip like she didn't want to say the next part, but I pinned her in my stare until she was forced to speak.

"He did. He just didn't share the video publicly." That blush was lighting her up from the inside out and my pulse tumbled over itself as I looked at her. "But he played it for me and Kyan to watch at The Temple-"

I damn near shouted at that admission but I held my tone down a notch. Just. "If he showed someone else a sex tape that you didn't give permission to-"

"I told him to play it," she admitted, shaking her head as she looked down at her gloves again. "He was clearly going to anyway and I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of begging him not to. Besides, at this point it seems like one of the less awful things they've done to me. And Blake's on that tape too, I'm pretty sure he doesn't want it getting out into the world any more than I do." She shrugged and that motion alone was enough to make me see red. I ground my jaw and moved to open the door for her.

"Why don't you go shower?" I said abruptly. "I've just remembered something I should be doing." Like tracking down Blake Bowman, confiscating his phone, deleting that tape and then smashing the fucking thing for good measure. Maybe smashing his face a bit too. I bet he wouldn't find it so easy to trick girls into screwing him if his pretty face was all messed up.

Tatum got to her feet and walked towards me with a frown. “I thought we were going to talk about-”

We both looked up as she was interrupted by Headmaster Brown’s voice coming over the tannoy. “Students and staff, this is an urgent message from your headmaster. We have had a confirmed case of Hades Virus amongst the kitchen staff-”

Tatum inhaled sharply at his words and my heart leapt. In amongst all of this lockdown bullshit and the news stories about cases spreading rapidly around the world, I hadn’t even considered it making its way up here. Not to the bubble of boredom, stuck in the middle of nowhere boarding school for the elite. But with that one simple sentence, everything suddenly changed. It was no longer this thing that was happening to other people, but a monster which had made it to our door.

“The staff member in question has been taken to a hospital for treatment and as a precaution, every staff member who came into contact with her has been sent away from the school. Their housing and work areas have been closed and will be thoroughly sanitised. But as a further precaution, we have been advised to isolate every member of this school where you are at this moment in time for forty eight hours starting *now*.” Tatum’s hand found mine and I gripped her tightly as she stared up at me in horror, begging me to make this news a lie with her eyes. But in all honesty, the reality of this situation was bad. Really fucking bad. Bad enough to make me consider grabbing a bag and running the fuck away from here for a moment before I realised that I couldn’t do that without abandoning her to the Night Keepers and every twisted plan they had for her. But the last I’d heard the death rate for people who caught this thing was around sixty percent. And those weren’t good odds at all.

“To be clear,” Brown continued. “That means that you are to *stay where you are for forty eight hours*. We need all of you to text your location to the admin office so that guards in protective gear can deliver food rations for you and whoever is with you. During this time you need to pay careful attention to your temperature and if you feel you are displaying any signs of the virus then you need to report it immediately. The CDC has announced that symptoms will present within forty eight hours of contact with an infected source, so this should be long enough for us to ensure that we all remain safe. Anyone found to be flouting the forty eight hour isolation rule will be instantly expelled and delivered into the care of the local police who will enforce your isolation outside of the school. During this time, you are advised to remain six feet away from anyone else around you and avoid physical contact at all costs. I will keep you updated of any further information that comes to light during this time and I thank you in advance for your cooperation.”

The announcement cut off and I was left standing beside Tatum Rivers as she clung to my hand and looked up at me like I might have some magical way to make this whole thing okay.

“What do we do?” she asked, biting down on her bottom lip.

“Simple,” I said, as I took in the fear that was dancing in her eyes. She needed me to help her banish that fear and I was willing to give it a shot. “We hang out here for two days having a slumber party. We don’t have any pillows for a pillow fight but I’m sure we can find a few secrets to swap while we do our mani pedis.”

Tatum laughed and I smirked at her for a long moment before releasing her hand. “Six feet back, remember?” I teased, but I meant it too. I needed to put a bit of distance between us anyway. Sharing this vendetta against Saint Memphis was making me think about her as more than just another

student and I couldn't let those boundaries blur too much. Especially as she just so happened to have pretty much every quality I tended to look for in a woman. Total badass, smart mouth, long blonde hair and a body...that I refused to look at. I was still her teacher. And she was still too young for me. Six years might not have been much in any other circumstance, but in this particular one it might as well have been fifty.

I could go to prison for doing any one of the things my body wanted to do with hers. And with the kind of money people like the ones who ran this school had, I might damn well rot away in there for the rest of my life.

Tatum nodded like she was a good little girl and backed away from me until we were following protocol and keeping six feet apart. It seemed pretty pointless now though. We'd just spent over an hour rolling around on the mats together so I was gonna guess that if either of us had it we'd already passed it on.

"C'mon," I said, "Let's see who else we're stuck with for the next two days."

Pearl Devickers and her little squad of stalkers had been using the gym equipment before we'd headed to the sparring room and I could only hope on all that was holy that they'd fucked off before now. Tolerating them during class was bad enough, let alone being stuck with them for two entire days.

Just be gone you pantie dropping perverts.

I was willing to guess that Pearl had a thing for fucking the staff because she seemed to believe that her money would get me hard eventually. But I'd honestly rather cut my dick off than put it into any of the entitled bitches who attended this place.

"I'll go check the pool," Tatum announced as I headed towards the gym.

My gaze caught on her ass as she went and I cursed my eyes for looking. Okay, so maybe I'd rather cut my dick off than put it into ninety nine point nine percent of the bitches at this school.

Fuck.

I pushed the door to the gym open and looked around at the darkened space with a frown. My gaze caught on the clock and I raised an eyebrow as I saw that it was gone eight. We'd been sparring for much longer than I'd realised and the student access to this building had ended. The staff were allowed solo use of it after eight, but it didn't look like anyone had taken that opportunity up. Most of them were too lazy to keep fit in their spare time anyway so I wasn't all that surprised.

"Hello?" I called, giving it a moment before accepting that no one was in here.

I headed back out into the corridor and pushed open the door to the pool just as Tatum pulled it from the other side and we almost crashed into each other.

She stumbled back and I caught her waist as she grabbed my biceps.

My lips parted, but for a moment I didn't say anything and neither did she.

"Sorry," I said just as she blurted, "Thank you."

She smirked at me and I pushed my tongue into my cheek.

"I didn't find anyone in the gym," I said.

"There's no one here, either," she added.

"So...we're alone in here?" I asked, realising that I was still holding her up and I quickly let go. "For two days?"

"Unless you want to get arrested," she teased, her hands slipping from my arms slowly, her fingertips skimming along my flesh. I shouldn't have liked the way that felt. And I didn't. I refused to.

“Not again,” I joked and she looked at me like she wanted to know whether or not I meant that. I didn’t. I’d gotten into a bit of trouble with the cops in my teenage years, but I couldn’t afford to get a criminal record or I wouldn’t have been able to take this job. And ever since Saint’s family ruined mine, revenge had been pretty much all I’d worked for.

“Six feet back, remember, sir,” Tatum said as she started backing up and I rolled my eyes at her, though I really should have been the one to remember that.

“I wouldn’t want you any closer than six feet anyway, Rivers.”

Her smile slipped a little as I used my teacher tone and I ignored the twinge in my gut that said I felt bad about that before turning away from her.

“We might as well grab showers and get out of these sweaty clothes,” I said as I headed for the men’s locker rooms. “And into some clean ones,” I added hastily, glancing over my shoulder at her.

Tatum’s expression tightened at the mention of clean clothes like there was some issue with that, but she didn’t say anything about it before heading off into the women’s locker room.

On my way, I quickly sent admin a text to let them know that we were out here, wondering how long it would take them to organise supplies and deliver some food to us.

I made quick work of showering and pulled on a fresh pair of grey shorts and a black tank. My hair was wet, but I didn’t have anything to style it with so I just tucked it behind my ears and left it at that.

I headed to locker twelve in the corner of the room and pressed my thumb to the lock on it to open the door. I often stayed late here to work out after my training sessions with students so I had a healthy supply of snacks stashed.

I grabbed my gym bag and tossed in the protein bars, nuts, seeds, dried apricots, protein shake mix, raisins, rice cakes and a jar of peanut butter I kept there.

Dammit, this is a boring fucking bag of food to offer her.

I normally just took the punishment of my healthy eating habits without complaint during the week so that I could focus on my workout goals and then I just had cheat days on the weekend to help keep my sanity. But right now, I was looking at the most boring fucker of a feast I'd ever seen and taking it to a girl whose eating habits were already being ruined by those douchebags who claimed they owned her.

She was getting two days of freedom from those assholes and I wanted to offer her better than sugar free peanut butter on rice cakes.

My gaze fell on the bottle of Jack Daniels Kyan had turned up here with the night of the initiation party. He'd barely had a mouthful of it and had stumbled out of here without it after I'd kicked his ass around the boxing ring enough times to satisfy his demons. I'd tossed it in here with the vague intention to throw it out, but maybe we could make use of it now.

Not that I was about to offer a student alcohol.

I shook my head to dismiss the idea, closed the locker and took a step away from it. Then I remembered the fact that I was going to be stuck here with Tatum Rivers for two whole days on our own and we'd have to figure out how to make the time pass somehow. And it would sure go a lot quicker with a shot or two to help it speed by. I turned back to the locker, yanked it open and tossed the bottle of Jack into the bag. I didn't drink as often as I used to anyway. I deserved a night off from being a teacher.

The corridors were dark and I glanced out the front of the building towards the sky which was falling into shadow.

It was already closing in on nine so all I had to do was make it through a few hours with her and we could go to sleep. And with our plans for the Night Keepers to occupy us, that should be easy enough.

“Tatum?” I called out, wondering where she’d be.

She didn’t reply, but the blue night lighting in the pool room caught my eye through the frosted glass doors so I decided to try there first.

As I pushed the door open, Tatum’s voice caught my attention and I looked up to see her sitting on the far side of the pool with her feet in the water. She was wearing a red skater dress with a halter neck and a plunging neckline and the effect of it paired with the spill of her honey blonde hair made my breath catch.

“I don’t know what you want me to do about it, if I try and sneak back and get caught, they’ll ship me off to juvie – though maybe that’s a better option at this point,” she growled and it didn’t take a genius to guess who she was on the phone to. I strode around the pool towards her and she didn’t seem to notice me coming as she spoke again. “No, I’m not alone, I’m here with-”

I snatched the phone out of her hand and glanced at the caller ID to see *King of the Fuckwits* displayed on the screen.

“Who is this?” I barked even though I already knew.

“Saint Memphis. Is that you, coach?”

“Bingo. Are you hassling Miss Rivers into leaving the safety of her designated quarantine area?” I asked in a dark tone.

“No, sir,” he said, but I could smell the bullshit on his breath from here. “Me and the boys are just worried about her being alone up there.”

“Well, she’s not. She’s with me. I’ll ensure she stays far away from anything and anyone, and if all goes well you can have a nice long chat about it over dinner in two days.”

Saint hesitated for a long moment before releasing a sigh. “What will it take for you to bring her to us?” he asked with that I’ve-got-enough-money-to-buy-the-world tone of his.

“A cure to the Hades Virus would be great,” I replied. “Failing that, we’ve got shit to do and you’re wasting battery life.”

I cut the call and it felt so fucking good to shit on that asshole’s plans that I barked a laugh.

Tatum gaped at me as she realised what I’d done, but a huge smile took over her face a moment later.

“He’ll be losing the fucking plot right now,” she laughed and I grinned as I dropped down to take a seat beside her, letting my feet hang into the water like hers.

Her phone started ringing again as the King of the Fuckwits called back and Tatum bit her lip nervously. I held the phone between us, looked right into her big blue eyes and switched the fucking thing off.

A moan escaped her that I swear was actually sexual as her eyes lit with a wild energy.

“Holy shit,” she breathed.

“Yeah, I’m a real bad boy,” I teased her. “Hanging up on people and switching phones off like a fucking gang mobster with a death wish.”

Her laughter rang out again and I found myself wanting to hear more of it.

“Is that a sleepover bag?” she asked, her eyes falling on my gym bag.

“Better...assuming you like post workout, high protein and healthy carb type snacks.” Which no one did, but it was better than going hungry.

She smiled as I pushed the bag towards her and she started rummaging within it.

“So what’s with the getup?” I asked her, my gaze sliding over the red dress again. “You off to prom or something, princess?”

That blush lit up beneath her freckles and she tucked a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “It’s actually one of Saint’s strange forms of torture,” she said and I frowned in confusion.

“How?”

“He...kinda took my suitcase hostage when they moved me in with them. And then he bought a bunch of clothes for me with weirdly accurate knowledge of my sizing and he picks out everything I wear.”

“Everything?” I asked, wondering why he wanted her dressed up like this. Although as my gaze raked over the way the material clung to her, accentuating each and every inch of her body, let alone the fact that the colour suited her perfectly, the reason was pretty obvious.

“He even buys my underwear. And it’s like, the *best* underwear I’ve ever owned, it’s like a second skin. Even the panties-”

“It probably isn’t appropriate to discuss your panties with your teacher,” I reminded her as I tore my gaze away and looked out over the huge pool.

The water here was considerably warmer than in a public pool. Rich little darlings couldn’t risk a chilly ass when they wanted a swim after all and the warmth of the water kissed my legs as I kicked them lazily.

“Is it appropriate to drink with my teacher then?” she asked as she found the bottle of Jack. “Or are you planning on having a party for one and making me sit out in the corner?”

I suppressed a smirk as I reached over and took the bottle from her before twisting the cap off and taking a long drink. I swallowed five times, sinking a quarter of the bottle as I felt her eyes on me.

Ain’t no party like a lock in, right?

“There is absolutely no way in hell that I’m giving you alcohol,” I said firmly, keeping my eyes on the far side of the pool and fighting off a laugh as she huffed irritably.

I placed the bottle down beside her without a word and waited as I continued to look out over the water. Within two seconds, she’d snatched it and pressed the bottle to her lips.

My heart leapt at the idea of what I’d just done. I was being really fucking reckless with this girl, but some part of me just didn’t care. I’d been stagnating here, losing hope of bringing my vengeance down on Saint Memphis like I’d worked so hard to do and she’d swept in to my life, called me an asshole, kicked my ass in the boxing ring and singlehandedly made it possible for me to do what I’d come here to do in the space of a few weeks.

I glanced at the Jack as she placed it down between us and arched an eyebrow as I saw she’d matched my portion so the bottle was already half empty.

A low buzz was churning in my gut and I reached for the food just as she did. She slapped my hand away from the dried apricots with a laugh before pushing one into her mouth and groaning with exaggerated pleasure.

“Oh for the love of sugar,” she moaned as she chewed and I snorted a laugh.

“You’re not still on the lettuce leaf diet are you?” I asked, half because if I found out that Saint was still pulling that shit with her then I was going to personally find a way to stop him, and half just to have something to say to her.

“No. I’ve been a good girl so I’m getting plenty of treats,” she deadpanned. “No pizza though. I swear, I’d just about do anything for a taste of the cheesy good stuff. But Saint likes *proper* food.” She mimed

vomiting and I glanced at the hoard of healthy food guiltily. I was hardly offering her the junk food freedom she desired.

“Do you wanna keep discussing ways for you to work against them?” I asked.

“No. Not tonight. I’ve got two whole days of freedom ahead of me and I want to be truly free of them for at least part of it. At least tonight.”

“Okay,” I agreed, wishing I could forget about the Memphis family so easily. For so long they’d been all I thought of, all I dreamed of, I couldn’t imagine a true night of freedom from that but I could attempt it. “So what does freedom look like to Tatum Rivers?”

She cut me a look that was full of trouble before pushing to her feet suddenly.

I looked up at her as she reached over her shoulders and my lips parted as the red dress fell from her body in one swift motion.

She hadn’t been kidding about Saint picking good underwear and for a moment all I could do was stare at her in the red and white silk which made her look like a Victoria Secret model before she dove straight into the pool.

I watched her swimming away from me beneath the water and by the time she surfaced, she’d reached the far side of the wide pool.

“You can hold your breath for a long time,” I said.

Did I just try and compliment her on how long she can hold her fucking breath?

“I was on the swim team in a few of my schools, but then I transferred again and they didn’t have a pool so I shifted my attention to gymnastics,” she replied with a shrug.

“So you’re flexible too?”

Why the fuck did I just ask that??

“Yeah,” she replied in that husky voice of hers and I swiped a hand over my face as I tried to remember why the fuck I’d started on the whiskey. I had no fucking game when I drank whiskey and I knew it. Not that I needed to have game right now anyway but for fuck’s sake, I didn’t need to be commenting on how flexible she was or wasn’t.

“Aren’t you coming in?” she called when I didn’t ask her any more fuckwit questions.

“No.”

“Because you’re chicken shit?” she asked, arching a brow.

“Maybe.”

“Or maybe it’s because you don’t know how to be free anymore,” she teased.

It was just a joke, but it hit me right in the gut. Because I sometimes wondered exactly how many things I’d forgotten how to be in my mission to tear Saint’s family apart. I never used to be the kind of guy to back out on a dare. So fuck it. I didn’t even care that she was goading me into it. I was gonna swim in a pool with a beautiful girl and just have some fucking fun for once.

I picked up the bottle of Jack and took another series of long mouthfuls, feeling it burn on the way down as I set the bottle back on the tiles.

I pushed myself to my feet and pulled my tank off before dropping my shorts and standing there in my boxers.

Tatum watched me and the look in her eyes sent a prickle running down my spine. I backed up before running and jumping straight into the centre of the pool with my legs tucked to my chest. Water splashed everywhere as I sank like a stone and Tatum’s screams echoed off the high roof.

The moment I surfaced, soft hands grabbed me and Tatum’s fingers twisted into my hair as she drove her weight down on my back and tried to

force me under.

I barked a laugh as she dunked me, taking in a mouthful of water as I went under.

I caught her bare leg and tore her off of me, launching her away again with all of my strength so that she splashed into the water a few meters away.

I started swimming for the far side, but her hands locked around my ankle a moment later from beneath the surface and she yanked me back under.

I laughed as I fought to free myself, but she was suddenly clambering onto my back yet again, her arms locking around my neck as she held on.

I took a deep breath and dove beneath the surface as I swam for the far side with her clinging onto my back like a limpet the whole way.

I reached the edge of the pool and grabbed her thighs as I prised them off of me and she laughed as she fought to hold on.

I managed to get a good grip on one of her legs and yanked hard enough to twist her around my body, trapping her between my chest and the tiled wall of the pool.

“Are you gonna beg, princess?” I teased her as I used my position to pin her back against the wall with my hips.

“I don’t beg. And I’d normally just go for the balls, but I’m afraid you’d give me detention.”

Her words were meant as a joke but at the mention of detention, I fell still.

“That’s what teachers do to students who misbehave,” I agreed in a dark tone.

She caught me in the trap of her endless blue eyes for the longest moment as I felt her skin pressing against mine in so many places that it

was overwhelming.

Her ankles were crossed behind my back as she used me to hold herself up and the moment dragged between us as she slowly tightened her thigh muscles. The movement made her crotch graze against mine and every piece of me stiffened, as in every, *single* piece.

Her eyes widened and I released her suddenly, dropping her so that she dunked beneath the water and climbing out of the pool before she could surface again.

I strode away from her as she called for me to come back, asking if I was okay and I snorted a laugh to myself.

Just fucking peachy, princess, I just need to go and sink this boner you gave me before I give you the wrong fucking impression about me. Or maybe jerk off so that my dick doesn't get any more of these ideas tonight. If I can just tire the fucker out then he might not be so damn primed to fire around you.

“Monroe?” she called again and I waved her off with a promise to be back with the supplies the guards were delivering.

I had no idea if they'd have dropped them off yet, but I'd just wait by the door until they appeared if not. And by then, one way or another, I'd be looking at Tatum Rivers as a student and nothing more.

I woke to the heavy scent of chlorine scratching at my nose and an ache in my back which reminded me of exactly where I was. Where *we* were.

I pushed myself upright and ran a hand over my face to banish the sleep from my flesh as I yawned. This whole thing was either some kind of hopeless nightmare or a joke designed to punish me.

Tatum was still sleeping on the other side of the crash mat we'd dragged in to lay beside the pool, giving us something soft enough to sleep on while using the warmth and humidity of the pool room to keep us warm without blankets. She was wearing the red dress again, presumably without underwear as hers were drying in the sauna, but I wasn't thinking about that. Her breathing was deep as her brow pinched. There were shadows hanging over her now which hadn't been there when she'd first arrived in this place. But if I had anything to do with it, those shadows would recede again soon.

I pushed myself to my feet, adjusting the waistband of my sweatpants as I headed in search of a bathroom so I could take a piss.

The corridors of Cypress Gym were hauntingly quiet, their walls aching for the sound of students' voices to bounce off of them. I'd always liked being inside the school buildings when they were like this. Absent of the crowds they'd been designed to hold and pregnant with the expectation of what was to come.

Once I'd relieved myself, I moved to stand before the mirror in the men's locker room, washing my hands as I studied my reflection. A long time ago, my mouth hadn't sat in such a hard line, that frown hadn't been buried into my brow almost permanently, my dark blue eyes hadn't been haunted with the memories of everything I'd lost. But it was kinda hard to remember that kid these days. Thinking about him felt like thinking about someone else. His memories were always hazy with sunshine and the echoes of laughter. But I wasn't sure I even knew how to laugh like that now. I hardly remembered how to smile and when I did, it wasn't that joy filled expression I'd used to use.

I was cold and hard and untouchable now. All because Saint Memphis's family had decided that mine had no value. His father had taken everything

from me because he'd been afraid for his *reputation*, and I sure as fuck wasn't going to let him and his friends do something similar to that girl out there.

I glanced at my dirty blonde hair and sighed as I tried to make it lay flat for a few moments. I usually used product to slick it back but without any, I just had to tuck it behind my ears. I quickly gave up on it and sighed as I realised I'd be pushing it out of my eyes all day whatever I did.

The box of supplies that had been left out for us last night wasn't actually all that well stocked. It had food and bottled water, but that was it. No blankets or spare clothes or damn toothpaste. I guessed they'd had to work in a rush, but it was still frustrating knowing that my apartment was a short walk away and it held everything I could want and more for this situation.

I blew out a breath and shoved my hand into my pocket, pulling out a pack of gum and pushing a stick between my teeth.

My phone buzzed as I placed the gum back in my pocket beside it and I drew it out to see who was looking for me.

My eyebrows rose as I spotted the list of eight missed calls and three messages from Kyan Roscoe and I quickly opened the messages to see what he wanted.

Kyan:

I need to ask you a favour

Kyan:

We can pay you for it.

Kyan:

This is urgent, asshole, call me back.

I considered that for a moment as I walked back into the pool room, pushing my tongue into my cheek as I tried to keep my temper in check. I could easily guess why they were calling. It seemed that the photos Tatum had sent them last night after she'd switched her phone back on to prove where she was hadn't been enough to ease their concerns about their pet escaping their clutches.

My gaze swept over the messages again as I walked back to the crash mat where we'd slept and when I looked up, my heart leapt as I realised I'd walked in on Tatum getting changed.

Her back was to me and she'd already put her yoga pants on thankfully, but she'd taken her dress off and her bare skin caught my eye and refused to let me look away for a moment that stretched far too long.

"Sorry," I said, clearing my throat as I forced myself to turn my back on her and she gasped at the sound of my voice.

"No, it's my fault, I should have gone to the locker rooms, it's just so cold outside this room," she replied quickly and I could hear her pulling her clothes on as she cursed beneath her breath.

A smirk captured my lips and wouldn't let go. By the time she told me to turn back to face her again I found myself caught on the verge of laughter.

"What?" she asked, tipping her head so that her long hair snaked over her shoulder and tickled her side. She was wearing that push up sports bra again, dressing in the same outfit she'd worn for our kickboxing session. She'd had the good idea to give them a wash and hang them in the sauna to dry so she had two outfits to alternate between for our lockdown. It was just my luck that both of her options made her look insanely tempting. I just couldn't decide whether that luck was good or bad.

“It’s just, this whole fucking situation,” I said, gesturing between us and at the building we were standing in. It was a fucking joke. Someone like me never should have set foot in a school like this, let alone been teaching these elitist little fuckers, but here I was. I’d slogged my guts out to get here and really, none of it had been for me.

Tatum was looking at me like she didn’t understand and of course she didn’t. She may have been less caustic than a lot of the kids here or I might have just wanted to believe she was, but either way, her family could afford the tuition and that in itself proved that we came from entirely different worlds. I doubted she could ever understand what it was like for me to live my life.

Before either of us could add to that dangerous topic of conversation, my phone started ringing again as a FaceTime call came from Kyan.

I clucked my tongue and moved closer to Tatum, holding the phone out to show her who was calling.

Those full lips of hers pouted in a way that drew my gaze to them and I chewed my gum a little harder as I looked back down at the phone. I wasn’t equipped to deal with her here, wearing that little sports bra with her hair all messy and those big eyes hooded in sleep. It was like seeing a lion at the North Pole. The fact that it was out of its natural habitat just made it all the harder to look away from.

“I might as well see what he wants,” I said and she nodded slowly, accepting my decision.

I answered the call without actually saying anything, giving the camera a flat look as it connected and I was gifted a glimpse of The Temple where Kyan was sitting on a grey couch.

“You’ve got something of ours,” he said, not bothering to greet me either.

“What’s that then?” I asked.

Kyan suddenly disappeared from view as Saint snatched his phone. “Can I have a word with Tatum, sir?” he asked in that way that wasn’t really a question at all and more of an order.

“Why?” I asked in return, refusing to give in to his bratty ways. “I’m not your errand boy or hers, if you want to FaceTime your girlfriend then just call her phone.”

Tatum flinched in the corner of my eye as I called her that but I ignored it. I didn’t want Saint to suspect anything at all about my relationship with her. If he thought we were even on friendly terms, he was likely to go to some effort to keep her away from me. The best defence we had against him and his bullshit was making sure he didn’t look at us too closely.

“Because Tatum’s phone seems to have been switched off all night,” he growled and the way his eyes flashed let me know exactly how much that pissed him off. I’d told her to switch it off again after sending the photos and now I was doubly glad of that suggestion.

“Well her battery probably died and I don’t intend to waste mine on talking to you.” I shifted my thumb and was about to hang up when Saint spoke again.

“We’re concerned for her safety, *sir*,” he hissed. “And if we aren’t reassured that she hasn’t had any crazy ideas about running off again then we’ll just have to break these stupid isolation rules and come down there to make sure she’s alright.”

Tatum sucked in a sharp breath at that and I had to force myself not to snarl at the little shitbag. Instead, I flipped the camera so they could see her, standing by the pool and twisting her fingers through her long hair.

“Satisfied?” I growled at Saint as I flipped the camera back to look at me.

“Barely,” he replied.

“Well that’s good enough for me.” I hung up on him and shared a grin with Tatum.

“He’ll turn on you next,” she warned.

“Let him try,” I replied with a shrug.

“You wanna spend the day plotting his downfall then?” she asked and the excitement I felt at those words burned right through me.

“Hell yes,” I agreed, tossing her a stick of gum before blocking Kyan’s number so he couldn’t call again. I’d unblock it after the quarantine period, but for now, I had a date with my destiny.



“Is he taller than you?” Monroe asked his seventeenth question.

We’d been playing twenty questions for over an hour, lazing on the mat we’d pulled up by the pool. I was in the red dress again and Monroe had on sweatpants and a T-shirt. We’d spent most of the morning playing Marco Polo in the water, followed by our pasta lunch that was delivered last night and then we’d sparred for most of the afternoon while plotting the Night Keepers’ demise.

I knew our time was coming to an end here, and I wanted to cling to my bubble of safety for as long as I could. Two whole days without being told what to do, what to wear, what to eat had been indescribable. And the company wasn’t half bad either. Monroe had turned out to not only be easy on the eyes, but also fun as hell.

“Yes,” I said, flopping back onto the mat and chewing the minty piece of gum he’d given me.

“Is he a douchebag?” he asked and I laughed.

“Can be,” I said.

“And he’s attractive?” he asked for the second time.

I rolled my eyes. “Objectively,” I said airily, fighting a smirk.

“Do *you* think he’s attractive?” he asked and I fought a blush as I nodded.

“So he’s not a Night Keeper and he’s not on the football team...”
Monroe frowned at the pool, his brow creasing.

“He’s not *on* the team, no,” I gave him a clue with my heart thundering in my chest and he looked to me with his brow lifting. He couldn’t ask me anything else anyway.

“Wait, is he faculty?”

I bit into my lip to stop myself from laughing. “You’re out of questions.”

“Well who was it?” he demanded, moving onto his hands and knees and crawling toward me with a threat in his eyes.

My laughter died away at the intensity of his gaze and I shook my head, my lips firmly sealed.

“It was me, wasn’t it?” he asked in a low growl and I continued my silence.

He reared over me, capturing my wrists and pinning them down to the mat. “I can always force you tell me.”

My breathing became shallow, my cheeks burning as he stared down at me, exuding power. The scent of pine sailed from his flesh and I longed to rear up and see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

Headmaster Brown’s voice burst over the tannoy and Monroe lurched away from me like he’d just been caught leaning over a murder victim.

“The quarantine period is now over. Thank you for your cooperation. You can now return to your daily routines and classes will resume as usual on Monday morning. You will be relieved to hear that no cases of the Hades Virus emerged during this time. So Everlake Prep is a safe haven once

again.” The line cut and I drew myself up to sit, my heart sinking in my chest.

Everlake might have been a safe haven to the rest of the school, but my greatest fear lived beyond these walls.

Monroe gathered up his bag and tossed the empty Jack Daniel’s bottle inside before frowning over at me. He opened his mouth to say something when a loud knocking came from the front of the gym.

My blood chilled as I rose to my feet, grabbing my gym bag and hooking it over my shoulder.

“I’d better give you my number,” Monroe said in a serious tone and I took out my cellphone with a nod. He took it, keying it in and forwarding himself a text so he had my number too. He passed it back and I read the name he’d saved it under.

“Nash?” I looked up.

“That’s me.” He shrugged and a smile hooked up my lips. *I like it.*

“Shouldn’t I give you a code name like Daddy Bear or something?” I teased and he smirked at me, sending a bolt of electricity through my body.

“I’m not gonna dignify that with an answer,” he said, trying to fight away his smile and appear professional, but I didn’t buy it.

More knocking came from outside and I sighed as the air became fraught with tension once more.

“Do what we discussed.” He schooled his expression and I nodded firmly. I could screw with these assholes until their little unit fell apart. I just hated to leave the sanctuary of this place and face reality.

We headed out of the pool room and the air grew colder as we approached the front doors. Saint, Kyan and Blake stood beyond the glass, scowling in at me like reapers come to collect a soul. And I guessed in a way, they had.

Monroe unlocked the door, yanking it open and heading outside.

“Thank fuck for that,” he said, heading past them and striding off in the direction of Maple Lodge where the staff resided.

Saint stalked forward with a menacing look, raising his palm beneath my mouth. “Spit,” he commanded and I half considered actually spitting *at* him instead of what he wanted. But I didn’t think he’d believe there’d been a miscommunication. I spat my gum into his hand and he tossed it into the bushes, his eyes remaining on me the whole time. “I don’t like gum,” he said simply. “It makes you look like a prom queen from some eighties chick flick.” He turned his back on me, striding away and I glared at his back with venom in my eyes.

Blake’s gaze skipped up and down me then he sneered and headed away. Kyan took my arm like he thought I might run, but there was no point in that. Besides, I was armed with tactics now. Going along with these bastards was just a means to an end. And the end was going to be seriously juicy. I couldn’t wait to sink my teeth into it.

“How was your time with Monroe?” Kyan asked and I felt his eyes on me. It was damn lucky I was a good actress or this plot would have fallen apart already.

I released a sigh of annoyance. “Not much better than living with you assholes. He had me training for most of it. Said something about me competing, though he probably just wants the shiny achievement badge on his own CV.”

Kyan frowned. “If you’re competition level, why not?”

I glanced at him, surprised by him saying that. Then I shook my head. “Nah. I’d have to train with him at least another day a week. Probably at the weekend. And though I thought it would be a break from you jackasses, it’s like being with another freaking Night Keeper.”

Kyan chuckled in a low tone. “Well maybe you should take on that extra day then, baby.”

A smile niggled at the edges of my lips, but I fought it away, hitching on a frown instead and falling quiet.

“You should spar with me one time. If Monroe thinks you’re good, you must be,” he said thoughtfully. Monroe had worked hard to earn the Night Keepers’ respect, and I wondered if his douchebaggery was an act to befriend them or if he was as coldblooded as them sometimes.

“Sure, any excuse to put you on your ass, Kyan.” I fluttered my lashes at him and he smirked.

“The day you put me on my ass is the day you’re riding my cock like a cowgirl.”

I slapped on a look of disgust although I wasn’t wholly offended by that image. The idea of him beneath me moaning my name while I made him beg for release was enough to make my mouth water.

“One Night Keeper was enough for me,” I said airily. “Besides, I doubt you could top Blake if you tried. That guy might be a mean piece of shit, but he fucks like he was put here on earth to do it.”

I swear Kyan actually snarled like an animal as he yanked me against him, throwing his arm over my shoulders in his usual possessive way. He dropped his mouth to my ear, sending a ripple of heat down my spine. “I thought you said you faked it.”

A blush rose in my cheeks and I laughed lightly. “Guess you caught me out. Blake’s got a way with his dick. Some guys have it, some don’t.” I shrugged, knowing the insinuation pissed him off as he tightened his grip on me.

“You can’t compare the three of us, baby. If Blake’s sugar, I’m spice. And Saint is...fucking arsenic.”

I fought a laugh but it escaped me, serving me with a glare from Saint up ahead. He glanced between us with a scowl and I knew he didn't like it when me and Kyan flirted. Which was all the more reason to do it.

"Have you been practising on each other then?" I asked and Kyan snorted a laugh. Asshole that he was, he at least had a sense of humour. Unlike Lord Coldemort and Sir Hates-a-lot. Although the latter used to have one, but it must have fled his body when he turned into an ice cold prick.

"I don't fuck guys – but if I did I'd be excellent at it by the way. I could probably share a girl with the other Night Keepers though if the occasion called for it."

"Right, because there's always a scenario which calls for that," I taunted and he smirked, making my mind conjure a lot of images I didn't wanna let in. I may have had my fair share of one night stands and heated flings, but I couldn't say I'd done much beyond the standard. I'd had a few outdoor trysts and even one guy who'd liked to give me a little light choking, but I'd never had group sex or used anything more than a vibrator in the bedroom. It hit me that the Night Keepers had probably pushed all the boundaries to try and liven up the monotony of their dull-ass, rich kid lifestyles. Boys like them needed constant entertainment. And they had undeniably gotten some of that entertainment through girls.

"Well you don't screw girls at school so I guess you'd have trouble finding one you all wanted," I said lightly like I didn't care. And I didn't. Obviously.

Though I tried to ignore the prickling in my skin at the image of them all fucking one girl. Or taking turns with her. Or maybe there'd be several girls and they'd all defile a bedroom together. Or a lounge, or a kitchen, or a hot tub. *Or maybe you need to stop picturing that shit this second, Tatum.*

“We’re not always on campus, baby. The summers get real long and real fucking boring, not to mention the wildness of spring break next year.”

The image of them all sharing some flashy villa down in Mexico made me grimace. *God help the cleaning staff...*

“Well I hope you get paid top dollar to satisfy multiple dusty vag at once, Kyan,” I taunted, not letting on that this conversation was weirdly unsettling to me.

His grip around my shoulders firmed, but a low chuckle escaped him. “I could satisfy at least ten dusty vages at once if I wanted. But that would be at the premium rate.”

Another laugh escaped me just as we reached The Temple. Saint and Blake had already headed inside. The cool air was whipping around my bare legs and my skirt fluttered in the breeze.

I lifted my gaze to Kyan’s, slipping out of his hold and giving him a mock curtesy. “Good night, *master*.” I bit my lower lip and his eyes darkened at the word.

“Don’t call me that. Call me a fuck-up or a piece of shit,” he demanded and I laughed lightly.

“That’s not nearly personal enough for you though, Kyan,” I purred. “You’re a thrill-seeking manwhore who dresses like he’s a roughneck, but he’s really just as fancy as his rich kid friends.”

Kyan looked seriously turned on and half a second away from grabbing me again.

I backed up to the door of The Temple, resting my spine to it and taking hold of the handle behind me.

“Did you miss me?” I whispered in case anyone was listening inside.

His throat bobbed as his gaze roamed down to my cleavage and back up again. He stepped closer, taking his time as he eye fucked me so hard I

swear I nearly came. I was panting by the time he got close, pressing one hand to the door and the other lowering to rest on my waist. The scent of gasoline and power danced in the air and intoxicated me like a drug.

I was just about to celebrate my victory in successfully luring him in, when he clucked his tongue and shoved me out of his way.

“Naw,” he said easily. “I could never miss you, baby. I missed torturing you though.” He winked before stepping inside and I scowled at his back as he went. *Asshole*.

I woke in the bathtub to an alarm on my phone. It was silent, just buzzing enough to pull me from sleep. And though getting up at the butt crack of dawn was about as appealing to me as dropping onto my knees in front of Saint and licking his shoes clean, I’d made sure I was up at a quarter to six every day since I’d been returned to their clutches. Those fifteen minutes were *mine*. A time when no one was going to walk in to the bathroom and take a piss or a shower or, so help me, a shit.

I at least had a blanket and a pillow in the tub now, but it still didn’t make for a good night’s sleep. I climbed out of it, keeping on my tip-toes to try and put some space between me and the cold tiles. Then I grabbed my backpack from where I’d stuffed it beneath the bath. I was sure they could find it easily enough if they wanted it, but keeping it out of sight at least meant they wouldn’t get any spontaneous ideas about looking through it again.

I took out a piece of paper and a pen before grabbing my pillow out of the bath and dropping to the floor so I could write. I couldn’t be totally honest with my sister about what was going on here, about my plans with

Monroe. Just in case they found it. But I needed to get some stuff off of my chest anyway.

Dear Jessica,

I hate it here. I hate the three boys keeping me captive and I'm starting to hate this school too. It's so beautiful here, Jess. If it wasn't for the Night Keepers, I think I'd really love it. But they're like poison, spilling into the atmosphere and tainting everything around them. I can't let them taint me though. I have to be strong, weather out this bullshit until I can see the light again. It just seems impossible right now.

I wish I knew where Dad was. I wish I could call him and know he was okay. Sometimes I have these awful dreams of him lying in a bed, coughing and coughing, burning up in a blazing fever. But then I wake and I remember he's a survivor. Wherever he is, I know he's living on the outskirts somewhere. He could last forever in hiding. I just hope he's biding his time to reach out to me. But what if he's not? What if he's cut me off and has no intention of ever coming back?

I know you'd have all the right answers. You'd know exactly what to do. I'm doing my best. I just hope it's enough.

Love, Tatty x

I took in a shaky breath before folding the letter up and placing it in the bag with the others. My heart was knotted and pain was dancing through my body. I missed Dad. I missed Jess. I missed being okay.

I thumbed through the pile of letters stashed in that pocket and tugged one free. A reply from Jess from years ago. It was crinkled and worn, the

page read by me a thousand times.

Dear Tatty,

You are so freaking awesome! That photo you sent is hilarious. I could never climb trees as good as you, but hanging upside down from a branch like a monkey? You're crazy! Maybe California is taming me too much. I miss the woods, camping, Dad's crazy adventures. Do you remember when he made us hike up to Finnick Rock at four am in the middle of winter? I don't think I'll ever forget the feel of that snow seeping under my collar. Or the way your nose turned bright red. You looked like Rudolph haha!

Anyway, all is well here. I've been learning to surf. And it's definitely not because of the hot as shit instructor by the way. Alright, maybe it's ten percent because of him. But I'm actually pretty good at it. Don't tell Dad though. You know what he'll say. 'No sport is worth learning unless it can double as a survival skill'. I could totally surf my way out of a zombie hoard though, right? Definitely worth it. Especially if we face a zombie fish plague.

I miss you tons. And I'll continue to badger Dad about letting you come visit soon. I told him most fifteen year old girls can't kneecap a dude before finishing them with a roundhouse, so you'd be completely able to look out for yourself. But he says you need to focus on your training. Sigh! I hope he's not pushing you too hard.

Love you sis,

Jess x

I folded the letter up, taking a shaky breath as my heart started to splinter. About her, about my situation. Everything. I put it back in the bag and pressed my hands to my eyes, holding back tears as they threatened to fall.

I had to keep it together. Had to take this day by day and chip away at the Night Keepers inch by inch. It was the only thing I had to hold onto right now and it helped ease the pain in my chest. I'd turn the foundations of their empire into rubble and by the time they realised what I'd done, it would be too late to stop their downfall.

I put the backpack away and headed to the sink, brushing my teeth, washing my face and combing my hair. By the time I was done, my mask was back in place and my breathing was even. I'd slept in the silky white nightdress Saint had given me and my nipples were pebbling through the material from how cold it was in here.

I checked my phone with a sigh before lifting up my nightdress and tucking it into the right side of my panties to hold it against my thigh and heading to Kyan's door. He always left it open for me to get out in the mornings considering it would take a tsunami to wake him up. I slipped into his room, my eyes drawn to the muscles of his back as he slept. It was too dark to see the interconnecting tattoos that covered it clearly, and I vaguely wondered what this boy cared about enough to get inked onto his skin. Aside from the brand of the Night Keepers on the back of his neck.

I realised I was still standing there like a creeper and shook my head at myself as I walked to his door and exited into the hall. Right on cue at six am, Saint's freaky music filled my ears and I hurried along to the top of the stairs that led down to the crypt and knelt beside them. Like a fucking dog. I would have thought sticking to Saint's routine would have gotten less degrading as time went on, but no, it definitely became more so. This

kneeling part was the worst of it. I had to stay here for an hour and a half before that asshole finished his workout. And for what? I was gonna get freaking chilblains from these ice-cold flagstones. And then his precious little doll would be tarnished.

Saint's silhouette appeared up on the balcony as he gazed down to check I was where he expected me to be.

"Good morning, master!" I called cheerily, slapping on a fake ass smile.

He ignored me, stretching his arms above his head before heading down the stairs. He was in his workout gear. Black T-shirt and black sweatpants. I didn't know why he bothered with the shirt. He always came out with it stuffed in the back of his pants when he was done. But I guessed he just couldn't bear to break his routine.

He strode toward me as the music grew to a crescendo and I tilted my head back to look up at him. He sailed past me, placing his hand on my head and shoving hard so I was forced to look down, then continued jogging down the stairs. The second the door shut, I cursed him under my breath and moved to sit on my ass cross-legged.

I took my phone from my panties and started playing Donut Dash, soon setting a new high score. If I kept this up, I was gonna make it onto the Donut Dash leaderboard. And judging by the fact that I was gonna be here every morning doing this bullshit for the foreseeable future, that was more of a foregone conclusion than a possibility. Saint would pop his head out occasionally to check I was still here, but the door creaked so I always got a two second warning to hide my phone and get back on my knees.

After half an hour, I got bored of the game and brought up the news instead. The Hades Virus death toll had risen to twenty six thousand overnight and my skin prickled as I read about the overwhelmed hospitals and the shortages of essential personal protective equipment the staff

needed. There was also an article about my father, naming him as a terrorist. There was even a reward on his head for over five hundred thousand dollars and that made me feel sick to my core. At the bottom of the article were a list of Facebook comments and though I tried not to look, only a short glance showed me the words, *asshole*, *murderer*, and *traitor*.

My heart clammed up in my throat and tears came for me for the second time this morning. But they couldn't have me now. I was never going to let these bastards see me cry again.

Saint appeared right on seven thirty with his shirt tucked into the back of his pants. I liked that bit. His body was pure, cut muscle and I had to admit that that hour and a half in the gym twice a day was supremely worth it just for my one minute eye fuck while he headed upstairs. He never looked at me. I wasn't acknowledged until he decided it.

I headed to the kitchen and started making breakfast. I actually enjoyed this part of my morning the most. Cooking was soothing. And for those sweet thirty minutes it took to prepare everything, my mind sailed away and I kinda got into the dramatic rise and fall of the classical music filling the entire church. If it hadn't been a reminder of Saint, I might have even found it peaceful. But there was always an undertone to it. And that undertone was him.

It was Saturday and there had been zero sign of Blake or Kyan; I wondered if they were gonna show up for breakfast at all. I imagined Saint's perfect little routine didn't extend to them when they didn't have to go to school, but I hadn't been given any other instructions. So they would just have to eat it cold or not at all. *Or they'll just make me cook it all over again, dammit.*

I opted for muesli with fresh fruit and yoghurt myself. Saint didn't let me have anything fried, too sugary or too tasty. The muesli was something I'd

found that not only helped with my sugar cravings, but actually tasted good. So I guessed that was a win. But if you looked really closely at it, it was definitely a fail. My usual breakfasts consisted of toast with jam and at the weekends I'd always have waffles, ice cream and strawberries with my dad and Jess. It had been our Saturday morning tradition since before I could remember. And that memory stung me now with the keenness of an angry wasp.

Just before eight am Saint's music cut off and he reappeared in a fitted white T-shirt and dark, designer jeans, a chunky Rolex on his wrist and a pair of AllSaints army boots which looked ripe for kicking heads in. If Saint looked divine in his school uniform, he looked transcendent like this. He wore casual clothes like they were the finest tuxedo in the world. And the way his muscles bulged against them made me one jealous ass bitch of that shirt. *Down girl*. Sometimes it felt like that wild part of me was growing bigger, taking over. But I had to keep her locked up tight. Because if she ever got free, she was gonna lead me right into one of their beds, naked, panting and aiming to please.

Saint sat in the middle seat as usual, picking up his knife and fork, just as I placed his plate in front of him. Eight am sharp. I was more punctual than a freaking Stepford wife.

Saint took a bite of his meal and I waited. If the toast wasn't perfect – *golden brown but not overdone Barbie doll!* – or the eggs weren't salty enough or the avocado wasn't the epitome of ripe, then I was gonna have to do it again. So far, I'd only had one day where I'd fucked it up. And that had been the avocado's fault.

I'd tried to explain to Saint that if he expected to get perfect avocados through the rest of this pandemic, he was going to be seriously disappointed. Even as it was, I was limited to the stash we had. Half of

them were on the turn already and the rest weren't ripe enough. The avocado was a fickle mistress that was going to cause me a lot of unnecessary spanks if Saint didn't learn that it was out of my control. But then that concept was obviously unknown to him. In the past, I'm sure he would have had people to walk miles and miles barefooted on broken glass just to get him a perfectly ripe avocado for his breakfast. *Oh well, I guess I'll just have to suck up the spanking like a bad girl...*

Saint nodded to approve his breakfast. *Damn.*

I headed to the kitchen to fetch my own, definitely not disappointed and definitely *definitely* not considering knocking some shit on the floor to earn myself a spanking.

Blake appeared with a broad yawn, shirtless and drawing all of my attention to his huge chest for a long second. I headed to the oven, grabbing out his plate of pancakes and wondering how my life had come to this. I'd never imagined myself as a house wife, not that I had any disrespect for that life path. Each to their own and all. But I'd never even seen myself getting married. My mom had ditched out on my dad when I was so young that I hadn't even realised most kids had two parents until I'd joined elementary school. And I'd moved around so much that I'd rarely gotten to know any of my friends' parents.

Between Dad and the nannies, that was what seemed normal to me. And why would I choose to be with someone who could up and walk out the second things got too hard? No, in one sense, me and Saint agreed. I knew the people in this world who were always going to be there for me. And I never intended to add any more people into that small circle. *Very small circle.*

Blake's eyes slid down my little white nightdress and he licked his lips, though I wasn't sure he was aware he was doing it. The action reminded me

of his tongue between my thighs and I battled the heat snaking up into my cheeks as he continued to look at me like *I* was his breakfast instead of the pancakes. I was half tempted to grab a bottle of syrup and squeeze it all over me in case he'd really mistaken me for his food. Except the moment I ever let Blake Bowman get his hands on me again would be the same day the trees grew from the sky and the lake turned pink.

"What's with the nice clothes, Saint?" Blake growled. "Our Cinderella should be in rags."

Saint tsked. "I wouldn't let the rats in the catacombs show up without their best attire, Blake. Do you really think I'd let Plague look anything but perfect?"

"Maybe it shouldn't be up to you," I said to Saint, watching from the corner of my eye as Blake's hands curled into fists.

"Yeah," Blake growled, fixing Saint in his sights. "Maybe it shouldn't."

"If you want to dress her like a gutter whore when I'm not around, be my guest," Saint said with a shrug. "But whenever she's within my range of sight, she will look like a fucking queen. Besides, the way you keep looking at her says you appreciate it just fine. So stop with the complaints."

Blake slammed his hand down on the table with a snarl, making my heart leap in my chest. "I'm looking at her like what she is: the spawn of the devil."

"Do you always lust over the devil's spawn?" I asked airily. "Only that means you must get hard for Saint *all* the time."

"Shut your smart mouth," Blake snapped as Saint eyed me like he was about to step in too. But he sat back as Blake closed in on me, letting him deal with me. And from the look in Blake's dark green eyes, that was the more frightening option right then.

He stepped past me, moving to the refrigerator and ripping open the freezer compartment. I watched him with my heart pounding out of rhythm, the tension in his body sending a flicker of fear through me. He took out a bag of ice, planting it on the counter before beckoning me closer and kicking the freezer door shut.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I approached and he ripped the bag open, tipping the whole lot into the sink so it was half full of ice. Blake caught my arm, yanking me close and placing me in front of it. He stood behind me, gripping my wrists and walking me forward with his crotch pressing to my ass. I clenched my jaw as he shoved my hands deep into the ice and I flinched at the bite of cold. He released his grip on me, resting his hands either side of the sink as his body crushed me in place.

The ice burned against my skin and I shut my eyes, falling into that deep space of calm inside me. I'd faced a thousand hardships in my training. Dad had made me dive into a freezing lake every time we took a trip to Alaska. This was nothing compared to that. I could still feel the kiss of pain that licked over my skin and the rush of goosebumps fleeing up my arms and making my nipples harden. But this torture wasn't the worst I'd faced.

"How does it feel, Cinders?" Blake purred in my ear.

"It feels...long and hard and throbbing," I said, fighting a smirk.

"What?" he snapped.

"Oh sorry, I thought you meant your cock," I said innocently.

Blake yanked my hands out of the ice and I gasped as he grabbed a handful of it from the sink, yanked up my nightdress and shoved it into my panties. I yelped in alarm, slamming my shoulders back against him as I tried to escape the cage of his body. Saint was laughing and the sound made my skin prickle all over. I reached frantically between my legs to get rid of

it, but Blake caught my wrists to stop me and I groaned in discomfort as the ice pressed against my sensitive flesh.

“You’re the one who needs to cool down, Cinders,” he growled in my ear. “And if you lie about me again, I’ll put you in an entire bath tub of ice. *Naked.*”

I bit my tongue on a comeback, the swell of his dick against my ass so obvious it was a joke. But I did not wanna be stripped down and forced into a freezing bath.

“Are we clear?” Blake snarled and I nodded in agreement.

The ice started to melt, dripping down the insides of my legs and I panted as it started to feel weirdly good.

No, god no, this is not okay.

With Blake’s hard on pressed to my ass and my skin beginning to tingle with heat, I couldn’t help involuntarily grinding back against him. It was totally shameless, but I simply couldn’t help it.

Blake growled low in my ear then released me suddenly, marching away. I turned, flustered as I watched him snatch up his plate of food, taking it to the couch and eating it in front of the television without a word of thanks. Not that I expected any.

“If you have to eat like a savage then at least use a fucking napkin,” Saint snarled at him.

“Yeah yeah,” Blake answered vaguely and Saint’s posture stiffened.

I stood in the kitchenette with a puddle growing around my feet and flames searing my cheeks, my appetite for breakfast entirely gone.

Blake glanced over his shoulder at me from the couch, eyeing the puddle with a smirk. “Better get a mop, Cinderella. You’re so wet for me it’s ridiculous.”

Saint eyed me with delight, my shame making him blaze with satisfaction.

I headed over to the closet to snatch out a mop and soon had the kitchen floor clean, though my dignity was never going to be intact again.

By the time I was done, it was time for my least favourite part of my morning. My shower. It wasn't like I was body conscious, but knowing the doors to the Jack and Jill bathroom could open at any second put me on edge. I didn't want Blake or Kyan walking in on me 'accidentally'. So far, they hadn't invaded my privacy, but I never felt any less on edge. Especially considering Kyan hadn't woken up yet.

I cleared Saint's plate before heading away and using Blake's door to get through to the bathroom. I frowned at Kyan's door and turned the shower on to give him a warning before stripping out of my clothes and tying my hair in a knot. I stepped under the heated flow and sighed as it warmed all of the places the ice had frozen. Then I used my honey blossom and vanilla shower gel to scrub at my skin in record time.

Before I could get out, Kyan's door flew open and I shrieked in anger.

"Get out of here you asshole!" I shouted, covering my breasts and turning my front to the wall as I glared over my shoulder at him.

He was butt ass fucking naked as he strode to the toilet and took a piss. From the angle we were at I couldn't see his dick thank God, but I could see his muscular ass alright. And the tattoos that curled up his thighs, joining the artwork on his back. In the centre of his back, a fallen angel knelt with black wings extending over his shoulder blades and the face of a demon which spoke of its sins. He hadn't tied his hair into its top knot yet but I could see his Night Keeper tattoo peeking between the long strands on the back of his neck too, the tip of the arrow looking viciously sharp.

He started laughing and I scowled as he walked to the sink and washed his hands. *At least he's not a total animal.*

Except that thought died in a wave as he strode straight toward me, ripped the door open and stepped inside the shower. *Holy fucking shit!*

"Kyan!" I screamed in alarm as his naked body butted up against mine and he hummed to himself, grabbing his shampoo and rubbing it into his hair like I wasn't even there.

I couldn't even get past him to get out because he was so damn huge. I had both hands wrapped around my chest as he caged me in against the wall and I looked over my shoulder to glare at him in horror.

"Get the fuck out," I demanded and his eyes dragged down to my ass, making my breathing quicken like mad. One glance down and I could have seen his dick. I refused to give him what he wanted though, despite the fact that I wanted to look so fucking bad that it was almost impossible to stop myself. But I damn well did. I had no dignity left, but I still had my pride.

"This is *my* shower," he said with a smirk. "*You* get out."

"You're in my way, you dipshit," I hissed.

"Oh, am I?" he mused, lifting a hand to wash the suds from his hair. I was practically drooling as I took in all of those muscles and the way he kept brushing against me was sending raging electricity darting everywhere under my skin. I was already turned on from Blake and now this Night Keeper was making things worse. Why couldn't they be as ugly as their personalities? "I think a little thing like you can squeeze by."

I swallowed the lump of fury in my throat, narrowing my gaze on him as I saw the dare in his eyes. And dammit if it didn't spark a wildness in me.

I wasn't going to back down. And if he wanted a fucking show then he was going to get one.

I mentally amped myself up for what I was about to do, turning to the wall as I took in a slow breath.

Do it.

I dropped my hands, turned around and moved right into his personal space. His eyes widened in surprise as I laid my palms flat on his hot, naked chest and pushed him back a step. He didn't give in, growling with desire as his eyes dipped down to stare at my breasts.

I pressed myself against him, having to rub my way past him to the door and feeling the hard length of him brushing my skin as I went. Heat burst between my thighs and I stamped my teeth to my lip to fight a moan of desire.

I stepped out onto the bath mat, snatching up a towel and Saint's robe before hurrying into Kyan's room to dry myself off. That big-balled piece of shit had gotten me all kinds of hot. Angry hot. Physically hot. Gonna-be-turned-on-for-a-week hot. And I was so pissed at him for it.

When I was dry, I dropped the towel on the floor for him to clean up then pulled on Saint's robe. It was still hanging open when Kyan walked in, holding a towel to his junk as he rubbed it dry and brushed his teeth with his other hand.

I quickly did up my robe, my throat overly tight as he continued walking toward me, smirking around his toothbrush.

"Get out of my room," he demanded and I turned my back on him, heading to the door.

"Gladly, asshole," I called back and his laughter followed me.

I was flustered as hell by the time I reached the stairs leading up to Saint's room. And it took me way too long to realise Saint wasn't sitting at the breakfast table on his phone like he had been the past few days at this time.

My pulse elevated as I rounded onto the top of the stairs and found him sitting on the end of his bed with his elbows resting on his knees like he'd been waiting for me. All week he'd left my clothes up here to get changed alone. So why was he here right now? Was everyone in this house determined to see me freaking naked today?!

"Your hair's wet," Saint said sternly, rising to his feet. I was only supposed to wash it on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. And I was fairly sure the reason for that was because Saint was batshit.

"Yeah, well tell Kyan not to fucking walk into the shower while I'm in it already and maybe I'll be able to keep it out of the flow next time," I snarled and Saint's eyes widened.

"That asshole," he muttered, but not like he was pissed at him, like he was freaking jealous.

I pursed my lips, folding my arms around myself and straightening my spine. "I go along with your bullshit, Saint. But we had a deal. Nothing sexual."

"You being naked doesn't count as sexual unless one of us is inside you, Barbie," Saint said coldly and my lips parted in refusal before he barrelled on. "It's Kyan's shower, so if you don't wanna share then get the fuck out of it before he gets in. You gave up your privacy when you became ours. So we're gonna see you naked and you're gonna see us naked too. That's the way it is."

The injustice of it made me pout like a child and I was half a second from stamping my foot before he turned and stalked away from me into his closet.

I closed my eyes, counting to ten, trying to retreat into that calm place inside of me, but I just couldn't manage it this morning. I was so pissed off and turned on and *gah*.

Saint appeared a moment later with a black maxi skirt and a lacy pink top in one hand and a delicate, dark blue lingerie combo in the other.

“Put these on,” he demanded, placing them on the bed and folding his arms as he waited.

I could tell this was a test. He wanted me to blink, to beg for him to turn around. But I was not in the mood to be fucked with anymore. So I was going to front it out just like I had with Kyan.

I walked over to the clothes then turned to face Saint and undid my robe. I stared him right in the eye and let it fall from my shoulders to pool at my feet. I knew I was flushed and my nipples were hardened from my encounters with Blake and Kyan. Saint could probably tell how turned on I was and suddenly I found a power in that.

The vicious mask he wore dropped for the first time since I’d met him. He swallowed hard and his eyes softened to something dark and hungry that almost drew me in. I grabbed the panties, pulling them on before putting on the bra. Neither did much to cover my nudity and if anything they just enhanced my body even more. Next, I pulled on the skirt which fit snugly over my ass before falling down to my feet and splitting up both sides to the knee. I tugged the pink lacy top on over it and it gently caressed the skin above my navel, leaving my stomach on show.

Saint moved toward me, taking my hand and guiding me to a large mirror on the wall. He placed me in front of him and my heart juddered as he reached up to pull my hair out of its knot. A waterfall of gold tumbled around me and Saint combed his fingers through the damp strands, arranging it over my shoulders. Every touch was firm and controlling, but then he stroked his finger down my side and over the curve of my hip with the most gentle of touches and a breath snagged in my throat.

“Beautiful,” he said softly, pressing up behind me and gazing at me in the mirror.

It wasn’t a compliment from him. I was just one of his pretty possessions. A thing to be admired.

“Well?” he asked, stepping to my side and fixing his already perfectly styled hair. “Aren’t you going to comment on how I look?”

I blew out a derisive breath, looking him up and down in the mirror and wetting my lips. “You look merciless, Saint Memphis. Like always.”

He smirked and that expression sent an angry tirade of butterflies swarming through my belly. *Better call pest control for those little bastards.*

Saint leaned in and pressed an icy kiss to my cheek, making my entire body freeze in reaction to it.

“Do your makeup,” he breathed then walked away and every butterfly dropped dead just like that.

An entire Saturday with the Night Keepers was predictably long. I brought them drinks while they played video games then they made me count pebbles on the shore while they swam in the lake and laughed together about how fucked the world was. I didn’t *quite* mind that display of muscular bodies dripping with water. Shame about the personalities attached to them though.

When the sun finally did me the solid of setting, I was ready to go to bed and be done with this day. It was only a few more hours of torture until they let me and I finally stepped into the bathroom with a sigh of relief.

Although, it was short lived, because I soon remembered I had to do this all over again tomorrow. And the next day and the next...

I stripped down and put on my nightdress, climbing into the bathtub ready for another uncomfortable night's sleep. My phone battery was low and I made a mental note to ask the asswits to charge it. I knew they would; they wanted me on call at all times. As it was essential to them controlling me.

My eyes fluttered closed and I drew in a long breath as I begged sleep to come and take me away from this nightmare. And hopefully not fling me into another one. I just wanted the sweet gift of nothingness to steal me away for a while. And at long last, I got my wish.

I woke with a cold sense of dread in my bones and I knew something was wrong. A hand clamped over my mouth and my scream was stifled by the huge palm. Blake hauled me out of the bath, crushing my back to his chest and holding me so tightly I couldn't breathe.

He dragged me out of the bathroom into his room, shutting the door quietly behind us.

"Don't fight me," he snarled in my ear and I nodded against his palm. He slowly released his hand then turned me around and slapped a line of duct tape over my mouth instead, making my heart falter. He twisted me around again, yanking my hands behind my back and tethering them together with a zip-tie.

He guided me out into the hallway and walked me to the front door as fear collected in my bones. I glanced around, anxious that neither of the other two appeared as he half carried me outside.

Something deep inside me said this was wrong. I didn't know what he was gonna do, but I was sure if I went with him I'd regret it.

As we made it onto the porch, I slammed my heel down onto his foot as hard as I could. But without a shoe to aid me, he didn't even flinch. He jerked me against his body once more, not releasing me an inch and my heart thrashed against my ribcage.

"What did I say?" he hissed. "One more move like that and you'll pay for it, Cinders."

My breathing became frantic as he led me up the path, the darkness thick around us. When we reached the edge of the woods, he shoved me up a narrow track and released his grip on me, jabbing me in the back.

"Move," he commanded in a tone that had fear rolling through me.

I marched in front of him, my bare feet pressing to the damp ground as I made a plan in my mind. Every nerve in my body was screaming at me to run. And Dad had always told me to trust my instincts.

The second there was a curve in the path, I fled, racing off into the trees, circling back in the direction we'd come. I knew running to the other Night Keepers was insane, but I was sure this was more than just another way to freak me out. Blake was on a warpath and I was his target.

"Stop!" he barked and a scream ripped through my lungs, unable to get past the duct tape. His heavy footfalls raced after me and panic spread into my limbs as I tore through the trees in the dark. My white nightdress stood out starkly and I knew my only chance was outrunning him and making it back to The Temple.

My heart thundered in my chest as I almost made it to the path.

Blake's weight collided with me and the full force of his best football tackle took me to the ground. I wheezed beneath his weight, unable to breathe for a second before he dragged me to my feet by the hair. I wished I could scream and claw and bite. But I was at his mercy as he lifted me up and threw me over his shoulder.

I screamed against my gag, tears filling my eyes as terror crawled into my limbs and took me hostage. He strode deeper and deeper into the woods, his breathing growing heavier the further we went until we were so far away from the centre of campus, I was sure even without the gag no one would have heard me scream.

He dropped me onto my back and I winced as my hands were crushed beneath me. The light of the moon spilled over us, giving me just enough light to see by and the shadowy man before me turned my blood to ice.

“I am so fucking sick of looking at you,” he snapped, his voice like a knife slicing through the frigid air. “Get up!”

I pushed my hands into the soft earth, rolling to my knees and standing. Terror ripped into every inch of my body as I found myself gazing down into a six foot deep grave before me.

Blake severed the tie around my wrists then ripped the gag off of my mouth and I yelped in pain.

I swung a fist at him, but he was ready, throwing his palm against my chest so I stumbled backwards. My feet met nothing but air and I screamed as I tumbled down into the hole, landing hard on my back. I spluttered a cough, terror consuming me as I hurried to get to my feet and gazed up at him above me.

“Please don’t do this,” I rasped, my throat raw from swallowed screams.

“Shut the fuck up!” he bellowed and I stilled, trembling from head to toe, wondering how I was ever going to get out of this. Was this where I was going to lay for the rest of time? In some hidden grave in the woods?

“You won’t get away with this,” I blurted. “Everyone on campus knows who-”

“I said – *shut the fuck up*,” he snarled, reaching for something at his hip and producing a gun. Not just any gun. My dad’s gun. The Glock 19 pistol.

“Blake,” I breathed, my throat closing up as my heart beat harder and harder.

“She’s in a grave like this, you know?” he snarled. “Six fucking feet under because of *your* filthy fuck of a father.”

“I’m sorry,” I begged as panic seized me. “I know you lost your mom and I’m so, *so* sorry for that Blake. But you don’t want to do this.”

He laughed hollowly then crouched down, gazing at me with malice in his eyes. “You don’t know what I want,” he said in a deathly quiet tone. “And you don’t know what I’m capable of either.”

I quaked before him, frozen to my core in nothing but my panties and nightdress. “I do know what you want,” I choked out.

Blake blew out a sharp breath through his nose. “And what’s that?”

“You want me hurt,” I whispered. “You want to see me in pain, you want me suffering for what happened to your mom.”

“Maybe I’m done with the suffering,” he growled. “Maybe I want it over with.”

My lower lip trembled and I tentatively reached up to him, my fingers grazing his as I stretched up onto my tip-toes. “You won’t kill me,” I breathed, though I wasn’t sure if my words were true. I just wished they were with all my heart.

He slapped my hand away and I flinched, stepping back.

“She suffered for a week in hospital,” he growled. “She was infectious so they wouldn’t even let us visit her. I had to say goodbye to my mother through fucking FaceTime,” he spat, rising to his feet and kicking the earth so it showered over me.

I backed up against the opposite wall, tears washing over my skin as I stared at this broken boy.

“I’m sorry,” I breathed. “I never had a mom, I can’t even imagine.”

“No, you can’t,” he snarled, his shadowy silhouette blocking out the light of the moon as he glared down at me. The gun hung loosely in his hand, his finger sitting on the trigger and my heart drummed a war beat in my chest. Despite all of my self-defence classes, nothing had prepared me for this. Being helpless. Weak. Unable to fight back.

“She was a good person,” Blake said, a cloud of vapour rising around him in the cold air. “She didn’t deserve to die like that. Alone. With no one there to hold her-” his voice cracked and he turned away from me, starting to pace.

“I know you’re hurting,” I said gently, praying he’d listen to me. “I know what it’s like to lose someone.”

“Fuck you!” he roared, his voice echoing back to us from the mountain. “Don’t lie to me,” he growled and my heart withered as I realised he was never going to listen.

“Please Blake,” I begged. “I’m not your enemy.”

He fell still and I couldn’t see his expression in the dark. I stood, shaky and tiny beneath him, everything I’d ever been and ever would be narrowing in on this moment. He could take it all from me in a single movement. Buy his revenge in blood.

He lifted the gun, aiming it down at me and my heart fractured. It was over. Done. And between the freezing air and the heated tears rolling down my cheeks, I found an inch of calm in it all. Jessica. She felt closer to me then than she had in such a long time, I could almost hear her calling my name on the wind.

I shut my eyes, not wanting the darkness to be the last thing I saw. I pictured the light days, the happy days, the moments curled in my dad’s arms with a story book resting on his knees. I remembered playing with

Jessica in the yard, pretending we were birds as we flapped our arms and soared across the ground, really believing we were flying.

The heavy thud of boots sounded in front of me and my eyes flew open a second before Blake grabbed the back of my neck and yanked me in for a fierce kiss. Adrenaline spiked through my blood as he crushed me back against the dirt wall, his fingers tangling in my hair as he groaned like he was in pain.

I could taste my tears on our lips and he drank them hungrily, the full force of his body pinning me against the earth. His tongue invaded my mouth with desperate strokes and the fire in him burned right through to my core, igniting everything along the way.

I started kissing him back, lost to the voracious passion in him as it brought every part of my being to life. It was wrong, twisted, wholly fucked up. But I wanted him in that moment. I wanted him to taste my pain and I wanted to taste his back. And somewhere between it all, there was just two people grieving, aching, hurting. And in that kiss was a relief I'd never thought I'd feel. A dulling of that eternal pain inside me.

Blake broke the kiss and the fire in my veins gave way to the icy cold of the grave once more. Our breaths fogged between us as we panted. Reality was as sharp as a blade slicing into my flesh.

"Never, *ever* tell the others about this," Blake warned and my throat constricted.

"Never," I swore. But not because I cared to follow his orders. But because this crazy, fucked up moment was ours. It didn't make it right, or good. I couldn't forgive him for dragging me here and pointing a gun in my face. But I also knew what grief did to a person. I knew it ate away at who you were, gnawing until there was nothing but a bloody wound that begged

for redemption. *I* was Blake's redemption. And for some strange, messed up reason, I had a feeling he might be mine.



“I need to run some errands,” Saint said abruptly, pulling my attention from the Xbox where my character was battering a zombie’s head in with a baseball bat full of nails. *Nice.*

“Errands?” I asked casually, my gaze fixed on the screen. Speaking fluent Saint was a fucking life skill that I deserved a medal for. Errands did not mean popping to the shops or going to visit friends in Saint speak. Oh no, *errands* meant that someone had stepped out of line and he was going to fuck them up for it.

“Yeah.”

“You need me?” I asked, hoping that this particular errand might need his ass kicking. My blood had been getting hotter and hotter for the last few days. Spending so much time locked up in The Temple during that quarantine bullshit hadn’t suited me at all. I was a wild animal and I wasn’t meant for a cage. Not even a gilded one.

“Not this time. Just some jumped up little Susan who needs knocking down a peg. It’s better suited to me and Blake. Besides...” Saint stepped closer to me and I actually looked up from my game at the growl in his voice. “With the way Blake’s been with her recently, I don’t think we

should let him be around Tatum unless we're both there too. Just until we can be sure he's not going to lose it entirely. I'm all for fucking her up as much as he needs to, but if he kills her that's a whole other level of shit landing on our doorstep."

"Naw, Blake might have gone batshit but he's not the killing kind," I said, though I had to admit some of the things he'd been saying recently sounded like he'd come close to snapping like that once or twice. But I'd known a few killers in my time and I knew Blake Bowman better than I knew myself. He was a lot of things. But a killer? I couldn't see it.

"Maybe. Maybe not. Do you want to risk our pet's life on it?" Saint asked and I pushed my tongue into my cheek as I considered that.

My gaze skimmed across the room to the kitchenette where Tatum was busy washing up after our dinner. She was making enough noise for me to be fairly sure she couldn't hear us and my gaze trailed over her as I wondered whether Saint had a point. I did like having her around. It was refreshing. Something new in a life that was so predictable. And she wasn't half bad to look at. Not half bad at all. No was the answer, I didn't like the sound of that one bit.

"I guess I like having her around," I admitted.

"Good. Then you're on babysitting duty tonight. Don't expect us back until late, this errand will take most of the evening. I need to drive the point home. With all of this virus bullshit, people are starting to think of their lives as more fragile than they used to be. They're wondering whether they wanna stay under our heel for the duration of this shit or if they're going to fight against our command. And I'm not going to allow any descent amongst the masses."

"Of course you're not." I snorted a laugh and looked back at the screen. Saint was always so concerned about controlling everyone and everything

around him. He had to be certain that every single person in this place knew exactly who ruled over them at all times. But I saw the whole top dogs thing as simpler than that. When it came down to it, I could and would beat the shit out of any fucker who tried to stand against me. I didn't see the need for all the posturing and threats. If anyone stepped too far out of line, I'd just kick them back down again. Simple. But Saint would be Saint and it was on him if he wanted to play his fucked up little games.

"I'll see you tonight," he promised as if he thought I might be going anywhere else. But the school was on lockdown so where the fuck was I supposed to go?

I got back to my game, slashing, killing, stabbing and shooting my way through hoard after hoard of zombies before finding a group of survivors who were holed up in a barn. They gave me the option to join them and I took the choice to butcher them and steal their supplies instead. Obviously.

Saint and Blake soon left on their little mission and my skin prickled as I realised I had Tatum Rivers all to myself for the evening.

Now what will I do with her?

I continued my game for a while, but my character kept dying as my attention wavered. Before I could make any decisions on my little night in with my trophy, she came to me.

The cushions bounced as Tatum moved to sit on them, folding her legs beside me and letting her knee brush against my thigh. That shit was intentional, but I had no problem with the seduction game she was trying to play with me. I just wondered how far she was really willing to push it. Because if she was hoping to crawl into my bed, she might be surprised when she found herself chained to it too.

I tossed the control aside, abandoning my game as I turned to look at her. She was wearing a pair of high waisted grey slacks and a white blouse that

had enough buttons undone to give me a glimpse of her cleavage and the black bra she wore beneath it. Saint had her dressed up like a sexy secretary who was destined to get fucked over the CEO's desk. All she needed was a pair of thick rimmed glasses to complete the look. It was hot. But it wasn't my usual bag.

"So..." she began as I let the silence drag between us.

"So?"

"Umm, what are we doing tonight then?" She bit her lip nervously and I chased the movement with my eyes, a hungry growl escaping me as I imagined biting it harder.

"Same thing we do every night at the moment," I deadpanned, the mind numbing boredom of this fucking quarantine situation already making me ache with a need for violence and freedom, and we'd only been locked in this fucking school for a short time.

"So Saint said we have to stay in?" she asked with a sigh.

"Saint's not the boss of me," I growled.

"Mmmhmm."

I knew what she was trying to do. She was trying to drive a wedge between me and the other Night Keepers, trying to goad the beast in me. But what she didn't realise about Saint being in charge was that I liked it that way. I had no interest in controlling the masses and I didn't give a shit about making decisions and hard choices. All I cared about was the rush of the fight. So if people saw me as Saint's guard dog, held tight on his chain to be unleashed at his whim, that was just fine by me. I didn't give a shit. Because it wasn't true. I did what I wanted. And it just so happened that I wanted to be pointed in the direction of fuckers to mess up from time to time. I didn't mind being set loose with my fists and fury at his beck and call one little fucking bit. Because whenever he offered me up a fresh

victim, he was just feeding the beast within me. And that fucker was *always* hungry.

“You want me to take you out then, baby?” I asked her, seeing exactly what she was angling for. But if she was willing to test me, she’d better be ready to accept the consequences for it.

“Yeah,” she said, her eyes all hot with the dare. “I do.”

I smirked at her, getting to my feet and pulling her up with me. “Come on then. But I’m not taking you out dressed like a fucking secretary.”

A breath of laughter escaped her and I caught her hand, dragging her up the stairs to Saint’s room with a smile playing around my lips.

“Are we allowed up here?” she asked hesitantly.

“No. Do you think we’ll get in trouble?” I asked, throwing a look at her over my shoulder.

“Definitely,” she breathed.

“And does that turn you on?”

Tatum didn’t reply, but the way she bit her lip told me it did.

I headed straight for Saint’s closet and pulled her inside.

“Strip,” I commanded. “But you can keep the underwear on.”

I headed down the rack of clothes Saint had bought her, eyeing most of it dismissively until I found a pair of leather pants and pulled them off the rack. That asshole had clearly bought them knowing I’d like her in them and despite the bullshit he tried to spout about wanting her to look pristine all the damn time, I knew he wanted her roughed up sometimes too.

I searched the rack of tops but couldn’t find anything I liked so I grabbed her a tight black tank instead.

I turned back to find she hadn’t taken off the secretary getup and I growled at her as I moved forward to help her out of it. Tatum’s eyes

widened as I closed in on her, but she was too late to stop me now. She'd had her chance to do this the easy way.

I ripped the shirt open, scattering buttons everywhere and she yelped in alarm as she flinched back, making her tits bounce with the movement.

"Am I ripping the pants off too?" I asked, wondering if we should just stay in instead of going out after all.

"I can do it," she growled, clearly less than impressed about my caveman attitude but I just didn't give a shit. Not a single one.

She shrugged out of the remains of the shirt and I caught her arm to get a closer look at it as my gaze caught on a rose shaped scar on the inside of her forearm.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"Don't tell me you have a scar fetish?" she accused, rolling her eyes as she jerked her arm back out of my grip.

"Naw. But I've got a violence fetish and scars usually go hand in hand with violence."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you but not this one."

She didn't seem inclined to tell me any more about it, but I soon forgot it as she dropped her pants too. Saint may have had questionable taste in clothes for her, but he'd done an exceptional job on the underwear and I was more than happy to appreciate the view of her modelling it for me.

I folded my arms and watched as she changed into the clothes I'd given her, my gaze snagging on the way the leather pants hugged her ass.

I'm gonna bite that peachy ass one day real soon.

"Satisfied?" she asked, cocking her head at me like a real rich bitch and damn near stomping that foot. I swear if she did it though I'd be out. I couldn't stand those fucking girls.

“Not quite,” I said, moving forward and grabbing her tank top right beneath her tits before ripping the material in half. She gasped as I yanked the bottom half off of her and I smirked at the look of my home made crop top on her body. “Much better.”

Tatum gaped at me for a moment but a smile soon pulled at those lips. “You’re a fucking animal, you know that?”

“Naw, baby, I’m much worse than an animal. They never kill for sport.” I leaned in close as her breath caught and I clawed my fingers into her perfectly styled hair, messing it up until it looked like she’d just woken up from a night filled with fucking. Perfect.

I turned away from her and grabbed one of Saint’s black shirts from the rack before hanging it in the middle of the white section. Next, I opened his cufflink drawer and swapped three of the boxes around.

“He’s gonna lose the plot when he finds that,” Tatum breathed and her voice was rough with excitement as her blue eyes danced with energy.

“That’s the point, baby, you wanna join me?”

She only hesitated for a moment before hurrying to my side and taking a pair of his sweatpants from the perfectly piled stack. She turned them inside out, folded them perfectly again and slipped them back into the pile beneath another pair.

“Are you as wet for me as I am hard for you right now?” I teased, watching her as she fucked with the demon who owned her like she wasn’t afraid for her life. Or maybe she was but she just knew the thrill of it was worth the consequences like I did.

“Probably, but I’m still not adding sex to our deal.”

Her response surprised me so much that a real laugh tore from my lips. She looked up at me with a laugh of her own and I was seriously tempted to

test her resolve on that decision. But I was more tempted to see more of what she was like when she was breaking the rules.

“C’mon my little rebel. We’ve got a date to attend.” I picked up the clothes she’d taken off and tossed them in the laundry basket so that Saint wouldn’t know she’d been in here too easily before hurrying back out onto the balcony and down the stairs with Tatum on my heels.

We crossed the living room but before we made it past the couch, Tatum shrieked and stumbled backwards.

I turned to look at her in confusion as she leapt up onto the couch and pointed at the floor. “Holy shit, look at that thing!”

I followed her arm and spotted the huge spider scuttling across the flagstones, a laugh bursting from my lips as I realised what had gotten her all skittish.

“Don’t tell me you can fuck with Saint’s perfect closet without pissing yourself, but at the sight of a little spider you shit your pants?” I teased.

“Shut up and get rid of it!” she demanded and I arched a brow at her tone.

“Bossy much?”

“For fuck’s sake, Kyan, *please*.” She aimed those big blues at me and for some reason I was tempted to give in to her request.

“What do I get for rescuing you?” I asked, my gaze sliding over her in those leather pants.

“What do you want?” she ground out, giving me a look that said I was an asshole, but I’d made my peace with that a long time ago.

“A kiss,” I said, eyeing her lips for a lingering moment as I smirked at her.

She snorted a breath of frustration, her eyes flicking to the spider which was headed her way again. “Fine,” she snapped, “Just get rid of it!”

“Your wish is my command.” I gave her a mocking bow and headed over to deal with the little fucker. And to be fair it *was* a pretty big beasty.

The thing was fast, scuttling away from me in a bid to escape but I managed to catch it on my third attempt, cupping it between my hands as it scrambled to get free.

“Don’t kill it,” she exclaimed like she thought I was about to crush the little thing.

“Why would I kill it?”

“I just assumed...I mean you beat the shit out of people for fun, so...”

I rolled my eyes at her and she held her breath as I crossed the room and dutifully tossed it outside. “I kick the shit out of people who deserve it or who want me to. I’m not gonna kill some little spider for no reason.”

“You care about its life?” The surprise in her big blues was kinda offensive, but I guessed that maybe she had good reason to have a low opinion of me. Hell, most people had good reason to have a low opinion of me.

“I care about its life more than I do about most people’s,” I granted her as I kicked the door shut again. “Animals aren’t capable of evil so they don’t deserve any from me.”

“That’s...unexpected,” she said, tilting her head as she looked at me in a wholly different way than usual.

I stalked closer to her, having to look up at her as she still stood on the couch. “Well don’t get too excited, baby,” I purred. “Because you look pretty human to me.”

“Maybe you should get a kiss from the spider then?”

“Naw. His lips are hairier than yours.”

She tried to fight off a smile at that and I reached up to curl a hand around her cheek. “You gonna keep me waiting?”

Her gaze drifted to my mouth and she shook her head slowly, moving forward to lean on the back of the couch as she closed the distance between us.

I let my hand slide from her cheek, reaching out with my other arm as well and curled my hands around her waist, liking the way her soft skin felt beneath my rough hands.

“Just one kiss,” she warned.

“Just the one,” I agreed.

She let out a shaky breath and leaned in, the vanilla and honey blossom scent of her enveloping me as she looked into my eyes.

Her lips parted and her eyes fell shut as she leaned closer, her lips almost brushing mine before I turned my cheek and the soft warmth of her mouth grazed against the stubble on my jaw.

She pulled back in surprise, her eyes widening as she looked at me like she wasn't sure what the hell to think of that. “That's the second time you've made me lean in for a kiss and rejected me,” she growled.

I laughed darkly, my grip tightening on her waist as I tugged her closer, our mouths almost touching again. But not quite. “I only kiss girls who I want to make mine in every way,” I said in a low voice. “It's not necessary for fucking and I don't see the point in it unless it means something.”

Her eyes widened as she took that in, her gaze holding me captive for a long moment and I had to admit I was tempted to find out what she tasted like.

I shifted one hand from her waist to her hair and fisted her blonde locks through my fingers, tugging her head back before dipping my mouth to the hollow of her neck and running my tongue right up to that spot beneath her ear. She gasped at the contact, a shiver running through her entire body as I growled with desire.

“But don’t worry, baby, if you want me to, I can do much better things to you with my mouth than kissing.”

I released her and stepped away again, beckoning for her to follow me as I headed down the short corridor which led out through the back of the church.

A moment later, her footsteps followed me and I smirked at the fact that I’d shocked her into silence for once.

I led her through my bedroom and into the bathroom where she slept, picking up the huge bag of makeup Saint had bought her and rifling through it until I found a blood red lipstick. The perfect colour for smearing over my cock. Which I still wasn’t convinced would be happening, but I liked to prepare for the best outcome.

I left her to put it on and headed back into my room, ditching my own clothes in a heap on the floor before pulling on a pair of black jeans and a white tank. *All the better to see the bloodstains later.*

Last, I grabbed my favourite leather jacket and threw it on before grabbing my second favourite for her.

Tatum emerged from the bathroom as I headed back towards it and my eyes widened as I took in her dirtied up look. She’d even gone one better than just putting on that lipstick for me and had shadowed her eyes to match. She looked fucking badass and I was more tempted than ever to put that bad ass to good work.

I tossed her my jacket and she hesitated a moment. “Saint doesn’t like me smelling like you.”

“Saint’s not here, baby, and I want you marked out as mine tonight in every way thinkable.”

She swallowed thickly at my words and for a moment it didn’t even look like she hated them as she pulled my jacket on. *Yes. Fuck yes.*

I grabbed her hand and pulled her back out into the living room and she breathed a laugh as she picked up on my excitement. There was a tall set of drawers by the door and I opened the top one, taking two rolls of cash from it. There was two thousand dollars in each of them. Saint's pocket change. I'd pay him back out of my winnings. Probably. Or maybe not.

I shoved the money into my pocket and grabbed a notepad and fancy ass fountain pen next.

I pulled the lid from the pen with my teeth and spat it onto the floor before scribbling a note for Saint and Blake.

I've taken our pet out for a bit. Be back when I'm back.

I tossed the note and pen down on the dining table, leaving the lid off to enrage Saint even more.

"Where are we going?" Tatum asked as I pulled her out of the door and into the night.

"Sad as it is, I'm gonna take you to what might just be my favourite place in the world," I replied and she didn't have anything to say to that, only offering a frown which said she didn't like me being cryptic.

I led her through campus all the way up the hill to the main gates and she started to drag her feet as I didn't slow.

"Why are we heading for the gate?" she asked urgently.

"Because I promised to take you out."

Tatum jerked to a halt and I turned to look at her in the moonlight.

"We're on lockdown! Are you fucking insane?" she hissed.

"Yeah, baby, I am," I purred, moving closer to her and catching her waist as I pulled her body flush with mine and inhaled that vanilla honey blossom scent of hers. She stilled in my arms but didn't try to push me off as she

looked up at me with her big blues. I leaned down and pushed my nose into her hair, drawing a line up her neck with my mouth without actually kissing her which made goosebumps rise along her flesh as I reached her ear.

“Question is, are you?”

Her pause made my heart leap, but her answer made it race.

“Sometimes.”

“Good.” I wound my arm around her waist, slipping my hand beneath the jacket she wore so that I could curl my fingers around her hip bone and enjoy the feeling of her soft skin against my rough palm.

She didn’t slow as we walked on and when I reached the gates, I gave them a good rattle to draw the guard out of his hut.

He walked towards us in his black uniform with a medical mask strapped to his face. It was creepy but kinda cool too. Like we were living a real life apocalypse movie. *Oh what I wouldn’t give for the virus to turn people into zombies so I could get myself a baseball bat filled with nails and beat skulls in all fucking day every fucking day.*

“I didn’t think we’d be seeing you for a while, Kyan,” Porter said from beneath his mask, his eyes skimming over Tatum and then focusing back on me. “It’s not so simple for us to just look the other way with lockdown in effect.”

“I imagined it wouldn’t be. I guessed the price would have doubled.” I pulled the rolls of cash from my pocket and waved them enticingly.

Porter’s beady eyes widened and I was sure he was salivating in that mask. “Just this once then, but be back before one am. That’s when my shift changes and Corlo is taking over after me. You know what an asshole he can be.”

“Just call me Cinderella and expect us back by midnight,” I said, with a predatory grin.

I could feel the tension coiling in Tatum's body as she stayed pressed to my side and I grinned, fully expecting her to try and run tonight.

Do it, baby, I love a hunt.

Porter unlocked the gate and I tossed him the cash as we stepped out into the outside world. *Freedom. Fuck yes.*

I kept Tatum close but she didn't seem to be considering running yet, probably waiting until we got further from the school and the guard dogs to try that. I couldn't fucking wait.

I led her away from the main gates and down the drive before drawing her into the trees.

"Where are we going?" she asked nervously.

"If I wanted to fuck you in a bush I'd do it in one closer to The Temple, baby. I'm not a big fan of long walks."

"Asshole," she grumbled and I moaned like that word had turned me on.

"Give it to me harder, baby, you know I like it when you talk dirty to me."

"You're a fucking mindless douchebag who just runs around after Saint like a whipped little bitch," she added.

"Better." I stopped suddenly, releasing her as we reached my true love and I pulled the cover off of it with a flourish. It was a limited edition Harley Davidson with an entirely black paint job and I loved it like a fucking brother. Mine. All mine. And I'd never let anyone ride it with me before.

"Wow," she said. And that earned her points. Boner points. Girl knew her shit.

"Hop on, baby, we're already late. I didn't know I was going to be able to make tonight's bout so we're gonna need to ride hard and fast if we wanna get there."

I rolled the bike forward and she hopped on obligingly, shifting forward so that I could sit behind her with my dick pressed firmly against that biteable ass.

The bike roared to life beneath us and I hoped she was feeling those vibrations real good from her perch on top of the engine.

I kicked it into gear and we were soon shooting down the driveway and out onto the road beyond.

I took back roads and left my headlights off, letting the bright moon guide me down the route I knew so well. I didn't need the cops spotting me breaking quarantine and the light moving through the hills would be only too obvious from the town below.

Before we headed into Merkwell, I took a sharp left onto a dirt track and slowed my pace so that the bike could cope better with the dusty trail.

We finally made it up to the huge barn where the fight nights were held and I parked my bike up at the end of a row of beat up old trucks. There must have been over a hundred vehicles here so clearly I wasn't the only one ignoring lockdown. Though I had to admit I knew how fucking dumb that was. But I just couldn't bring myself to care. I needed this. I lived for it. Hungered for it. It was all or nothing and I feared that the nothing would kill me sooner than any virus could.

I took Tatum's hand and drew her with me as we headed for the barn. Four enormous fuckers were working the door, but they recognised me instantly and let us in. I didn't even have to pay entry. Half the people here had come to see me fight.

The scent of stale sweat and cheap beer hung in a cloud of tobacco over the whole place and I grinned to myself as I remembered the few times I'd dragged Saint here. It was like looking at a penguin in the desert. I still

liked to crack out the photos every now and then and laugh myself shitless over them.

Eyes turned our way as I headed for the bar at the back of the enormous barn, glancing at the upper level where people were hawking and screaming for whoever happened to be fighting in the ring right now. I couldn't see the actual ring through the crowd in front of us, but by the screams of the crowd I was willing to bet someone was having their ass handed to them.

Denise was wiping the bar down with a dirty rag as I approached, her tattooed tits spilling out of a bra that was too tight and her midnight hair falling around her shoulders. She was a fairly good fuck but as I looked at her now, I wondered what it was I'd found so attractive about her before.

"Who's this?" Denise asked, jerking her chin at Tatum with a sneer on her face that didn't hide her jealousy.

"Tatum. She's my girl," I replied easily.

"Hi," Tatum said brightly, like she hadn't noticed the super bitch vibes being aimed her way, but like fuck had she missed that, she was just playing a classier game.

"That's Denise," I said, deciding to play a game of my own. "We used to have sex."

"Used to?" Denise balked. "I'm pretty sure you'll be ditching the beauty queen and tying me to the silo again by the end of the night. Pretty girls don't know how to fuck like me."

"No?" Tatum asked. "I guess not. But I can suck cock so good that dirty boys like Kyan forget their own names, isn't that right, baby?" She leaned closer to me and cupped my junk as all the blood in my body ran to my dick. Like seriously, every fucking drop of it. And the way her eyes widened said she liked what she felt beneath my jeans.

I groaned hungrily, grabbing her ass in those tight leather pants and yanking her against me with a grip firm enough to bruise.

My gaze was on her lips and she licked them in a way designed to keep those filthy words that had spilled from them on my mind. I *really* wanted to put that claim to the test.

Denise slammed two glasses down on the bar to remind us she was still there and Tatum's hand slid from my cock as if it had never been there in the first place.

I growled hungrily as I looked back at Denise as she poured two measures of Jack into shot glasses for us. There were two things on the menu here. Cheap beer and whiskey. The choice had blown Saint's mind when he'd come. Not in a good way.

She slid the glasses towards us but as Tatum reached for her drink, Denise leaned forward and spat in it.

My hand fisted in her hair before Tatum even got her gasp all the way out. I yanked Denise around and slammed her head back on the bar so that she was staring up at the barn roof and struggling to get free. I picked up the tainted shot and spat in it myself before holding it out for Tatum.

Her eyes lifted to mine and whatever she found there was enough to make her spit too. I grinned at her as my heart pounded for that.

"Hold the shot, baby," I encouraged and she took it from me without question.

Denise continued to struggle against my hold on her, cursing my name and growling plenty of other colourful things at me, but I ignored her as I grabbed her jaw and forced her mouth open.

I didn't even have to say a word before Tatum poured the spit filled shot straight into Denise's mouth and I slammed her jaw closed again as I forced her to swallow.

“No one insults my girl,” I snarled in my deadliest tone and Denise shivered beneath me as several more punters backed away from us.

“And let’s be honest, sweetie,” Tatum said in a tone almost as dangerous as my own. “That’s not the dirtiest thing you’ve had in your mouth tonight. But you might wanna take the hint – Kyan is *mine*. So back the fuck off before I’m forced to really hurt you.”

I knew it was just the part she was playing, but fuck me, I actually liked the way it sounded when she claimed me like that.

Tatum reached out for the shot intended for me and knocked it back with a savage look in her eyes which I wanted to bottle.

“I thought we were meant to be having fun tonight, baby?” she asked, mocking me. “Can we get on with it?”

“Fuck yes.” I dropped my hold on Denise and left her to scramble upright behind us as I took Tatum’s hand again and we dove into the crowd.

Sweaty bodies in plaid shirts and leather jackets surrounded us and we carved a path between them, sometimes having to shove them aside as we went and even throwing the odd punch to make sure they moved. There were a lot of people wearing masks and latex gloves and I wondered if that shit would really be of any use to people who were packed together like sardines. I was just hoping that no one here was infected or I was pretty sure we were already fucked.

Tatum took it all in her stride, looking just as at home here as any of these fuckers, though her skin was certainly cleaner and her clothes more expensive. But she didn’t look rattled. Didn’t even look disgusted. In fact, she was lit up from the inside out and riding on the same high that I was always chasing by coming here.

“Hey, sweet thing, how much for a ride on your merry-go-round?” a rough voice drew my attention and I turned to look just as Tatum threw a

punch into the throat of the big motherfucker who'd spoken.

He dropped like a sack of shit as she snarled at him. "Keep your hands to yourself, asshole!"

"Did you just touch my girl, Merl?" I snarled, dragging Tatum behind me as Merl tried to push his way to his feet. I threw my boot into his chest with a brutal kick to knock him back down.

"Fuck!" Merl cursed. "I didn't see you there, Kyan. I was only checking out the goods."

"He grabbed my ass," Tatum hissed and I kicked him again as rage spilled through me like a vat of acid.

"No one touches what's mine," I growled, kicking him again and again as he tried to crawl away from me.

A circle opened up around us as people watched and even exchanged the odd bet but before I could really go to town on him, Tatum caught my hand and dragged me around to look at her.

"I think he got the message," she said in rough voice, her heated gaze telling me she didn't mind me stepping in to be her hero one bit. Not that she'd exactly needed my help, but that only made her hotter. "Don't let him ruin our night."

I actually fucking smiled at that. *Our night*. Like this really was a date and I wasn't just some asshole taking his pet for a walk.

"If you say so, baby," I agreed and I didn't miss the way people were looking at us. But fuck it, Merl was already down and bleeding, I could do better than beating him up and in that moment I was enjoying the feeling of her hand in mine enough to let my issue with him go. For now anyway – the next time I saw him, he'd be in a whole world of pain.

I turned to spit on him for good measure before tugging Tatum into the crowd again as we started to close in on the ring.

I had to shove a few people aside and cursed at them until they got out of the fucking way.

We finally made it through the crowd to the edge of the ring where two huge guys were stumbling away covered in blood.

“Mike!” I shouted, drawing the attention of the asshole who ran this operation and his face lit up like he was seeing Santa on Christmas Day, not just some fucker who won every fight he entered. But that was why he loved me. The odds against me were so good that idiots threw their money at the bets in the hopes of winning big and the odds for me winning were shit because everyone knew I’d win. But they poured money into that all the same, just to see a tiny return. So basically when I fought, he made a shit tonne of money and the crowd were all in.

“Kyan!” he cried like we were old friends. His two front teeth were missing and his belly hung low over his waistband. He caught sight of Tatum and swept his faded baseball cap off as he bowed low to her. “And you brought a real lady down here too!”

“Naw, she’s just as dirty as me, aren’t you baby?”

“Dirtier,” she agreed, her eyes lighting as she looked out at the ring.

There were hay bales stacked around it to keep the crowd back and more than a few blood splatters lining the filthy wooden floor. It was so fucking beautiful, I was damn near brought to tears.

“You wanna wait the next round out?” Mike asked. “I promised a doubles round next. Or you can just pick a teammate if you wanna go in now?”

“I’ll do it,” Tatum said suddenly, her gaze snapping back around to us.

Mike scoffed a laugh. “You can try your luck in a ladies bout if you really think you can handle yourself, but a sweet little thing like you is

better off waiting back here for your fella to finish up. You can kiss him better when he comes out victorious.”

“Fuck that. I want in,” Tatum demanded and the dangerous look in her eye said she meant it. I swear my dick was hardwired to that fucking look.

“This isn’t some pretty fight with rules, baby,” I warned her as I looked her up and down. “There’s no gloves, no mouth guards, no one to say you can’t break some bones.”

“What’s the matter, Kyan?” she taunted. “Are you just afraid that I’ll prove my balls are bigger than yours? Or is it that you really are Saint’s little bitch and you’re afraid to bring me back to him with bruises and busted knuckles?”

I growled at that suggestion. And in all honesty, the thought of her with bruises and busted knuckles was just a turn on. Fuck what Saint had to say on the subject. I turned back to Mike with a smile that offered no argument.

“You heard the girl, she’s in. And if you want me to fight tonight there won’t be any complaints on that.”

Mike’s face paled as his gaze slid over Tatum’s small frame and she arched an eyebrow aggressively. He cut a glance towards the two big motherfuckers who’d just entered the ring on the opposite side, wetting his lips nervously.

“You accept responsibility for this, Kyan,” he warned. “I don’t want you screaming in my face when she gets hurt.”

“I’d be more worried about those guys,” Tatum scoffed and fuck me, I wanted her more in that moment than I’d ever wanted any girl.

“It’s on me,” I agreed, turning away from Mike and shrugging out of my leather jacket.

Tatum followed suit and I drank in the sight of her in that homemade crop top as she raised her arms to tie her long hair in a knot and gifted me a

view of the base of her bra and the curve of her full tits. I positioned myself so that I was the only one seeing that slice of temptation and she rolled her eyes at me as if to say it was my fault she was dressed that way. Which it was. And I was perfectly fucking happy about that too.

I lifted the rope for her so that she could step into the ring and snapped a photograph of her to taunt Saint with later. Or maybe jerk off over. Or maybe both.

I tossed my cellphone on the chair with our jackets before I followed her, not worrying about anyone stealing them. No one here was dumb enough to fuck with me.

Mike called out the odds as the crowd went wild at the sight of the fuckable blonde chick stepping into the ring with a look on her face that said she was going to kick some serious fucking ass.

“Do you think you can work with me to win this, baby?” I asked her, stepping close as she eyed the opposition.

“I guess you can help out if you want,” she teased and I laughed. Really fucking laughed. In fact I’d been damn near grinning all night in her company and it wasn’t a feeling I was used to.

Mike’s crew finally stopped taking bets and the look on his face said it was an exceptional haul which was perfect for me as I needed that money.

He reached up to ring the bell and at the glorious fucking sound of that ding, I leapt into the fight.

Tatum was right beside me, throwing her fists at her guy with a snarl of rage that had me wondering if she was imagining he was me or Blake or Saint. Either way, it was hot as fuck.

I focused on my own opponent as he swung at me, throwing my fists against his flesh with savage abandon as the call of the bloodlust sang to me.

I free fell into the bliss of delivering and receiving pain, feeling that beautiful ache as my knuckles split open as they came into contact with his face.

Within minutes he was bleeding and I was bathing in it, punching again and again as he fought back fearlessly.

A cry of pain caught my attention as Tatum was knocked to her ass by the other fucker, her bottom lip splitting and staining her red lips redder.

I wheeled away from my guy to help her up but she didn't need me, springing to her feet and throwing her heavy boot straight into the guy's gut as he lunged. He coughed as the air was driven from his lungs and she darted around him, punching him in the temple hard enough to send him flying.

He crashed to the ground just as my guy recovered enough to come at me again and I stumbled back a step as he took advantage of my distraction. I fought back savagely but he'd caught me on the back foot and I stumbled away again, my back colliding with the heavy post which marked the corner of the ring.

He bellowed in my face as he threw a punch at my jaw, but I jerked away from it before catching his T-shirt in my grip and yanking him towards me as I swung my forehead down on the bridge of his nose.

The snap that followed was almost drowned out by his screams as he fell to the ground and I started kicking.

On the other side of the ring, Tatum was straddling her opponent, slamming her fists down into his face repeatedly as he fought to block her attacks.

Mike started counting as the two assholes remained on floor and after three long seconds, the glorious sound of the bell rang out and the crowd roared at our victory.

I abandoned the asshole who was groaning beneath me and strode straight towards Tatum, dragging her upright and grinning at her. I hoisted her into my arms and lifted her to sit on my shoulders as we yelled our triumph to the crowd and she raised her arms in victory, not giving one shit about the blood dripping from her lip.

This girl, this fucking girl! I was all lit up inside and buzzing like I was high on something, but the only thing it could be was her. And I couldn't get enough.

Before we'd finished our celebrations, a new sound blared out over the crowd and I fell still as the police sirens echoed through the air.

Everyone fell silent in a heartbeat and in that pause in between the chaos, a voice called to us through a megaphone.

"This is the state police! You are all in breach of the lockdown orders set in place by the Governor of Sequoia!"

"Fuck that," I muttered, yanking Tatum back off of my shoulders as the crowd started screaming and running for every exit.

I grabbed her hand and dragged her back towards Mike, snatching our jackets and my phone before taking the fistful of winnings he held out to me. He was gone before I could blink and I dragged Tatum into the crowd as we took another route out of here.

"Are they gonna catch us?" she gasped.

"Fuck no," I laughed, pulling her faster as we ran on.

People were screaming, crying, police were shouting and making demands, some poor fuckers fell and got trampled but none of it mattered. Only me and Tatum Rivers did.

We ran to the bar which was abandoned and I picked her up and tossed her over it before following myself. I pulled open the hidden door behind

the bar where they stashed the booze. I'd fucked Denise back here more than once and I knew the escape route for when I was done with her.

Tatum let me lead her through the dark space, knocking the door closed behind us and I led her past crates of beer and whiskey before making it to the small door on the side of the building.

I slowed for a moment, easing it open to check for cops before yanking Tatum out behind me and making a run for it.

"You there!" an officer barked behind us. "Stop!"

"Fuck you!" I yelled back and Tatum laughed wildly as we raced away. I didn't know if he'd given chase, couldn't spare a moment to check.

We just ran and ran until we reached the parking lot where hundreds of people were diving into cars and trying to make a getaway despite the fact that the police had clearly blocked off the road which led in here.

We made it to my bike and I tossed Tatum's jacket into her arms as she leapt on, throwing mine on too before stuffing the cash and my cellphone into my pocket and retrieving my bike key from it.

"I said stop!" the cop bellowed just as I started my baby up and she roared loud enough to block out the rest of his words.

I flipped him the finger as he ran at us and Tatum laughed again as we shot away.

"Hold on tight, baby, this one's gonna be bumpy," I growled in her ear as I directed the bike over the field which ran to the left of the track.

She screamed as we thundered over the dirt and stones, but it wasn't in fear. That was excitement, real and pure.

Her hands gripped the handle bars beside mine and my gaze snagged on our matching split knuckles as my dick hardened against her ass.

"You're something special, you know that, Tatum?" I growled as we left the chaos of the barn behind and I cut across country towards the road.

“I know,” she replied cockily and I laughed again.

My dick was straining against my jeans, aching for a piece of her and the way she pushed her ass back against me told me she knew and might just want a piece of me too.

“Can you feel how hard I am for you?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she breathed in a tone that told me she wasn’t sure whether she should be pleased about that or not.

We bumped down onto an abandoned road and I turned the bike back towards Everlake, slowing as I accepted that the police had lost us.

“Does the fight get you hot too?” I asked, my lips brushing against her neck and making her shiver.

“Yes,” she admitted and I could feel how heavily her breaths were coming as her back pressed to my blood spattered chest.

“Keep your left hand steady,” I instructed, lowering our speed a little more as I took my left hand from the handlebars and moved it to her waist. The bike swerved predictably and she gasped as she fought to straighten it.

“What are you doing?”

“Showing you how much I enjoyed our date.” I found the button on her pants and popped it open before sliding her fly open too.

“Kyan,” she breathed in warning but she was panting now and I knew that ache. The high of the fight. She wanted this release as badly as I wanted to give it to her.

“You can give me the orders if it makes you feel better about it,” I purred as my fingers teased the top edge of her panties.

It was damn hard to keep an eye on the road, but it was hot as fuck too and I wasn’t stopping unless she told me to.

Her silence echoed between us, the growl of my bike the only sound to be heard.

“Tell me if you want me to, baby,” I pressed, my stubble grazing against her neck and making her shiver.

“*Fuck*,” she cursed like she’d always known she’d end up here and had been hoping she could avoid it. But we both knew she couldn’t. We’d been dancing around each other since we’d first laid eyes on one another. And she might hate me, but she wanted me too.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Touch me.”

I growled at her order, more than happy to follow it as I pushed my hand inside her panties, my fingers gliding down until they met with her hot, wet pussy and I was groaning again.

“Do you have any idea how much I’ve wanted you at my mercy like this?” I asked as I circled my fingers around her opening, stroking her clit slowly and savouring the way she shivered against me.

She was completely immobilised as she fought to keep the bike straight, her thighs parted over the saddle and her ass grinding against my dick. She couldn’t move at all. She was mine. And for once I could tell she wanted to be.

“Stop teasing me, Kyan,” she panted as I circled my fingers again and I smiled at her command as I pushed two fingers deep inside of her. I had big hands and I knew exactly how to use them to pull her limb from limb.

Tatum moaned as I pumped my fingers and the bike swerved as she fought to maintain control of it. We were only going at about fifty now, but it would still hurt like a bitch if we fell.

“Keep us steady, baby,” I reminded her just as I my thumb found her clit and I started circling in time with my thrusts.

She rocked her hips as she moaned, her body tightening around me as I kept up the torment, owning every piece of her in that moment.

“More,” she ordered. “*Fuck*, Kyan-”

I moved faster and my dick chaffed against my fly as it ached to join in. I wanted to pull over and fuck her over the handlebars until we both forgot our names, but I wasn't going to. She wasn't ready for that yet. She needed to take something from me now, not give it.

The bike swerved more violently and my heart leapt as I teased her clit, circling it perfectly so that her moans drowned out the sound of the engine.

"More," she demanded again and I growled as I moved my hand harder, my mouth dropping to her neck as I kissed and bit her, sucking hard enough to give her a hicky.

The dark road stretched away ahead of us and it was damn hard to keep my eyes on it. My gaze kept dipping to take in the view down her shirt as she leaned back against me and I was gifted a view of that lace bra as her nipples strained through the thin layers of material. I wanted to release my grip on the right handlebar too and touch her more and I would have done it if I wasn't sure she'd have us in a ditch within seconds.

I kept moving my fingers in that perfect rhythm and she rocked her hips into the movement, riding my hand as she moaned and demanded more.

I didn't think I'd ever denied myself like this before, given something like this and gotten so damn much in return without her so much as stroking my cock. The Night Keeper stuff may have all been bullshit and perhaps her swearing on some fucking rock that she belonged to us was a load of shit too. But it didn't feel like it. This right here felt like owning her in the best way, like a zealot owning their goddess through worship. Because that was the only way I could ever truly claim to own her – by making her want to be mine with every inch of her being. And the more time I spent with her, the more the darkness in me wanted that too.

Her moans were getting louder, more demanding as I pumped and teased, drawing her to the very edge of ecstasy and holding her there,

teetering on the edge.

“Tell me you’re mine, baby,” I growled, pushing my fingers in as deep as they’d go and making her cry out yet again.

“Don’t stop,” she begged, her body quivering against me as I kept my fingers deep and circled my thumb more forcefully.

“Say it, baby,” I demanded, wanting her to admit it in a real way just in this moment. She could feed me bullshit every other time I asked but right here and now, I really did own her and I wanted her to admit it.

“I’m yours,” she gasped, and the demon in me liked that a whole lot.

Her hips rocked on my fingers urgently and I gave her what she ached for as I upped my speed again, working her body into a frenzy as she moaned and panted for me, lost to the sensations I was delivering to her.

“You know what I realised tonight?” I asked her, my mouth grazing her neck as she parted her thighs even wider than the bike required, wanting me to have all the access I needed and more. “You’re an animal just like me. You’re wild and dirty and just a little bit ruined. And I don’t just want to play at owning you anymore. I want you shackled and tethered to me, I want you chained and bound in blood and beyond. And I want you to want it. I’m going to make you want to be mine, Tatum. You’ll want it so bad it will burn you up from the inside out and when the two of us dive into that fire, it’ll burn hotter than the deepest pits of hell.”

“Kyan,” she moaned and I wasn’t sure if she was even lucid enough to understand what I was saying to her as I built the pleasure in her body to breaking point. I could feel her getting tighter as I kept pumping and circling, bliss dancing closer and closer to her as she gave herself to me.

“Tell me you want it, baby,” I offered, my own muscles flexing as I could feel her orgasm building through every single place where her body touched mine.

“Yes,” she gasped breathlessly. “I want it. I want *you*.”

I groaned against her neck and tasted her sweet flesh beneath my tongue as I pressed my thumb down on her clit and she cried out as pleasure lit her body alight and she shattered against me.

The bike lurched to the left and I snatched my hand from her panties as I grabbed it again, righting us just before we could crash.

She tipped her head back against my shoulder, panting against me and I couldn't resist biting that sweet spot at the base of her neck so that she cried out again, the pain of my teeth sinking into her skin enhancing the pleasure I'd given her.

“Fuck,” she panted and I laughed darkly as I ripped the throttle back again, the bike pulling up into a wheelie and making her scream for me. Yeah, I could get real used to owning this wild girl.

We sped the rest of the way back to campus and I hid my bike again before pulling her off of it and fastening her fly.

She gave me a hooded look which told me just how good that had felt and I smirked at her as I checked the time on my phone.

“It's almost midnight,” I cursed, “Come on.” I ignored the countless messages from Saint and Blake demanding to know where we were and ran with her back to the gates.

Porter let us in with a stern look and we kept running all the way to The Temple.

Before we could head up the path to the front door of the church, I pulled her into the trees around back and led her to my window, drawing it open.

We could hear Saint cursing from beyond my bedroom door and I sniggered as I pushed the window closed behind us and pressed a finger to my lips.

Tatum smiled as she stayed silent and I quickly locked my door before heading into the bathroom.

“You wanna sleep in a real bed tonight, baby?” I offered in a low voice as I grabbed her bag from the bath tub and tossed it into my room.

“I’m not fucking you, Kyan,” she breathed, giving me a look that said she’d happily use me to get herself off, but I wasn’t gonna be that lucky any time soon.

“I know,” I smirked at her. “It’s just an innocent bed between owner and pet. I can even finger you again if you think you can stay quiet this time?”

“No chance,” she hissed.

“Yeah you’re right, you wouldn’t be able to stop yourself from screaming my name like that again.”

She glared at me as I brushed my teeth before stripping out of my bloodstained tank and dropping it to the floor. I wiped the rest of the blood off with a washcloth and offered it to her next.

She accepted it and quickly started cleaning her skin as I ducked back into my room. I stripped out of everything but my boxers, pulled my hair from its tie and got into bed.

Tatum appeared a moment later, clearly deciding that a night in my bed beat that fucking bath any day and she pushed the bathroom door closed behind her, plunging us into darkness.

“You can borrow one of my shirts to sleep in,” I offered, pointing at my closet.

She headed over to it and I watched her in the dim moonlight which filtered through my window as she stripped out of everything but her underwear and pulled my T-shirt on. It fell to her mid thigh and looked stupidly good on her as she moved closer and slipped into my bed.

“You’re not going to stab me in the night are you?” she hissed and I dutifully pulled the hunting knife out from under my pillow before tossing it on my nightstand.

“Not with a knife anyway,” I teased.

Her gaze dropped to my dick which was still hard as stone beneath my boxers and it twitched at the attention.

“You wanna spoon with me?” I offered, wondering if I could get away with having that ass pressed up against me all night.

“Not a chance in hell,” she growled and I sighed before flipping the covers over us.

“Goodnight then, baby.”

She didn’t reply and I sat there for a long time as I waited for her to fall asleep before shifting across the mattress and holding my phone up to take a selfie of the two of us in my bed.

I quickly wrote out a message for the group chat, including a bunch of pictures from tonight to show the others where we’d been and then set it up to send at six am just as Saint woke up.

I laughed to myself as I let my eyes fall shut and settled down on the pillows.

When Saint saw that shit he was going to flip the fuck out. And I really couldn’t wait to see what he did when that happened.



The heat of a warm body called to me and I shifted towards it in my dreamy state. I hadn't slept this well since...I couldn't even remember when. My fingers brushed hard flesh and my thigh grazed his as I sought out more warmth. His hand slid around me, yanking me closer by the ass and my eyes flew open, reality giving me whiplash as I gazed at the Night Keeper I was entangled with.

He was still fast asleep, his face just an inch from mine and though I was about to remove myself from his hold, I was suddenly captivated by being able to look at him like this while he was so still. His features were rugged and dark and the usually harsh set of them were softened in sleep. I didn't want to admit it, but last night had been the most fun I'd had in years. And I was pretty sure I'd never felt so wildly free. Which was ironic considering I was just his captured little bird with clipped wings. *This definitely beats sleeping in the bath though...*

"I'm gonna use the pitchfork," he murmured in his sleep. "Gonna stab you like a garden bed and plant an oak tree in your gut."

I released a laugh and Kyan's grip on me tightened, dragging me firmly against him and I gasped as he ground his morning glory into me.

The wild girl in me had taken over completely last night. After winning that fight, I'd been high on adrenaline, and maybe a little high on Kyan too. He was intoxicating to be around and perhaps that was why I'd let him touch me. He was danger and temptation personified. And I'd be kidding myself if I said I'd only done it to try and get closer to him. Last night had been real, every second of it. And it scared me how much I'd wanted him. How much I wanted him now too...

My eyes trailed over his body and I blinked hard, cursing myself for being so easily led astray by his looks. But deep down, I knew it was more than that. Kyan's soul mirrored mine in ways that called to me on a primal level. He brought out a craziness in me that made me feel so alive. And it was impossible to ignore. But I had to be careful. Because he also made my heart feel exposed, like he could curl his fingers around it and hook it out of my chest if the notion took him. And I could never let that happen.

Saint's classical music reached me from his bedroom and I swore; I needed to be out by the crypt.

I tried to wriggle free from Kyan but he held on tighter, throwing his huge leg over me then nuzzling his whole face into my breasts through the T-shirt he'd given me to sleep in. He was still freaking asleep.

"Kyan," I hissed. Nothing. He was snoozing soundly between my boobs. And I didn't wanna hit him in case he went psycho on me like the last time I'd woken him.

Footsteps pounded down the hallway and my heart pounded in time with them.

"Get up." I tried to wriggle free, but I swear he weighed as much as a damn rhino.

The door flew open and hit the wall with a bang as Saint stormed in.

Kyan jerked awake, looking down at me in a moment of confusion before Saint shoved him off of me.

Saint grabbed a fistful of my hair and I screamed as he yanked me out of the bed, his eyes two circles of hell, and I reckoned the other seven were awaiting me beyond that door.

“You think you’re so fucking funny, Kyan,” Saint snarled, dragging me out into the hallway while I tried to make him let go. I knew I was holding back. I could use my kickboxing skills, but part of me knew that if I flipped on him this was going to be much worse for me. And I despised him even more for that fact. How he made me weak through his power games.

Saint shoved me against the wall in the hallway and my breathing hitched as he released my hair and grabbed my throat instead.

“Did you fuck him?” he demanded, unblinking like he was trying to pull the answer from my flesh.

My heart hammered against my chest as I clamped my lips shut in a potentially foolish act of rebellion. His gaze trailed to my neck where Kyan had given me a hicky and my heart leapt in fright at the fury in his eyes. Saint needed everything to be perfect at all times and it was pretty obvious that finding me in Kyan’s bed, wearing his shirt with marks on my skin proving he’d had his mouth on me was pretty far beyond his tolerance zone.

He shoved me along the corridor and I stumbled away, turning back to face him with my hands raised. He strode toward me with intention in his posture and I retreated in alarm, unsure what he was going to do in that moment. Kyan’s arm suddenly locked around his shoulders, yanking him back a step.

“It’s just a joke, man. Chill out,” Kyan laughed.

Saint threw him off with a fierce strength, rounding on his friend as my breaths came frantically.

Blake stepped out of the door to my left, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and frowning in confusion.

“This is not a fucking joke.” Saint shoved his palms into Kyan’s chest and all of the light extinguished from Kyan’s eyes. “You took her outside the school. She could have escaped!” he bellowed, sending a tremor right down to my toes.

Kyan squared up to him, a flare of danger in his eyes which equalled Saint’s. “You wanna fight me, asshole? She’s mine as much as she is yours. I’ll do whatever the fuck I want with her.”

I ground my jaw, glaring between the two of them as Blake moved forward to try and break up their fight.

“There are rules!” Saint snarled and I started backing away again, not wanting to be involved in this crazy bullshit. They were completely insane. The whole fucking lot of them.

“Dude, calm down,” Blake stepped in. “Kyan’s sorry, aren’t you bro?”

“Sorry?” Kyan barked a hollow laugh. “Fuck no.”

“Fine,” Saint said in an icily quiet tone that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. “It’s not you who’ll pay the price anyway.” He turned his gaze my way and my heart froze to a solid lump of ice as he stalked forward.

The psycho look in his eyes told me one thing and one thing only: I did not want him getting his hands on me. The split second I hesitated lost me valuable time before I twisted around and ran for my life.

His footsteps pounded after me and fear ate me alive as I made it across the lounge and darted up the staircase towards his room. “Leave me alone you crazy asshole!”

I raced up the stairs but a hand locked around my ankle and I cried out as I fell down, rolling over and kicking out with my free foot. I missed. Saint dragged me toward him, rearing over me and locking his knees around my hips.

“Get off of me!” I yelled, terror making my throat tighten.

The ferocious look on his face was nothing but satanic. I wasn’t gonna get a spanking for this. I was gonna get something so much more terrifying and I feared how far Saint would go to see me punished.

He grabbed one of my wrists in an iron grip and I knew the second he got hold of the other one, I was done for. Rage gathered inside me, straining against the dam I’d built against it. Days and days of this shit was driving me to insanity. And I was *done*.

The dam burst and I snapped in time with it.

I threw a punch with my free hand, my fist cracking into Saint’s nose so hard that pain splintered through my knuckles. He released me with a roar of fury and blood spilled down over his mouth. I gazed at him with my veins singing my victory and my heart not beating for a full second. Then I realised with a horrifying clarity that I was now totally fucked.

As fast as I could, I scrambled backwards and hurried upstairs before he could recover.

“Blake, get her,” Saint growled and I gripped the railing of the balcony, watching as he stalked off in the direction of the other guys’ rooms, wiping his bloody nose on his hand. The tension in his shoulders was enough to send a lick of terror up my spine.

Kyan smirked up at me from below like he was happy I’d punched Saint and my mouth twitched at the corner, my breathing coming quicker as adrenaline sank into my veins. I’d hit that fucker. And it had felt so damn *good*.

Blake rushed up the stairs, grabbing my arm and I glared at him as he yanked me back towards the steps.

“You’ve really done it now, Cinders,” he said in a low tone and the victory flooding my limbs quickly gave way to fear once more.

“What’s he gonna do?” I breathed, looking up at him and seeing no fire in his eyes today. Only a blankness that scared me to my core. “Blake?” I pressed.

Kyan folded his arms, glancing between us as Blake guided me to the couch and shoved me onto it before dropping down beside me. I folded my legs up beneath me, flexing my hand as I relived the punch I’d landed on Saint. My knuckles were already bruised up from yesterday’s fight, but this was a bruise I wanted to tattoo onto my flesh forever. I might have been about to face my maker, but I couldn’t say I regretted it. Not for a second.

Saint eventually reappeared with the blood washed from his face and my backpack in his grip. My heart slowed to a halt as he tipped it up over the coffee table and all of my stuff fell out of it. I clenched my jaw, glowering at him as he gazed around at the mess of clothes and school books. Then he stuffed his hand in the bag and ripped out the wad of letters I kept in the secret pocket and tossed them down on the table for me to see.

Dread gripped my soul and made every part of my body scream.

“No!” I gasped, leaping out of my seat, intending to get them back no matter what I had to do. Blake snatched me around the waist, dragging me down into his lap and locking his arms around me so that I was forced to remain in place.

“Let me go!” I demanded, wriggling wildly as Kyan watched us all with mild intrigue on his face. My heart thrashed in my chest, my mouth was overly dry and the part of me they’d broken before was already coming unstitched.

Saint cocked his head to one side, surveying me with nothing but evil in his eyes. I'd made the devil bleed and he intended to repay the favour.

"Do you think we didn't go through your whole bag when we first brought you here?" he asked, stepping toward me and leaning down into my face. The scent of sin washed from his skin, pure and clean and deadly. "Because that would have been a really fucking stupid thing to think, Plague."

I bared my teeth, fighting viciously against Blake's hold, but I couldn't get free. Every part of my body was begging me to claw and tear my way to Saint. I couldn't bear the look on his face, couldn't stand the cruelty in his eyes.

He fished through the pile as if looking for a particular letter then smiled satisfactory as he lifted one up and read from it. "I miss you, Jess. Sometimes it hurts so much I can't breathe. Knowing you're gone, knowing you left me."

His words cut into me and I roared my rage at him as he tossed the letter onto the fire burning in the grate behind him.

"No!" I screamed, my throat rubbing raw as I watched the page curl and turn to ash. It was a piece of my soul, lost, gone, destroyed.

Saint casually picked up another letter, reading another snippet just to make me bleed on the inside. "Sometimes I wonder if you're still out there somewhere. I hope you're somewhere happy, somewhere safe." He sneered at me, enjoying my pain, his eyes electrified with it like it was the only thing that made his heart beat.

"What are they?" Kyan asked with a frown, but Saint only answered by tossing the letter onto the flames and snatching up another one. My heart felt like it was burning alive with those pages on the fire. Each word had poured from me, meant for her. But she'd never read any of them.

Saint snatched up another one, a nasty smile biting into his cheeks. “Today was your funeral. I had to say goodbye to my big sister. My guiding star. I love you, Jess. I don’t know what I’ll ever do without you.” He gave me a mocking stare and another piece of me shattered like glass.

A wave of pain crashed against my heart as I remembered that day, the way I’d poured over that letter as I unleashed my pain, letting it all out. And in the years since, I’d written to her whenever I needed to. Whenever I wished I could get her advice or tell her about my life. It had helped ease the grief, given me an outlet for the words I’d never gotten to say to her. For all the moments I’d never shared with her. And now they were all disappearing, one at a time, consumed in flame like they meant nothing. But they were everything, *everything*.

Saint sifted through the pile again and produced a letter that made my heart fracture into a million pieces. The paper was different. Crumpled, worn, a hundred tears soaked into its fibres.

Jess and I had written letters to each other all through my sophomore year. She’d stayed in California to study biomedical science, but I was too young to stay with her. I’d continued to travel with Dad. But that letter, the one the devil held between his fingers now, was the last one she’d ever given me. She’d come to surprise us in Chicago for Christmas. She’d delivered it to me in person.

“Dear Tatty,” Saint read in a mocking tone that made my bones ache. “I thought I’d give this one to you myself as we’re going to be spending the entire holiday season together. And guess what?! Dad says you’re coming to California with me in January. Now I’m eighteen I can look after you for a while. He’s gotta work in dull-ass Fort Wayne for a few months. So you’re gonna be free, bitch! You’re gonna love it, Tatty. The beaches are to die for and I swear you’re made for it already with that golden skin of

yours. You know me with my pale-ass Dad complexion. At least Mom left you something when she abandoned us, right? Bitch didn't leave me anything but her allergies. I can't wait for you to meet everyone. You'll never wanna leave, I swear. Maybe we can live there permanently one day? I'll talk Dad around. Love you little sis. Your new roomie, Jess."

I fought so hard against Blake that I managed to get free, terror driving my actions as I dove over the coffee table to snatch the letter from Saint's fingers. My hand was outstretched, just grazing it when Blake caught me around the waist at the last second, pinning me down onto the table and slamming his weight on top of me.

"You shouldn't have broken the rules," Blake growled as he held me in place and my heart nearly gave out. Because I hadn't broken the rules. I'd only done what Kyan had told me to. But saying that seemed worthless. Kyan wasn't going to protect me from this. He'd had his fun and now I was paying the consequences. He was as heartless as them and I was a fool for ever thinking there was more to him than brutality.

"Make her watch," Saint commanded and Blake fisted a hand in my hair to turn me to toward the fire.

"Please don't," I begged as tears washed over my skin. The other letters were my words, I could let them all go for that single one. I could face anything but losing that piece of my sister. "Not that one, *please* Saint." My voice was raspy and dry, my desperation lacing the air around us.

Kyan cleared his throat before Saint made any move toward the fire. "Don't you think this is going a bit far now, dude? I was the one who took her out."

Saint glowered at him, a deadly glint in his gaze but a flicker of hope filled me.

Please don't do this. Please listen to him.

Saint moved out of sight, striding towards Kyan and I writhed against Blake's firm hold on me, but it was no use.

"I decide when it goes too far," Saint snarled, then he strode back into view, grabbing the entire pile of letters from the table and throwing them all into the flames. I screamed, but I couldn't hear it. I was locked inside my head, a haze of hate and grief consuming me, taking everything with it. Jessica's letters were amongst them, burning up with the rest. Her messages to me lost, devoured.

Blake released me, but I didn't move. I sobbed, despising that they saw me fall apart as I curled my legs to my chest on the table and buried my face in my arms.

I heard them moving away and I gasped for air as I reached for Jess's necklace around my throat and clutched it tight in my fist.

I'm so sorry, Jess.

A violent shudder ran through me as my heart broke and the world seemed to darken around me. There was a shadow in my soul now, a brand they'd left there, tainting me. Marking me with this hurt forever.

I needed to get away from this place. These vile boys. I was done. So fucking *done*.

I lifted my head, drawing in a shaky breath. None of them were close by.

I turned my gaze to the door then pushed myself up and ran straight toward it, determined to get out of this place and never look back.

I yanked the door open just as Saint shouted, "Stop!"

I ignored him, kicking my feet into my sneakers and snatching someone's trench coat from beside the door before throwing it shut behind me. I started running, hearing them shouting after me. I shot a glance back at them through teary eyes, spotting Kyan getting in their way to stop them.

They didn't come for me but I upped my pace anyway, wiping my eyes on the sleeve of the coat, the apple scent of Saint hanging on it and making me want to hurl it into the lake. But it was freezing out and still dark; I couldn't wander around campus in nothing but Kyan's T-shirt.

I didn't know where I was gonna go, I just knew I needed to be as far away from that church as I could get.

Tears continued to fall and my heart continued to break. He'd taken the most precious items in the world to me. And it felt like losing my sister all over again.

I made it all the way down to Sycamore Beach by the lake before I stopped running. Dawn was painting the sky in pale pink tones and I hated the beauty of it. I hated the peace of the world when it felt like it should have been falling to ruin around me.

Hate spilled out of me from every pore in my body as I glared at the sacred rock and the arrow markings of the Night Keepers at the top of it. I tipped my head to the sky and screamed my rage. At Saint, Blake, Kyan. I hated them all for owning me, taking everything I'd ever had and casting it aside like it was nothing. Making me bare my soul just so they could slice it up and laugh while they did it.

Despite my scream feeling like it could start an earthquake, nothing happened. The world continued to be quiet and still. The lake rippled darkly and the sky brightened with another coming day.

A hand suddenly grabbed me from behind and I lurched around in fear, my fists raising as I prepared to fight and kick and bite. But it wasn't them. It was Monroe. His dark blue eyes widened as he took in my expression. He pulled his headphones off to hang around his neck and I suddenly came apart all over again.

I lurched forward, wrapping my arms around him, needing the comfort of his embrace more than anything in the world.

His arms slowly closed around me and I fell to pieces, my tears spilling onto his white T-shirt and soaking through. I let myself fall apart in his arms as he held me and I breathed in his fresh pine scent, his presence somehow making my heart slow and my world start to feel less shaky again.

He held me until I could draw breath, until I was strong enough to stand on my own two feet again. Then I pulled away and wiped at my eyes, spinning away from him as I wrapped my arms around myself. I didn't want to need him. I wanted to need no one and nothing. I wanted to be strong enough to face the world alone. Like Dad had taught me. Like Jess had always said I could. But I was just a weak little girl again, except now my dreams were fragmented and my innocence gone.

"What did they do?" he asked and I shook my head, unable to say it. My voice felt trapped down in a deep, dark well inside me. He moved closer behind me and I felt the warmth radiating from his body like it was the heat of the sun.

"Fuck them," he snarled as more tears spilled over my cheeks.

I nodded, but said nothing.

"Fuck them, Tatum." He grabbed my arms, twisting me around to face him and there was so much passion in his eyes, I could feel it butting up against my ruptured heart and demanding I be strong. "They're trying to break you. Are you gonna let them?"

I bit into my lower lip as another fat tear rolled down my cheek. He reached out to wipe it away and the action helped my voice resurface. "They went too far this time."

His brows pulled together and he stepped closer, dropping his hand to cup my jaw. "If you're done, that's it. They win. Is that what you want?"

His tone was harsh, but I clung onto the strength in it, needing it to fuel my own. I shook my head, dropping his gaze but he forced my chin up again, refusing to let me crumble.

“Say it then,” he demanded. “Because it looks like you’re done to me.”

I opened my lips, taking in a long breath as I tried to draw on his mettle. “You don’t understand. What they did...what they took from me-” I choked on the last words and my heart crushed in my chest.

“What did they take?” he growled.

“*Everything*,” I groaned.

I tried to turn away, but he wouldn’t let me, forcing me to remain in his hardened stare.

When Jessica had died, I’d fallen apart. It had cut a gaping hole in my chest which had never healed. One second she’d been sick with a cough, the next she’d been in intensive care fighting for her life. It had all happened so fast. The blinding lights of the ambulance at two am. My dad climbing in with her. My neighbour resting her wrinkled fingers on my shoulder promising me everything would be okay. But it hadn’t been okay. Nothing had ever been okay since.

“Well then there’s nothing left for them to take now, is there princess?” Monroe’s words were softer and my lips parted as I realised he was right. How could they hurt me now when they’d already ripped me to shreds? Literally burned the only items in the world that mattered to me? They were gone, destroyed, ruined. But now that they were, they could never be used against me again.

There was nothing left to destroy, barring one thing. I lifted a hand to my necklace, caressing the pendant of the Celtic knot before reaching behind my neck, taking it off and holding it out to Monroe.

“Will you take this for me?” I asked, my voice rubbed raw from screaming.

His brow creased and he didn’t reach for it, his lips pressing tightly together. “Are you going to give up?”

I chewed on my lip before shaking my head, finding another ounce of resilience to hold onto. He took the necklace into his palm then tucked it into his pocket and my shoulders dropped in relief.

I turned to face the lake, lowering down to the ground and using Saint’s coat to cover my ass from the damp sand with a sweet satisfaction running through me as I got it dirty. Monroe dropped down beside me and I glanced at him, unbelievably grateful that he’d found me here.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m gonna stay right here until you’re ready to face those assholes again. Then, we’re going to get your uniform and you’re gonna show them what you’re made of by making it through the entire day, princess.”

I stared at him for a long moment as my heart thumped wildly against the base of my throat. He was a dark prince, not a valiant one. I knew there was a malice in him that almost matched that of the Night Keepers’ at times. But there was a goodness in him too. And even if he was just doing this for the sake of his own revenge, I was still grateful for it.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

He shrugged and I turned my gaze to the water, trying to let the calm of the world seep into my skin. And as the minutes ticked on, my pain numbed and my heart turned to iron.

I wanted to destroy those bastards more than I’d ever wanted anything. I wanted to do it for Jess, for Dad, for Monroe. But most of all, I wanted to do it for *me*.

The only thing I feared was what I was going to look like at the end of this battle. Because how could I destroy three monsters without becoming one myself?



Even Beethoven couldn't lighten my mood. Or Mozart or Vivaldi or Stravinsky or Wagner or Tchaikovsky or even fucking Debussy.

My skin was coated in sweat and my muscles were burning with fatigue from pushing so goddamn hard in my workout to try and make up for the time I'd missed from my ritual, but it was no good. No fucking good.

My grip tightened on the weight I was holding and with a roar of rage, I launched it across the room where it hit the grey bricks and knocked a chunk out of them before it fell and slammed into the ground beneath in a scattering of dust.

I whirled around and took the stairs back up to the main room of The Temple two at a time as my pulse pounded in my ears.

I hadn't slept. I never did much anyway, but last night I'd been awake all night ringing and ringing Kyan as I climbed the fucking walls, not knowing where the fuck he was. Where the fuck *she* was.

I didn't even know what time it was now which was fucking unthinkable. My ritual was the only thing which kept me sane and it had blown up in my face this morning. And it felt like...like...my motherfucking *head* was about to explode.

I stormed through the living room and up the stairs to the balcony as I tried to get my mind straight. The clock on the wall was waiting for me, offering the answers that could get me back on track if I just-

Seven, *thirteen*. Thirteen fucking minutes past seven. What the fuck was that? Nothing happened at thirteen minutes past anything. It was a void time, a time when I should have been deep into the cathartic part of my workout not wandering the church like a fucking wraith.

I swiped a hand over my face as I tried to calm myself, but as I looked down at my palm I found fresh blood coating my fingers from my fucking nose where that bitch had punched me.

The voices were getting loud now, the echoes which haunted me, chased me, infected me.

It's too late now, you've lost the fight today.

Better to let the demons take charge.

Better to just give in...

I cranked Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake up loud enough to drown everything else out, trying to let it calm me, searching for myself in the peace of it but only finding any solace in the darker parts of the composition.

I expelled a harsh breath and ripped my clothes off before stepping straight into the shower in my en-suite and turning it on. I flipped the dial around so that stone cold water crashed down over my body, pressing my palms to the tiles as I stared down at the water swirling around my feet. It was tinged red with blood from my nose which only made my pulse pound harder.

Shivers wracked my flesh, but it wasn't the cold. It was the demon in me aching to break free. It was the fury in me needing an outlet. It was the combination of every hateful, vengeful, corrupted, tarnished piece of my rotten soul demanding retribution.

I was losing it. I could feel my grip slipping and the break coming. And if I broke, there was no telling what it would take to rein me back in.

The last time, Kyan and Blake had practically had to chain me down to stop me from spilling blood. And I wasn't talking about the kinds of wounds that could heal.

But this time, Kyan wasn't with me. He was *against* me. And all because of a fucking *girl*. A girl we'd chosen to share so that nothing like this would ever happen to us and yet-

Tchaikovsky died a sudden and brutal death, but I wasn't gifted silence over the speakers. No. What poured down on me, assaulting my ears and shattering what little control I had left was Eminem – My Name Is blaring through my sound system loud enough to bust a fucking eardrum.

A tremor tumbled through my flesh and I wasn't even sure how I ended up out of the shower but it continued to run behind me, water racing away down the drain into the abyss with the last fragile pieces of my self control.

I crossed my room, snatched a pair of sweatpants out of my closet and yanked them on, damn near running out of my en-suite and down the stairs.

Kyan was waiting at the foot of them in a pair of shorts which left his tattoos bare to taunt me, the devil on his chest seeming to mirror my own desires perfectly as it bathed in the suffering of others. Kyan's eyes were alight with that thirst which ruled him as he waited to see what punishment he'd earned with this latest assault on my sanity and I was more than ready to unleash my worst on him.

"Your sweatpants are inside out," he taunted, his eyes dancing with glee and I glanced down, ready to correct him except somehow, *unthinkably* he was right.

My vision darkened as he barked a laugh and I felt myself snap as the last shreds of my control shattered.

If he wanted pain then he could have it. I'd give him a fucking feast.

I roared at him as I launched myself off of the stairs and slammed into his hard chest before tackling him to the ground.

I punched and punched him, my mind writhing and tempestuous like a stormy sea as I gave in to my baser nature and acted like the animal he was.

Kyan barked a laugh like this was all some fucking game to him and I bellowed at him before throwing my fist straight into his face.

I caught him in the mouth and he lurched back in surprise, his head knocking back against the floor as he spat a wad of blood right onto the fucking carpet before throwing his head forward in an attempt to break my fucking nose. I avoided the blow by jerking aside, but a moment later his knuckles were slamming into my side with the force of a fucking freight train.

We had a single, cardinal rule which we had always followed to the letter whenever we'd fought before. Never hit the face, no wounds that lasted. But that had gone to shit just as surely as my fragile grip on my control had.

I threw another punch at Kyan's face, but he somehow managed to get his knees between us and he launched me backwards off of him so that I fell against the coffee table. He was on me in a heartbeat, snarling in my face as his hand wrapped around my throat and he squeezed hard enough to cut off my oxygen supply.

A small part of my brain considered the fact that he'd clearly been pulling his punches whenever we fought before. But this creature leering down at me now wasn't holding back at all.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Blake bellowed a second before his weight slammed into us too.

He managed to knock Kyan off of me, but I wasn't ready to be done yet so I swung at him instead, my knuckles splitting as I drove my fist up

beneath Blake's chin, making his mouth snap shut.

Blake had been dancing a thin line with his control recently anyway and that was all it took to snap it.

Blake's boot swung into my ribs as he kicked me off of the coffee table and pain made my body sing to a new tune. Kyan might have had a point about that. There was a subtle kind of beauty in agony. Something which cut through everything else and connected your body to your soul.

The three of us collided again and for a moment there was nothing between us but fists and pain and rage.

"Enough!" Kyan bellowed finally, throwing his hands against my chest and knocking me back against the stained glass window before shoving Blake back a step too.

We stood there, panting as we glared at each other and every small secret that hung between us seemed to expand to fill the fucking room.

Eminem was still playing, though I didn't recognise this song. In some fucked up way that seemed right. The lyrics were angry, bitter, accusing.

Blake slowly reached out and touched the control panel on the wall to cut the sound and we were plunged into a silence so thick that I could feel it pressing up against my skin.

"This wasn't the way this was supposed to go," I snarled, the iron tang of blood coating my tongue.

"You can't plan out every little fucking thing in life, Saint," Kyan growled. "That's not living."

"So you think sauntering through life with no plan beyond seeing what assholes you can beat up next is better?" I demanded incredulously.

"At least I found a cure for the emptiness in me," he growled.

"That's not a cure," Blake cut in. "It's a fucking distraction. You crave the fight because you don't want to look at who you are without it. You

don't want to risk feeling anything real so you crush it all with violence."

"So who am I without it then?" Kyan demanded, the sweat on his skin making his tattoos glisten. He'd always claimed that the images on his flesh were meaningless, but I wasn't convinced. Either he just didn't want to tell us the meaning behind them or his subconscious was pushing him to choose tattoos which reflected the darkness in him. The pain. The things we all knew about his past but never discussed.

"You could be anything you want to be," Blake snarled. "But you're just taking the easy path all the damn time. You think being the toughest asshole in the room makes you the shit, but you're still a fucking coward. You don't make a single fucking choice that isn't selfish."

"I can't help it if Tatum would pick me over you assholes," Kyan bit back, ignoring most of what Blake had said to him. "And I'm not going to apologise for taking her out last night."

"She could have *escaped*," I snarled. "And then what would we have done?"

"She didn't," he replied flippantly.

"She's *our* girl," Blake said, driving his fingers through his hair as he tried to stay calm. "Which means *we* need to make decisions about the things she does as a unit, not just do whatever the fuck we want with her and cause this kind of friction!"

"That's impossible and you know it," Kyan snapped. "We might have a lot of things in common but we want different things from her. I know I don't give a fuck about seeing her dressed up like a fucking business woman for a start."

"No," I agreed. "You'd rather dress her up like a street whore and fuck her like one too. Don't try to pretend this is about anything more than that."

“And yet you don’t hear me complaining when you make her kneel on the fucking floor for an hour and a half every morning. Or how you’ve got her following your fucking routine to the letter to make sure you get all of your fucking meals the minute you want them,” he bit back.

“What difference does it make if she follows Saint’s routine in the mornings?” Blake demanded, weighing in with me.

Kyan’s face darkened at the signs of us uniting against him. “None,” he snapped. “But that’s not what I want from her. It’s what *Saint* wants. How is she *our* girl if she’s only following his orders and not ours?”

“You never had a problem with me being in charge before,” I growled.

“I never had a *problem* with you setting me on your enemies and asking me to beat the fuck out of them because I *wanted* to do it. When have I ever bowed to a command I didn’t agree with?” Kyan demanded.

And fuck him, but it was the truth and we all knew it. Maybe that meant I wasn’t in charge at all. But the mere suggestion of that had my heart pounding and my palms growing slick.

“So what do you want from her?” I snarled.

Our fight had stolen the restless energy which had been dancing beneath my skin, but it couldn’t banish the feeling of powerlessness which came with having my ritual sabotaged. My mind was a whirling storm of emotion and so much of it was dark that I was sure it would corrupt me to my core.

“Everything she gave me last night,” he replied, his eyes flashing with a warning.

What the fuck did that mean? What did she give him last night? What had been so fucking *special* about their little night out that he’d thought it was worth doing this to me and Blake?

“Did you fuck her?” Blake demanded suddenly and I ground my teeth as I waited to hear the answer to that.

“What if I did?” he growled. “We never said we wouldn’t fuck her.”

“*She* said it,” I snarled. “That was her one and only term. Do we break our fucking word now, Kyan? Who the fuck are we if we do that?”

Kyan snorted derisively, his gaze scraping over me slowly. “I didn’t fuck her,” he said and I exhaled slowly, wondering if I was relieved about that because I was jealous of him having her or of her taking his attention from me. “But I never agreed not to. I agreed not to force her to. Which wasn’t exactly difficult because I’ve never had any desire to force a girl into sex in my life. But we never agreed not to if she wants it.”

I pushed my tongue into my cheek as I read between the lines of what he was saying. He clearly thought she wanted it. I just didn’t know what to do with that information.

“Then why don’t we just decide it now?” Blake asked. “We just agree not to fuck her.”

“No,” Kyan growled immediately and my fucking dick didn’t want to make that deal either. Though it seemed like a pretty tall order to believe she’d ever want in my bed after the shit I’d just pulled. And if she wasn’t riding *my* cock, I definitely didn’t want her riding his.

“What if I command it?” I asked in a deadly tone.

“You can command a broomstick to climb right up your ass, but I doubt the thing will leap on up there for you,” Kyan replied, fixing me in his gaze. “Besides, are you saying you want *your* word to mean shit? Because I’ve seen the way you look at her, it’s pretty obvious you want her too.”

My heart leapt at the accusation and not just because it was true, but because he was calling me out on my own bullshit and I didn’t like that one fucking bit.

“We need rules,” Blake insisted. “Rules about what we can do with her and when.”

“I’m not agreeing to you caging me,” Kyan spat.

“Not rules for what we can’t do,” Blake growled. “Just a way to make this even. So that this shit doesn’t happen again. She’s not a fucking chew toy for us to fight over like mutts.”

No she wasn’t. Tatum Rivers was something much more important than that, but none of us were going to even attempt to put a name on exactly what that was.

“What rules then?” Kyan snapped.

There was too much animal in him for this kind of discussion. He was a beast governed by instinct; he did what he wanted when he wanted and didn’t like following rules. But I was the fucking king of rules so if that was what we needed, then I could certainly manage that much.

“Like where she sleeps,” I said darkly. Because out of all the fucking photos he’d sent me of the two of them last night, that had bothered me the most. Not the fact that he’d put her in danger on his motorbike or even the fact that he’d allowed her to brawl like an alley cat in that godforsaken illegal fighting pit he loved so much, not the way he’d dressed her like a fucking porno biker chick or how he’d coated her in his scent by wrapping her in his jacket and then putting her to bed in his shirt with a fucking hicky. No. All of those things had incited me, but the fact that he’d put her in his bed at the end of it was what had blinded me.

“She’s not going back in that bathroom,” Kyan said instantly. “I’m all for fucking with her, but that shit is just spiteful. If something belongs to me, I look after it. Which means she needs a bed.”

“Well there’s only three bedrooms here, asshole, and I’m not bunking in with you to give her one,” Blake snorted.

“There’s an easier solution than that,” I interrupted. “She rotates.”

“You mean she takes turns sleeping in with each of us?” Blake asked and I was surprised to see he didn’t look as repulsed by that as I’d expected.

“Yes.”

“In that case, on the days she’s in with me, she doesn’t have to go and kneel outside the fucking crypt at six am,” Kyan said instantly and my lip curled back at that. “If she’s warming my bed for me, I want her there when I wake up.”

“That makes sense,” Blake added infuriatingly and I ground my jaw.

“She still has to be up to make breakfast,” I said, refusing to budge on that.

“Obviously,” Blake added and some of the tension left my shoulders.

“If I wanna take her for a night out, I can do it without having to answer to anyone,” Kyan added coolly.

I didn’t like that one fucking bit, but what was I supposed to say?

“We’re on lockdown here because of that bastard virus,” I said. “Going out last night was really fucking stupid for more reasons than the chance of her escaping.”

“The police shut the place down anyway,” Kyan said with a shrug. “So I won’t be going back there any time soon and I can agree to stay on campus until lockdown is over.”

“Fine. We can take her out individually,” I conceded.

“But we have to let each other know,” Blake added.

“Are we good then?” I asked. “No more shit anyone needs to air?”

I looked between my two best friends, the space dividing us feeling like a chasm filled with things we still hadn’t said.

Kyan met my gaze and he sighed, clenching and unclenching his fist as the last of the tension slipped from his muscles and the fight went out of him.

“I took Tatum out into the woods the other night with the intention of putting a bullet through her skull,” Blake growled.

I stopped glaring at Kyan and we both turned to stare at him instead. It took a lot to shock me. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time that emotion had entered my body. But holy fuck, a murder had nearly gone unnoticed in our circle. Right under my nose. I knew Blake was close to breaking point, I’d even had vague concerns that he might be tempted to snap her pretty neck. But evidently I hadn’t taken that threat seriously enough.

“Clearly I changed my mind,” he added, but the shadows in his gaze said it had been a close won thing.

Kyan blew out a breath and pushed his long hair out of his face. His knuckles were lined with blood, but most of it was his where his skin had split again during our brawl.

“This whole situation is getting really fucked up,” Kyan muttered.

“Did you get it out of your system then?” I demanded, my gaze fixed on Blake. “Because if you can’t be trusted alone with her then tell us now. I’m not having your life destroyed because you murdered some girl out of grief.” My gut twisted in a strange way as I dismissed Tatum as just some girl, but I refused to acknowledge it. There had only been two people in my life who were truly worth a damn for a really long time and they were standing right in front of me now. I wasn’t going to waste my time considering anyone else in this equation.

“Yeah, it’s out of my system,” Blake said firmly, his gaze hollowing out as that fucking grief came for him again, but there was enough conviction in his words to convince me that wasn’t a lie. “I put the gun back in the safe and I have no desire to use it again.”

“Good. Then it’s not a problem,” I announced.

“So we’re all good now?” Kyan asked, his tone suggesting he was getting sick of this heart to heart and he was right. We weren’t the touchy feely kind, and if we kept this shit up one of us was likely to puke sooner or later.

“Yeah.” I walked towards them and they silently moved forward too, closing the triangle until we were standing shoulder to shoulder.

I met Kyan’s brown eyes and the corner of his mouth twitched in amusement as he reached up and caught the back of my neck, pulling me forward so that our foreheads were pressed together. He gave Blake the same treatment and the three of us stood there for a long moment, our heads pressed to each others’ and our souls twisting into one.

I inhaled deeply, relishing the moment as it passed between us and all of our rage just vanished like it had never existed at all. Or maybe it was because we had so much of it that we just cancelled each other out.

We might have been a trio of fucked up monsters with more demons than the ninth circle of hell, but we were a family too. And nothing would ever tear that apart. Certainly not a fucking girl.

“Sorry to break up the three way, but you assholes are late for class.” Monroe’s rough voice washed over us and we pulled apart to look at him where he stood in the open doorway with Tatum at his side. “And I just caught Rivers trying to cut class down at Sycamore Beach too. So tonight you’re all going to be spending detention with me running a lap of the school campus. And unless you’re looking to make that a week in detention, the four of you will get your asses in uniform and run to Miss Pontus’s lesson within the next five minutes,” he demanded.

All three of us were looking at Tatum but she only had eyes for me and her gaze burned with a hatred so pure, I felt it searing away at my flesh.

She was wearing my goddamn coat and it was covered in sand which made my fingers twitch with the urge to spank her. But stronger than that, I was swept up in the idea of pulling her into my arms. Just for a moment. Just to be sure she was back here. Where she belonged. Not that I did either of those things.

She turned away from me dismissively before bounding up the stairs to get her uniform but as I made a move to follow, Monroe called me back.

“I need a word, Memphis,” he demanded, striding into my home like he’d been fucking invited. “Bowman, Roscoe, fuck off and get dressed.”

Kyan and Blake stalked away without a word and I was left with my football coach, folding my arms as I looked at him. “Yeah?”

“The headmaster informs me that you stole the school’s supply of toilet paper,” Monroe began, throwing me off entirely. I’d assumed that Barbie had gone telling tales, but it looked like she knew how to keep her mouth shut after all. His gaze slid beyond me to my hand crafted toilet paper throne and his lips twitched. Possibly with amusement or possibly with rage. Hard to tell with him.

“I’ve had that throne for years,” I commented lightly. “But if he’d like to enter into sales negotiations with me, I’d be open to it. Unfortunately, in the current climate the demand is quite high though, so obviously the price would have to reflect that.”

Monroe lunged at me so suddenly that I didn’t see it coming, my back hitting the wall beside the door as he snarled in my face. “You and your little friends have already got detention with me tonight. After that you can pack up this toilet paper and deliver it back to Brown’s office. Are we clear on that, Memphis?” he yelled.

My jaw locked and my anger rose again, but I couldn’t let it rule me. I needed to play this right. There were a lot of things I could buy my way out

of. Hitting a teacher wasn't one of them. Not easily anyway.

"No problem, sir," I agreed, though the death threat in my gaze would be letting him know there was a problem alright.

I shoved away from him and headed up the stairs, meeting Tatum as she tried to step out of my closet dressed in her school uniform.

"Move," she snarled, but of course I didn't. I backed her into the confined space and shut the door behind me.

"Are you gonna keep up the kicked puppy act all day, Barbie?" I asked, eyeing her uniform carefully before reaching out to straighten her tie.

She jerked back so I couldn't touch her and I pursed my lips. My gaze snagged on that fucking hicky on her neck and I fought against the urge to ask her what Kyan had done to earn the right to put his mouth on her flesh. He said he hadn't fucked her and I believed him, but clearly something had happened between them. I just didn't know if I wanted to hear about it or not.

"Just so long as you keep up the evil asshole routine," she growled, making a move to push past me.

I caught her arm to stop her, glaring down at her as she tried to walk away from me. "You agreed to belong to me. To all of us. You can't have thought that would be easy."

"I *hate* you," she hissed and the raw emotion of those words hit me like another punch. "Now let me go or I'll scream for Monroe."

I released her without a word and she strode to the door, flinging it open.

"Oh, and you should probably fix your face before class," she said acidly. "That fucked up nose of yours really looks like shit."

The door snapped shut in my face and I stood in the silence as chaos reigned inside me. My ritual had gone to fuck. My only friends had been

lying to me. Monroe was inside *my* Temple. And Tatum Rivers had just gotten the last word in. My life was officially in tatters.



School was just about bearable. I put on my fiercest resting bitch face, sucked up the Night Keepers' bullshit and even got to partner with Mila in English for an assignment. Not that I told her what they'd done to me. I gave her a false smile and said nothing could hurt me. I had a heart of iron. And by the time I was back in The Temple, cooking dinner for the assholes who owned me, I wished I did.

I'd made many wishes in my life; wishes on stars, wishes on birthday candles, wishes in wells. And I'd wasted them all. Because if I could exchange just one of them to replace my heart with a lump of cold, hard metal then fighting back against them would have been easy.

Every time I saw them laughing and smirking together, I thought of those letters. I thought of all of those private words being poured secretly into those pages only to be burned out of existence. And my heart felt it all.

When I'd finished washing the dishes at seven thirty, Saint called me upstairs. There had been few words shared between any of us today. I'd

answered their requests with as little syllables as possible and done all of it with a mask of indifference on my face.

My stomach knotted as I headed across the room, feeling Kyan and Blake's eyes on me from the couch. We had detention with Monroe at eight and I wished he'd done me the favour of only giving it to the Night Keepers. A couple of hours here alone would have been a dream come true. Even if they'd locked me in the bathroom.

I made it to the top of the staircase, finding Saint lying on the bed and gazing up at the vaulted ceiling. He'd somehow managed not to wrinkle the sheets around him and was dressed for a workout like Monroe had requested. His grey T-shirt clung to his muscular frame and his feet hung over the end of the bed despite the fact that his designer sneakers didn't have a speck of dirt on them.

He patted the space beside him. "Lie down," he commanded and I clenched my jaw as I approached, sighing as I dropped down, making sure not a single hair on my head touched him. I gazed up at the high ceiling above, the wooden rafters curving overhead in a beautiful display of craftsmanship.

"Your silence is boring me," he drawled and I felt him turn to look at me, though I didn't repay the favour.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked innocently, knowing he'd hate that. As much as he wanted my compliance, he wanted me to fight back even more. They'd all made that clear. And today, I was not going to rise to it.

"You could start by apologising," he said in a growl, a note of amusement in his tone.

I bit down on my tongue, my heart screaming in my chest.

"Well?" he pressed in a cold voice, a threat living between the letters.

“I’m sorry,” I forced out on a breath. “Sorry that your mother is the only woman in the world who will ever love you. I’m sorry that your life has been so empty that you have to fill it with pointless, expensive things. And I’m sorry you have to break those things when they don’t bring you the happiness you so deeply fucking crave, Saint.”

My words hung in the air for a full minute before I turned my head to look at him, waiting for the wolf to bite back. His gaze was on the ceiling and his jaw was ticking with an unreadable kind of anger. One that didn’t seem to be directed at me for once.

“You got one thing wrong.” He turned his head to face me and I took in the darkening bruise across the bridge of his nose with the sweetest kind of satisfaction. “My mother loves her other sons, but not me.”

“I thought you were an only child?” I frowned.

“I am, but not if you count Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and even George Washington on those little dollar bills. I guess my complexion didn’t come out green enough for her to love.” He sneered like those words didn’t touch his heart and they probably didn’t. I reckoned if I slammed a knife into Saint’s chest, he’d keep on living like the walking dead. So if it came to it, I really had to remember to aim for the head.

I said nothing. Because nothing was everything sometimes. If he wanted pity from me, he was going to be sorely disappointed. But I didn’t imagine Saint would ever want that from anyone. So I wasn’t really sure what he was angling for.

I moved to sit up, but he planted his arm over my shoulders to make me stay. My skin prickled where he touched me and I fought the shudder he wanted to draw from my flesh.

“And what about *your* mother?” he asked, though it wasn’t out of politeness or even curiosity. I suspected now that Saint had fired the most powerful ammo he had at me, he was hunting for another magazine to load in his gun.

“Your mother and mine have something in common, Saint. She took half my dad’s money and left when I was three. So feel free to bad mouth her all you like. I’ll even join in.”

He extracted his arm from me then rolled over to prop himself up on his elbows, his gaze travelling over my face, pausing on my lips before slipping to my neck. My breathing came faster as this predator assessed me, then he slowly reached out and laid his hand over my neck like he was about to throttle me. His fingers grazed my pulse and it elevated at his icy touch. My face might not have betrayed my fear, but my heart wasn’t capable of lying.

“Where’s your necklace?” he hissed and my throat closed up.

I acted fast, rearranging my features into confused worry as I lifted a hand to feel the absence of it too. “Shit, I must have lost it.”

His gaze narrowed as he hunted for a lie. My fingers grazed his and his hand twitched at the touch, like for half of half a second he’d considered taking my hand.

“I’ll make sure it’s found,” he said darkly before rising to his feet and straightening down his T-shirt. “Get up and get dressed. We leave in five minutes.” He strode away down the stairs and I sat up, my hand still at my throat. *Nothing gets past the devil unnoticed.*

I spotted the clothes he’d left for me piled neatly on his nightstand and moved to grab the navy sports bra, matching fitted yoga pants and black Nike sneakers. I was soon dressed and I left my clothes strewn beside the laundry basket to piss Saint off later and headed downstairs.

The guys were all ready to go and I followed them out the door into the cool night air. I didn't miss the appreciative glances the push-up sports bra served me from Kyan. But despite the night of fun we'd had together, I was now firmly pissed at him. He let Saint get away with whatever he wanted. And any small ounce of humanity I thought I'd seen in him had clearly been a total lie.

"Looking good, baby," he purred as he waited for me to walk past him on the path so he could check out my ass. I flipped him the finger over my shoulder and his chuckle reached me.

Blake was having trouble keeping his eyes off of me too and I scowled as he offered me a smirk. "There was never any mention of Cinderella's huge rack in the original story. I like this version better."

I rolled my eyes at him, quickening my pace so I didn't have to listen to any more of their shit.

We headed down the track to the right, making our way to the path that led up to the faculty quarters, Maple Lodge. Monroe was waiting for us there on a bench, sitting on the back of it and resting his feet on the seat. He glowered as we approached, looking like a crossroad's demon ready to bargain for some souls. I'd rather he owned mine than the current possessors though.

"Evening, sir," Saint said, his eyes full of malice. He did not like getting detention at all. And that made it all the more gratifying to watch.

Monroe jumped down from the bench, striding toward us with no patience in his expression. He had something gripped in his hand and he reached forward, taking my arm and strapping on a black fitness watch with a square screen. He tossed the rest to the others and I felt his fingers lingering on my skin for a long moment after they were gone.

“You’re all going to do a lap of the entire campus. Your watches are set to the same route. Follow it,” he growled. “The route will finish back here at this bench where I’ll be waiting for you.” He smirked. “If you’re not back here within two hours, you can do this all over again tomorrow. Is everyone clear?”

“Yes, sir,” I said in time with the others. It might have been a long ass run, but it beat hanging out with the Night Keepers for the duration of this detention. *Little mercies and all.*

“Good. Your time starts...now,” Monroe announced and all of our watches beeped as the run started. I checked the map and headed back in the direction we’d come while Kyan and Blake fell into pace with me on both sides, fucking flanking me, while Saint followed right behind my back.

I gritted my jaw, ignoring them as I jogged on, waiting for them to pull ahead and leave me behind, but they just kept with me like goddamn hounds.

I tried slowing my pace, but they just fell back to match it and I huffed in annoyance.

As the map guided us off of the main path up a track to the right, we headed into the trees and Blake’s arm brushed my right while Kyan’s brushed my left.

“Now,” Saint hissed and Kyan collided with me, whirling me back against a tree, making my heart lurch into my throat. The three of them closed in on me and my breathing came faster and faster.

“What the fuck?” I spat, my heart jack-hammering as they surrounded me.

As one, they all shed their watches, grabbed my wrists and tightened the straps around my arms.

“Enjoy our run, Cinders,” Blake said with a dark laugh. “We’ll meet you before you reach Monroe again and you can tell him how much fun we all had running together.”

Kyan pushed me up the path as the others stood back then he slapped my ass. “Yah pony!”

I growled my rage, wanting smack his damn face but before I could even get my thoughts in order, the three of them turned, running back to the main path and darting out of sight in the direction of The Temple.

I clenched my jaw then started jogging again, cursing them with every name under the sun as I hurried up the dark track.

After a while, it felt good to be working out the tension in my muscles at least. And I supposed I had gotten my wish of some alone time, so there was that. In fact, apart from the chilling hoot of an owl in the distance, this was pretty damn sweet. And after living in a house with three monsters for days on end, I knew I didn’t need to fear being alone in the woods. It was having company in the woods that worried me most these days.

I soon fell into the rhythm of my feet pounding along the track and I wished I had my headphones with me to listen to music on my phone.

The track curved down towards Aspen Halls at the head of campus and my feet hit a solid path again as I followed the map around the huge gothic building towards the main gate.

I spotted the football team and the rest of the popular crowd sitting on the benches in the courtyard at the back of the building. I saw Mila amongst them and she waved as she caught sight of me, beckoning me over. I raised a hand at her, but my heart twisted as I kept running. I wasn’t going to tarnish her reputation by going over there, even though I appreciated the sentiment. I spotted the Unspeakables on their own table and frowned as Chad McCormack jumped up onto it and started throwing bread on the

floor, demanding they pick it up with their mouths and make quacking noises. The worst feeling of all was when they did it.

Just as I was nearing the front corner of the halls, a figure stepped around it and I crashed into them full speed. I grabbed his arm before he hit the ground and blurted an apology.

Bait was seriously recognisable with the landing strip carved through the centre of his hair and my gut twinged with guilt for me putting it there.

“Sorry, are you alright?” I asked and he laughed nervously, patting himself down as if to check.

“I think I’m all intact, Pla – ah – Tatum.”

“It’s good to see you,” I said earnestly.

“You too.” He stepped past me, glancing around as if expecting the Night Keepers to appear at any moment. “Goodnight,” he said before hurrying off down the path toward the rest of the Unspeakables. My gut sank with disappointment as I watched him go. A conversation would have been nice, but I guessed whatever had been left of the guy’s balls had been lopped off the second my escape plan had failed us. I still felt shitty about that. But I mostly felt pissed at Sneak’s mom for abandoning us.

I headed around the building to where the gravel drive stretched out towards the gate, glancing wistfully that way as I pictured the freedom that lived beyond it. This place had become my prison. And I couldn’t imagine a time when those gates would be open and I could step out of them freely.

A foot crunching against gravel caught my attention and I slowed to a halt, a shard of ice sliding smoothly down my spine.

I looked towards the gate once more and I could have sworn there was movement in the thickness of the shadows.

My breathing came unevenly as a guy moved up to the gate, clearly unaware of me as he slid his hands around the bars and rattled it. My throat

dried up as I took in the sinister expression on his face. He had dark, torn jeans on and a check shirt that didn't marry with anyone on campus. He wasn't a student and he definitely wasn't a teacher.

Where are the damn guards?

"Hey!" I called out to him and he looked up in surprise before darting back into the darkness.

My heart shuddered in my chest as I stared at the gates. For a second it almost looked like the chain wasn't in place around them. But that couldn't be right.

I might not have been in a horror movie, but I sure as shit wasn't gonna go over there and check all the same. The guards would be patrolling. If that asshole came back, they'd catch him.

I wet my lips then jogged on, trying to figure out if I should be worried about that guy or not. I guessed it was a good idea to alert the guards so I brought up the school app on my phone and tapped on the security alert button, shooting them a quick message. As it sent, my shoulders relaxed.

No one could get inside this school. It was a fortress with its high walls and armed security. So why did I feel so on edge?



“Look at this masterpiece,” I said with a sigh as the three of us stood before the toilet paper throne Tatum had built alongside the stained glass window in The Temple. “Seems like such a shame to destroy it.”

“Pfft,” Saint waved a hand dismissively. “We’re not destroying shit. Six packs will be more than enough to make our point.”

Kyan had that look in his eye which promised trouble. And not just detention level trouble, he was looking for someone to lay into tonight for sure. Hospital trips would be required, therapy sessions in later life, the works. I just had to wonder who his target was, because going after Headmaster Brown seemed like the perfect way to get his ass hauled off to juvie. But as far as I knew, we weren’t going to be getting close to anyone else unless he had some other trouble planned.

“We don’t have long to fuck around here, boys,” Saint warned. “Tatum is giving us a good alibi, but only so long as we make it back to get those watches from her before she completes the circuit and reaches Monroe again.”

“Let’s hurry then,” I said, my skin tingling at the challenge. It wasn’t going to be easy to do all of this within the timeframe and I was itching to prove it could be done. It was perfect, Monroe himself would be our alibi

and Tatum would back up the claim. There was no way Brown could pin anything on us.

Saint moved away to grab his set of school keys from the safe hidden in the floor while me and Kyan grabbed a couple of twenty four packs of toilet paper each from the back of the throne.

“I wish we could ram a roll of this right down Brown’s throat,” Kyan joked.

“And another up his ass. He’d be auto wiping for a month,” I added and that even earned me a laugh from Saint.

“I spoke to my mother again earlier,” Saint said as he hid the safe away again before coming over to grab two packs to carry himself. “Brown’s days here are numbered, I’ve got the board *this* close to moving forward with an act of no confidence vote. It seems there have been reports from hundreds of students detailing all of his failures in dealing with the Hades Virus. There was more than one account of people being stuck in uncomfortable and unsanitary places during that quarantine stretch. Danny Harper and three other members of the football team had to use a stationary cupboard to shit in for the two day period.”

“I heard they made Bait sleep in that shitty cupboard too,” I said, my lips twitching in amusement at the idea of that.

“I might have gotten a text request from a few of the footballers asking to take command of the Unspeakables during quarantine,” Saint admitted.

“Imagine what fun we could have had with a few of them if they’d been stuck with us,” Kyan joked as we headed out of The Temple and up the hill towards Aspen Halls where Headmaster Brown’s office was located.

I glanced at the others with their awkward packages of toilet paper and grinned. “Last one there has to offer to wipe Brown’s ass for him when we see him,” I challenged, my heart leaping at the idea of a race.

“Fuck that,” Kyan burst into a run and I laughed as Saint and I followed.

It was awkward as fuck to run up the steep hill while carrying the two huge multipacks of toilet paper, but I’d always been the fastest of us. Kyan chose boxing for his cardio if we weren’t on the football pitch so he was the easiest to beat. He might have been one big motherfucker, but he couldn’t chase someone down the way I could.

Saint was my competition, charging up the hill like a rhino as he gripped the packs of toilet paper beneath each arm. We looked fucking ridiculous, but I ground my teeth and made it into first place by pure force of will. I couldn’t help but think that anyone who saw us could only imagine we had a major case of the shits and were racing to the closest toilet armed with the white stuff to wipe to our hearts’ content.

I charged up to the door of Aspen Halls with Saint right on my heels, whooping my triumph to the night sky as the little victory set my body humming with satisfaction. *Fuck*, I loved to win. Even stupid shit like this. Didn’t matter. I still came out on top.

There were several students sitting around the picnic benches beneath large orange flood lights at the top of the hill. They’d been arranged to offer a view out over the valley which held the campus and it was one of the preferred hang out spots on site.

A group of footballers were sitting together. There were a few girls with them too and I noticed Mila Cruz eyeing me from Danny Harper’s lap, clearly still pissed about us laying claim to her old roomie. *Tough shit there, sweetheart.*

I couldn’t help but grin as I spotted a few of the Unspeakables sitting off to one side of the space on their own table.

“Oh look,” Kyan purred as he came to a halt beside us. “Fresh Bait.”

The kid in question definitely heard that, looking up at us from beneath his head of half shaved hair. That shit was still funny and it had been over a week. When it grew back, I planned on making Tatum shave a cock into it next.

“Is that toilet paper?” Freeloader asked, getting to her feet and looking like she might just salivate at the sight of our supplies. It didn’t surprise me that she was in desperate need of some of the white wipers, the other students would have come for her supply the moment theirs ran out.

“Bet you wish you’d had some of these supplies the night you earned your name, eh Squits?” I called, spotting the shitter amongst their little gang.

Chad McCormack and some of the other football jocks laughed along to give my ego a little top up. Not that it needed it. I had so many trophies that I didn’t know what to do with them all. I knew I was number one in everything without needing anyone to pat me on the back for it. But who didn’t like a little back patting from time to time?

“Anyone who needs some toilet paper, follow us,” Saint called, his voice laced with compassion like he was channelling his namesake.

The official story behind his name was that his mom had taken one look at his angelic little face when he was born and said that he was the only truly good thing she had in this life. And something truly good could only be a Saint. But I was willing to bet that was horse shit. More likely, she took one look into baby Saint’s evil little eyes and tried to give him a pious name to ward off the demon she could see peering back out at her from within them. It didn’t work of course. In all honesty, we were just lucky that he hadn’t self-combusted the moment he’d set foot inside The Temple and crossed onto holy ground.

The Unspeakables hesitated, glancing between each other as they sensed a trap and to be fair, Kyan's smile was enough to say that at least one of them would be getting their ass kicked tonight.

He was always like this the night after he went to one of those fights in town. I kinda thought of it like him getting laid and having the best sex of his life and then the next night his body just craved a little more of that ecstasy, so he fed it another taste.

And I knew that feeling well enough. I'd been fighting it ever since the night I'd spent buried in Tatum Rivers. I was caught on that girl, no matter who she'd turned out to be. I just couldn't stop picturing all the things I'd done with her body whenever she was around me and of course I craved more. I hadn't even been with another girl since her. Hadn't even considered it. Which was too fucking weird not to mean something. But I craved her destruction too. In payment for what her father had done. It was tearing me apart. Like there were two pieces of my soul residing inside me now instead of one, but my flesh didn't have room to contain them both at once. So I lashed out as each of them broke free of my restraint. It was why I'd had to drag her out into the woods with that gun. And why I'd had to kiss her the moment I realised I wasn't going to pull the trigger. The push and pull I felt towards her was blinding. I just didn't know which piece of my soul I was going to cave in to from one day to the next.

Saint didn't wait to check if the Unspeakables were following us as he unlocked the door and we headed into Aspen Halls, but I noticed Bait peeling away from the group and scurrying off. Probably a clever move in all honesty.

We strode along dark corridors and the sound of many footsteps following were punctuated by sniggers of laughter from the footballers as they came to find out what we might do next.

We moved straight past the abandoned secretary's desk and up to the oak double doors which hid Brown's office.

Saint unlocked it with one of his keys and I smirked as we sauntered into the wide space. The smell of old coffee and older books hung in the room and I glanced at the bookcases lining the walls for a moment before my attention settled on the mahogany desk which took up most of the space before the window.

Brown had a brightly coloured baseball bat hanging on his wall, signed by every member of the Sequoia Black Bears and sitting in pride of place like he was claiming to be their friend or something. I bet he'd just bought the thing on eBay. I doubted any of the signatures were even real.

All of us had been hauled in here more than once for a dressing down from our noble head, and it was beyond time for us to remind him who the fuck he was dealing with. We were the next generation of men destined to rule his little world and it was past time he adjusted to that fact.

"C'mon in, Deepthroat," Kyan called, that darkness in his gaze deepening as he moved forward and ripped the plastic packaging off of the first pack of toilet paper.

The girl in question sidled in, her eyes wild with fear and pathetically, still a hint of lust aimed at Kyan too. That shit was sad. He'd made her life hell since the incident and in all honesty, I was surprised she hadn't transferred schools. Saint had wanted her expelled after the shit she'd pulled but Kyan refused, preferring to dole out his own punishment for what she'd tried to do to him.

I snorted a laugh as I moved to rip the plastic off of the other packs of toilet paper with Saint and started arranging them on Brown's desk in the shape of a giant cock with knobbly toilet paper balls.

“On your knees, Deepthroat,” Kyan growled. “That’s your favourite spot after all.”

Deepthroat dropped down in front of him and I swear the girl was salivating at being so close to her dream of sucking him off. She had stalker issues for sure.

Kyan balled up the plastic wrapper in his hand. “Open wide.” She did, her graze drinking him in as he stood over her in his wifebeater with the muscles of his tattooed arms flexing. He’d never lost a drop of the rage he felt towards that girl and I could easily admit, I hadn’t either.

Kyan lurched forward and shoved the plastic wrapper straight into her mouth, forcing it to the back of her throat and snarling as she jerked away from him, choking on it.

I laughed but it wasn’t my old boisterous laugh, it was a dark and cruel thing which appreciated the girl’s suffering. Maybe that meant I was an asshole. But that girl had slipped Kyan a roofie, dragged him into her dorm room and gotten his pants half way off before he’d come to his senses enough to find her with her mouth wide and his cock in her hand. At the time he’d barely managed to get the fuck out of there. But the next day when he’d slept it off, the three of us had kicked in her door and found a stash of the pills alongside a huge collection of photographs of him which he hadn’t even known she’d taken. If she’d been a dude he probably would have beaten her to death, as it was, the three of us had done a damn good job of ruining her life. There were reputation destroying rumours about her circulated throughout all of high society and we’d even set plans in place to bankrupt her family after we graduated. Kyan just wanted to wait until then so that he could torture her before he never had to see her again.

Deepthroat fell to the floor, clawing at her mouth to tear the toilet paper packet back out of it as she gasped for breath and I snorted a laugh as Kyan

came to help us finish up our sculpture.

“Perfect,” I announced, snapping a photo of our masterpiece as Saint smirked triumphantly.

Movement beyond the window behind Brown’s desk drew my attention for a moment and I frowned as I looked out into the dark at the main gate.

For a moment, I could have sworn I saw someone slip through it, but with the light of the room reflecting off of the glass it was hard to be sure. It looked like Kyan might not be the only one flouting the quarantine rules though. My gut squirmed uncomfortably at that knowledge. That virus had torn through my mom in little more than a week and stolen her from me. I didn’t think we should be fucking around with the rules put in place to protect us from that shit, and tomorrow I was going to be talking to Saint and Kyan about us laying down the law about it. I was too young to fucking die.

“Punch?” I snapped, my grief tainting my words as it reared its ugly head. I was starting to wonder if Saint had been entirely right about me channelling it into rage all the time. Sure, it gave me an outlet but it didn’t feel like it was actually helping me to chip away at the pain at all. When I poured the torrent of emotion I felt over my mom’s death into anger, I felt seriously close to losing control. And after dragging Tatum up into the woods, I had to wonder just how far I was capable of going if I didn’t get a handle on this.

Punch eased into the room looking sheepish. There was a dude who’d taken his punishment seriously. I’d even seen him cry once. And after the way he’d flattened me with that punch last year, I wasn’t going to waste any time feeling bad for him. That said, I was willing to offer him an out. We actually could do with him back on the football team and he’d served his time.

“Be a lamb and hold this for me,” I pulled a lighter from my pocket and tossed it at him. He fumbled the catch and dropped to his knees as he scrambled to pick it up.

Hmm, if his catches have gotten that sloppy then maybe we don't need him back on the team after all.

“What's this for?” Punch asked, his eyes flicking between the lighter and the cock shaped heap of seriously flammable toilet paper as he figured it out.

Saint laughed darkly in that way that told me his monster was feeding off of the fear in the room and I had to say that I was developing a taste for it too. Before I'd lost my mom, it had been more about power for me than getting off on inciting terror, but the more I focused on that aspect of my position as a Night Keeper, the more I found I liked it.

“I just thought you'd like it as a gift,” I said innocently.

“Can everyone here attest to the fact that the Night Keepers delivered all of this toilet paper to Headmaster Brown's office as requested?” Saint asked, his gaze sweeping over the crowd who had followed us here. “And that we left the room without doing anything at all to damage Brown's property?”

A chorus of yeses swept over us and I exchanged a smirk with Kyan.

“Good.” Saint headed towards the door and I fell into step with him.

Kyan hesitated for a moment before crossing the room to pull the signed baseball bat from its holder on the wall. He casually swung it back and forth as he barked at Deepthroat to get out of the room, then he moved to join us by the door. She scrambled to comply, still shooting him looks that told me she'd be getting herself off over this interaction later on tonight when she was all alone in bed.

Punch tried to follow too, but I held up a hand to stop him. “How would you like to end your term as an Unspeakable, Punch?” I asked casually.

“It’s been a long time since anyone called you Toby Rosner,” Saint commented lightly.

“Is that his name? I thought it was Willy Cockfist,” Kyan joked and the football team all laughed along, loving their position in the inner circle so much that it didn’t even occur to them that they were one fuck up away from being an Unspeakable themselves. But I guessed no one liked to think of themselves as having the potential to be one of the dregs of the school society.

“I can end my term?” Punch asked, licking his lips hungrily as that little thought slithered into his head and set his pulse racing.

“Sure,” Saint said casually.

“If,” I added, fixing my gaze on Punch and smirking as he instantly dropped his eyes to scrutinise his shoes. “You do something to impress us...”

“Like what?” he asked hungrily, apparently needing more than a lighter in his hand and a desk full of kindling to put two and two together.

And as much as I would have enjoyed sending Brown’s desk up in flames myself, you couldn’t hold onto power like ours if you got your own hands dirty in stupid ways. Brown knew we were coming here tonight with all of this toilet paper. If we set his desk alight it would cause us a pretty big headache with the school board for our parents. We wouldn’t get expelled for a stunt like that, but they’d probably try and punish us in other undesirable ways.

Much better to get a patsy to do it for us so that we wouldn’t have to take the fall. Besides, Punch’s dad was big in the oil industry. Old money. No way was he going to get expelled for it and I was willing to bet he’d suck

up a year's worth of detention to get out of the Unspeakables. The rest of his group were staring at him wide eyed with a mixture of fear, jealousy and even full on fury at the injustice of him being offered this chance when they weren't. And sure, we could have offered it to any of them. But some of their crimes were worse than others. And he was the only one who could be of some use to us when he returned to society by re-joining the football team. Hell, in ten years we'd probably all be sat around laughing at some fucking posh party about the way we used to fool around at school and he'd be laughing along with us like he hadn't been made into our little bitch for nearly a year. But that was just how our world worked. And if he wanted to claw his way back up towards the inner circle then this was his shot. If he didn't, he wouldn't be getting another.

Punch swallowed thickly, his gaze flickering between the three of us like he might discover a scrap of mercy. But hell, we were being lenient as fuck here. We hardly ever offered people a chance like this.

He raised a hand and clicked the lighter and everyone in the doorway behind us seemed to hold their breath.

I smirked as I caught Saint's eye and Punch raised the lighter above the toilet paper cock. I started my phone up to record it, wanting the image of that burning cock on camera so that I could look back on it and laugh every time Brown pissed me off.

Punch stepped forward, his hand shaking a little as the flame licked the closest roll of toilet paper and a laugh tumbled from my lips. Saint slung his arm around my shoulders, grinning as the fire quickly took hold and started to spread, blackening the rolls of toilet paper and causing smoke to pour from them.

"No!" Freeloader shrieked, bursting between me and Kyan as she raced towards the desk. At first I thought she wanted to save Punch from getting

into trouble by following our orders or something, but she charged straight past him and grabbed an armful of toilet paper from the head of the cock instead, rescuing it from the flames like it was a new born babe.

“Looks like someone’s been desperate to wipe,” Kyan joked. “Maybe we should change your name to Skids now, huh?”

Freeloader didn’t answer, seeming to think the new nickname would be worth it if she could just keep hold of her prize as she raced for the door with her haul. Several of the footballers followed after her, clearly intent on relieving her of them and I snorted a laugh.

“And so, the great toilet paper wars began,” I joked.

Punch scrambled back towards us as the flames billowed higher, looking equally horrified and thrilled as he glanced at me expectantly.

“Nice work, Toby,” I conceded.

“Now go catch that runaway Unspeakable and teach her a lesson in respect for us,” Saint added.

Punch’s face dropped as Saint set him on his former friend and the other Unspeakables glared at him like he was a traitor. The footballers would still see him as lesser than them too for at least a while, so it looked like he was fresh out of friends even if he was back off of the shit heap. *Life’s a bitch and all that.*

The fire alarm blared out above our heads and Kyan instantly swung his new baseball bat at it, shattering the thing and buying the fire some more time to run free. Hopefully it wouldn’t spread too far before the sprinklers kicked in. Toby really might get expelled if he burned down Aspen Halls. But oh well, that was his problem really. Should have thought about that before he used the lighter.

The crowd parted for us as we headed down the corridor back to the main doors. We needed to hurry if we were going to intercept Tatum and

retrieve our watches before Monroe realised we'd cheated our way out of detention.

We stepped out into the dark, laughing as the light of the flames showed through Brown's window and lit up the old, red Ford Mustang which was parked outside it. It was some great classic that had been donated to the school by some rich asshole who used to go here and seemed to think it would look good parked up by the gates forevermore. I didn't really get it, but the school board had obviously decided to keep it.

As I looked beyond the flames, movement caught my eye again and I fell still as I spotted some douchebag in a plaid shirt pushing his way through the gate which was unlocked for some unknown reason.

"Hey!" I yelled, pointing him out and drawing the others' attention to him.

Another guy was running up the drive towards us too and beyond them I spotted the guard on duty laying still on the gravel.

"Just give us your food and toilet paper and we'll be gone!" the asshole yelled back.

"Fuck that," Kyan snarled, swinging his baseball bat as he took a step closer.

"There's more of them heading into campus!" Mila shrieked behind us and I turned to see that she was right. These assholes must have been the tail end of their crew and at least twenty more fuckers were already racing away from us.

"You'll get the fuck out of here if you know what's good for you," Saint growled, striding forward just as the dickhead leapt through the gate in front of him.

"I'm not fooling around kid, go hide somewhere until we're done here," he snarled. "I've got a church full of food to clear out."

“What do you mean a church full?” I demanded but the guy was clearly done talking, he lunged at Saint but before he could get close to him, Kyan swung the baseball bat as hard as he could.

There was a sickening crunch and blood splattered over my shit a second before the asshole fell to the ground, shrieking in pain as he clutched his shattered elbow.

“Fuck me, I can see bone,” Saint said like he was commenting on the weather and a bark of laughter escaped me. It was either that or puke and this fucker had deserved that shit.

His friend stumbled back on the far side of the gate, raising his hands in surrender as he backed off.

“Wait!” Saint barked, marching forward and pointing at the screaming guy on the ground. “Take your trash with you. And if you even *think* about coming back here, the next swing of that bat will be aimed at your skull.”

“Okay!” the guy gasped, darting forward to drag his friend away from us as he continued to howl with pain.

My pulse pounded as I looked around and realised how far ahead the rest of those fuckers had gotten. They’d said that they were heading for a church and there was only one of those on campus. But how the fuck did they know about the food we’d stashed there?

“Danny!” I snapped, pointing at the footballer as he stood staring at us in shock alongside the rest of the team and the lingering Unspeakables. “You stay here and make sure no more of those fuckers get in. And that none of them leave with our shit. If they take our supplies then we’re all fucked.”

“Okay,” he agreed, though there wasn’t enough fire in his tone to convince me he’d do a good job.

“Let me rephrase that,” Saint said in a deadly growl. “If any of you do anything less than your absolute best to defend this place then you’ll be

turned out of here right alongside those fucking assholes who came to rob us. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a chorus of agreement to that and I exchanged a glance with my friends as we prepared to go defend our home.

"Call the rest of the students and the staff too!" Kyan barked at the footballers and Unspeakables alike as we started moving away from them. "Tell them to bring weapons and come defend our school. That's a fucking order!"

"And anyone who doesn't show up will answer to us," I snarled.

We turned away from them as one and started running down the hill towards The Temple as fast as we could.

"What's the plan?" I asked as we ran.

"Simple. Those moneyless, trailer-trash pieces of shit are trespassing on our property and we have the right to bear arms and defend ourselves against them," Saint growled.

"Basically, we're going to fuck them up," Kyan hollered and I gripped onto the excitement in his tone as we raced down the hill, making it my own.

I'd been waiting for the perfect outlet for all of this rage. One where I wouldn't be forced to bear the consequences of unleashing the beast within me to its fullest capacity. And it looked like my wish had just been granted.



The route on my watch took me back towards The Temple, but then it was gonna make me run all the way out to Sycamore Beach and complete an entire lap of the lake. I was here for it though. I wasn't even pushing myself so I could make the most of the two hour window Monroe had given us and enjoy the time away from the Night Keepers.

A scream carried to me somewhere across the lake and my breathing quickened for a moment before I remembered it was probably just some girl messing around with her friends. Ah *friends*. That must have been nice. My plans to live out a normal school year and make life-lasting connections with other students had gone so spectacularly to shit, that it was almost laughable. Like, funny in the way that it made you weep your heart out and bleed on the inside. That kind of funny.

I beat up the track beside the water, the looming shadow of The Temple's steeple peeking through the trees ahead.

A flash of movement in my periphery made my head whip sideways and a frown pinched my brow as I spotted a line of people racing down the

woodland track that joined the main path.

Ripped denim, leather, too many piercings and body tattoos made me think of the rough crowd from the bar Kyan had taken me to the other night. My heart stalled as I spotted weapons in some of their hands, even a couple of damn guns.

Holy shit!

I sprinted away from them as they spilled onto the path behind me, powering down the concrete toward The Temple. My pulse thundered against the inside of skull, my instincts screaming at me to get away.

“There!” a woman shouted and the stampede of footsteps rushed closer behind me.

I veered right down the path to The Temple, my heart pounding wildly as I made it to the door and threw it open. I turned fast, slamming it shut behind me and letting the latch fall down. I couldn’t lock it with a master key though, only the guys had those.

A weight slammed against the door and I gasped, throwing my shoulder against it to keep them out.

What the hell do they want??

That latch wasn’t gonna hold long and there was no way I was strong enough to hold it myself. I fumbled for my phone in my pocket, taking it out with trembling fingers as I brought up Monroe’s number and dialled.

I wedged the phone between my ear and shoulder as I pressed myself against the door and another loud thud sounded against it, making the latch shudder.

He answered on the fifth ring. “If you’re calling to try and sweet talk your way out of this run, princess, then-”

“Nash! I need your help,” I cut over him.

“What? Why, what’s happened?” His tone became deadly serious and that reassured me a fraction.

“I’m in The Temple, but there’s some crazy fucking people trying to get in. I can’t hold the door much longer!”

“Crazy people? What the hell are you talking about?”

“They’ve broken into the school!” I cried.

“Aren’t the Night Keepers with you?” he ask frantically.

“No, they gave me their stupid watches to wear and ran off. I’m on my own-”

More bodies slammed into the door and I was thrown backwards onto the ground as the latch broke, bruising my arms and back as I hit the ground with a scream of terror. My phone went skittering across the floor and I screamed as the crowd surged toward me. I scrambled backwards but wasn’t fast enough as boots slammed into my gut, my legs, sending pain splintering through my body.

“Stop!” I begged, throwing up a hand to shield my face as terror gnawed at my insides. I couldn’t get up, there were too many of them. Every time I made a move, another foot knocked me down.

A large hand suddenly closed around my wrist and yanked me upright and I released a ragged breath. My relief was short lived as I took in the huge man who had hold of me; he had dark sideburns and a thick moustache. A scar ran over his right eye, his teeth were yellow and he had on a stained wife beater with sweat patches under the arms. Disgust wound its way around my heart as I recognised the ass-pincher, Merl, from the fight club.

His mouth curled up into a smile as his gaze fixed on my cleavage. “Hey there sugar, aren’t you gonna show a little gratitude to your saviour? Or are you just gonna throat punch me again like a high and mighty whore?”

I tried to twist my wrist free of him, but his grip was iron.

“Let go,” I demanded, but he shook his head, puckering his lips up like a cartoon character. “Get the fuck away from me!”

Panic slid into my veins and I threw my fist out, delivering on his second guess as I caught him in the throat. He choked, releasing me as he stumbled back and I darted around him to try and get to the door. His fist slammed into my side and I was thrown into the couch from the sheer force of it, gasping for breath as pain ricocheted through my body.

Holy fuck.

“I’m gonna cut off pieces of you for that, you little whore,” he rasped, coming at me again as the crowd swept around him, grabbing as many packs of toilet paper from the throne as they could carry while others raided the fridge and the kitchen cupboards.

With a bolt of adrenaline, I jumped over the couch and he came for me, a manic rage filling his eyes as he followed. I grabbed one of Saint’s pretentious pieces of abstract art that was nothing but twisted metal and threw it at him with a yell of defiance. He ducked it, coming at me faster as the smile on his face fell away and a grimace took its place.

I gazed over his shoulder to the door, my hopes failing as he continued to block my path.

“I’ll teach you how to show gratitude,” he growled, cupping his junk at me and fear crashed through my body. He hounded forward and I threw another punch as he got too close, one to the gut and a second to his side. He caught my wrist on the third blow and twisted until I screamed.

He threw a meaty fist at me and I was too slow to escape it as it slammed into my chest and knocked me down into Saint’s armchair beneath him. Pain blossomed through my skin and it took several seconds to catch my breath.

Merl leered over me, laughing as he reached out to get a hold of me, but there was no chance I was going to let him touch me with his greasy hands. I threw the heel of my palm into his chin with a shout of rage and his head snapped backwards.

I scrambled over the back of the chair as fast as I could then raced down the hallway as his footsteps came after me again.

He was like the fucking terminator.

I rushed into Blake's room, throwing the door shut behind me but there was no fucking key in the lock. It flew open the second I made it to the bathroom and I raced across the pristine tiles as the creep chased after me. I threw the next door wide, rushing into Kyan's room, my gaze set on the window.

My heart thumped madly as I jumped onto the bed, hurrying over it and hopping down on the other side, reaching the window. I fumbled with the catch, my fingers shaky and it cost me too much time. Merl wrapped a hand in my hair and yanked me backwards, tossing me onto the bed. I screamed as he dropped over me, the scent of tobacco and body odour filling my nose. His hand latched around my throat and he pressed his full weight down to keep me in place as I thrashed wildly beneath him.

"Does Kyan Roscoe know how to fuck as well as he fights?" he purred as I thumped and kicked and scratched, his grip so tight, my vision was already fading. "I made a pretty penny on you two that night at the pit. But I've been fighting since you and your boyfriend were just a babe, sweet girl. You can't win this bout." He curled a finger in my hair, admiring it.

Sickness swirled in my stomach as I started to black out. But I couldn't give up. If darkness claimed me, this man was going to do unspeakable things to me. And I couldn't – no, I fucking *wouldn't* let that happen.

An answer came to me and I stuffed my hand under Kyan's pillow, my fist closing around the huge ass hunting knife he kept there.

I slashed it toward my attacker, slicing it into his side and he roared in pain, releasing me in an instant as he reared back.

I was up like lightning, dragging down lungfuls of air as I slid off the bed, stumbling into the nightstand as I fought the dizziness his attack had brought on.

Come on, move, Tatum, move!

"You fucking bitch!" Merl's voice carried to me as my ears rang and everything faded in and out of focus.

I have to move.

Have to run.

The world started to sharpen again and I ran for the door just as he got off the bed, clutching his side. I just saw the flash of murder in his eyes before I fled out of sight, sprinting down the hall as fast as I could and tearing back into the lounge.

My eyes locked on the exit, but before I got there, a fight broke out. Punches were thrown and toilet paper went flying as an all-out riot filled the doorway, shouts of rage and desperation tearing through the air.

"I'm coming for you, whore!" the booming voice of my attacker turned my blood to ice.

There was no way out. No fucking way.

Except...*shit!*

I turned towards the crypt, powering across the room and taking the steps two at a time as I threw the door open and ran down down down, tearing through the gym as my lungs laboured in my chest.

Just keep moving. Never stop moving.

I sped through the archway, passing the prayer rooms where all of the food had been stockpiled, sprinting past them to the gate on the other side of the space. Saint had said the tunnels would lead me all the way out to Sycamore Beach. It was my only hope.

The keys hung on the wall and I snatched them from the hook, trying the first one in the gate. I jiggled it in the lock, but it didn't give and I swore as my hands shook even harder.

Yanking the key out, I tried the other one, knowing I was wasting precious seconds.

"Well lookie here. I'll kill some time with you, blondie, then keep all this food for myself."

I glanced back at Merl as he strode toward me with a hungry glint in his eyes.

With my hands shaking like crazy, I forced the key to turn.

The gate swung inwards and I leapt forward, turning back to shut it with a yell of hope. His huge body barrelled into the metal gate and I was forced back as I couldn't hold it.

I fled, terror bouncing through my limbs as I tore off into the darkness, hearing his boots thumping along behind me.

I ran harder and faster than I ever had in my life, but he kept coming after me.

I clutched the knife tighter in my grip and sprinted into the pitch black, praying I wouldn't stumble or fall or find myself at a dead end. Because if I did, I was going to have to fight for my damn life.



I ran uphill as fast as I could, sprinting flat out towards the church spire I could see poking out above the trees beyond the lake.

My heart was thrashing with panic and my muscles burned with an electric energy which begged to be set loose on these fuckers who had come to destroy our bubble of sanctuary.

At the last staff meeting, we'd discussed the idea of looters trying to come up here now that the stores were running so low on essential supplies, but Brown had been convinced that we were nowhere near the point at which that would be a concern. Well now look. Look what had come from being underprepared and overestimating the good in people.

I should have known better. I'd seen first hand how ruthless people could be when it came down to it. At the end of the day, when someone was backed into a corner, all of their morals went out the window. Even the sweetest little old lady would cut your throat if it meant her grandkids didn't starve to death. It was the human condition. And I couldn't claim to be any better. All I could claim was that I didn't have a single soul in this world to look out for like that aside from myself. Or at least I'd thought I could claim that. Until Tatum Rivers had called on me begging for help.

I couldn't remember the last time someone had needed me like that. Hell, I couldn't think of a single other person in the world who would even consider calling *me*. Let alone calling me *first*. So either Tatum was just as alone as I was in this godforsaken place or she actually trusted me more than anyone else.

I didn't know if the idea of that terrified or thrilled me, but I did know there was no fucking way I was going to let her down.

I didn't know what the fuck had happened during that call, but the screams had been enough to send my imagination into overdrive. I'd started running for The Temple instantly and as I'd closed in on it I'd finally remembered something that could help me. I could see exactly where she was using the GPS tracker on her watch. And as I checked it again, my heart leapt as I saw that she'd made it out of the church.

She was heading east, away from The Temple and moving towards the lake.

I adjusted my path, turning slightly so that I could intercept her, leaping off of the path and into the trees as I ran on.

Thorns and brambles snagged at my sweatpants, one of them catching the bottom of my T-shirt and ripping it as it scored a line of blood across my stomach, but I didn't slow.

I gripped my phone so tightly that I was afraid I might crack it, my teeth clenching as I checked the dot marking her location again and again.

I was getting closer. Three hundred meters, two hundred, one...

I stumbled to a halt near a cluster of boulders between the trees and spun around as I searched for her.

It was eerily quiet in the woods, only the distant shouts of the looters at The Temple breaking the silence at all.

“Tatum?” I called, not too loud but loud enough for her to hear if she was anywhere near me.

There was no reply and my heart pounded as I fought to catch my breath, straining my eyes in the moonlight that filtered down through the trees as I tried to spot her.

“Tatum?” Louder this time, but she still didn’t reply and I fought really fucking hard not to give in to the panic that rose in me.

I glanced down at my cellphone and my heart leapt as the dot marking her location was showing further away from me again. But that didn’t make sense. There was no way she could have passed me out here without me seeing her. No way.

Unless...

I looked down at the ground beneath my feet, remembering the time I’d found the old entrance to the catacombs beneath the church which opened out down by Sycamore Beach. The tunnels burrowed all over this side of the hill. I’d thought that I might be able to sneak into The Temple to search through Saint’s things by using them to get into the old church, but of course he had it gated off and locked up half way through the tunnels. But if my theory was correct, it looked like Tatum had found a way into them from the church end.

I turned and dove into the trees again, racing for the beach as anxiety gnawed at me.

Tatum had been afraid for her life when she’d called me. She’d been scared of those fuckers and begged me to come. I wanted to believe she’d managed to escape them when she’d run down into the crypts, but I couldn’t be sure. And if there was even the slightest chance that she was still in trouble then I was going to get to her come hell or high water.

I tore through the trees, racing down the hill towards the lake where the moonlight glimmered off of the deep water and lured me closer.

The further I got, the thinner the woodland became until I spilled out onto the sandy beach.

The soft sand sank beneath my sneakers, fighting to slow me down as I turned north, racing towards the rocky outcrop at the end of the beach where the cave which led into the catacombs was hidden.

The water was still and ominous to my right, the sky bright and clear with the moon hanging like a fat orb low to the horizon. It would have been beautiful if the scent of blood hadn't been hanging thickly in the air.

I glanced at my phone once more just before I reached the cave entrance, seeing the dot marking Tatum's position somewhere off to my left. The catacombs were filled with endless tunnels and crypts and it was no wonder I'd beaten her to this point. She was so close now, but I wasn't going to slow until I reached her. Wasn't going to relax until I was sure she was okay.

I hesitated at the mouth of the cave, glancing between the ancient Native American carvings which were almost entirely hidden beneath the more modern catholic symbols. Newer still than those was a sign painted onto the rock wall in what looked suspiciously like dried blood.

Turn back now or invoke the wrath of the Night Keepers.

You have been warned.

Beneath the message they'd painted the four Night Keeper arrows too and it pissed me off that I even recognised the stupid symbols they used to mark themselves out.

A scream echoed to me from the darkness and my breath caught as I recognised Tatum's voice calling to me from deep inside the caves.

It was clear that Tatum was somewhere within these tunnels and not even a warning from the devil himself would have made me turn back now. So the Night Keepers were going to come for me if I crossed their threshold were they? Well, I'd like to see them try.



My pulse was thrashing to the thick roar of some heavy metal which was currently taking place entirely within my own head.

My entire existence had narrowed down to three things. One: the tightness of my grip on the bat I held between my fists. Two: the power in my muscles as I swung that motherfucker like there was no tomorrow and I really was living in my own personal zombie apocalypse. And three: the way my soul sang with every drop of blood I spilled and every thieving asshole I knocked to the dirt screaming beneath me.

Blake and Saint were right behind me as we carved a path towards The Temple and we hunted down each and every one of the fuckers who were already spilling back out of our home with their arms full of toilet paper.

If someone had told me a few weeks ago that I'd be breaking bones over packs of stuff intended for wiping your ass, I'd have laughed myself shitless. Turns out, fate had a sense of humour after all.

The three of us fought savagely as we drew closer and closer to the church, the inside of which had never before been seen by another soul. Saint was practically busting a blood vessel at the thought of so many unwashed commoners tearing through his things and I wasn't sure if I

should be concerned about him dropping dead from a heart attack or suddenly sprouting horns and a forked tongue.

As the only one of us with a weapon and our trio's self-appointed attack dog, I took the lead but not by much. They had to stay behind me anyway, keeping away from the arc of my baseball bat as I swung it with reckless abandon.

For the first time in my life, there was no leash on me at all. Nothing to keep me in check, no reason for me to hold back. Hell, every fucker in the world would be on my side in this. I was protecting my motherfucking home from trespassers. I was practically a superhero. Though with less morals and a fuck tonne more bloodlust. But still, Batman had nothing on me. For a start I had an actual *bat*. He couldn't claim that shit. And I had to say as far as weapons went, this one was pretty damn epic.

We made it to the door of The Temple where it hung open and I bellowed a challenge as we burst inside.

The place had been ransacked, the fridge and kitchen cupboards hanging open with nothing left in them, the toilet paper throne scattered and broken, drawers, doors and boxes open and turned out. They'd even upended Saint's fucking chair.

Saint roared in agony as he saw the state of his spotless home, charging past me as he leapt on a guy whose arms were full of toilet paper. He punched, kicked and even bit with the fury of a wild animal and I felt like I really was seeing a demon given flesh as I watched him for a moment.

The grin on my face couldn't be dampened and Blake raced across the room towards the flagstone which concealed the safe, barrelling a guy over with a classic football tackle as he went.

I looked around to pick my own target and swung my bat at an asshole who was trying to steal my fucking guitar.

He leapt back, waving the guitar in front of him to keep me away as I stalked closer.

“People don’t steal from me and live to tell the tale,” I warned him in a dark voice.

“This is *my* guitar you motherfucker!” he shrieked. “*You* stole it from *me* when I was busking in town last summer! It’s my whole life you piece of shit!”

“Oh.” I’d almost forgotten about that. A laugh burst from my lips. This shit was funny. Like some kind of cosmic irony. “You can go then,” I said, waving him away with my bat.

“Really?” he gasped, not waiting for my response as he darted for the door.

I let him get four steps before I chased him, swinging the bat with all my strength so that it slammed into the middle of the guitar, shattering the thing into a thousand shards of wood and wire.

The busker screamed like I’d just butchered his wife or something and I laughed as I hefted the bat again.

“You want it to be your skull next?” I taunted.

The busker’s eyes widened and he shook his head as he backed away from me, his features painted with terror.

“Then get the fuck out of my house! And don’t ever let me see your sorry face again or hear your piss poor attempt at singing either!”

He bolted like there was a rocket jammed up his ass and I laughed as I turned back to the room.

“Kyan!” Blake bellowed and that warning coupled with my instincts helped me dodge aside just as a hammer swung straight for my head.

I threw the bat up between me and the asshole who’d just tried to kill me and as the two weapons collided, it was ripped from my hands and spun

away across the flagstones into some dark corner.

My hand closed around the asshole's throat before he could get another swing in and I threw my arm up to deflect the next blow before it could brain me.

Pain splintered through my forearm as the wooden handle of the hammer collided with it and I roared a challenge as I slammed the motherfucker back against the closest wall.

His head hit the bricks so hard that the strength left his limbs and the hammer fell beside us with a dull thump.

The guy's hands locked around my wrist as he tried to rip my hand off of his throat and he was damn strong. But I was stronger and as my fingers cut off his oxygen and his eyes widened in panic, I knew he knew it to.

I held his life in my grasp and my pulse thrummed hungrily as I watched his fear spike to panic and finally begin to dull.

The sound of a gunshot snapped me out of the moment and I dropped the asshole just before he managed to blackout, whirling back towards the room and finding Blake standing over the safe with Tatum's gun in hand as he aimed it at the closest looter to him. There was a shiny new bullet hole in the brick wall beside the stained glass window.

"You've got thirty fucking seconds to leave our stuff behind and get the fuck out of here or the next one goes straight in someone's skull," he snarled and that flat, black look in his eyes told me he meant that with every fibre of his being.

In less than a heartbeat, every fucker in the room dropped their shit and ran. The guy I'd almost choked out tried to grab his hammer but I stepped on it before he could, snarling at him as he glanced up at me for a moment and then ran for it. I wondered if he'd seen his death in my eyes when I'd been choking him. I wondered if he knew just as surely as I did that he

owed his ongoing survival to my mercy. Because there was something about being the owner of that power which had me lighting up from the inside out.

I whirled around to check that the rest of the fuckers were gone and spotted Saint covered in blood splatter as he continued to beat the living shit out of the guy beneath him.

I strode across the room and grabbed his shoulders, forcibly tearing him off of the thief who was still clutching a single roll of toilet paper in his hand like it had all been worth it if he could just keep that.

Saint damn near swung at me and Blake leapt on him to hold him back as I looked down to see if the guy he'd been pounding on was still breathing or not.

He groaned but didn't seem capable of walking so I grabbed him beneath the arms and hauled him across the flagstones to the door. I tossed him out onto the path beyond The Temple doors and reached down to snatch the roll of bloody toilet paper from his fist.

He whimpered like that was the worst thing to have happened to him in all of this and I ripped a single square from the roll before dropping it on his chest.

"Clean your bloody face up and fuck off," I snarled. "If you're still out here when I come back, I'll toss you in the lake to drown."

I slammed the door between us and locked it before I turned back to the destruction of our home.

Saint's lips parted on what was bound to be a tirade which would last into next week, but before he could start it, a scream echoed up to us from the open door which led down to the crypt and we all froze.

"Was that-" Blake began but Tatum screamed again and something cold and sharp slid deep inside my chest, threatening to gut me more surely than

any knife.

We all raced for the door at the same time but I got there first, taking the stairs three at a time before landing in the gym and spotting the gate which led down to the catacombs standing wide open.

“If someone followed her down there to hurt her, I’ll rip their organs out and force feed them to them,” Saint hissed behind me, but I didn’t respond.

My own rage had no words. It had no voice and no time for thought.

It was deep and pure and endless.

Tatum Rivers belonged to me and I had no intention of that ever changing. She’d wormed her way beneath my skin and I’d given my word to protect her as my own.

There were no words which could describe the depths of my anger, but as Blake began cursing behind me as we ran, he got as close to voicing them as possible.

We dove into the dark without any need to discuss it. Because it wasn’t a choice we had to make.

Tatum had agreed to belong to us, but perhaps she hadn’t realised the depth of that promise as she’d made it. She’d bound herself to three monsters and we were bound to her just as surely in return.

We might own her, but she owned us too.

And a woman capable of wielding three demons was something to be feared. Especially by any creature who might hurt her. Because if we found her with a single hair on her head out of place, we’d do far more than rain down hell on the perpetrator. That would be a mercy by comparison.



Strong hands grabbed me from behind, one slithering up my bare stomach and making it to my breasts. I threw my elbow back with a shriek of defiance and Merl lost his grip on me with a curse. I darted forward once more, the only light around me the one he was using on his phone to find me. It was a blessing and a curse. Because so long as I could see, so could he.

I raced past tomb after tomb, the scent of death everywhere as dust rose into the back of my throat and made me wanna hurl. The hilt of the knife dug into my hand so hard it hurt.

Just keep going.

Run as fast as you fucking can.

My foot caught on a step and I lurched forward as the ground beneath my feet climbed, my fingers grazing the concrete for half a second before I managed to keep going. Sweat dripped down my spine. The air was frozen but my skin was on fire.

The tunnel suddenly split ahead of me and I wheeled to the left at random, immediately crashing into a wall. I screamed as he grabbed me, turning in his arms and throwing fists, scratching, clawing. I slashed the knife at his arm, but he caught my wrist and slammed it back against the cold stone, making my heart lurch in fear. His phone was wedged in his jeans' pocket, the flashlight sticking out the top so it glared at me.

I refused to ease my grip on the knife as he bashed my wrist against the wall again and again.

I won't let go. Not ever!

His free hand dropped between us to the edge of my waistband and my heart nearly combusted. I needed a plan and one came to me as I called on my training with my dad, drawing on everything I'd ever learned and begging it to take over my actions.

I dropped the knife, letting it clatter to the ground and as his gaze shifted to it, I threw my knee up between his thighs, catching him right in the balls.

He roared in anger, backing up as he clutched his junk and howled in pain. I dropped down, grabbing the knife as I darted past him and his fingers yanked out a few strands of my hair as he tried to catch me.

I sped down the other passage, my breathing ragged as I raced on into the darkness at a furious pace.

The tunnel started to climb and I could have cried as a hint of moonlight called to me up ahead.

"Tatum!" Monroe's voice reached me and a glow of light from his phone showed me how close he was.

My heart lifted with pure, desperate hope. He'd actually come for me. And somehow, he'd found me.

"I'm here!" I panted as I raced towards him.

He lifted his phone and I squinted against the brightness, suddenly crashing into a solid iron gate. A metal clang rang out, reverberating through the entire tunnel.

He was just on the other side of it, his face pinched with anxiety as he grabbed my hand through the bars.

Footsteps sounded behind me and panic laced my blood like poison.

“Who the fuck is that?” Monroe demanded then barrelled on. “Can you open the gate?”

“Yes,” I gasped, swearing again and again as I tucked the knife into my waistband and lifted the keys with shaking fingers. Monroe angled his phone light down towards them so I could see.

“*Hurry*,” he pressed and I wet my achingly dry mouth as I picked a key at random and stuffed it in the lock.

“Hey!” Monroe called out to the asshole heading my way. “Back the fuck up!”

I turned the key hard, but it didn’t work and I knew I’d cost myself everything as Merl snatched a fistful of my hair.

Fear clutched me in its grip and I screamed as he yanked me around to face him, tossing the keys at Monroe in desperation, hearing them jingling across the ground.

“Let her go!” Monroe bellowed, rage and fear colliding in his voice.

Merl pinned me against the wall, throwing a solid punch to my ribs. I wheezed as the air was knocked out of me and he shoved me to the ground, his weight following me, pressing me into the ice-cold concrete.

I jerked and fought but his eyes were wild, unforgiving. I fought to hook the knife from my waistband in determination, but he took my head in both hands and cracked it down against the ground before I could pull it free.

Light burst in front of my eyes and for a moment I saw Jessica calling my name, her hand reaching for me.

A haze washed through me and I tasted blood in the air as I drew in a ragged breath. All the light in the world seemed to extinguish as my thoughts started to slowly pull back together and I felt his hands on me. His fingers dragging down my skin, his rancid breath against my lips. The clink of him undoing his belt and the distinctive rolling down of a zipper.

My hand twitched as I heard Monroe calling my name and shouting at Merl with a thousand curses as the gate banged and rattled while he tried to break it down.

Suddenly more voices joined with his and for a moment I was sure that I could hear the Night Keepers calling my name too. But instead of fearing more monsters drawing close to me, the thought of them coming for me brought me a fierce kind of strength.

My throat was tight, my mind blurry, but I fixed on one thing. One rule I'd lived by my entire life. The gift my father had given me, stitched into my damn soul. *Survive at all costs. Any cost.*

I screamed in my assailant's face, pouring my hate, my rage, my need to live into every note, then I yanked the hunting knife free of my pants and rammed the full length of it into his side. It sliced through flesh and bone, the impact of the blow echoing through my arm. My soul.

He jerked, grunting in shock as my thoughts snapped back together and I gazed at the man who looked over me as blood dripped from his mouth onto my face, making my limbs freeze in horror.

Merl was ripped off of me and I lost my grip on the knife as he was thrown to the ground. My lips parted as I stared up at Monroe to my right and the Night Keepers to my left with the dying man at their feet.

They looked like four demons, their dark expressions filled with a fury so pure I could taste it on the air. But there was more to them than that. Something that was equally as terrifying in the way they were looking at me. It took me a moment to realise it was fear. Real, pure fear *for me*. These brutal creatures had come running to my aid when I needed them most and despite all of the things that had passed between us, in that moment I felt truly safe with them surrounding me. Protecting me.

Blake moved forward, taking my hand and pulling me up. He was looking at me like the night we'd been together, back when he didn't hate me, when I'd just been a girl whose flesh he'd worshipped.

My breathing was suddenly so loud against my ears. Everything was too quiet and I was horribly aware of what I'd done. I clawed my hands into my hair and felt the stickiness of my attacker's blood on my skin. I could smell it, taste it. It was everywhere. And Merl groaned and cursed as more and more of it pooled out around him.

"No...no no no," I spoke to myself, unable to look at anyone around me. "I stabbed him. My life is fucked. I am so *fucked*." I started to shake from a new kind of fear. I couldn't find it in me to regret it. He'd been attacking me. But I'd stabbed him bad. He was going to die. I could see it in his eyes, in the pool of blood that just kept growing and growing and-

"Tatum," Saint said my name in a powerful tone and my eyes snapped up to find him in the dark as the single word cut through the fog of my panic.

The dying man's phone lay beside him, the flashlight on it smeared with blood so we were all lit in ominous red tones.

Saint leaned down, taking hold of the hilt of the knife in the man's side and ripping it out in one clean pull, making him scream in pain. In a flash of

movement so sudden it made me gasp, Saint drove the knife into Merl's chest with a merciless blow.

Merl shuddered and passed out, still somehow clinging to life, but his body was growing stiller by the second.

"You didn't kill him," Saint growled in a tone flecked with warmth as he looked to me. "*I did.*"

A beat of silence stretched through the air for so long, it felt eternal. Then Blake snatched the blade, kicking Merl over and slamming it into his back. My throat thickened as he looked to me with his jaw tight.

"*I did it,*" Blake breathed and I shook my head, at a loss to understand what was happening.

Kyan prised the blade from Blake's hand, grabbed a fistful of the guy's hair and slashed the knife across his throat. More blood spilled and I winced, scrambling backwards until my spine hit Monroe's legs.

"No, *I did it,*" Kyan growled and I looked up at him with my lower lip trembling, finding a swirling sea of darkness in his eyes. I felt that same darkness in me, like our beings were made of shadow. Like all of ours were.

Kyan lifted the bloody knife, holding it out to Monroe and I tilted my head back to look up at him, shaking my head in refusal. I had no idea what he was going to do. He'd just seen us all murder someone. He could run to the cops. He could give us all up. And why wouldn't he? This was exactly what he'd need to take Saint down.

"You're one of us now, Nash," Kyan said in a low tone. "Time to prove it."

Monroe lowered down, helping me to my feet and taking my chin in his grip as he looked at me. I didn't know what he was going to say or do, but the swirling storm of hate in his eyes made me afraid.

I guessed he found whatever he was hunting for in my eyes as he released me, stepping towards Kyan and taking the knife from his outstretched hand.

“Don’t,” I gasped, knowing that if he did this, he couldn’t go back. He really would be tied to the Night Keepers. He’d be bound to them as fiercely as I was.

He ignored me, dropping over the man and sinking the blade between his ribs and that moment burrowed into my mind, never to be unseen.

“*I* killed him,” he growled like he was proud, like he really would have done it for me if he’d gotten to him first. And I realised with a terrifying clarity, that they all would have.

I didn’t know why they were saving me, but they were. These creatures who had used and tormented me were banding together to defend me from this. We were bound by blood, this secret living between us and forever latching us together. They could have disposed of me, told the cops what I’d done and let them lock me away. But instead they did more for me than anyone had ever done. All four of them.

They were the beasts who hated me, broke and tortured me. And now for reasons I couldn’t fathom...they’d protected me too.



My eyes were fixed on Tatum as we stood around her, all of us taking a moment to accept what we'd done before anyone could speak again.

"We're blood bound now, the five of us," Kyan said darkly. "That's a bond as strong as family. Stronger even."

My lip peeled back as my gaze landed on Saint. The son of the man whose family had destroyed mine. My soul reason for pursuing everything I had in life. The man I'd hated from the very first moment I'd laid eyes on him even if he'd never known it. Family? That was unthinkable.

But as my gaze found Tatum's again, I could almost feel it. That pull to protect her still humming through me fiercely.

I'd done it for her. For a girl who'd breezed into my life and flipped it upside down, made me question everything and made me think and feel things I'd begun to believe I wasn't even capable of.

There was one, single reason why I'd just pushed that blade between that rapist's ribs. And it was her.

Because as insane as it sounded even to me. I was willing to kill for her. I just didn't know what the fuck that meant for the rest of my life.

Blake moved forward suddenly, gripping Tatum's head between his hands and drawing her forehead against his as he released a shaky breath. She reached up to grasp his forearms as her eyes fluttered shut and for the strangest moment it seemed like she was taking comfort from this creature who I knew had worked tirelessly to destroy her.

"Thank you," Tatum said, her voice rough. "All of you."

None of us said anything to that and I wondered if their silent answers could possibly be the same as mine. That she didn't need to thank me. That I'd do that a thousand times and more for her. Kill for her. Paint my soul in blood for her. It made no sense to me but it was true. I'd just proved it. Were they wishing they could say that too? And was their silence guilty like mine was? Were they cursing themselves for not being faster. For not helping her sooner. For letting that foul creature who lay dead beside us get his hands on her for one single second?

Were they wishing she wouldn't thank them and drowning in the need to apologise for being so late. Almost too late...

I didn't know, and with all I understood about them I wanted to seriously doubt it. But it was hard to ignore the way the three of them were staring at her. Hard to deny the depth to those looks. The intensity in each of their gazes.

And harder still to ignore the bond this secret put on us. All of us. Together.

What the fuck did that mean for me?

"Strip, *now*," Saint barked and my gaze flipped to him again as Blake released Tatum and the three Night Keepers instantly ripped off shirts, kicked off sneakers and downed sweatpants. Tatum stripped the watches off of her arms too, dropping them with our clothes.

“Everything but your underwear, baby,” Kyan said, reaching out to brush his knuckles against Tatum’s cheek and causing her attention to fall on him.

The look she gave him made my gut clench and writhe in a way that I couldn’t even try to pretend wasn’t jealousy.

“We can’t deal with the body now,” Saint added. “If we’re gone much longer we’ll be missed. We need to get back out there and help make sure these motherfuckers are all gone for good.”

My gaze fell to the body beside us and the blood slowly pooling across the floor. Had the Night Keepers done this before? Did they know exactly how to deal with a body because they’d had a lot of practice?

“Now, Nash!” Kyan snapped and as my eyes flicked back up to him standing there in his boxers, I caught a wild kind of fear in his gaze which made me think not. No, they hadn’t killed before, but they knew how to destroy evidence.

They were all standing in their underwear waiting for me, Tatum’s arms crossed over her bare chest as she looked my way with a desperate apology painted across her beautiful features.

I quickly stripped out of my clothes, dropping them with the rest and stepping over the puddle of blood to join them.

Blake moved to lock the gate, stooping down to switch off the rapist’s cell phone too and plunging us into darkness. A moment later, Kyan’s phone illuminated the way on and he started jogging up the tunnel towards The Temple.

We soon emerged in a wide space that had been converted into a gym and I glanced around at the state of the art equipment.

“Wait here, Tatum,” Saint commanded and she fell still wordlessly as the Night Keepers jogged up the stairs and out of sight.

I didn’t follow them and they didn’t look back.

Tatum turned to look up at me, her blue eyes glimmering as she drew in a ragged breath. “I’m so sorry,” she breathed, drawing closer to me to keep her words private. Her hands and stomach were coated with blood and there was a savage kind of beauty to her as she stood there in nothing but her panties with her arms wrapped around her chest, smeared in the blood of her attacker. Her jaw was set tight and the determination in her gaze let me know she didn’t regret what she’d had to do for one second. She was a warrior embodied, refusing to bow down no matter what was thrown at her. And only rising stronger each time she fell.

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” I growled. “If I’d just gotten to you sooner after you called, I-”

“But now you’re tied to the Night Keepers for life because of me,” she protested and the look in her eyes said she knew what that must have cost me even if she didn’t fully understand what Saint’s family had done to mine.

“Not because of you,” I growled. “*For* you. And I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

A soft sob escaped her and tears gathered in her lashes for a moment which I knew were entirely for me and nothing to do with that fucker we’d left cold in the catacombs.

She moved towards me so suddenly that I almost didn’t know what was happening as she fell against my chest, her arms wrapping around me and her bare flesh pressing to mine in so many places that it overwhelmed me entirely.

My arms closed around her too as I pulled her closer, drowning in the scent of her and the exquisite feeling of her skin against mine.

I didn’t know how the hell we’d deal with all of this now, but I did know that we’d done the right thing. All of us. Even the Night Keepers. And this

bond between us was real whether I liked it or not.

Saint appeared again suddenly, dressed in an outfit that looked almost exactly the same as the one he'd been wearing a few minutes ago.

In one hand he held a fistful of clothes and in the other he had a black bucket with two cloths swimming in it. The cloying scent of bleach washed over us as he drew closer, leaving the clothes on the stairs before approaching us with the bucket.

"Come here," he said, his eyes on Tatum and his tone almost soft.

If it concerned him that he'd found the two of us wrapped around each other in nothing but our underwear, he didn't mention it.

Tatum released me and went to him, not bothering to cover her chest this time as he grabbed a cloth and quickly started wiping the blood from her skin.

I grabbed my own cloth from the bucket, forcing my eyes away from Tatum's body as I hurried to wipe the blood off of me too.

Saint diligently cleaned every spot of blood from Tatum's skin. Her gaze remained fixed on him as he moved the cloth all over her flesh and she seemed to struggle for the right words to offer him.

Once he was done, she plunged her hands straight into the bucket and washed the blood from them too.

"Here," Saint said, moving to pass me a pair of grey sweatpants and a black T-shirt which looked almost exactly like the ones I'd just been wearing.

I shrugged them on with a grunt of thanks and he gave his attention to dressing Tatum next.

"I had the same outfit for you in black," he said as he offered her the matching leggings and sports bra. "It's dark out tonight, no one should notice that they're not navy now."

“Thanks.” She dressed quickly and we ran up the stairs to find Kyan and Blake waiting for us wearing fresh versions of their last outfits too.

“Just like it never happened,” Blake said darkly as his gaze slid over us.

“I dunno if I’d say that,” Kyan growled, reaching out to take Tatum’s hand as he pulled her towards the door where fresh sneakers were waiting for us too.

“Let’s go,” Saint commanded and my skin prickled as he aimed that tone at me just as clearly as it was aimed at the others. Whatever this bond between us meant, it definitely didn’t include me taking orders from him.

Kyan scooped a baseball bat up off of the floor and I noticed a gun jammed in the back of Blake’s sweatpants. Saint didn’t take a weapon, but I spotted an old claw hammer laying on the flagstones and snatched it before following the others out into the dark.

Distant shouts coloured the air from somewhere up near the gates and adrenaline surged through my limbs as we turned towards the fight.

“Who the fuck do these assholes think they are breaking in here and trying to steal from us?” I demanded in a deadly tone.

“Let’s go show ‘em what happens when you invoke the wrath of the Night Keepers,” Blake growled.

Kyan cupped his hand around his mouth and hollered to the sky, his voice echoing all over the mountain in a deadly promise which made the hairs rise along the back of my neck. It was the cry of a hunter. And a vow of violence to come.

Saint smiled darkly and we started running without another word, the four of us taking up positions all around Tatum without anyone needing to order it. It could have been a coincidence, but I didn’t think so. We were all bound by this thing we’d done, but in truth we were bound by something so much purer than death. We were bound by *her*. This girl who’d shown up

out of nowhere and managed to claim a hold on the corrupted souls of four broken monsters.

And though I might have hated what these other beasts were and all they stood for, I could appreciate the power in them all the same. Each of us was capable of real ferocity when it came to protecting what was ours. And Tatum Rivers was ours. We'd written it in blood.



The noise from up ahead reached us like a storm. My heart wouldn't settle as I ran amongst the four creatures who had saved me. I was still in shock from the attack and couldn't adjust to this shift in our dynamics. Because it was like all of them had severed off a piece of their souls and handed it to me tonight. And after weeks of abuse, hatred and persecution from the Night Keepers, I didn't know what to do with that knowledge. It didn't make sense to me. Yet when we'd stood in the aftermath of that bastard's death, I'd felt them joined to me as keenly as if as an invisible chain had wrapped around us.

The sound of a baying crowd grew deafening as we crested the hill and ran past Aspen Halls, the scent of smoke filling the air.

My heart stuttered at the sight before me.

We had to slow as the throng of students and outsiders clashed together before the gates. The football team were leading a charge against them, shoving as many people out of the gates as they could, but the outsiders were fighting back hard.

“Let’s save our school, brothers,” Saint barked and he, Kyan, Blake and Monroe rushed into the fray.

Kyan swung his bat with a roar to announce his arrival and the crowd scattered around him in terror. He whacked it against a guy’s ass and he yelped before running for the gate. Saint threw violent punches that cracked noses and spilled blood down his knuckles. Monroe raised his hammer with a yell of fury and that was enough to make a bunch of them run for their fucking lives. He was as wild as the Night Keepers, and as fearless too.

Blake was pointing the gun at anyone who got too close, making them piss their pants before he threw punches and sent them running for the gate.

Screams carried into the sky as the chaos descended and a primal urge made me want to dive in and join my men. No, *shit*. They weren’t mine. But hell, right then I felt like I belonged in the fight at their sides. And there was too much insanity in the air tonight to question it.

I darted forward, shoving and kicking people towards the gate and I soon fell into the rhythm of the fight. Shove, kick, push, punch.

With every blow I landed, my mind felt freer. It was a fierce distraction from the blood I’d just spilled and I relished the wildness in me as it unfolded.

I wheeled through the crowd with all the skills I’d honed my entire life, enjoying having real opponents to land my attacks on and my veins hummed as I unleashed my inner beast.

A scream caught my ear and I whirled around, spotting a couple of the Unspeakables guarding a pile of toilet paper and hand sanitiser on the ground. They’d formed a circle around it, but the outsiders were swooping in like vultures and I darted toward them to help.

A woman dove at Freeloader and I grabbed hold of her black hair, yanking her backwards before she could get near her. My heart jolted as I

recognised Denise from the bar with her tattooed tits and pissed off eyes. The second she realised it was me, she raked her nails down my arms with a shriek of hate.

I shoved her back then threw a hard punch into her mouth, making her yell in pain as blood spilled over her lips. I kept rushing at her, landing kicks and punches as she fought to keep me back, but she wasn't trained like me.

"Fuck you, you little slut!" she snarled, throwing a fist that landed against my tit and I gasped at the low blow.

I shoved my weight into her with a growl and she hit the gravel, her eyes widening in fright as I loomed over her. "Where's your fucking girl code?" I demanded, rubbing my sore boob.

She pursed her lips then hurried to her feet and ran away from me. I cursed as I realised she wasn't running for the gate. A bunch of them weren't.

I turned back to help the Unspeakables, watching as Deepthroat held onto a roll of toilet paper with bloody fingernails. *What the hell has happened to the world?*

I ran forward, shoving a guy away from her as he tried to take the frayed roll, throwing a hard punch to his solid gut.

He lurched backwards, clearly not looking for a fight as he raised his hands in innocence and darted away again. Kyan came swinging with his bat, taking out the final three assholes who were attacking the Unspeakables in a single freaking blow.

He tossed me a wink before darting back off into the crowd and *man* I almost fucking liked the guy sometimes.

"Thank you," Freeloader gasped as she and the others gathered up the supplies and made a run for it.

The Night Keepers and Monroe were driving more and more of the outsiders toward the gate and my heart lifted with hope.

Someone grabbed my wrist and I jerked around, ready to fight, but relaxed at the sight of Bait standing there.

“Come on,” he demanded. “We’ve gotta run with them. Let’s go. This is our chance!”

He started tugging me toward the gate and I could see that he was right. We could run, escape this place and never look back. But a tug in my gut made me hesitate for a second as I looked toward the four men fighting valiantly in the crowd. They’d saved me tonight. Wet their hands in blood for me. How could I run now? Surely things would be different after tonight? But was it insane to think that?

I should have been running.

“Come on Tatum, I did this for us! And it’s gone even better than expected,” Bait exclaimed, excitement darting through his eyes. “I just had to lift the gate key off the janitor – couldn’t believe I did it as first but then-”

I yanked him to a halt, my blood turning icily cold. “*You* did this? You let them in?” I breathed, horror rushing through me.

He nodded, tugging my hand again and I yanked it free of his grip.

“I almost died!” I shouted at him, starting to shake. “People have been hurt. How could you do this?”

Bait gaped at me, opening and closing his mouth as he hunted for an answer. “I didn’t...I mean, no one was supposed to get hurt. I just...”

“What did you think was gonna happen?” I demanded.

Bait turned pale, shaking his head then ran off into the crowd without another word.

My throat thickened as I stood there, torn between running and staying. Unsure why I couldn't simply make myself go.

People shoved their way past me and a huge hairy guy suddenly slammed into me full force. I was knocked to the ground as he leaned over me, clutching his gut and coughing heavily, seemingly unaware I was even there as he hacked his fucking lungs up.

"Stop!" I screamed in disgust, throwing up a hand to cover my mouth and nose.

I spotted a reddened rash of rose shaped marks on his skin peeking out from his collar and horror and fear consumed me as I tried to scramble away. *No fuck, no!*

I threw a kick at his calf and he stumbled back, blinking down at me through bloodshot eyes like he'd just realised I was there. A baseball bat suddenly slammed into his arm and he jerked sideways, hurrying away with a yelp of pain as Kyan took his place.

He leaned down to take my hand but I shook my head, needing to keep the hell away from him as I scrambled back.

"Don't touch me!" I yelled. "He was infected."

Fear took root in my chest. Sixty percent of people died from this virus within a week. A fucking *week*. Was I gonna be just another statistic? Was the virus already snaking its way into my body and sliding its teeth into my life force?

Kyan's lips parted in horror as I got to my feet. He yanked his shirt off, rushing forward and I raised my hands to try and stop him. "Keep still!" he barked, giving me no choice as he used it to wipe over my face, my clothes, any part of me he feared the virus had touched. It was beautifully sweet and painfully pointless.

“Get back, Kyan,” I urged, my voice cracking as I stepped away from him.

He gave me an intense look, tossing the shirt on the floor. “Follow me,” he barked with no room for dispute and I hurried after him as he cut a path through the crowd towards Aspen Halls. A fire caught my eye on the bottom floor and my heart thrashed at the sight of the flames licking their way out of the window of the room, reaching toward the red Ford Mustang parked in front of the building. *Holy shit.*

Kyan veered towards the Unspeakables who were carrying armfuls of supplies away from the fight.

“Hey!” he snapped and they all turned around at the single word. “I need hand sanitiser – now!”

One of them hurried toward him with a box in his arms, bowing low as he laid it at his feet. Kyan took out a bottle of the hand sanitiser, squirting it all over his hands before turning to me and rubbing it all over me, smothering my face, my neck, arms, even rubbing it into my hair.

“Kyan, it’s too late,” I breathed as his brow pinched and he continued to rub it all over my body.

When he was done, he clenched his jaw, fixing me with a fierce stare. “You won’t get sick, baby,” he commanded like I could really obey that order. But I could see the desperation in him, the need for me to assure him that I wouldn’t.

I nodded, trying to fight back the cloying fear taking hold of me and making an oath I could only pray that I could keep. “I won’t get sick.”



The air echoed and hummed with the cries of the students who backed us and the screams of the fuckers who'd come to try and take what was ours.

Everywhere I looked there were more and more kids and staff running to help us, grouping together as they followed our lead and fought to defend our school.

We might have been a bunch of entitled rich kids, but that entitlement came from a position of power. And every single student here knew that power was a fleeting and fragile thing if you didn't nurture it. If we wanted to keep hold of it, we had to reinforce it, make sure that those who had come to test it ran from here with their hands empty and their pride shattered.

They needed to fear us. To flee from here with nothing at all but the knowledge that coming against us would only earn them pain and failure.

Miss Pontus was wielding an umbrella like a fucking javelin and the Geography teacher Mr Hilex was smacking the outsiders with a heavy book on volcanoes.

The Night Keepers and Monroe held the front line with me, the footballers and more of the inner circle with a few of the faculty taking up

position at our backs. The rest of the student body created a solid wall of flesh beyond that which ensured none of our attackers could head back onto campus.

My knuckles were torn and bloody, my flesh bruised and aching and my corrupted soul singing with an endless kind of energy that set me alight from the inside out. I was surrounded by chaos and carnage, havoc spilling forth all around me and shattering any false sense of security that could have been claimed by my usual routines. But instead of burning in the flames of the chaos, I was blossoming, free falling into the oblivion of the carnage which surrounded us and letting my inner demon do its worst.

I gripped a huge guy by the back of his neck, tearing the packet of toilet paper from his hands before forcing him out through the gate with a cry of rage and a kick to his spine. He fell sprawling in the gravel and as I swung back to look for another opponent, I suddenly found myself face to face with the wrong end of a shotgun.

Everything seemed to fade away from me apart from the view down that barrel and the curled lip of the asshole holding it.

His finger twitched on the trigger and my cold heart leapt as I saw my death coming for me.

A roar of defiance caught my ear just as he pulled the trigger and before death could find me, the gun was knocked aside.

The blast of the gunshot cut through the air with a finality which should have ended me, but it didn't.

Monroe bellowed like a Viking warrior as he tore the shotgun from the asshole's grip and turned it on him like a bat, slamming it into his face and breaking bones with every strike he delivered.

A savage smile tore at my lips as I moved forward to help him drag the guy through the gate.

Monroe caught my eye for a moment and I didn't see a teacher looking back at me. I saw an equal, a beast just like me, a Night Keeper. I tossed him a smirk which acknowledged him saving my ass then turned away from him as I looked for any more of the thieving fuckers who had come to test themselves against the monsters who owned this school.

I leapt up onto the roof of the old Ford Mustang as the crowd of students and staff surged closer and I failed to spot any more of the townsfolk amongst the crowd.

Brown's office was still burning behind me despite the toilet paper prank seeming like it belonged in a different lifetime. The orange glow of the flames flickered over the crowd and the warmth of the fire brushed along my spine as I looked out over everyone.

"Is that all of them?" I roared and every face in the crowd turned to look at me standing above them.

Some of the footballers started cheering and whooping in victory as I swept my gaze over the masses.

Monroe climbed up beside me, his T-shirt torn and blood splattering his face. He wore a savage expression which dared our attackers to try again, his chest heaving with exertion as his dark gaze took in the crowd.

"Who made the mistake of thinking we'd be easy prey?" I roared and the students screamed their approval. "Who dared to come and challenge the Night Keepers?"

Blake leapt up onto the trunk of the red Mustang with Tatum's gun in his hand, pushing his fingers through his black hair as he surveyed the crowd just as keenly as I was.

"Did they think we'd just bow down and let them steal from us?" I bellowed and a chorus of nos tumbled over me.

Kyan moved in front of the car, dragging Bait by the scruff of his neck and throwing him in the dirt by the wheels like some kind of sacrificial offering.

“Caught one trying to run,” he snarled.

Tatum followed him, her eyes wild and fierce as she looked up at me, Blake and Monroe on top of the car. My heart pounded as I dragged my eyes over her. This strange and beautiful creature who’d cast a spell on all of us. She might just be my undoing. Or even my salvation. The only thing I knew for sure was that she was my obsession and I wouldn’t be relinquishing my claim on her for any man or beast.

Kyan leapt up onto the hood of the car. He’d lost his shirt somewhere and his tattoos glistened with blood as he swung his baseball bat over his shoulders and roared his victory to the moon.

The gathered staff and students howled with him, clamouring and cheering the four of us for coming to their rescue. We might have been tyrants in our rule over them, but true leaders always protected their flock. And if that meant we had to step up and fight to keep this school safe from the savages beyond our gates, then it was clear that we would.

The crowd before me parted and suddenly Headmaster Brown appeared, pushing his way between the raucous students and staff members in his pristine suit and tie.

“Get down from there now!” he shouted, pointing up at me like he truly believed he had some authority to tout after hiding throughout that war.

I looked at him for a long moment, a sneer curling back my lip.

“Who here is grateful to Headmaster Brown for stepping in to protect you when shit got bad?” I cried, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

The crowd booed and hissed at him, causing colour to rise along his thick neck and crawl right up over his bald head.

“We need to maintain order, Mr Memphis!” Brown shouted. “Get down from there right now! Monroe, would you kindly assist in-”

“Where were you?” Monroe demanded in a voice colder than ice as he glared down at his boss. “Where were you when the students you vowed to protect needed your help?”

The crowd jeered and booed again, screaming out for the same answer.

“I was taking stock of the situation and-”

“Not good enough!” Kyan bellowed, swinging his baseball bat into the windscreen of the car and shattering the glass so that it flew over Brown and he was forced to scurry back.

Tatum had backed away, standing by Bait to our left but her heated gaze burned me as she continued to watch us, her eyes drinking in the sight of the Night Keepers showing the full extent of our power. *We* ruled this school completely. Not some washed up, ex-army douchebag who’d clearly left his courage behind with his balls when he’d quit the military.

“I’m the head of this school! I’m in charge here!” Brown bellowed. “If you don’t get down from there this second, I’ll-”

Blake fired a bullet into the air and Brown fell back onto his ass as screams tore out all around us before the crowd fell deathly silent.

“You’re not in charge of me,” Blake snarled.

“Or me,” Kyan echoed.

“Me neither,” I agreed in a deadly voice, not even needing to shout now that the crowd were holding their breath like they thought we really might kill the son of a bitch.

I turned my head slowly, looking at Monroe beside me, his face a stony mask of rage as he glared down at the man who should have been here to protect the students from all that had happened to them and hadn’t been.

“I think what we need around here is new blood,” I said loudly. “A real leader to take up the role of Headmaster while we fight to stay alive throughout the spread of the Hades Virus. A man who came and fought on the front line for us. Who put himself between all of you and those who’d come to hurt you!”

The crowd roared again as they realised what I was saying and Monroe frowned as he met my gaze.

“You can’t just allocate things like that,” he growled, but the hunger in his eyes said he wanted it.

“Like fuck I can’t,” I scoffed. “I’m Saint Memphis. My father is the Governor of the state. My mother runs the school board and they’re already in the process of voting Brown out. If I tell her you’re the man for the job then it’s done. So what’s it to be, Monroe? Are you with me?”

I held out a hand to him and he eyed it like it was the cloven hoof of the devil. Which in all honesty, it might as well have been. Because he knew as well as I did that this was so much more than a job opportunity. It was a commitment to a life as one of us. But in reality, he’d already made that commitment when he slid that knife into the rapist in the catacombs. He was one of us already. And something about that seemed right. Like he’d always been destined to become a Night Keeper anyway and tonight had just confirmed it. The legend said there should be four of us after all and I was willing to put my faith in that even if others might have thought I was insane for it. But that was the thing about faith. So long as you believed something was real, it was. That was all there was to it. And I believed in the Night Keepers more than anything else in this world.

Monroe’s palm slapped into mine and I smirked at him as I felt that deal strike between us like a thunder clap.

“You can’t do this!” Brown shrieked as he got to his feet again and we turned back to look at him.

“We already did,” I snarled.

Kyan whooped his excitement, slamming the bat down on the red hood of the car and breaking more glass from the lights as Blake cupped his hands around his mouth and started up a chant which was quickly gathered up by the crowd watching us. Even Miss Pontus was screaming alongside the mob and the words that filled the air were the final nail in the coffin for our ex headmaster.

Down with Brown!

Down with Brown!

Down with Brown!

Down with Brown!

I leapt from the roof of the car, landing before him with a savage grin on my face as I stalked closer.

“You won’t get away with this!” Brown threatened as he backed up, but the many hands of the surrounding students shoved him towards me again and I snatched hold of his lapel as I dragged him close to speak in his ear.

“I already have. We’re kings here, but you’re nothing more than a traitor. And we have no room for traitors in our empire.”

He struggled as I dragged him towards the gate but his shiny, polished shoes just slid across the gravel. Who would have thought I’d be looking down on someone for keeping their appearance polished? But when the world was going to shit apparently even some of the most important things in the world to me didn’t matter at all.

With a grunt of effort, I threw our headmaster out of the gates and swung them shut in his face with an echoing clang.

“Get the fuck out of here!” I roared.

I turned away from him dismissively and leapt back up onto the roof of the Ford Mustang beside Monroe.

Brown was staring back at us, his mouth wide as the crowd cheered for his downfall and crowned Monroe as a new king in his place.

“And if you even *attempt* to come back, you’ll answer to the Night Keepers!” I threw my arm around Monroe’s shoulders and he looked at me with a ruthless kind of triumph shining in his gaze. “All four of us!”

Blake fired the gun again as Kyan howled to the moon and the crowd of onlookers screamed their approval to their saviours.

My gaze caught on Tatum once more as she looked up at us with her full lips parted and her wide eyes taking in the show with a mixture of horror and awe. And she was right to be afraid. Because if she thought we’d held power here before, then she had no idea what was coming next.

My heart thrashed with excitement at the idea of that.

It felt like everything was about to change around here. But one thing remained the same. We still owned her. And I had no intention of ever letting her go.

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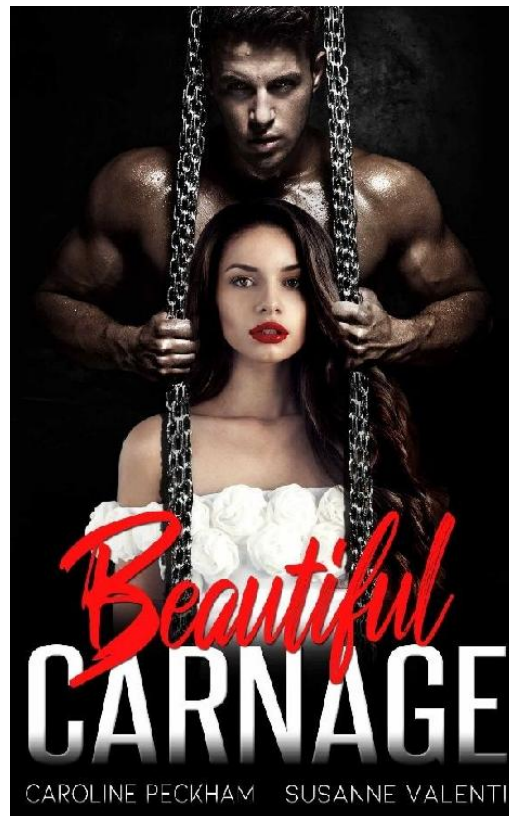
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*“If she sleeps in my bed every night, she’ll end up falling
in love with me...and that’ll be awkward as hell when I
have to kill her.”*

SLOAN

He’s my twisted nightmare.

My blood bound enemy.

My ruthless desire.

Our fates were spun the night he **tried to kill me** and now he’s back to destroy me for good.

It’s always been **us versus them**. The Calabresis against the Romeros.

This city is ours but they vowed to take it from us. And when they couldn’t, **they took me instead.**

Now I’m chained by the cruellest of them all; the man who wrapped his hands around my throat and tried to **squeeze the life from me** all those years ago.

But **I won’t fall prey to him**. I’m older, fiercer and I’ve grown claws of my own.

Rocco Romero thinks he can keep me **captive**, but he’s about to regret bringing a sleeping tiger into his home.

ROCCO

She’s my greatest failure.

The name that always haunts me.

My dirty little secret.

And when I had the chance to **kidnap her from her wedding**, nothing on God’s green earth could stop me.

She’s mine. I could take her life, her body or her heart if I wanted to.

But my **brothers** refuse to believe me.

So when they bet I can't make the little principessa fall in love with me, of course I step up to the challenge.

And when she's **down on her knees**, pouring her heart out, I'll crush it in my fist.

I'm lining the Calabresis up like dominoes. And **she'll be the first to fall.**

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