

ROYALS OF ARBON ACADEMY
BOOK -2-



PLAYBOY PRINCES

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ROYALS OF ARBON ACADEMY



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[The Final Chapter...](#)

[Also by the authors:](#)

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*To self-isolation, for forcing our butts into office chairs so that this book
would be here months early.*

CHAPTER 1



The wet, heavy sound of my fist smacking into his face would have sickened a lesser woman. Me, though? It made me *happy*. Every crack of my knuckles into his flesh, every spray of deep red blood, every pained grunt and cry from his bruised throat.

I knew he was done. He'd been done *ages* ago, but I was toying with him. Dragging out the pain and using his broken body as my own personal rage therapy.

With every swing of my balled fist, every strike of my elbow, knee, and heel, those vile words burned through my brain. Over and fucking over.

Genetically superior babies.

Contracts signed.

Violet's falling in love.

Fuck me. Fuck me and my stupid, childish, moronic naivety. How could I have *trusted* him?

Alex. Goddamn Alex.

I kept beating my pathetic excuse for an opponent as I pictured my vile boyfriend—*ex-boyfriend*—in his place. But physical violence like this was a stopgap. A coping mechanism. What Alex would get would have to be a thousand times worse than a few broken bones and some internal bleeding.

Hands grabbed at me, and I lashed out at them too. My mind was too far lost to rage, and I barely even registered what was happening until my feet left the floor and my thrashing body was slung over a broad shoulder.

“What the *fuck*?” I screamed, my voice hoarse. I must have been yelling while I whaled on that poor fool, not even noticing it. Fuck, I hoped I hadn’t said anything incriminating.

On the other hand, who gave a fucking shit? I sure as hell didn’t. Let them know exactly who Violet Rose Spencer really was. I hoped Alex would hear about the purple-clad fighter named *Violence* and feel some real fear.

The dark room around me blurred and my head spun. I was hanging upside down, my long bloody braid almost drooping low enough to brush the floor as someone—probably one of my well meaning friends—hailed me out of the fight arena.

“Let me down!” I demanded, smacking his back with bruised, aching hands. My blade was gone, and I had no recollection of dropping it. When had I decided that steel would make the fight too quick and resorted to my bare hands? I had no idea. But *fuck*, I needed to get it back. That blade had cost me more of my soul than I was willing to admit, and I couldn’t just let some punk snatch it.

The dickhead carrying me didn’t respond and sure as shit didn’t let me down like I asked. Instead he sped up until he was damn near running out of the fight arena and down a gloomy tunnel. He didn’t bother turning on his palm reader light or pause to check arrows, so he was clearly pretty familiar with the underground network that seemed to span the whole of freaking Arbon city.

I continued to rage for another few moments until a door slammed and I was abruptly dropped on my ass in the middle of a plush carpeted floor. By Rafe. I’d been carried—and dropped—by *Rafe* of all fucking people. He still had his mask on, but it was him. No doubt about it.

“Oh, boy.” I chuckled a dark laugh. “You seriously picked the wrong night to fuck with me, Prince Prickly.” I clambered halfway to my feet only to be shoved back down to the floor by a rough push to my shoulder.

“Shut up,” he snapped, tearing his mask off and glaring at me with those dangerously beautiful eyes of his. “I am this fucking close to losing my cool, Vi; you need to just *shut up for two seconds*.” He held his finger and thumb up to demonstrate how close, and I suspected they were less than a hairsbreadth apart.

Normally, I wouldn’t give two fucks what Rafe wanted, but something wasn’t stacking up. So I kept my fury bottled up inside

while he paced the expensive, decorative carpet and ran his hands through his messy black hair, over and over.

I pulled my own purple mask off while I waited and tossed it on the carpet beside me.

"Are you done?" I snarked when he finally stopped pacing and turned to glare at me again. I hadn't tried to move from where he'd shoved my ass onto the middle of the carpet. Not because he'd told me to—fuck that—but because seeing him so worked up and ragey when I was still hyped up on the adrenaline of my fight... well... I was woman enough to admit it was a major fucking turn on. I stayed put on my ass because I was dangerously close to jumping his bones.

Apparently my question hit a trigger for him, though, and his mouth dropped and his face twisted with disbelief. "Am I done?" he repeated, staring at me like I'd grown three heads. "Me? Am I done? That's what you're asking?"

I blinked up at him a couple times, confused at where this conversation was going. "Uh, yeah, that's what I asked. You're pacing like a caged wolf and looking all"—*sexy*—"murderous and shit."

He just gaped at me, seemingly lost for words for the first time since ever. It didn't last long.

"Are you fucking joking? You just almost killed that poor fuck out there! With your bare hands!" His eyes were pitch fucking black at this stage. "What the hell happened? Did you have some kind of psychotic break in the time between the game and fight?"

Guilt washed over me. I'd been so focused on channeling my rage I hadn't given my opponent a second thought. At least, not past how I could inflict the maximum amount of damage and pain, all while picturing he was Alex.

Whoops.

Still, there was no way in hell I'd be apologizing or explaining myself to my biggest tormentor at Arbon Academy.

I arched a brow at him and held steady eye contact. "Is killing against the rules in these fights? I didn't get a handbook."

If anything, his eyes just bugged out wider before a carefully neutral expression closed over his face. "It's not," Rafe admitted from behind clenched teeth, "but it creates a hell of a lot of trouble and the winner is required to clean up their own mess. I seriously doubt you've made the necessary connections here to handle a body disposal. Nor could you afford it."

Ah yep, there he was. Arrogant, entitled prick.

He did kind of have a point, though. Body disposals were *expensive*, so I generally avoided killing my opponents to save my measly cash reserves.

"What do you care?" I snarled, not ready to calm down anytime soon. Beating the shit out of a nameless, faceless opponent had tempered my rage somewhat, but I was far from done. If Rafe wanted to fight, so fucking be it.

The cruelty in his glare as he curled his lip in a sneer said everything I needed to know. He wanted a real fight just as bad as I did.

"I don't," he spat back at me. "I'd have happily left you there to deal with your own mess. There would have been plenty of sleezebags willing to trade a cleanup for something other than cash, and I bet you're no stranger to that kind of trade."

Oh. Did he just call me a whore? That was cute.

Riding the manic high coursing through my veins, I laughed out loud. "Is that the best you've got, rich boy? Calling the orphan girl a whore? Oh, you're so original. Remind me again how you're managing to top your classes? It's sure as shit not from your IQ."

His brows dipped, and for a micro-second I saw through that infuriatingly blank face and spied outrage. But maybe that was my imagination.

"Listen, Cinderella, you—"

"Save it," I cut him off, pushing myself back to my feet in an athletic flick of my hips. Okay, fine, I was showing off a bit. Sue me. "I need to get back there and find my blade. Unlike *some* I can't just get a new weapon delivered to my door if I lose it."

I made to push past him, but quickly found myself blocked by his huge body. Holy damn, he was big. Had I noticed that before? Ugh, I could see the edges of his ink curling up the side of his neck, peeking out of his black sweater. Why were the hot ones such awful bastards?

"You're not going anywhere," he growled, far too close for my liking. Despite not wanting to seem intimidated in any way, I took a step back. It was that or do something dumb, like sniff him.

Focusing on his words, not his body, I planted my fists on my hips. I ignored the still wet blood on them because it was all freaking over the rest of me too. "Oh yeah? You going to stop me, then?"

I had expected more of the same blank, bored stare from him—not the malicious smirk that pulled his lips up or the glitter of excitement in his eyes.

Oh shit.

“You’re damn right I am, Violence. Perhaps you were so lost in your bloodlust frenzy you didn’t notice, but the Swiss Guard found our tournament again. You’re not leaving here until Noles gets back with an all clear. Not that I particularly give a shit if you get executed for illegal use of weapons, but Mattie would have my balls for breakfast.” He lifted his chin and held my gaze with a clear challenge. “But if you want to fight me over it, I have no doubt I’ll win.”

Test my skills against the notorious Fallen Angel? Tempting. Oh so tempting.

I opened my mouth to tell him to give me his best shot, but my body took that opportunity to radiate pain and remind me of the fight I’d *just* been in the middle of. Yeah, I’d wiped the floor with that punk, but I hadn’t come off totally unscathed. In fact, I’d taken more hits than I normally would have because rage had made me blind to pain.

Damn it all to hell.

Damn Alex right to fucking hell.

“You want to tell me what has your panties in such a bunch you needed to beat that twat to death?” Rafe, observant as ever, seemed to sense where my thoughts had traveled.

Alex’s and Claudette’s voices still echoed through my head, and as badly as I wanted to offload all of that onto someone else, Rafe wasn’t that person. He’d just make fun of my naiveté for trusting Alex, and I was getting enough of that from myself.

“None of your business,” I snapped back, looking around me for the first time. “Where the hell did you bring me anyway?” We were in some kind of studio apartment, complete with a sitting area, kitchenette, three double beds, and an attached bathroom. I could just see the edge of the vanity through the open door. “Are we underground?” There were no windows, and the air had that slightly stale quality to it that suggested poor ventilation.

Rafe arched a brow, folding his arms over his chest and leaning his broad back against the door. What, did he think I was going to barge back there while Swiss Guards were hunting? Fuck that, I wasn’t an idiot.

"Yes," he replied with a small incline of his head. "We're safe here until the tunnels back to the academy are cleared."

Okay... so we weren't under the academy anymore. Interesting.

"And where is *here*?"

He gave a small shrug. "Just a safe location." There was something cagey about the way he said that... and the three beds were tripping up the train of logic in my head.

"Is this where you guys bring girls for orgies?" My exclamation was just this side of shrill. But ew. So much ew. The idea of Rafe, Jordan, and Nolan having chicks down here was all kinds of... *hot*. Ugh, I mean... Fuck. "I can't believe you brought me to your fuck pad." I muttered it with disgust, and my skin crawled as I eyed the beds.

I told myself it was disgust, not arousal, but I was also a big old liar.

Rafe's face may as well have been carved out of stone for all the emotion he showed. Damn him.

"You should clean up," he suggested, nodding in the direction of the bathroom. "We could be here a while and it'd probably be best if no one saw you wandering around looking like *that* when we get the all clear." He flickered his gaze down my purple catsuit, and I could swear there was heat in his stare that spoke of something a whole lot more than annoyance.

The contempt in his voice, though... it was like fanning a fire. All my previous fury bubbled back up inside me, and I wanted nothing more than to bring him to his knees. Figuratively and literally.

"You're right," I agreed, my terrible plan unfolding in my head like a poisoned flower. "I should get rid of the evidence." Reaching up to my throat, I grasped the little zipper between my fingers and slid it all the way down to my navel. I had decent tits on the worst of days but there was something particularly awesome that an unzipped catsuit does for a girl's, er, girls.

"What are you doing?" Rafe asked. His voice was neutral but his gaze was locked on my black lace bra.

Hah. Too easy.

"Taking my clothes off. Is that a problem for you?" I threaded enough blatant challenge into my words that it was flipping a switch in his brain. His nostrils flared ever so slightly, and his next breath

was just that fraction quicker than the one before. I had him, hook, line, and sinker.

Rafe couldn't back down from a challenge any more than I could. We were both damaged like that.

Letting a smug grin play across my lips—he wasn't looking at my face anyway—I shrugged my catsuit off my shoulders and started peeling it down my legs. Underneath, I wore nothing but a black lace bra and thong—because catsuits were awful for panty lines—and I definitely heard Rafe's breath catch when I bent over to unzip my boots and pull the whole lot off.

"Careful, Cinderella," he growled, his voice dark and full of threat. "You're playing one hell of a dangerous game. What would your boyfriend say?"

The word *boyfriend* was like a bucket of ice over my libido.

I straightened back up and scoffed. "I doubt he'd say much, seeing as he's probably balls deep in *your fiancée* right now."

A flicker of surprise crossed Rafe's face, and he pulled his gaze away from my tits to stare at me in that intense way that sent shivers through me.

"So, you want to fuck his worst enemy to get back at him, huh?" He didn't sound all that put out by the idea. Just curious. "You think that'll make you feel better?"

I snorted a bitter laugh. "I think an orgasm from anyone who *isn't* a two-faced backstabbing piece of shit would make me feel fucking amazing right now. If you're not man enough to provide that, I can take care of it myself in the shower." I shrugged and started toward the attached bathroom. "Or maybe Jordan can lend me a *hand* when he inevitably shows up here."

CHAPTER 2



I'd made it all of five steps across the room before I was basically thrown onto the nearest bed.

A small squeak of fright slipped from my throat, but it quickly turned into a gasp as Rafe's body pinned me down. He held both my wrists easily in one hand, restraining them against the comforter above my head, and I groaned at the bite of my many small injuries. My right arm was aching, and the smear of bright red on Rafe's bicep told me I might be actively bleeding.

Fuck it. Not the first time I'd been cut in a match before, and it wouldn't be the last.

"Don't fucking push me, Vi," the Swiss prince warned me. Or threatened me? I hoped it was a threat he intended to follow through on.

Doing the exact opposite of what he'd said, I pushed. In fact, I laughed. "You scared, Angel?"

That was the best I could taunt him with because it was all too evident he was *up* for it. Up, hard, and holy crap... massive. I shifted under him, spreading my legs wide enough to wrap around his waist, then pulling him tighter against my core.

Rafe made a small noise but simply hovered over me a moment, his deep blue eyes unreadable as he peered into mine.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," he muttered so quietly it could have been to himself, then crashed his lips into mine with all the intensity of a firestorm.

For the briefest moment, I let it happen. This... this was the sort of kiss I'd read about in fairytales. The sort of kiss that sent heat sear-

ing through my whole body and made my toes curl, fingernails claw, and panties melt. This was the sort of kiss I'd thought Alex—

Fucking Alex.

Wrenching my lips from Rafe's, I gave him my neck.

"We're not making love, asshole. Take your pants off and fuck me, or I'll find someone else who will."

My face was to the side, but I still caught the flicker of anger that crossed his gorgeous face. What he had to be upset about, I had no idea. Wasn't this exactly what guys like him wanted? No strings, no emotional attachment, just fucking?

"Fine," he snapped, peeling my legs off from around him and moving to stand up.

My heart sank, and I thought for a moment he was actually leaving. But when he reached over his shoulder and whipped his top off in a smooth, very practiced move, I let out a small sigh of relief.

Holy ever-loving shit, a body like that should be illegal.

Rafe barely allowed me a moment to ogle his hot, tatted body before grabbing me by the ankles and flipping me over in a move that screamed of fight training. My bruised muscles protested the sudden movement, but I just groaned with anticipation.

"Is this what you want, Cinderella?" Rafe's voice was deep and husky. Dirty. I was damn near gushing already. The distinctive rustle of fabric and slide of a zipper teased me, and I cursed him for denying me a look at his goods. "A quick, faceless hate fuck to wipe that Australasian prick from your mind?" His hands were on my ass, burning hot as he stroked over my flesh and teased at the flimsy lace of my thong.

"Yes," I replied in a breathy moan, hitching my knees up underneath me and leaving zero doubts as to what I wanted from him.

His low chuckle sent shivers chasing down my spine, and I couldn't help myself, I wiggled my behind in desperation. Not that he needed the encouragement. As he leaned closer, stroking a hand up my back to tangle in my messy, bloody braid, I could feel the heat and hardness of his own arousal against my ass.

"You think you can wash away the memory of his touch that easily? You think if I fuck you hard enough you'll forget that you let a two-faced, murderous bastard defile your body?" His lips brushed my ear as he fucking growled those words at me. His voice was

heavily threaded with anger, frustration, and hate. But it was also drenched in desire.

Unable to help myself, I turned my head a fraction. His grip on my hair was so tight I couldn't manage to look back at him fully, but I pushed it enough that my scalp screamed protests and he could catch the arrogant smirk on my mouth. "Only if you do it right, Angel baby."

The noise he made was barely even human. He'd snapped, and I was solely responsible.

Damn that felt good.

Rafe wasted no time with foreplay. Our whole snarky, combative exchange had been the best kind of foreplay for both of us, really. A sharp bite of pain at my hips alerted me to the demise of that particular thong, and before I could even suck in a breath of surprise, he was fully inside me.

"Oh, *fuck*," I groaned, panting as my pussy stretched at the sudden intrusion. The polite thing for him to do would have been to pause a moment, let me adjust a bit, but this was Rafe. We barely tolerated each other, we certainly didn't *like* each other, and we gave zero fucks about being polite with one another.

He started moving almost instantly, fucking me hard enough that I couldn't do anything but hold on and enjoy the ride. My fists tangled in the bedclothes, my breath came in harsh gasps, and my whole body vibrated with that delicious mixture of extreme pleasure and pain.

I was covered in cuts and bruises, aches from my debut in the underground fights, and Rafe wasn't afraid to remind me of it. His hand slid up from my hip to press down on a particularly painful spot somewhere on my back, and I screamed.

"Well, *Violence*? Is this doing it for you?" He was taunting me, trying to get under my skin like I'd done to him. Foolish prince. He had no idea just how thick my skin really was.

I laughed a sexy, throaty sound and arched my back into his touch further. "It's getting there." I kind of loved that he insisted on calling me Violence. It felt truer to who I really was... not that I'd ever admit that to him.

He snarled a frustrated sound, and I grinned. Until he flicked open my bra clasp and palmed one of my breasts, that was. Then the

smug smile dissolved, and I whimpered with desperate desire as he roughly manhandled my hard nipple.

Fuck. Holy fuck. How he knew what I wanted... *how* I wanted it...

"Oh shit," I moaned aloud when his grip on my hair tightened, pulling my head back as he fucked me with fury. "Fuck, Rafe, I'm going to come." I could feel it building with intense momentum, and I was beyond ecstatic to welcome it.

"Good," he grunted. "Come for me, Vi. Come hard, all over my dick."

I gritted my teeth, fighting for breath as the delicious, intoxicating sensations started rushing through me. "I wasn't asking your permission, asshole," I snapped back at him. "Just stating a fac—oh shit—a fact." The end of that statement deteriorated into a moaning scream that seemed to go on for *ages*. Whatever. Like I cared what Rafe thought of me or my orgasm noises.

When I was done, my muscles like jelly and my cheek smooshed into the comforter, he laughed.

Bastard.

"Is that all you've got?" he taunted, gripping my hips with both hands now as he continued to move inside me. His motions were slower. Probably because my cunt was still pulsing and clenching so tight he was having a hard time freeing himself. "Let me guess, that pathetic boyfriend of yours only managed to make you come once?"

"Not my boyfriend," I snarled back at him, turning my face far enough that I could glare death at the gorgeous creature who was buried balls deep inside me. "And if you think you can do better, please, be my guest." Every damn word dripped with condescending challenge. It was how we operated.

A cruel smile slid across his face, and he barked a laugh.

"Oh, precious little street princess. I have every intention of doing just that."

The way he bit his lower lip was almost enough to make me come again right then, but I clenched my teeth and met his stare unflinchingly.

"Well? Go on then, I'm wait—" I didn't get to finish my taunt.

Seconds later I was flat on my back, my legs draped over Rafe's shoulders and his face buried between my thighs as I screamed

through another crazy intense orgasm. And another. Suffice it to say, he hadn't been bluffing.

By the time I was balanced on the edge of my fourth orgasm, my short nails had raked bloody lines and marks all over his broad back. His cock was buried back inside me again, and we were both slick with sweat as we moved together. We'd long since given up trading verbal barbs, choosing to use our mouths for far more important things. Like breathing.

Knowing full damn well that if he dragged a fifth orgasm from me, I was probably going to spontaneously combust, I took matters into my own hands. Dredging up what little strength I still had left, I rolled us over until I was on top, grinning down at Rafe's sweaty, dazed face. His dark hair was disheveled, and my blood pounded harder through my veins at just how stunning he really was.

I braced my hands on his chest, balancing as I rode him with determination. This time I wasn't just chasing down my own climax, I wanted *his*, too.

A throaty groan purred out of him when I shifted my weight, arching my back and finding that sweet spot. That exact, perfect angle that saw the head of his cock rubbing my G-spot.

"Holy fucking shit," I panted, feeling his huge, rough hands cupping my breasts. His fingers rolled my nipples, pinching them roughly as I whimpered encouragement.

He was close. I could tell by the tension in his shoulders, by the tightness in his jaw and the slightly panicked, deranged look on his face. Still, the way he watched me with those sexy, hooded eyes was a touch too intense for my liking. His walls were down, the neutral mask nowhere to be seen, and it was all too fucking much. He stared up at me like I was some kind of... I don't even know. Maybe it'd been a while since a girl had rocked his world like this.

It only took a few more seconds for me to be gasping and thrashing with my climax. It was the best one, though, because somewhere along the way Rafe totally lost it along with me. He came hard, crying out with his own earth-shattering release. Or I fucking hoped it was earth-shattering for him, too.

I was done. My body no longer obeyed my commands, and I just kind of collapsed into a boneless heap on Rafe's muscled, colorfully inked chest. Damn, his ink was sexy.

"Are we seriously cuddling right now?" His raspy, sarcastic question magically mustered up a flicker of strength in me. Amazing how that worked.

Growling a pissed-off sound in my throat, I rolled off him, then used my jelly legs to shove him off the bed. "Fuck off, Rafe. We don't kiss and we sure as shit don't cuddle." One final shove with my feet saw him thump onto the carpet, and the pained groan he let out said he was just as wrecked as I was. Hah. Served him right.

I draped an arm across my face, feeling my chest heave as I still fought to catch my breath. Rafe made more exhausted complaining noises as he stood up from the floor, then the mattress dipped with his weight as he leaned over me.

"We'll see about that, Violence," he whispered, his breath feathering my skin the only warning before he sucked one of my nipples into his mouth and gave it a teasing bite. "I'm taking a shower. Someone got blood all over me."

I didn't move, didn't *breathe* again, until I heard the bathroom door close and the water turn on. Only then did I sit up just enough to frown down at my body.

Yep, sure enough, I had a half dozen small cuts and lacerations from my tournament fight, which were still oozing fresh blood. My brain barely registered anything more than a dull ache from them, but it wasn't pretty. Maybe a shower wasn't such a bad idea...

Maybe I should join Rafe...

Just as that thought crossed my mind, the heavy click of a door unlocking reached my ears, and the front door of the studio burst open.

"Violet!" Jordan exclaimed, his eyes widening when he saw me sitting there on the bed. "Thank fuck you're okay!" He crossed the room in all of three steps, and the next thing I knew his lips were on mine.

Shock didn't even begin to describe what was going on in my brain. Jordan was kissing me? Jordan. Prince of New America. Kissing me. After I'd just fucked his best friend six ways to Sunday.

Shock was fully to blame for what happened next.

I kissed him back.

Jordan hadn't really been on my radar until now. I mean, sure, I was attracted to him on a physiological level, but I'd been so consumed by Alex and then... *Rafe*.

Confusion stunned me, and I acted on instinct.

My fingers threaded through his hair, pulling him closer to me, even as he pressed me back into the bed. He nipped and sucked at my lips like he'd been thinking about doing this for *way* too freaking long, and damn if I didn't repay the favor. Could I actually be crushing on Jordan as hard as Rafe? Where the hell had that come from?

"Violet, baby," he groaned, his fingers flexing on my bare hip, "you're naked. Wait." He pulled back from our kiss, a frown creasing his brow. "Wait. You're naked. Why are you naked?"

"Probably because she was about to join me in the shower for orgasm number, oh, what are we up to now, Vi? Six? Seven?" Rafe's cocky sneer was full of venom as he leaned on the bathroom doorframe. A pale blue towel was tucked low around his hips, and his huge, muscular arms were folded across his inked chest. The part that turned my stomach and chilled my soul, though, was the ice-cold look in his eyes.

"Five," I replied, trying to sound sassy and just coming out croaky.

The smile he gave me back was all sarcasm. "Oh yeah. I lost track when you were coming all over my face."

"Whoa, what the—" Jordan was playing a huge game of catch-up, but neither of us seemed all too inclined to fill him in.

"I see you're happy to kiss my best friend then," Rafe continued, ignoring the friend in question and just pinning me with his deadly glare. "That's fine. I got what I wanted."

"Oh please," I scoffed back at him, mocking. "We both know I *took* what I wanted. You were just along for the ride."

Rafe's mouth opened to shoot back what I'm sure was going to be another poisonous barb, but Jordan had finally picked his jaw up off the floor.

"Enough!" he roared. "Both of you, just fucking *enough*." He shot Rafe a scathing glare, then flickered a sheepish look at me. "Violet, do you need something to wear? I can't concentrate when you're all..." He waved a hand at my stark naked, post-fuck-session state, and I couldn't hide a grin. His sharp gaze seemed to run over not just my nudity but also every cut, scrape, and bruise like he was mentally cataloguing them all and storing the information for later. He didn't baby me or ask if I was okay, and I loved that.

When I was really exhausted, I lost control over my emotions and they all just played out on my face. All of them. And right now I feared he could see exactly how confused and turned on I'd been by his kiss.

"Seriously, the way you're looking at me makes it really, *really* hard—"

Rafe snorted.

"—to *concentrate*." Jordan finished, shooting his friend another glare.

As funny as I found the current dynamic, Jordan had never done anything to deserve my malicious anger, so I dragged a sheet over my body and gave him a small smile. "Better?"

"Marginally," he muttered, his heated gaze staring at the thin material like he wanted to make it disappear. With a sigh, he sat on the side of the bed and ran his hands through his hair several times while Rafe and I just waited to see what he needed to say.

"What the hell did I walk in on here?" Jordan finally demanded, encompassing us both in this line of questioning.

I just shrugged and deferred to Rafe. Let him sort this out; I'd just wanted hot, meaningless sex to wash Alex out of my brain. Ugh. Fucking *Alex*.

An arrogant sneer curled Rafe's lip, and he scoffed back at Jordan. "Shouldn't I be asking the same thing? Since when did you and Cinderella start swapping saliva?"

I spluttered. "Uh, since never. That was a first, and I'd also really like to know where that came from."

The small, apologetic frown that touched Jordan's brow when he looked over at me struck a nerve. Had that been something more than just adrenaline at play?

He let out a small sigh, turning away from me again and giving Rafe a small headshake. "You knew I liked her. If you felt the same, you should have fucking said something sooner."

"That's not even remotely what this was about," Rafe replied, his jaw clenched with frustration.

I was officially lost. There was more going on in the subtext than I was picking up on, and it was making me twitchy.

Clearing my throat, I folded my arms—holding the sheet in place to retain what little shreds of dignity I had left. "This was about my need to erase my *ex-boyfriend* from my mind for five fucking min-

utes." Rafe quirked a brow at me, and my cheeks heated. "Or longer. But it doesn't change anything. Prince Prickly and I still hate each other just as much as yesterday." I paused, frowning as I remembered everything I'd learned before the fight. "Maybe more than ever. Did you know that the Princess Ballot was rigged?" I speared Rafe with my stare. For some reason, some stupid, hopeless reason, I wanted him not to be the epic, unredeemable asshole I suspected he was. I wanted him—and all my friends for that matter—to be ignorant of the secrets Alex had so carelessly spilled.

His long hesitation filled me with dread.

"What? No, we don't know anything about that," Jordan responded, his confusion clear in his voice. But my gaze never moved from Rafe's. He fucking knew something. "Rafe? Bro? Why aren't you saying anything?"

I genuinely believed I didn't care what Rafe thought of me. We weren't friends, and despite all the sex we'd just had, we certainly weren't lovers. But somehow as I stared into his angry, unsurprised eyes, my heart broke a little bit more.

"You knew, didn't you?" I whispered. "You knew that I was chosen because of my DNA. That Alex was planning on making me fall in love and sign some archaic marriage contract. Is that what happened to all the ballot winners? Did they all get tricked into getting pregnant, too? 'Cause that's what Alex had planned for me."

At this, I finally got a reaction out of him. "What?" he spat, his face twisted in disgust. "No! I didn't know anything about that. That's..." He trailed off, shaking his head with disbelief. "No." His gaze returned to mine, and this time there was no pretense. His eyes were full of what appeared to be a sincere apology. "I swear, Vi, I had no clue *that's* what they were up to. But... yeah, I have suspected since the last ballot that something weird was going on."

I nodded slowly, releasing the heavy breath I'd been holding. Suspecting wasn't knowing, and that made all the difference to me. He'd also tried multiple times to warn me away from Alex, in his own fucked-up way, and I'd chosen to ignore him. I had no one to blame but myself for this mess.

"Well," I muttered, feeling my shoulders sag under the weight of all my issues. "Maybe you can understand why I needed to forget all of *that* for a while."

A fake cough near the door alerted us to another participant in the conversation, and Nolan grinned a sly, sexy grin. He held my missing blade, which he must have rescued from the tournament. Relief flooded through me that it hadn't been lost or stolen. I'd worked too damn hard to earn that blade.

"Well, New Girl. If that's how you forget your problems, I, for one, would like to be involved."

He was joking. Wasn't he?

"Me too," Jordan added, and he definitely *wasn't* joking.

What. The. Fuck?

Rafe just snorted and shook his head. "I'm finishing my shower, since I got interrupted. Figure this out yourself, Cinderella."

The bathroom door slammed behind him, leaving me naked, bruised, bleeding, and squirming under two sets of all-too-interested eyes.

Oh shit. I was *so* fucked.

CHAPTER 3



I managed to avoid seeing anyone for the rest of the weekend. Mattie blew up my palm reader, requesting me for movies, parties, and just general chick time. But I couldn't. I literally couldn't deal with what had happened.

I'd imagined killing Alex, that lying piece of shit, more times than was probably healthy. In fact, nothing I'd done since finding out had been healthy, including fucking someone who could barely stand me at the best of times. It didn't matter though, I couldn't get Rafe out of my head. My body, still bruised and battered from more than the fight, ached to be touched like that again, but I was not giving in. Rafe was a weakness I would exorcise from my being.

"Violet Rose Spencer, open this fucking door before I smash it down!"

Mattie followed her words with some loud banging on said door, and I wondered if she was really going to attempt to break it down. The solid timber doors here were designed to protect each room's rich, famous, and royal inhabitants, and there was no way my slender best friend had a hope in hell.

But she'd give it a try because that's who she was.

"Vi, seriously," she huffed, and I leaned my head against the door for a moment before I yanked it open. Mattie almost toppled in, just catching herself on the ridiculous six inch heels she sported.

"You're dressed to kill," I said, stepping back to see her better. She had on a royal blue minidress with lace cutout panels in the front and, from what I could see, the back as well. Her boobs were

pushed to their limits, her legs long in those heels, and her hair straight and shimmery in the two low lights illuminating my room.

"You're dressed like death," she shot back, eyes wide as she ran her green-eyed gaze over me. "My god, Violet, what in the heck are you wearing?"

I looked down. Holey shirt, tracksuit pants, chocolate stain near my right thigh, wine stain on the center of the shirt.

"And you smell like death too," she added, pushing inside. "To finish off"—she waved her hand at my slovenly appearance—"this package."

Laughter burst from me before I could stop it. I hadn't expected that.

"Please come in, insult me some more while you're at it," I said, sweeping my hand to the side.

Mattie ignored me, striding through my mess and kicking clothes to the side like she gave no fucks. When she reached my bed, she spun around and glared. "Why are you ignoring me? And why in the hell are you all bruised up again? Did someone hurt you? So help me, I will fucking bring this school down on them."

My heart ached, and this weird sensation started to fill my throat and eyes. Like... there was so much love in my body that it was overflowing and the only place it could exit was from my eyes. "I'm sorry," I said huskily. "I'm really fucking sorry for being a shit friend. I tend to shut down when my life screws up. It's easy to forget that I have someone in my corner now."

Mattie took two steps forward, and I was hauled into a fierce hug. "You've got me in every fucking corner and at your back and front. You don't have to face them alone, girl."

Jesus. Make her stop; I really didn't have time to be a bawling mess.

Not that I'd change Mattie for anything in the world.

When she let me go, our eyes met, and she shook her head. "You're scaring me," she whispered.

"It's Alex," I said softly, forcing myself to feel the sting of his betrayal again—feel every facet that would burn my body but fill my resilience. I needed that to go the extra mile and take him down.

Most of the time, the twins, Mattie and Nolan, wore these relaxed, easygoing expressions that said they'd go along with whatever and were cool as cucumbers doing it.

But every now and then, their expressions reminded me of my sensei. Scary. Resolved. Ready to take down the biggest baddest mother in the room and not blink twice about it.

Mattie had that look now as she marched to the door, and I could have sworn her chest rumbled. "Be right back," she growled. "Got a prince to kill."

Lurching forward, I wrapped a hand around her arm. "Whoa, wait. Don't you even want to know what happened?"

Her smile was not nice. "I don't need to know. I've never seen you falter, no matter what was thrown at you—including an asshole half beating you to death, but right now... you look broken. No one breaks my friend and gets away with it."

I'd marry this chick if I swung that way. She was that perfect.

"He doesn't even know what he did," I told her, stopping her from trying to get to the door. "I overheard something, and now I don't know what to do about it. There's more at work here than some fucked-up playboy who was using me for whatever."

I'd had time to think over the weekend, time to truly understand what I'd heard from Alex. Or at least what I thought I heard. I was piecing bits together, but I had a pretty clear idea.

Mattie's face was pale. "It's bad, isn't it? The world of monarchs is cutthroat, but I can already tell this is bad."

I sucked in a shallow breath. "I think the princess ballot is rigged."

She blinked at me, and the astonishment on her face spoke clearly of her confusion. "I did not expect you to say that," she finally admitted.

She'd stopped trying to storm out, so I moved to sit at my desk. She perched on the bed. "The other night, I was heading to the underground fight ring when I overheard Alex and Claudette."

Mattie's expression went from confused to pissed in two-point-three seconds. "The fight ring? Why in the fuck... Do you realize how dangerous that is? Noles almost got his heart sliced out."

"I know," I said, "but you don't have to worry about me. I've been training for years with one of the best weapons fighters in the world. It's a long story, and I don't want to go into it now, but I need you to understand that you don't have to worry about that part of my life. That part I have handled. It's the Alex thing I don't."

Mattie looked like she wanted to argue, but instead, she examined my face. She must have seen some truth there, because she sighed and nodded. "So what did the asshole of Australasia do to you?"

"He was fighting with Claudette. He basically said that he had me right where he wanted me, falling in love with him, and that I was the one who would give him a genetically superior heir. He implied that the entire thing was a setup and I was his last chance since Jasmine was dead."

Just as I had when I'd spoken of this to the boys, I watched Mattie closely. If she'd known about this for the past few months and hadn't said anything, my heart might possibly disintegrate in my chest.

Her shock and fury were real as she launched to her feet. "No," she said, arms trembling. "That can't be true. It's random. A random selection. There's no way it's rigged so that Alex's one chance at a perfect baby comes to the school. All of our marriages are arranged by our parents between royal families. They don't need the ballot..."

"It makes sense though," I said softly. "Do you have to go through testing first to make sure you're genetically compatible?"

I'd done a lot of thinking about this, and I saw the bigger picture.

Mattie nodded slowly, horror dawning across her face. "Yes," she whispered. "Fuck, yes. We have to be tested, and we have personality tests and genetic tests. We make sure there are no problems that might cause our heirs to be weak. It's standard practice to strengthen the future of the monarchy."

"So that information, teamed with the alliances you want to form between kingdoms, is probably how your matches are chosen."

"It's definitely how," she agreed. "But I've never heard of a commoner being brought in like that."

"What if there was no suitable genetic match for a royal among the monarchies?" I said slowly. "Or what if your match was murdered and you had no choice but to branch out into commoners. Wouldn't an orphan, with no ties to anyone, be the easiest to manipulate? We literally have no rights at the best of times, let alone when it comes to royals."

She just shook her head over and over, like she couldn't fathom this being real.

"The winners are almost always female," I reminded her. "And every single one of them has married into a royal family."

"Not a crown prince though," she argued back. "Only ever minor members royal houses."

That was true. "Shit, I just don't know," I said running my hands through my hair. "I've been trying to research it on my palm reader, but I'm scared I'll trigger some sort of security breach and get myself imprisoned."

I waited for her to laugh and call me paranoid, but when she didn't, I knew my instinct on that had been right too.

"What are you going to do?" she said, moving closer to me and perching her ass on the desk beside my chair. "Have you spoken to Alex at all?"

I shook my head, tangled blond curls going everywhere. "He's messaged and called, but I haven't replied to any of them."

He'd knocked on my door too but unlike Mattie, hadn't attempted to break it down. Not yet anyway.

"I should confront him," I said, playing with the idea again. I'd been contemplating it for the past few sleepless nights.

"No," Mattie said with force. "What if he is part of some monarchy conspiracy? They have killed people for knowing less. You might end up like Jasmine."

Jasmine. It was so hard to know if Alex could be the one responsible for her death. I'd truly believed he wasn't, but I'd also believed a lot of other things about him.

"From the first day we met, he's called me his future wife," I said, bitterness creeping into my words. "I'd dismissed it as some flirty, playboy prince thing, but I'm starting to wonder if he wasn't actually serious. Maybe Alex has known all along I was brought here to be his wife... his fucking womb for rent while he tried for royal heirs. That's why I need to confront him. I need to know."

Like I'd summoned the fucker, a knock sounded on my door, and a familiar voice called out. "Violet, are you okay? I've been trying to get in touch with you for two days. I've been worried about you."

Mattie's eyes were huge as they met mine. "Now?" I mouthed, and she shook her head.

"I can take him," I muttered.

"Violet," he called suddenly. "I can hear you. Open the door."

I shrugged at Mattie. "Guess I better open the door."

She almost fell off the table trying to get to me, but I was faster than she expected, racing across to yank the door open.

Alex stood tall on the other side, dressed casually for him. He had on black suit pants and a button down shirt, the maroon color a nice contrast to his blond hair and tanned skin. His eyes were blue and twinkling as he smiled down at me, and I fought the urge to wrap my hands around his throat.

He blinked as he took in my ragged appearance. "Are you sick?" he asked in a rush. "You should have told me; I would have arranged for the nurse to visit."

My blood boiled. The nurse. I'd known she was evil from the first moment I saw her, and now... now I wanted to destroy her, too. Messing with birth control... That was sexual assault in my books. She might as well drug me and let Alex rape me until he produced a child. In some ways, the violation would feel very similar.

A child.

My heart slammed against my chest, the beats hard and erratic. What if she hadn't given me an IUD at all? Or it was faulty? I'd had sex with Alex. We'd used a condom, but what if he'd tampered with it? I'd also had sex with Rafe, and it would be next to impossible to know whose baby it was if I was pregnant.

Fuck. Shit. Fucking fuck.

The only thing that stopped a full blown panic attack was the memory of his words, the way he'd said that she wouldn't mess with my birth control yet. *I'd found out in time.*

Hopefully.

CHAPTER 4



“Violet,” he said, still staring at me, as his concern faded into confusion. I tried not to notice his perfect face, instead holding onto the hatred that burned inside of me. Alex was gorgeous, there was no denying it, but that perfect exterior hid something broken and depraved.

“I’m not sick,” I said, my words flat. “Not in the way you’re asking anyway.”

I saw it then, probably because I was watching him closely. Studying him with a new perspective. Deep in those perfect blue eyes was a core of darkness.

“Why did you miss our date then?” he asked, sounding a little annoyed.

“She was helping me,” Mattie blurted out, and I was woman enough to admit that I’d forgotten she was in the room. Alex fucking eclipsed all else at the moment. Or at least my hatred for him did.

His brow furrowed with irritation. “You blew me off all weekend to hang out with Mattie? What the hell, Violet?”

I opened my mouth to take the easy out Mattie had just provided, but... nope. I was done. I couldn’t keep up the pretense even if I’d wanted to, and I didn’t. I was fucking done with Alex and his fake bullshit, and it was time he knew.

Shaking my head, I sucked in a deep breath, then released it in a resigned sigh.

“Mattie, can I speak to Alex alone a moment?”

My friend made a small sound of protest. “Are you sure that’s a good idea, Vi?”

Alex's blue eyes flared with anger at this comment, and again I saw the *real* Alex. Clearly this side of him had been lurking just under the surface the whole time, and I'd been too busy thinking with my vagina to notice it.

"I've got this handled," I assured her with a small, reassuring smile. As badly as I wanted to publicly tear Alex a new one, my own sense of decency told me not to break up with him in front of Mattie. This conversation was going to be ugly enough without my feisty, red-haired bestie yelling input from the sidelines.

She reluctantly left my room, giving Alex a death glare the whole time.

"Come in," I said when Mattie was in the corridor, stepping aside to let my duplicitous *ex*-boyfriend into my room. She shot me a meaningful look as I closed the door, and I nodded.

Our unspoken understanding was clear. If I needed her, she'd be here in a second ready to castrate this prick.

"Violet, what the fuck is going on?" Alex demanded when my door clicked shut, not waiting for me to speak. One of his many charms.

"We're done, Alex," I replied, too emotionally drained to deal with niceties.

His brows shot up and his body tensed. "Excuse me?"

I blinked at him, his innocent act fanning the fire of anger within me. "Did I stutter? I said we're done. Over. Finished. Find another stupid girl to fall for your act because I'm *done*."

Alex didn't move. Didn't blink. But something shifted... something about him suddenly became dangerous. Threatening. "My hearing must be compromised," he said in a soft voice underscored with raw fury. "I could have sworn you just tried to break up with me."

My brows shot up. "I didn't *try* shit, Alex. I *did*. We're fucking history, so you can throw your diabolical, disgusting plot with Claudette out the fucking window. You know what? Why don't you just knock that slut up instead? You've clearly been fucking *her* any chance you can get. Save us all a headache and make a new marriage arrangement."

His lips pursed, his jaw clenched, and a spike of fear ran through me. I'd hedged my bets on being a better fighter than him—if it came down to it. But what if his weak hits and sloppy form in those scuf-

fles with Rafe had been part of his act? He'd had me fooled in every other aspect, so why not this too?

Shit.

Alex took a step toward me, and I instinctively backed away, my shoulders hitting my closed bedroom door. I wouldn't give up my secret to him yet, not unless he attacked, so it was better to act a little scared.

"Violet," he said, still using that soft voice that I'd never heard from him before. "Are you scared of me?"

Fuck. Did I even know the answer to that question?

I shook my head. "Not even close, Alex." *You fuckhead.* "You made a mistake choosing me for this... whatever this is. I'm not remotely the girl you must think I am. Cut your losses and move on."

His brows quirked, and my broken heart squeezed painfully. He'd had me so completely under his spell, and just being around him was physically painful now.

"I don't know what you think you know—" he started to say, but I held up my hand.

"Stop. Just fucking stop. Every word out of your mouth is a lie, Alex." I was shaking. Fuck me, I was shaking, and he could see it in my hand suspended in the air. "Leave now, and I don't care what you tell people. Tell them you ended it 'cause I'm too much of a dirty peasant. Tell them I was shitty in bed. Tell them I cheated on you. I don't fucking care. Just stop *faking it* with me. I can't—" My voice hitched as tears threatened "—I can't do this, Alex. I can't look at you and not see that everything between us was one giant lie."

His eyes narrowed, but he didn't move any closer to me. "Violet, baby, you need to explain to me what you think you know. I thought we were good... I thought..." He trailed off, looking pained. Upset. It was like a fucking knife through my chest.

"Fuck you," I whispered, horrified and sickened. "You *thought* I was falling in love with you, didn't you?" I was accusing, but he still gave a small, confused nod. "So what was next, huh? What 'binding contracts' were you hoping to make me sign? Or were you going to just hit a home run and tamper with my birth control? Get me 'accidentally' pregnant and hope I had too much decency not to abort a royal baby?"

Alex sucked in a sharp breath, his eyes wide in shock. Understandable, given how much birth rates had declined over the past

three generations. None more so than within the monarchies, though. The idea that *anyone* would abort a royal baby was unheard of and doubtless something Alex was counting on to trap me.

"Why?" I pressed on, my own broken heart needing to hear it from his lips. I should have just ended it and kicked him out, but I needed closure. "Why do this? Why not just arrange another betrothal like every other fucking royal at this school? Why use the princess ballot?"

Give me some damn information, you bastard.

I was determined to understand it all since they'd decided to drag me into it.

Alex's jaw clenched again, and his eyes hardened, no longer the twinkling, ocean-blue gems I was so painfully familiar with. Now they were like chips of ice, and I shuddered at the stark contrast.

"Well, it sounds like you have it all nearly figured out, Violet." He snapped the words out, biting them off in anger. "So I'll give you this for free. The princess ballot is there for one purpose and one only. To provide perfect genetic pairings for royalty to ensure their lines continue. There is *no* charity. The monarchies don't give two craps about giving some poor orphan girl a better start in life. You, just like every so-called ballot winner before you, are nothing more than a broodmare." His face twisted into something ugly. Terrifying. Now, when he stepped closer to me, unease shot through my body and my fists clenched at my sides.

"That's disgusting," I spat back at him, but my voice quivered. I could take a beating from the best fighter in the world and never cry. But Alex had trampled all over my heart and the emotions were too raw. Too real.

His lip curled in a sneer, and he stopped just short of pinning me to the door. "That's life, Violet. We all do what we must to survive in this fucked-up world."

I shook my head, in denial. "Do it with someone else, Alex. I'm out."

He laughed then, a cruel, mocking laugh that cut through me like blades, leaving my soul in tatters. "You don't get a choice in this, you stupid girl. Here's what's going to happen." He paused, shaking his head like he could hardly believe he needed to explain this to me. "You're going to go into the bathroom and clean yourself up. You stink. Then, tomorrow morning, when you're fresh and beautiful,

dressed in your uniform and ready to start the day, we will leave here *together*. We will walk *together*, hand in hand like the loved up couple we *are*. When we reach the dining room, you'll sit with me. You'll smile and laugh and speak sweetly. You'll fucking kiss me like you can barely wait to ride my cock the second classes finish for the day."

I was damn near speechless, my jaw hanging open in shock.

"And if I don't?" I spluttered, the horror of what he was suggesting creeping over me like a thick black fog.

"If you don't?" He shook his head again, trailing a light hand down the side of my throat. My mind couldn't help bringing up the image of him and Claudette in the hallway, how he'd choked her and she'd come. "If you don't, then you'll find yourself with a broken neck at the bottom of a set of stairs. Just like Jasmine. Or worse."

I knew what he meant by "worse." Claudette's casual comment about non-consensual IVF labs in Siberia still haunted my memories.

Bile rose in my throat, and I could feel the blood draining from my face. "You killed her," I whispered accusingly. "I believed you when you said it was an accident."

A flicker of something passed across his eyes. Pain? Disappointment? Maybe it was just plain old psychosis.

"I didn't kill her," he said gently, his thumb still stroking the soft skin of my throat. "But it was no accident. Don't be stupid, Violet. Don't make them kill you too."

Oh fuck. My ears rang, and I needed to blink several times to fight back the creeping blackness. I was going to pass out if I didn't sit down soon. This was a million miles above my pay grade, and that was why they chose people like me. To them—and the world—we were nothing. We had no power. No rights.

Nothing.

"Take a breath," Alex ordered me, his voice cracking with command. He'd never spoken to me like that before. I hadn't even known he had it in him. "You're panicking."

"No shit!" I shrieked. "You just threatened to kill me if I don't become your fucking puppet!"

Alex rolled his eyes, like I was being painfully dense. "No, I didn't. I told you you'd *be* killed."

"Semantics!"

He sighed. "Just go and get yourself cleaned up. I'll be back in the morning."

Numb and in shock, I stumbled past him toward my bathroom. This... was so far removed from how I'd thought this conversation would go.

I paused in the ensuite doorway, turning my face just enough that I could see Alex still standing at my bedroom door.

"I fucked Rafe," I announced. What the hell I was hoping to achieve with that, I had no idea. Maybe I wanted to hurt Alex in some small way—hurt him just a fraction of how he'd hurt me. But the reaction I was looking for never came. When he turned around, his face was a cool, unaffected mask. Like stone.

"Good thing your IUD is still effective then. The last thing I need to deal with is another bastard pregnancy in my fiancée." His voice was pure frost.

I snarled. "I'm not your fiancée, Alex."

"Not yet," he replied with a shrug. "Go and shower. You've got a show to put on tomorrow at breakfast. Can't go letting that Swiss dickhead think he's won this round."

My stomach churned and dread rolled through me, but I'd been out-played. For now, I'd bide my time... but if Alex really thought I'd roll over and take a life of servitude as his walking womb? Oh yeah. He had another fucking trick coming.

He had no idea who he was truly dealing with, but I intended to show him *really* soon.

CHAPTER 5



*A*nxiety clawed at my belly the whole way down to the dining room for breakfast. My palms were sweating, and I had to keep wiping them off on my uniform skirt. Not that I gave two shits what Alex thought of my clammy hands, but the idea of facing my friends...

"If you could look a little *less* like you're about to vomit, that would be amazing," Alex snarled at me under his breath, all the while smiling like he didn't have a care in the world. It was terrifying.

"I *am* about to vomit," I hissed back. "Just being near you makes me want to throw up everywhere."

While that wasn't totally untrue, my anxiety was mostly fueled by another source. Another *two* sources. Rafe... and Jordan.

Fuck.

I knew I should have dealt with that situation when it happened on Friday night, but I hadn't. I'd fucking panicked.

"YOU'RE JOKING." I said to Nolan and Jordan, the shower splashing as Rafe washed the evidence of our hate fuck off his hard, inked-up body.

Nolan laughed. "Okay fine, I'm joking. You're like a second sister to me, and I don't get down on the twincest thing. Also, I'm likely to try and turn Rafe on to dick and then get punched in the nuts for it." He shivered dramatically. "No thanks. I just came to tell you the coast is clear, then caught the end of that convo and couldn't help myself."

My attention then drifted to Jordan, but he didn't look amused. He looked... hurt.

"I wasn't joking," he said. "I like you, Violet..." Shooting an unreadable glance to the bathroom where his best friend showered, he frowned.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, double fuck.

I couldn't do this. Not when my heart was still a bleeding, shredded mess from Alex's betrayal.

I yanked Rafe's shirt on and ran.

MY BACK SLAMMING into the wall jerked me out of that unpleasantly guilty memory, and I gasped.

"If you have any desire to see another sunrise, I suggest you improve your acting skills," Alex growled with menace, his face just inches from mine. "Fast."

That was the only warning I had before his lips crashed into mine. The shock of it made me gasp, and Alex pushed his advantage, slipping his tongue into my mouth and stroking along mine.

This... this wasn't Alex. Not the Alex I knew and had been kissing for months. This person was harsh and demanding. Dominant. If I wasn't already a hollow, heartbroken mess, the way he kissed me now would have almost convinced me he actually cared. That somehow he regretted deceiving me.

But I knew better.

This was about power and control. He was showing me who held both.

"Kiss me back, or kiss your life and freedom goodbye." He'd released my mouth just long enough to whisper that threat, and his blue eyes were close enough that I imagined he was peering into my soul. Weighing my desire to live, I found the scales tipped in his favor.

He was right, too.

Swallowing back my pride, my hurt, my guilt, I closed my eyes, draped my arms around his neck and acted my fucking ass off. If anyone had walked past us then, they'd have seen exactly what they needed to see, the shining, golden, crown prince of Australasia and his princess-ballot girlfriend. In love.

Inside, I was screaming. Sobbing. Dying a little. But nothing could have prepared me for the overwhelming desperation that washed over me when our kiss ended and I opened my eyes.

Rafe's furious, sapphire gaze locked with mine from across the hall, and the expression on his face was nothing short of murderous.

Now, normally I'd react, shoot back something as pissed off as Rafe was sending my way. But I couldn't.

Alex had taken something from me. I was that stupid fucking little girl again, trapped, locked away and sitting in my own piss. Helpless.

No!

Fuck.

Alex's lips twisted as he stared down at me. "You're gonna have to do better than that, princess," he said softly, pressing his lips to mine one more time before he took off down the hall. "One last chance, Violet," he called over his shoulder. There was no one but Rafe nearby now, and he clearly wasn't worried about being overheard by the Swiss prince.

I slammed myself back against the wall, pressing my palms especially hard against the brick, trying to find my balance. I was better than this. I'd spent too many years learning how to destroy the weakness inside of me, and all it had taken was some smooth words from a prince to break everything down.

Sharp, painful sensations ran down my spine and across my arms until they tingled in my fingertips. I didn't realize until blood followed that feeling that I'd slammed my back and shoulders so hard into the rough stone walls that I'd actually cut myself.

The blood was warm, ruining another uniform as it traced across my skin. That warmth was chased by another scent moving closer, one that smelled darkly enticing, turning my thoughts immediately erotic. Rafe had fucked me the same way he did everything else. Hard, intense, and on the edge of cruelty. My body responded to his scent now almost on instinct.

"Come with me," he said. No, commanded. Everything that fucker did was a command, and fuck if my body wasn't ready and willing.

I didn't know where he was leading me, but I needed to clear my head, so I was following.

For now.

Rafe led me away from the dining room and main part of Arbon, taking me on a twisting path that was almost as hard to follow as the secret passages that led to the fights. Part of me wanted to ask where we were going, but another, larger part, really didn't care.

Trapped. I was fucking trapped again.

How had this happened? How could this happen?

"Stop thinking," Rafe said harshly. "Let it go for five minutes."

I wanted to. I wanted to let everything go, including this fucking school, but I was afraid it was way too late for that. According to Alex, I was in a life and death situation, and if I didn't choose him, I chose death.

Rafe snarled again, and his lips slammed into mine. My cut-up back crashed into the nearby wall. I didn't care. I welcomed the pain because for the first time since I'd found out—outside of the last time Rafe had touched me—I was finally in blissful mental silence.

He did something to my body. He shut my senses down. And he erased Alex.

When he pulled back, he shook his head at me. "Keep the fuck up."

He turned, moving fast, and I was blinking, not sure what the hell had just happened. Rafe was going to be the death of me.

If Alex didn't get there first.

Eventually, when we must have been miles from the main part of the school, Rafe opened a door. It was partially hidden, completely nondescript, and I wouldn't have noticed it at all before Rafe opened it and stepped through. I followed him to a single set of rickety stairs made of wood, ancient-looking wood that I was afraid would cave in under his mammoth weight. But they didn't, apparently sturdier than they looked.

My gaze was all but glued to his ass as he ascended ahead of me, and I had to swallow a few times to keep the moisture in my mouth. I mean, I'd always been attracted to the prickly fuck, but now it was an almost tangible thing I could taste in the air.

And feel in my vag. That bitch knew him intimately now and she wanted more.

"You taking me up here to throw me off?" I half-joked when the stairs went on and on. I hadn't been to a second floor anywhere here yet, so this was clearly one of the towers I'd seen when I'd first been driven up to the school.

"Don't tempt me," he muttered.

I shut up after that, enjoying the burn of my thighs as we continued to climb. I'd been neglecting my training way too much since coming here, and my fitness was suffering. I needed to get back into it—at least start jogging again.

The stairs leveled out and we stepped into a room. Though a single room, it was large and sparse. There were two couches, a small fridge, a stylish, eggshell colored rug, an unlit fireplace, and the most incredible view I had ever seen. In my life.

Windows spanned one entire side, and it faced out onto what looked like a picturesque Swiss postcard with snow-capped mountains, trees, and nature as far as I could see.

"This is my spot. If you come here without me, I'll kick your ass," Rafe said, crossing his arms. "But you looked like you needed a minute."

I hated that he'd seen that vulnerable moment with Alex.

"Yeah, something like that," I murmured, pressing my hands to the glass.

Rafe remained silent at my back, and for some reason, I didn't mind him being there. The pain in my shoulders had died down, the blood no longer spilling, and for a second I forgot what had caused my injury in the first place.

It wasn't often that Rafe and I were alone with no distractions and an almost calming quiet around us. In the time I'd known him over the past months, we'd fought a lot, but I'd also noticed the way he could just exist with his own thoughts. No need to fill the silence.

That's where we were at this moment. Existing. Who would have fucking thought this would ever happen?

"Tell me your story," he said, and I felt almost offended that he'd broken our silence.

I wasn't surprised by the question though. I felt the same way about him. Fallen Angel fascinated me, and no one could fight like that without a lot of training. I wanted to know his story too, but as always, Rafe wanted me to be the one to give first.

This time I would—he'd caught me in a vulnerable position.

"It was my third foster home," I said softly, not staring at him because I wouldn't get through the story if I did. "I was eight, I think... or maybe a little older. It wasn't like any of my birthdays were celebrated. I have more or less guessed my age for most of my life." De-

risive laughter left me, but it really didn't hurt any more. I'd been given a new birthdate the day I was taken into care, one which placed me over eighteen now. That was good enough.

"When I first saw them, I thought they were the prettiest people in the world. All-American, my social worker called them. A true couple of God." Another forced laugh. "You know the type, both blond, tanned, with smiling blue eyes and lips. In hindsight, if I'd met them after this weekend, I'd have known they were evil incarnate from the first glance... Fuckers looked just like Alex."

A rumble sounded from the huge mountain of a dude beside me, and I finally turned to see him. Rafe was studying his hands, long tanned fingers clenched slightly. Most people wouldn't have even known he was upset, but I'd studied him enough to notice when he was working through some emotion.

"What happened?" he pushed his voice into a husky drawl. That caught my attention more than anything because he was never relaxed in his words. He snapped them out, one by one, and sometimes they physically hurt as they landed.

This was the calm before the storm.

"The mother, her name was Gayle, she wanted a perfect blonde doll to dress up and parade about the town. She called me sweetheart and hugged one arm around me when people approached, and then we'd stand there for what felt like hours while everyone gushed over how amazing they were. They talked about me like I wasn't even there, but I didn't care. No one had ever called me sweetheart, and I loved it."

I had no idea why I was giving him the slow buildup, but I desperately needed one person to know everything that had happened, everything that almost broke me. To understand why I was back in that fucking room again, even now.

"The first month passed in a blur of happiness, and I was so stupidly naïve that I missed the darkness brewing in the wings." I took a moment and forced the next words out. "I broke her lamp."

The silence felt both tense and confused, but Rafe didn't push again. He let me find the words myself.

"It was this ugly-as-fuck lamp that she had in the front room, a room I wasn't allowed in because it was only for when they entertained important family. But I'd heard a noise, and because I was a kid and didn't always think things through, I decided to explore.

The noise ended up being the neighbor's cat, but that didn't mean anything after I broke the lamp."

Rafe could have been a statue—there was no emotion on his face at all.

"They locked me in a closet for three days, and I almost died." I said it succinctly, like it was no big deal. But it was a big deal. I'd been struggling with myself ever since. And no matter how much therapy or training I'd been through, nothing ever let me forget the hunger and thirst. Fuck, the thirst had been the worst.

"I remember my throat closing over," I whispered. "Or that's how it felt to me because my tongue was so thick I couldn't swallow. I couldn't breathe. I was literally dying when they finally opened the door and dragged my body out."

His fists tightened further, veins standing out, but his expression remained neutral. It was only because I was trained to notice minute movements of the body that I even saw his hands shift. I was dying to know what he was thinking, but I had to get this story out first.

"After that, it was like the monster in them had been freed. I was punished in so many ways I couldn't keep track. But the closet, that tiny fucking closet was the worst. So many times I lay there in my own piss because it wasn't large enough for me to go anywhere except where I sat. So many times I wondered if this was my last moment on Earth and if that would really be so bad. I was a fucking child, and I was already done with the world."

Tears tracked down my cheeks silently. Tracks of my pain. I allowed myself a second to feel them, and then I shut it down because I was not that person any longer.

"How long were you with them?"

"Too fucking long."

He shifted a little closer to me; I could feel the heat of his body, almost like the fire had somehow been lit.

"Did you kill them?"

I smirked for the first time since starting my tale. "Let's just say they're not around any longer to torture little kids."

I hadn't been the one to kill them, but I'd set the situation up so they would be in the wrong place at the right time.

Sensei had punished me for letting my emotions get the better of me.

But it had been worth it.

Brandon and Claudette—and possibly Alex—were going to face the same fate because apparently I couldn't be the bigger person. Fuck that.

CHAPTER 6



After Rafe and I left his "special place," he waited outside of my room while I changed into a new uniform. The scratch on my shoulder only needed a patch and I was good to go, so we headed back to school. Near the dining room I started to drag my heels. The absolute last thing I wanted to do was be in the same room as Alex, where he'd expect me to play my part.

I couldn't do it. Not before speaking to my friends and explaining that I hadn't just suffered some kind of mental break... Not before I spoke with Jordan.

"Hey." I placed a hand on Rafe's forearm, halting him before we turned into the hallway that would take us straight to the breakfast room. He looked down at my hand on his bare skin—because he'd rolled his shirtsleeves up in that devastatingly sexy bad boy way—then gave me a brow raise. "About earlier. What you saw..." I trailed off as shame and guilt rushed through me. Not that I owed Rafe fucking *anything*, but it was how I felt nonetheless.

I expected some kind of scathing insult from him, something about how weak I was to "fall" for Alex's lies again.

That's not what I got.

"It was a smart move," the grumpy royal commented, his lips tight with displeasure or disgust or something. "We didn't get much of a chance to strategize, but I probably would have suggested the same thing. Play along until we understand this situation better. Who knows what Alex would do if you tried to publicly end things with him?" He frowned, his gaze unfocused while he thought that out.

I swallowed heavily, fear coursing through me. My friends—and Rafe—had always suspected Alex was behind Jasmine's death. And now I knew he was. Or at least he'd had a hand in it all.

"He knows I know," I admitted in a small voice, feeling like the biggest moron on the face of the planet. Of course I should have talked out a plan with the other royals. What kind of idiot—

The kind who had never known anyone she could rely on. That was what kind.

Rafe said nothing, but the slight narrowing of his eyes allowed me to fill in the blanks.

"Anyway," I hurried on, not wanting to dwell on my stupidity, "he told me that I need to keep dating him, publicly keep up the pretense or I'll get killed like Jasmine. Or worse."

Rafe's brows shot up. "What's worse?"

I shuddered. "When I overheard him and Claudette, she said something about Siberia and... forced IVF?"

His eyes sparked like a tropical storm, and his fists clenched into tight balls at his sides. "Leave it to me," he said, his voice like rolling thunder. "I'll get more information. But I find Alex's reaction interesting."

I snorted. "Oh? How so?"

Rafe gave a small shrug. "It almost sounds like he's trying to protect you from someone else. Which makes me wonder just how deep this shit goes."

I blanched, but nodded. He was absolutely right.

His palm reader lit up and buzzed, and he glanced down at it with a frown. "I have to go."

That was it. Just... *I have to go*.

"Wait!" I blurted out as he started to stride away from me. "What am I supposed to do now?"

He barely paused a second as he responded. "Exactly what you've been doing all along, Violence. Keep your enemies close."

I flipped off his retreating back. I couldn't help myself.

My own palm reader buzzed, and I clicked open the message that I knew would be from my best girl friend.

Mattie: you okay? just saw Alex at breakfast and he looked shockingly alive.

I sighed, dreading her reaction to this change of plans. Not that I really had a "plan" to start with, but I would bet money on Mattie

having some loud, shouty things to say about me continuing to date Alex. Even if it was all a farce.

Me: **Yeah, all good. I'll explain later.**

My palm reader buzzed back almost instantly.

Mattie: **lunchtime?**

My stomach flipped. It was almost lunchtime, and Alex was going to expect me to play the part of his besotted girlfriend in front of the whole academy.

I stood there, chewing my lip and debating what to reply. I needed to tell her now, not later. Before she heard from someone else that Alex and I had been making out in the hallway like we were... ugh... in *love*.

"Vi," someone said, and I startled. My gaze shifted up from my palm reader and collided with Jordan's tawny brown eyes. "Is it true?" His face was tortured. "You're back with Alex? After everything you told us... everything *we* told *you*..."

He wasn't just referring to Alex's betrayal. He was talking about how he'd confessed to liking me, kissed me, saw me naked, *knew* I'd fucked Rafe... and then I'd run away without having the decency to discuss it all further.

So much for being the badass, fearless *Violence*. I was nothing but a coward.

I shook my head, closing the gap between us by a few steps and reaching out to touch his arm. He held them tightly folded across his chest, and the muscles contracted beneath my fingers in a way that sapped my mouth of all moisture.

How the fuck had I ended up in this situation? I'd hardly spent any time with Jordan at all, but the interactions we *had* had... Yeah, I guess I liked him too. A hell of a lot more than I liked any of the other guys in this fucking academy, anyway.

My brain conjured up a flash memory of Rafe's head buried between my legs, my blood smeared on his strong hands as they held my thighs apart... almost like it was accusing me of lying to myself. Weird.

"It's not like that," I insisted, my voice pitched low and urgent. I couldn't let my friends think that of me. If I was going to make it through four years of schooling at Arbon Academy, I couldn't go it alone. I needed support. I needed my friends. All of them. "Can you..." I sucked in a breath, thinking as fast as my brain would go,

then heaved a sigh. "Do you think you could cut classes this morning with me? I want to fill you in on shit. And I think maybe we need to talk about, you know, *things*."

"I can cut class; they don't give a fuck what the royals do."

Right. I'd forgotten that small detail. I was the only one here who had something to lose in this insanity of a situation.

Jordan relaxed minutely, reaching out and gripping my hand. He pulled me along the hall, and once again, I was going in the opposite direction to Alex and the school, and I couldn't be happier about it.

Unlike Rafe, Jordan didn't take me to a hidden piece of paradise. Nope. Dude deposited me in his room, on his bed, slamming and locking the door behind us.

A small laugh escaped and Jordan zeroed in on that, his eyes narrowing. "What's so funny, Cinderella?"

I shook my head. "How the fuck I keep finding myself in these situations, I'll never know."

Jordan stalked across the room toward me. There was literally no other way to describe his walk, filled with arrogance and long-legged grace. I had a feeling he might be almost as good a fighter as Rafe, judging on the way he moved. "Maybe you like trouble, little princess."

I was shaking my head before he even finished. "No. that's not it at all. Trouble finds me, I don't go searching for it."

Liar. Yeah, I kinda was. But for the most part I kept myself out of anything too dark. I had limits. I'd always drawn a line and I'd stayed firmly on the side closer to the light. But now. Now I kept slipping and finding myself in these murky shades of gray. Pretty soon I would be in too deep.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked, standing. He was towering over me, staring down, and it had shifted the balance of power too much for my liking.

Jordan shrugged, but his eyes weren't giving me the same indifference. "It's private. Figured you didn't want this spread around the school."

I sobered at the thought. "It's kind of life and death right now," I admitted. "So private is definitely best."

Sucking in a deep breath, I quickly blurted out my next line. "I have to pretend to date Alex otherwise he basically told me I'd end up the same as Jasmine. I'm trapped like a fucking mouse that was

too stupid to see the danger until it was too late. Kissing Alex in the hall made my skin fucking crawl and if I could have killed him without repercussions, right then and there, I would have."

Needing to do something, because the intensity of his gaze was almost as disconcerting as Rafe's when he locked me in, I started to wander around the room, trying to find something personal about Jordan in here. There were a few photos only, mostly of him and Rafe, but also two with his parents. I recognized the king and queen of New America. Unlike their heirs, they were often in the public eye.

"I'll head back in summer for a week," he said from right behind me, and I would have jumped, but I'd felt him at my back a second before he spoke. "Be nice to see them and my little sister."

I spun, blinking up at him. "You have a sister?"

He nodded. "Yeah, she's twelve. Pain in my ass, but also the best fucking kid in the world."

His face got all soft when he spoke about her, and I felt my heart start pounding like a drum in my chest. When he leaned in close, I started breathing embarrassingly hard. "What are we going to do about Alex?" he asked, and it took me far too long to register the question.

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head. "Reading between the lines of what he said, this is much deeper than any of us realized. It's beyond just a simple arrogant fuck who thought he could force me to be his baby maker. The princess ballot was created with the sole purpose of ensuring genetically perfect royal heirs, whenever there wasn't a match found in the royal circles. These women probably don't even realize they are being manipulated, but it's pretty clear that the dudes they marry are well aware of the situation."

Since my royal friends didn't seem to know about it, it had to be one of those "need to know" situations where you only found out if you were one without a match.

Jordan was quiet, his gaze assessing. "We should check in on the previous winners. See where they all ended up."

"I've been trying to figure out how to do it without alerting whoever might be watching that we're looking into it."

Jordan just grinned, white teeth blinding me with their perfect straight sheen. Genetically blessed bastards, him and Rafe both.

"You're in safe hands. There's a way to disable tracking on these palm readers. If you know what you're doing."

I shook my head. "Mattie didn't mention it to me."

He let out a rumble of laughter. "Mattie doesn't know. It's New American technology. Not available to everyone, even that ratty little nation that developed one of the most important advances in war that we've seen in a hundred years."

I nudged him as I went past, back to the bed. "They're not ratty, you snobby jerk."

He shrugged. "Facts are facts, Vi."

Their arrogance knew no bounds. "Who decided that two of the most powerful princes in the world would be best friends?" I grumbled. "How you two fit both your heads in the same room is beyond me."

Jordan didn't look remotely offended. "We're good at a lot of things together. If you're interested in finding out."

I met his gaze fully then, wondering if I'd just heard him right. "Are you telling me that Rafe is okay with sharing a woman with you?" I couldn't imagine that scenario, not if Rafe truly cared about someone.

But... stranger things had happened.

Jordan shook his head, as darkness filled his eyes. The joking flirt was gone then, replaced with someone that had a core of steel and shadows. "Talk to me about the game plan for Alex."

And just like that, we were back to business.

CHAPTER 7



Jordan and I ended up spending most of the day in his bedroom. After he did something technologically impressive to disable any tracking bots from my palm reader, we spent hours pouring over old news articles about previous ballot winners. When we'd exhausted those resources, we moved on to even older information about the rise of monarchies and rumors of an infertility problem.

Mattie and Nolan had joined us before lunch, and we'd filled them in on everything. Good thing, too, because she'd arrived all red-faced with anger and accusing me of being brainwashed. Apparently Alex had been making sure the entire school knew we were "still together" and "totally in love." Gag.

"Hey, I have an important question," Nolan said when we stopped to eat the food we'd ordered up from the kitchens. There were numerous perks to being a student at Arbon Academy, and room service was just one of them.

"Go on," Jordan invited, taking a huge bite of pizza. The pizzas at Arbon were out-of-this-freaking-world good.

Nolan frowned thoughtfully, chewing his own mouthful. "How come Rafe isn't here with us?" He arched a brow at me, and the food stuck in my throat. "I know you guys have had your issues but I figured you'd... uh... worked through those?"

My face heated, and I did everything possible to avoid Jordan's intense stare. Despite my plan to speak with him about his confession, we hadn't broached the subject. It was just sitting there like this giant pink elephant in the corner of the room that we'd both been ig-

noring. Still hadn't stopped the occasional accidental-on-purpose touches as he'd helped me navigate my palm reader more efficiently.

"Wait, when did you work through things with Rafe?" Mattie asked, and I froze.

Fuck. I hadn't told her...

Clearing my throat, I wiped my hands off on a napkin. "I'm sure Rafe has better things to do than help the poor little charity case with her boy troubles."

That was probably unfair. He'd been nothing but understanding with me after watching me suck face with the enemy in the hall. But I was barely holding it together around Jordan. Add Rafe into the mix, and I might end up committed. Or naked.

My cheeks burned hotter—if that was even possible—as fantasies of Jordan, Rafe, and me naked flashed across my mind, and my thighs clenched involuntarily.

"Besides, I think we almost have this worked out. Right?" I gave Nolan a very clear *shut-the-fuck-up* glare, which he probably understood.

He took another bite of his pizza, seeming to let the matter drop.

But then... "Are you guys avoiding each other 'cause you fucked?"

I choked on my pizza, and Mattie started laughing.

"What? Violet and Rafe? As if!" She snickered, then sobered when she realized no one else was laughing. "Wait, *what*?"

I cringed. Hard. What the hell had I been thinking? I mean, obviously I hadn't been—at all—at least, nothing beyond my need to wash Alex off my skin and out of my heart.

"Well, this is awkward," Nolan commented, oh so helpfully. "So I guess Violet forgot to tell you about how Jordan kissed her, too?"

"Dude!" Jordan exclaimed, and I dropped my face into my hands with a groan.

"Wow," Mattie spluttered. "I'm not sure if I should be impressed or jealous. I mean, Rafe *and* Jordan."

She flashed a sweet but nasty smile at her brother. "You didn't throw your dick in the ring too?"

Nolan was not perturbed by her question. "Nah, I think Violet already has her hands full. I mean, I've seen the size of those two monst—"

Jordan punched him in the shoulder, hard enough to all but knock him off the bed. I worried at first he'd choked on his pizza, he was coughing so hard, but it was mainly laughter. Dumb fuck.

Mattie turned her full focus on me. "Are you really okay? I mean, Alex is a lot to deal with, but throw in Rafe... I'm worried about you."

I swallowed hard. "The heartbreak is one thing. I was the idiot who didn't read between the lines, so caught up in the 'romance' he was wooing me with. I'm sure I'll be over it soon, though. It wasn't like we were together very long. And Rafe... that was just quick"—Jordan cleared his throat but didn't say anything. It really hadn't been quick, to be fair—"revenge sex. I needed to cleanse the palate so to speak, and Rafe was both convenient and strong enough to handle my rage."

"Violence has anger issues," Nolan added in another unhelpful little tidbit. "She nearly killed her opponent in her last fight."

Mattie's face was now the color of a very ripe tomato, and she kept opening and closing her mouth as she looked between the three of us.

"Why?" she finally choked out. "You know those fights are resistance led. You know that people die and if any of our parents found out, they would probably disinherit us. Why do you keep doing it?"

"They're resistance led?" I cut in before anyone could answer her. "What do you mean?"

The resistance was like a fairytale wrapped in a nightmare. This group was out there fighting against monarchies, trying to bring some balance back with at least a basic set of rules the royals had to follow as well. Rules to protect the rest of us.

Everyone who wasn't royal had high hopes that one day they might succeed. But we'd also heard of their inhumanly violent raids, inflicting torture and attacking innocent children. Their leader was as out of control as any royal. They'd razed entire villages to the ground to maintain control over the few neutral—not under monarch rule—territories that remained.

Sometimes I was on the side of the royals because at least it was the evil I knew. The other was too unpredictable.

"Both resistance, regular people, and royals fight," Nolan reminded his sister. "There's no evidence that it's orchestrated by the

resistance." He cleared his throat. "Not that I fight. I've actually never heard of it."

For the second time in five minutes he got punched. This time by his twin.

With a sigh, she turned to me. "Please just promise that you're being safe."

Her eyes flicked to Jordan and then back to me. "With everything. Please be safe. And let me know when you need backup, because I will straight up destroy anyone who tries to mess with you."

I believed her. Leaning across Jordan, I wrapped my arms around Mattie. "I promise. I've been through a ton of shit in my life, and I'm not about to allow Alex or Arbon Academy to take me down."

Mattie pushed the pizza box aside so she could shift closer to me. Her palm reader was out in the same instant. "What's our plan of attack?" she asked, all business. "These assholes can't be allowed to get away with this. We need to take them down and make it hurt."

An image appeared on her palm; it looked like old-school lined paper. Names were written on it: Alex, Claudette, Brandon.

"Anyone else we need to add?"

She was serious, and my heart swelled. I'd never had anyone in my corner, not like this. My sensei had guided me, but he'd made me fight my own battles. Always. He'd also come down hard on me when I didn't live up to his very rigid expectations. It had been the discipline I needed, but it meant that unconditional support was a gift I did not expect. These fuckers were gonna make me cry.

Discreetly, I cleared my throat and blinked away any moisture that was trying to make an appearance. Crying was not a luxury I allowed myself. At least it hadn't been before I'd won the princess ballot.

Mattie noticed, squeezing my hand, and then we were back to planning the demise of three people.

"Claudette is tricky," she started.

"Because of Rafe," Nolan cut in.

"Right." She nodded. "Rafe's betrothal to her is causing him no shortage of political headaches, and he's been unable to move his parents on their stance."

"It's not just his parents," Jordan added. "They're usually pretty agreeable. It has to be Claudette's. They're holding something over King Felipe and Queen Jacinta—something large enough that if

Rafe's parents forced the dissolution of this betrothal, it could upset the political balance in an extreme way."

"Does Rafe know what it is?" I asked.

Nolan and Mattie shook their heads. Jordan did too, but there was a beat of hesitation before he did.

"Jords?" I pushed, slipping into the nickname zone. "Give me something, America."

His eyes darkened, the brown turning into a burnt toffee, delicious and mesmerizing. When he focused on me like this, it was as if no one else in the world existed. And I legit should not be having these dark, sexy thoughts when I'd just found out about Alex and the scale of his betrayal.

But damn, I was only human.

"Rafe suspects what it is," Jordan confirmed, "from some shit Claudette told him when he broke off their betrothal, after you got hurt. She pointed out that if it weren't for the support of the Britains, Rafe's parents would not have so much control over former Europe. He thinks it's because of their warships and satellite technology."

"Arghh!" Mattie actually growled. "We should have destroyed that archaic bullshit a long time ago. The Guays' technology is so much more sophisticated, and thankfully it's slowly seeping into the rest of the world."

"But so many of our royal protocols still work off the original series of satellites—satellites owned and controlled by Britain," Nolan finished.

"So, how can we usurp their control over the Swiss province?" Mattie mused. "Without causing an international incident."

"You have a way that would cause an incident?" I asked.

She smiled. "Why, yes. Our technology can obliterate theirs, and I've been wanting to do it for so long because they do nothing but abuse their power."

"But our parents would kill us, and we'd probably start another World War," Nolan chimed in, sprawled back on the bed, hands across his flat stomach as his eyes closed.

There had to be a way. "What if we use your technology but pin it on someone else?"

Nolan's eyes were no longer closed. "How could we get close enough to any of the royals to pin it on them?" he asked, leaning for-

ward. "And even if we did, who are we wanting to take down? Alex, right? Violet has the direct path to him as his future wife."

"We can't pin it on a royal," Mattie reminded him. "It would start the sort of war that none of us need in our lives."

"What about the resistance?" I suggested. "Could you dummy up a poor man's version of your technology and then somehow slip it to them? They might just do our job for us."

Mattie looked a little green under her bronze complexion. "With that technology, they could do a hell of a lot more than just take out satellite networks."

We all fell silent, trying to think of another solution.

"We'll work more on it tomorrow," Mattie finally said, shutting her palm reader down. "I do think we're on the right track in destroying Claudette. Discredit her monarchy, break down her betrothal, and strip her of her title. That's our first aim."

"I plan on killing her and Brandon in the end," I added casually, standing up to slip my sweater on. "So it's probably a moot point."

Mattie didn't look horrified, and that was why I loved her. "It's on my list as a possible punishment, but don't you think there's just something so delicious about stripping them of everything good in life and making them live like that? Killing them ends the suffering so fast."

I blinked at her, a rough chuckle escaping. "You're evil."

She smiled and shrugged.

Crossing back, I wrapped her up in a tight hug. "I love it. I should just marry you and live at your castle."

She hugged me back. "I'd marry the fuck out of you, if that were how you rolled. You could be my sister-in-law, though. That would work."

Nolan wrapped his arms around us both. "A plan I would normally get behind, but I'm not competing with Rafe and Jords."

"It's not like that!" I shook my head, shooting a quick, guilty look at Jordan, even as I denied Nolan's suggestion that I was involved in a love triangle.

I wasn't.

Right?

CHAPTER 8



My plan to exact revenge on Brandon didn't move very fast. Mostly because the fucker was nowhere to be seen. I was half-tempted to create an excuse to visit Dean Morgan just so I could suss out where his son was.

"I think he's visiting family again," Mattie said as we walked to the soccer game on Saturday morning. This week had been both hectic and stressful as fuck, but I'd successfully managed to avoid Alex for most of it. I was only going to this game today to support Nolan and Jordan. Otherwise I would be hiding somewhere, figuring out the best places to lure and destroy a few royals. And Brandon. No matter how much he wished it, dude had zero royal blood. He was just a mean spirited bully, and he deserved to be punished.

"Hi, Violet," a deep voice said from behind me, stopping me in my tracks. I spun around to see an older but familiar face.

"Oh, hey!" I said quickly, smoothing my hands down my jeans. "I haven't seen you in a while. Dean Morgan keeping you busy?"

Mr. Wainwright smiled, and I was reminded of the first time I'd seen him—in the matron's office, where my entire life had changed. Was he aware that the ballot was rigged? Had he known what he was dragging me into when he appeared at the orphanage?

Questions I didn't have answers to... yet.

"Yes, he is," he said, shaking his head. "There is a lot going on behind the scenes at the moment, and the first school dance is in the works. I've been conversing with a few of the royal families, and this year we might have some special guests at the spring ball."

I quickly shot a look at Mattie, and she rolled her eyes out of Mr. Wainwright's view.

Yeah, looked like it was going to be your typical school dance.

He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I'm glad I caught you. Dean Morgan has requested a progress meeting. He wants to see how you're settling in."

Alarm bells tinkled in my head because the timing of this was very convenient—right after I'd found out about everything and tried to break up with Alex. Maybe they'd noticed I was avoiding him? Or maybe this was about Brandon. Either way, it was a good opportunity to gather some information—and I didn't even have to create an excuse to do so. It was handed to me like fate was giving me exactly what I wanted.

"When does he want to see me?" I asked, annoyed that I might miss the soccer game if it was now. Sure, I'd acted like Mattie had to drag me along, but truth be told, I was turning into a secret superfan of this damn sport.

"Monday morning before class will suffice," he said. "Just come along whenever you're dressed and ready. We'll accommodate you."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "I'll be there."

He nodded before tipping his head to Mattie. "Greetings, Princess Matisse. Hope you have a wonderful day."

He turned and walked away. Mattie didn't say a word, but the look on her face was one of distaste. "Never trusted him," she said, slipping her arm through mine. "He's hiding something for sure. Don't go to the meeting without me."

I shrugged. "I can look after myself."

She chuckled before tugging me along. "I know you can, but that's when someone comes at you face to face. These bastards are sneaky. They'll never be honorable about it, and you're so new to this world. It's backstabbing and deception at every turn. Just... make sure you take me along."

"Sure, sounds like a plan," I said. I felt better knowing she'd be with me.

We hurried through the academy to the sports arena, and I blinked at the new security detail waiting at the main entrance. Four of them blocked the way, checking every person before they were allowed entry.

We had our bags searched, a quick pat down, and a guard used a scanner, running it across us to detect... something.

"Has there been a threat?" Mattie asked the closest guard, a female, probably ten years older than us.

Her face showed her displeasure at being questioned, especially with the crowd behind us waiting their turn, but she clearly recognized the princess addressing her and thought better of brushing Mattie off.

"Resistance agents have been seen in the area," she said, her accent mild. "There was also a bombing in an upmarket German street. Dean Morgan felt it was prudent to incorporate more security for these large events.

Mattie's expression didn't change with this information; she just nodded and murmured, "Thank you," before she dragged me into the main stadium. We didn't chat as she used her epic bitch face and some sharp elbows to secure us our usual seats directly behind our home team.

"So," I finally whispered. "That was weird. Have you heard anything about the resistance being in the area?"

She swallowed, moving her head much closer to mine. "My parents sent us coded updates that basically advised the new threat level around Arbon is a three. One is neutral, two is caution, three means there's legitimate concern."

Great. "This isn't about the fights?"

She shook her head. "No, definitely not. The fights have been run for years, and nothing weird is happening there, outside of the raids. That side of the resistance is just fun and games; it's the other side we have to worry about."

Like we didn't have enough to deal with.

Deciding not to dwell on it now, I turned away from the security still scanning people and out into the stadium. "Whoa." I surveyed the crowd. "Big turnout today. Who are we playing again?"

Mattie wrinkled her nose at me. "Damn girl, have you been under a rock lately? We're playing the Princeton Panthers."

"Oh." My mouth rounded in surprise. "We're playing a team from New America?"

Mattie nodded. "Yep, and there's some bad blood there with Jordan. He was supposed to attend Princeton, you know?"

I shook my head. "No, I didn't know. What happened? I thought all royals came here to Arbon."

"Nope." Her gaze was locked on the field, her eyes tracking the opposing team as they warmed up with drills across the field. "Not all of us. Just lots."

I frowned at her, then followed her line of sight again. She wasn't tracking the team... She was tracking a player.

"Who's number twelve, Mattie?"

Her gaze shot to mine, wide-eyed and guilty, while her cheeks stained pink. "Huh? Why would you ask that?"

I grinned back at her, smug as shit for guessing correctly. "So? Who is he?"

She cleared her throat and turned her attention back to the field. "No one. Anyway, what was I saying? Right. Jordan. So every other New American heir has actually attended Princeton since like... forever. Since the Monarch War."

"Right, so literally every New American king?"

"Exactly. But Jordan and Rafe went to high school together at Arbon Prep and became the best of friends. So Jordan applied to Arbon without his father's approval, then when he was accepted, there was this whole scandal because King Munroe couldn't decline the enrolment without insulting *all* the other royals attending Arbon. Like he thought *his* country offered a superior education for his son or something." Mattie spoke at a million miles an hour, like she could make me forget the hot guy she'd been eye-fucking across the field. He was cute, I'd give her that. But I thought Mattie liked her guys with more... vagina?

"Okay, so if he indirectly said his son was too good for Arbon, he'd have damaged a lot of political alliances?" I double-checked I was understanding Mattie's gossip correctly. "So where did that leave Princeton?"

Mattie screwed up her face, echoing what I suspected. "Offended as fuck."

With almost comical timing, shouts came up from the field below us.

"Oh shit," Mattie cursed, rising slightly out of her seat like she wanted to get down there and intervene. I'd admit, I felt the same way.

Number twelve for the Princeton Panthers was toe-to-toe with Jordan, his body language aggressive as he snarled something into the New American prince's face. For his part, Jordan looked like he was about to start swinging. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides, the thick fabric of his goalie gloves only highlighting the gesture.

"Crap," I muttered, my heart thundering as Rafe strode across the field to where Jordan and number twelve were arguing. Something about the way the Swiss prince stalked over the grass told me he was going to punch first, ask questions later.

Mattie grabbed my hand, squeezing my fingers and looking just as worried as I felt. Instinct told me to get down there and punch number twelve myself, regardless of what his deal was. He clearly had issues with Jordan, which meant he had issues with me. Like it or not. But Mattie looked *torn*.

"We can't do anything to help," she told me, but I suspected she was also telling herself. "The refs won't let it get out of hand."

I rolled my eyes, thinking of the fight I'd witnessed during the last soccer game. The one where Alex had taken a swing at Rafe. The referees hadn't been in any hurry to intervene that time.

Still, before Rafe reached Jordan and number twelve, other members of the Princeton Panthers had already separated the two guys. Two of them were tugging their team member away, creating a buffer zone of their own players to keep him away from Jordan, while another player—number eight—spoke to my friend in a much less aggressive manner.

"Okay, you're going to need to explain what just happened," I told Mattie with a long exhale.

She cringed and sighed. "Number twelve? That's Zachary Westbridge." She paused and gave me a meaningful look, like the name was supposed to mean something to me. "Jordan's half brother."

"What?" I exclaimed, my spine straightening as I halfway jumped out of my seat. "He said he had a sister but made no mention of a brother."

Mattie groaned. "I forget how tightly our advisers keep information about heirs under wraps when it's all common knowledge to us. Okay, so, Jordan never talks about it, so *swear* you won't ask him about it?" I nodded quickly. "Zachary is actually older than Jordan by like... six months? I think?"

My jaw dropped. "What?! He should be the crown heir then?"

Mattie gave me a knowing shrug. "Except that he was the byproduct of a super scandalous affair that King Munroe had when he and Queen Diane were going through fertility issues. Zach's mom, Lady Silvia, was six months pregnant when Queen Diane conceived Jordan... so as you can imagine, it became a bit, uh, awkward in the New American court."

"Wow," I murmured, my eyes locked onto Jordan as he paced the field. His anger and agitation were clear as he rolled his shoulders and scowled at anyone within twenty feet of him. "So, then what happened?" Illegitimate children weren't the shameful thing they had been in the Middle Ages when religion ruled kingdoms. Now they were often a necessity to continue family lines. Or at least, they were for commoners. *We* didn't enter into genetically matched engagements as children.

"King Munroe disowned Zach and all but exiled his mom. She raised him on her family estate in Alberta." She was squirming uncomfortably in her seat with all of this information, and my instincts told me there was more to the story.

I frowned, keeping my eyes on Jordan again. He looked so pissed off...

"So why the bad blood between them? What happened?"

Mattie blew out a long breath, hunching her shoulders. "Well, for one thing, Zach and Jordan have had their mothers poisoning them against each other their entire lives. Every time they're in the same place together—which happens a *lot* in royal circles—they end up in a fight over something stupid."

I shifted my gaze back to her, narrowing my eyes. "And the other reason?"

"The other reason?" She cringed. "Is that Zach's my fiancé."

I swear, my jaw just about hit the fucking floor.

"I'm going to need you to repeat that."

She rolled her eyes dramatically. "Oh come on. You know we all get sold off at like age six." She faked a gag.

"Yeah, I know. I just thought you'd have mentioned this before now. Damn, Mattie, way to be a shitty friend." I was teasing, and she knew it.

"Shut up," she grumbled, jabbing me in the side with her elbow. "Anyway. It's caused no end of drama whenever we have interac-

tions with Zach. He's a bit of a douchebag, to be honest, and slutty as all hell. Jordan and the guys kinda hate that he's my future."

I nodded, understanding where they were coming from. "But you were just staring at him like you wanted to lick him all over."

Mattie snorted a laugh. "I'm not fucking blind, Vi. If it helps, I totally looked at you like that when we first met, too."

I laughed before my humor faded away at another thought. "It's kinda odd that you'd be matched to someone who is exiled though, right? I mean, you're a princess and he's pretty much nothing." Her laughter died off, too, her brow furrowing.

"Is this the actual proof we need that it's all about the future royals?" I pushed. "That they only care about the perfect genetic match for babies and since he has royal blood, he's eligible?"

Mattie no longer looked remotely amused. "Yeah. They always joke about royals being genetically superior, but it's starting to look like they're actively working to make that happen."

I had a flashback to that fucking nurse again when she all but sexually assaulted me during her examination. In truth, I really had no idea what she'd done. I was just assuming she'd told me the truth, and the whole truth at that. I was no doctor and hadn't exactly checked what she was sticking inside me... it could have been *anything*.

The thought of that, the feeling of being violated, had my stomach churning.

"We need to know more," I murmured.

Mattie nodded, but then the announcements started and we focused on the game, relaxing into our seats. Given how high the tensions were between the teams, I'd bet it would be a good one, and I was glad to have the distraction.

"Thanks for telling me," I said to my friend after a few moments of silence. "But there's one more thing I'm wondering now..."

Mattie shot me a sharp look. "What?"

I bit my lower lip, anxiety churning in my stomach. "Who is Jordan engaged to?"

As soon as the words left my lips, I wanted to take them back. I already knew Rafe's betrothed and knew she posed zero threat to me. Not that I cared. It wasn't like I actually wanted to date Rafe or anything crazy like that, but we *had* fucked.

Jordan, though? I could actually see myself with him... going out for dinners or movies or just, I don't know, hanging out. Intimately.

Mattie shook her head. "I don't know."

Well, that wasn't what I'd expected.

"What do you mean, you don't know? Jordan's a crown prince; he's engaged to *someone* isn't he?" I frowned at her now, uncertain if she was lying to spare my feelings or something. But seriously, who could be that awful? Claudette was already taken—by Rafe—and no one else was remotely as horrible as her.

She nodded. "Definitely. But he's never told us who, and no girls at Arbon have laid claim, so..." She shrugged. "Noles and I think it might be a younger girl, and Jordan's respecting her by not publicizing their engagement until she's eighteen."

I sighed. That rang true to his personality. Damn him for being so... *decent*.

CHAPTER 9



The Arbon Royals won the match, but fuck it was close. There were no fights on the field, but it was one of the most intense, aggressive matches I'd seen in a long time. That included sports that were not soccer. "Wow, that bad blood wasn't at all obvious out on the field," I said somewhat sarcastically. "They kept it well locked down."

Mattie snorted. "I'm just grateful no one got punched."

"Not yet," I murmured. "Luckily the dressing rooms for the two teams are on opposite sides of that long hall, so they won't end up throwing down while half-naked."

Mattie smiled wistfully. "But... is that really lucky? For those of us who might sneak in to see it?"

Now that she mentioned it...

Everyone was exiting the stadium, and we stood to do the same.

"Hey, ladies!" Drake, the crown royal of Denmark, waved as he strolled past, down near the field. "Party at mine tonight. Eight on the dot. Don't be fucking late."

Then he was gone again, lost in the crowd.

I shuddered at the thought. Drake was Alex's closest friend, and I knew there would be no avoiding that fucking fuck if I went to the party. At the same time, if I didn't go, Alex would probably hunt me down. I knew my time of avoiding him was coming to an end, and I had to figure out my next move.

"We're not going," Mattie said bluntly, reading whatever expression had crossed my face. "And you won't be alone in your room so Alex can come at you either. That's not how this game works."

I snorted, pushing past a group of chicks who had to stop in the middle of the path to screech and hug each other. Even though they no doubt had seen their friends at breakfast this morning. "Alex is not going to let me avoid him any longer. I sense that this week he was giving me breathing room to come to terms with our arrangement. But you saw him on the field. He spent more time with his eyes on me than on the ball."

Something that had contributed to our team's near loss. Alex had been basically useless out there. And that fucking grin... it'd been locked on me, making my skin crawl and my stomach churn. He was planning something.

My palm reader buzzed.

Alex: **Be at Drake's party. There's nowhere to run, little lamb.**

Mattie tilted her head, peering at the message. "That asshole," she snarled. In about five seconds she was on her palm reader dialing someone. When they answered, she immediately started snapping out commands. I couldn't tell what those commands were—they weren't in English—but I could tell she was super pissed.

Figuring she'd tell me when she was finished, I went back to the message.

Me: **I think you're forgetting who's the lamb and who's the wolf.**

I sent it before I could think about the repercussions. I wasn't exactly scared of Alex, but I'd be a liar if I didn't admit that he made me uneasy. I couldn't tell what he was going to do next, unpredictable lunatic that he was.

Alex: **If you're a wolf, prove it. Come to Drake's party.**

A derisive snort left me. If he thought I was going to get into a dick-measuring contest with him, he was sadly mistaken. I had nothing to prove to that lying piece of shit.

Mattie was finished with her call now, her face slightly pinked for the exertion of all the yelling and probably cursing she had been doing. "Okay, so three things," she said, leading me toward her room. "First, I'm having someone look into Alex. Let's find the dirt we need to take him down." I wondered if that was what her phone call had been about. "Two, we are going to have our own party tonight, and no fucking assholes allowed." Okay, but that ruled out half this school. Still, it would be a nice way to stick it to Alex and Drake, his

sycophant. "And three... we need to look hot. Non-negotiable. End of story."

I laughed and rolled my eyes. "Well, obviously."

Mattie grinned at me with a wicked twinkle. "Excellent. I'll accept that as your agreement."

"As tempting as that is, we don't have anywhere to *host* a party. Drake lives off campus, remember?" Despite how relevant my point was, Mattie just shrugged it off.

"Don't underestimate me, girl. Head up to your room and order us some champagne. I'll swing past with makeup and outfits after I sort a few things out." She gave me a joking butt-slap and pushed me in the direction of the dorms. When I narrowed my eyes at her in suspicion, she sighed dramatically. "Just *trust me*, Vi. I got this."

As curious as I was about what *this* might be, I did trust her. So when she gave me a little finger wave and sashayed her way back into the crowd of soccer fans, I just watched her go and shook my head.

"Huh, she's still alive," some random girl giggled to her friend as they passed me. The way their eyes raked over me left little doubt who "she" was.

Her friend sneered, not bothering to lower her voice as she replied. "I guess Alex hasn't seen the way Jordan's been sniffing around her this week."

The first girl snickered again, then turned to give me a pitying look as they continued down the corridor. "I'm sure your funeral will be lovely, Charity."

I just gave her a bored glare back and muttered an insult under my breath before walking off. I didn't waste my time on chicks like that. Their entire aim in life was to make themselves feel superior by bringing others down.

Arbon students mixed with Princeton fans, all flowing down the main arterial corridor toward both the dorms and the main foyer. Not wanting to run into any more *concerned* girls, I decided to take a longer route back to my room. One that went past the locker rooms, too, so I could check on Jordan.

Not because I was afraid of what Alex might do—fuck that prick—but because of that scene with Jordan's half brother on the field.

By the time I reached the locker area, the hall was deserted. A shiver of fear and anticipation zapped through me. The new knowl-

edge that Jasmine had been murdered sat heavy in my gut, and I rubbed at my upper arms in an attempt to chase away the goosebumps that had suddenly appeared.

Just as I made the mental decision to bypass the locker rooms and carry on to my room without seeing Jordan, the door on the visiting team's side slammed open and a tall guy exited with a sports bag slung over his shoulder.

"Hey," he greeted me, pausing with one eyebrow cocked. Admittedly, I probably looked a bit strange just standing there in the middle of the empty corridor, lost in my own thoughts. Or rather, frozen in shock. Trust my luck. It wasn't any random Princeton player, it was Mattie's fiancé. Jordan's half brother.

Zachary.

"Hi," I replied, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from saying anything more.

He narrowed his eyes at me, and now that I was up close, I could see the familial resemblance. He shared the same coffee-and-cognac colored eyes as Jordan, and their lips curved the same way.

"Are you looking for someone?" he asked, tilting his head to the side slightly.

I shook my head. "Nope, just... taking a shortcut."

The half-truth fell flat, and Zachary Westbridge gave me a small, mocking smile.

"Sure." The word was deadpanned, and my cheeks heated. "Didn't I see you sitting with my fiancée during the game?"

This time it was my brows that hitched. "Your *fiancée* is my best friend, and she's never mentioned you until today. That's got to tell you something, huh?"

Zachary laughed, which wasn't the reaction I'd expected. "Cute." His attention shifted over my shoulder, and he gave a small nod. "Rafe. Hey man."

My shoulders stiffened, and I resisted the urge to turn around. I hadn't even heard the door to the Arbon locker room open. Sneaky fuck.

"Zach." Rafe's deep voice was like ice. "Don't you have somewhere to be? A flight home, perhaps?"

Mattie's fiancé just grinned, and it was one of those mocking, knowing kind of grins that suggested he knew something we didn't. "Nah, no rush. Your dean kindly offered us lodging for the night. I

sure hope someone throws a party while we're here. No one parties like the royal sluts of Arbon Academy, am I right?" His joke was aimed at Rafe, but the sly wink was all for me. Ugh. What a creep.

Rafe's hand came to rest on my waist, and I braced myself so I didn't jump out of my boots with shock. He was touching me. Voluntarily. In front of someone. And it wasn't to hurt me. Or... I didn't think so.

"I wouldn't know," Rafe replied, his words underscored with growling anger. "But I'll be sure to let Mattie know you're planning to disrespect her. Again."

Zach's grin was so wide he was starting to seem unhinged. He raked his gaze over my body, pausing and giving a pointed look at where Rafe's hand still rested on my waist. His thumb had somehow found a strip of exposed skin between my jeans and jacket, and I needed to bite my cheek hard to stop from leaning into that touch.

"I'll see you around, *Rafael*," Zach said after a long, tense moment. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Violet." He gave another smirk, then sauntered away down the empty corridor.

It wasn't until he was gone from sight that I gasped.

"What?" Rafe demanded. Neither of us had moved, so he was still standing behind me with his hand on my waist. His thumb stroked ever so lightly across my skin, like a subconscious movement.

"He just..." I spun around to face Rafe, my brow pulling low in a worried frown. "He used my name."

Rafe arched a dark brow. "So?" His hand was still on my waist. Now that I was facing him, it seemed... intimate. Yet I wasn't moving away.

I shook my head. "I never introduced myself. In fact, at first he acted like he had no idea who I was."

This made Rafe's brow drop into a scowl of his own, but he didn't look shocked. Just annoyed.

"He's playing games," he informed me. "And they're overstepping. I'll take care of it."

Before I could ask him who "they" were, the locked door opened again, and this time I heard it. Still... I didn't move out of Rafe's touch.

Yep, there was something seriously wrong with my brain.

"Hey, Vi, what are you doing here?" Jordan asked, shouldering his heavy sports bag and running a hand through his disheveled chestnut hair.

He really was gorgeous.

"I came to see you," I told him.

"Oh." He blinked at me with surprise, then his gaze darted down to where Rafe's hand remained against my body. "How come?"

Rafe gave my waist a small squeeze, then stepped away, and I felt noticeably colder for the absence of his touch.

"Mattie told me about..." I trailed off suddenly remembering I wasn't supposed to mention it. Shit. Thankfully, Jordan didn't seem upset with me; he just shot a sad smile my way.

"About my big bad brother? Yeah, I figured that might come out some time today."

I wrinkled my nose and gave a nod. "Sorry. He seems like a total asshole. Like, worse than Rafe."

The Swiss heir snorted a laugh, and Jordan smirked.

"That's a big call," he told me, slinging his arm around my shoulders and walking with me. "Rafe takes being an asshole to whole new levels some days."

I laughed, but this time Rafe didn't. Whatever. He knew he was an ass.

"So what's the plan this afternoon?" Jordan continued on, oblivious or unconcerned with the tension between me and Rafe.

The doors behind us banged again, and Nolan called out. "Thanks for waiting, dickheads!"

We paused while he caught up, and he tugged me free of Jordan's arm to hug me himself. "New girl! Did you see all the awesomeness that happened out there? We kicked those Princeton Prick's butts!"

"Is that what that was?" I teased him. "'Cause it sure looked like you scraped that win by the skin of your teeth. But hey, what would I know?"

Nolan clutched at his chest, gasping dramatically like I'd stabbed him, while his friends chuckled.

"Harsh, New Girl. Real harsh. So what were we talking about? Sorting out your complicated love life? How's that all going, anyway? You and Jordy fucking yet?" There you had it, Nolan, Prince of the Guays, Master of Tact and Subtlety.

"Jesus, Noles," Jordan muttered, giving him a headshake. Meanwhile Rafe just punched him in the shoulder.

"What?" my red-haired friend asked, all wide-eyed innocence. Shithead. "Okay fine. If you three *weren't* about to have a DP threesome in the janitor's closet, what *were* you talking about? Was it me? Were you discussing how great I look today? It's okay, you can tell me."

I rolled my eyes, fighting back a laugh. Despite the awkward subject matter—and how hot that suggestion of a threesome made me—Nolan was fucking fun.

"I was just about to tell the guys how Drake is having a party tonight," I said. "And Alex has *demand*ed I attend as his date."

"What? No!" Nolan exclaimed.

"Hell no," Jordan snapped, folding his arms over his chest.

"Not. Happening." Rafe bit his words off like they were poisoned.

I sighed. "As cute as this little show of macho caveman bullshit is, have we all forgotten how very capable I am of handling myself?" I arched a brow and leveled each of the three of them with a warning glare. Okay. Just two of them. I was too shaky and turned on to fully meet Rafe's eyes.

"Besides," I continued. "Mattie has other plans."

Nolan barked a laugh as he relaxed. "Of course she does."

"She's planning her own party?" Jordan asked, and I gave a small nod. "Cool. It'll be fun. Mattie always throws great parties, and if Drake is hosting one the same night, we won't need to worry about Alex and his slimy hands all over you."

My palm reader buzzed, and I gave it a quick glance. "I better run, Mattie's already at my room. Catch you guys later?"

"You bet," Jordan replied, giving me a warm smile. "Thanks for coming to check on me. That was really sweet of you."

I could feel Rafe and Nolan staring at me, and suddenly everything seemed all too... personal. Feelings-y.

A flutter of awkwardness washed through me, and I peeled myself free of Nolan's side hug. "No worries." Without sticking around to make things even weirder, I hurried away and raced up the stairs to the girls wing.

CHAPTER 10



I eyed the colorful pile of silk and lace spread out across my bed with wariness and suspicion.

"Where's the rest?" I finally asked Mattie after standing there in confusion for way too long.

She frowned back at me. "The rest of what?"

I waved a hand at the clothing on my bed. No, not clothing. Lingerie.

"You said you were bringing outfit options."

Mattie flipped her perfect copper hair and gave me a puzzled look. "Yeah, and...?"

"You only brought underwear."

"Uh," she replied, running her eyes over the array of delicate fabrics. "No, I brought lingerie."

I rolled my eyes. Something I did a lot with her. "Okay, so I repeat. Where's the rest?"

Mattie squinted at me. "Babe, I feel like you've missed the point of a *lingerie* party. These *are* the outfit options."

"What?" I shrieked. "Since when is this a lingerie party? Mattie! What the hell?"

She huffed, folding her arms over her chest. "Girl, I *told* you it was." She paused, her brow dipping in thought. "Didn't I? I'm sure I mentioned it. Or... if nothing else, I definitely meant to."

"Oh my god," I groaned, falling forward onto my bed. "Mattie..."

"Oh, stop it," she chastised me, whacking me on the butt with...

"Did you just smack me with a pearl thong?"

My friend held up the item in her hand to inspect, then grinned. "Oops, my personal shopper must have gotten carried away. Don't worry, they're all brand new. See? Tags attached." She showed me a price tag with a jaw-dropping figure on it. "No flap sweat has touched this pair. Yet." With a giggle, she tucked the pearl thong into her handbag, then turned back to me with a serious scowl. "Now, pick your outfit, Violet Rose Spencer. I want to see at *least* two princes cracking hard-ons when they see you tonight, or I've failed as your best friend."

"Only two?" I joked. "Aim higher, girl." But my mind had already started playing out fantasies of the two princes that I hoped she meant... and their hard dicks.

Fuck. Somehow it was getting worse. And I had seriously too many issues to deal with to be in this state of constant arousal over them.

Yet, here we were.

"So if we have to wear," I said, flicking my fingers toward the scraps of lace, "that. What do the guys wear?"

Mattie grinned, and suddenly I was much more interested in this little party.

"Girl, you just wait and see."

Fuck, now that wasn't playing fair. But I was intrigued, so her work here was done.

Moving back to the pile, I shifted through them with more interest, finally settling on a black set. It was not as revealing as some of the lingerie, but it had these lace panels that cut down on the ass cheeks and across the top of the bra. It felt like it covered more, but there was a lot of skin peeking through.

Stepping out of the bathroom, I had on the underwear, black heels, and a lace shawl that scraped the top of my thighs.

"Are you sure this is normal?" I asked, running a hand over myself. "I'm practically naked."

Mattie's eyes were wide as she gave me a once-over. "Holy shit, Violet. You look incredible. I don't even understand why you wear clothes when you have that bangin' body underneath."

Shaking my head at her, I let out a low sigh. "This is the physique I need to be a good fighter, and it's better that people don't realize I'm a good fighter until after I've kicked their ass. I like to hide this side until I need to bring it out. "

Mattie shrugged. "I'll take your word for it. Personally, I like to let my assets shine."

She grabbed a set and disappeared into the bathroom, returning a minute later dressed completely in red.

Unlike mine, hers was a thong, skinny straps across her hips the only thing holding it all together. Her bra didn't offer much more in the way of coverage, but I couldn't actually see nipple. Not really.

"You look hot," I said with a smirk. "Even if I can tell you have a fully waxed vag in that piece of string."

Mattie laughed, her tits almost bursting free. "I won't be the skimpiest dressed there. I can promise you that."

I held both hands up. "No judgment here. You wear whatever you're comfortable with. Everyone else can get fucked."

She high-fived me, and then got straight to work on our hair and makeup. By the time we were ready to head to her party, we were flawlessly made up, and apparently, ready to rock out in our underwear.

The hall was silent when we left, and I took a second to check my palm reader. I'd been decidedly ignoring it for the last few hours, turning it to silent.

Twelve missed calls and twenty messages flashed up at me. *Alex.*

Not tonight, dickhead. I'd deal with you tomorrow.

Tonight, I was getting shitfaced.

I was definitely gonna slip a nip at some point, but it'd be worth it to forget Alex for a few hours.

Mattie led us along the silent hall, and I followed. I wasn't closely paying attention to where we were going, but I was almost certain I'd never been here before.

"Dean Morgan isn't exactly aware I'm throwing this party," she whispered, and I fought down my laughter.

"Shocker."

She shrugged, the red straps of her bra moving across the dark creaminess of her skin. "He only thinks he owns this school. We're the ones who are really in charge."

Truth. The royals owned everything.

We ended up in a section of the school I definitely had not been to. It was a series of function rooms that all seemed to lead into a gigantic ballroom.

"This is where the dance will be held soon," Mattie said, no longer whispering. Apparently we were pretty far from the main part of the academy now. "We're just going to utilize one of the smaller rooms out the back."

Good plan because the ballroom would hold ten thousand easily. Mattie was popular, but not that popular.

We crossed the huge room to get to this smaller one, and as we got closer to the far side of the ballroom, I heard the music.

"My people set it all up," Mattie said, already moving her hips. "My door guys will stop any unwelcome assholes. It's going to be amazing."

My heartrate picked up, and it wasn't just the heavy bass pumping from behind the closed door. It was the thought of who might be on the other side.

Mattie opened the door quickly, and two beefy dudes stepped forward as the music spilled out through the gap. The second they caught sight of Mattie, they averted their eyes but still managed to bow their heads. "Princess," both of them said.

"Nice job, boys," Mattie said, striding into the room. "Appreciate your hard work."

They bowed again before resuming their positions at the door.

"Oh, and this is my bestie, Violet. Keep an eye on her too, please."

She strolled off into the crowd then, leaving me awkwardly standing as two men tried to look at me, but not below my face. They were definitely professional, I'd give them that.

"I can take care of myself," I said before I abruptly turned and marched after Mattie. I should never have agreed to wear an outfit I couldn't conceal my weapon in. Although...

A quick glance around told me that no one was concealing weapons here tonight, and at least that was some comfort.

"Tits and ass everywhere, am I right?" Nolan all but slammed into me, smelling of tequila and sexy man. He wore...

"What the fuck are you wearing?" I asked him, my eyes drawn to the tiny pouch that covered his dick and basically nothing else.

Nolan had a ripped-as-fuck body, smaller than Jordan's or Rafe's, but definitely sports toned. All of it was on display, except what was covered by the dick-pouch. Even his entire ass cheeks were out there for the world to see.

"You and Mattie suffer from zero confidence issues," I said drily, and his smile grew.

"Fuck hiding your body from the world." He ran his gaze across me. "Especially with a body like that, New Girl. I get the hype. I really fucking get it."

I whacked him across his stomach. "Twincest, remember. Let's dial it back."

Nolan threw his hands up. "Just making an observation. Like I said, there's no room for another dick on your dance card. And that being the case, I'm taking mine somewhere else."

Shaking my head at the words that came out of that dude's mouth, I moved further into the party, not sure I'd ever seen so much skin on display. Even at the pool.

The room was dark though, allowing us the illusion of privacy, with strobe lights flashing on the main dance floor. Making my way to the bar, I ordered two cocktails straight up.

"Whatever is gonna fuck me up," I said to the chick taking my order.

Her lips twitched. "I gotchu."

She was back in a few minutes with what she called "death by sunrise," and I smiled in anticipation. She waved away the cash I pulled out for a tip. "All included. Just enjoy and be safe."

She was gone then, and I downed the first one in about one minute, picking up the second as Mattie found me.

"Dude! You're drinking death by sunrise. They make the flaming illusions look like soda. I'm super proud of you."

I snorted, the alcohol already going to my head. "I always wanted a friend who was a bad influence. I'm so glad it's you."

Mattie laughed, throwing her arms around me. "I just overheard Zach, the fucking man-whore asshole pig-face, arguing with my bouncers over why he wasn't allowed in. I'm pretty glad I stuck him on the blacklist. He'll probably slink off to Drake's party and bang any chick who will have him, but whatever." She shrugged like she didn't care, even though she clearly did. "All in all, Violet Rose Spencer, I think my lingerie party this year is going well."

"You do this every year..."

My words trailed off as a familiar guy stepped into view. His dark hair was tousled, leading down to that perfect face, broad

shoulders, and a pair of tight white boxer shorts that did fucking nothing to hide what he was packing below.

"Jordy," Mattie shouted, having followed my slack-jawed stare.

Jesus. I was not going to survive. Not with my vagina or dignity intact.

I downed the second cocktail, all the while knowing that was a very bad move. Fuck it. This was my night. One fucking night to escape my shitty reality.

Like it wanted to prove my point, the palm reader lit up on my wrist, and I saw Alex's name flash across the screen.

Not tonight, asshole.

Heat settled into my veins, the buzz sending me toward the crown prince waiting on the dance floor. He stood there, eyes locked on me, heat in those cognac irises as they traced over my body.

"Wanna dance?" I said as soon as we were close enough to hear over the music. He took my hand, eyes never leaving me as he led me to the dance floor.

The music had a slow, heady beat, and as Jordan laid his hand on my back beneath the silk shawl I wore, tingles chased across my skin. We moved together, and I let every thought leave my head, choosing to focus on the delicious prince under my hands.

Literally.

I traced across the broad planes of his muscled body... Boy was fucking perfection, only superseded slightly by his prickish best friend.

Speaking of...

Heat pressed into my spine, and since Jordan didn't throw any punches—and I recognized the scent anyway—I knew it was Rafe. They danced with me between them, and when I couldn't take it any longer, I spun to the Swiss prince.

My breath caught, and all I could think of was fucking him again. "Cinderella," Rafe rasped, his gaze on the lace panels of my underwear. I'd lost the shawl thing, so he had the full display.

He wasn't in underwear, but he was shirtless, muscles and tats eyefucking me. All he wore was a pair of black pants, fitted to his body, while the rest was there for my greedy gaze to devour.

He leaned in even closer, breath brushing over my bare skin. "What the fuck are you doing, Violence?"

There was no desire in his voice. It was harsh and abrasive, and this time when goosebumps rose over my skin, some of my fucking senses returned to me.

What the fuck was I doing?

What the fuck?

This was not me. I didn't parade around in my underwear like a desperate chick needing to attract a prince using lingerie and as much naked skin as I could.

My body went cold, despite the heat of the alcohol still pumping through me. I froze between them, my gaze locked on the ground as a new sense of frustrated anger rose up inside of me.

"I'm hiding," I breathed, disgust coating my words. "Hiding from the reality of what I have to do."

It was loud in here, but Rafe heard me. His eyes bit into me, intense, darkly mocking in the way that only he could do.

"What are you going to do about that?" he pressed.

Jordan moved closer behind me. I could feel every hard line of his body, but it wasn't sexual. He exuded the same intensity that Rafe did.

"It's time for me to take my life back," I said, mostly to myself. I'd been in this position before, acting helpless... scared.

No. Fucking. More.

It was time for Violence to come out and play.

CHAPTER 11



“Nurse Reller tells me you’ve been avoiding her.”
Dean Morgan didn’t fuck around. His beady eyes, like his fucking son’s, bored into me from the other side of his desk.

“I’m not due for my next physical,” I replied, doing my best to keep the disgust from my voice. “There’s really no reason for her to summon me.”

It had only been a few messages on my palm reader through the school network system—easy to ignore. But apparently it was time for them to up their game. Just like Alex had said they would.

“There’s more for her to discuss with you than just your next physical,” he said, reprimand in his tone.

Mattie leaned forward in her chair, uncrossing her legs as she did. “Is this the sole reason for your meeting with Violet? Surely this could have been passed on in a message through the palm readers?”

Her voice was saying don’t fuck with me, you’re not royalty. And I’d never loved her more.

The dean cleared his throat. “No, of course not. I just wanted to make a point to mention that health should not be ignored. The nurse probably has some vitamins or supplements for her to take, and that’s in Violet’s best interest.”

Yeah, sure it was. Probably something to make me the most fertile woman on the planet. As it stood, Alex wouldn’t be putting an heir in me unless he could through the power of positive thought.

Or rape.

And I’d fucking kill anyone who tried to touch me like that.

"Is that everything?" I asked, keeping my tone as carefully even as possible, considering the anger burning through my veins.

Dean Morgan cleared his throat and shot Mattie a small frown. He was clearly pissed off that she'd come with me but couldn't tell her to leave the room without risking insult to a royal. The rules and double standards at Arbon Academy constantly confused me, but I trusted Mattie to know what was what.

"One other thing that we need to discuss, Ms. Spencer," he finally continued when Mattie made no move to leave. "Several complaints have been made against you from other students. Now, I'm sure I don't need to remind you that, er, scholarship students have a higher level of expectation around conduct"—Mattie snorted—"and that it's a serious breach of contract if you're found to be disrupting the Arbon way of life."

I blinked at him a few times, trying to understand just what exactly he was saying. I mean, sure, I was well aware of the fact that the rules were a whole lot stricter for me than anyone else. But...

"I'm sorry, what?" I frowned. "What complaints? From whom?"

Dean Morgan sighed, looking uncomfortable and annoyed. "Several students have alleged that you've been conducting yourself in a manner less than becoming of an Arbon Academy student." He paused, his mouth tightening. "Ms. Spencer, we take the betrothals of our royal students very seriously. Any attempts to interfere—"

"Hold up," I snapped, cutting the dean off mid-sentence. "I'm not even going to poke at the fact that you're all so casual about students being *betrothed* like we're in medieval times. But whose relationship is this actually about? I'm dating Alex." I swallowed back bile at that statement. "Who I was led to believe lost his fiancée in a tragic accident several years ago." Blergh. More bile. "So how exactly my relationship with him is damaging anyone's engagement, I don't..." I trailed off as the pieces clicked in my brain. Then I laughed. "Of course. Claudette. She thinks I'm chasing Rafe?"

It made sense, in a bitchy, mean-girl bullying kind of way. I'd just never realized things like this happened outside of old teen movies.

The Dean's face flushed, and he adjusted his tie. This whole topic was so incredibly juvenile I'd bet the dean of the most prestigious university in the world never would have imagined himself dealing with it.

Nonetheless, here we were.

"Ms. Spencer." Dean Morgan sighed again. "Claudette and several of her peers have expressed concerns that you—"

Mattie's chair scraped back, the sound of wooden legs on marble floor ear piercing. "I'm going to stop you right there," she announced, her tone harsh. "Claudette Bixel is nothing more than a lying, cheating, bully. Her *concerns* are totally unsubstantiated, and I will put money on it that none of her peers have any proof that Violet is acting *inappropriately*." She paused dramatically, and Dean Morgan just glared back at her. "I didn't think so. To clear things up, Violet and Rafe hate each other. Claudette is the one who's been sniffing around Alex like a cat in heat."

I gave the dean credit, he didn't even blink at that statement. He just nodded, adjusting more papers because he was clearly a touch uncomfortable with this topic of conversation.

"Please, just make sure to stick to the rules. Don't upset the way things are run here, Ms. Spencer, and we'll all get along just fine."

I heard the undercurrent of his warning. Just as Alex had said, there was more at play than a spoiled—possibly murderous—Australasian heir who wanted his own way. There was old-school money and power behind these betrothals, and they did not want anyone fucking with that.

Or fucking an heir they weren't betrothed to, apparently.

Then again, no one seemed to give two craps about the royals fucking around—so long as no pregnancies resulted from those affairs—so maybe this standard only applied to me.

"Understood," I finally managed to bite out, somehow not adding "Dean Fuckhead" after that.

He cleared his throat. "Excellent. Also, I've changed some of your schedule around to make life easier." He shuffled the papers again, and at this point I figured he was just fucking with me. But no, he was actually searching, and he managed to fish out a single piece of cream paper.

"It'll be sent to your palm reader as well, but here's the paper copy so you can keep track. You have a few new classes."

He waved me off then, already reaching for a pen as he filled in some bullshit form. My hands shook as we stood, and it was from pure fury at the audacity of this asshole. Change my schedule?

What the fuck did that even mean? Why?

This couldn't be good.

Mattie and I didn't say anything until we were out of his office and far from the prying ears of his staff.

"Show me the schedule," she said shortly, hand held out.

I shoved the crumpled paper at her, not able to look at it myself because I was already an eighth of a second from punching a wall. Or a dean.

"Motherfucker," she muttered, eyes running across the writing. "He's basically shifted you into every one of Alex's classes—" She broke off. "And a private study hall on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

My teeth clicked together as my jaw clenched. "Who wants to bet there is one other fucker in that private study group. They're not even pretending to give me an education anymore. Alex is a third year and studying totally different subjects for fuck's sake."

Arbon really was going to do everything to assist Alex in his quest to make me his baby maker.

"What do I do?" I murmured to Mattie, aware that there were multiple students lingering in the halls around us. Classes were due to start soon.

"First we get some food," she said, straightening and looking every fucking inch the princess she was. "Then we deal with this."

* * *

JUST WHEN I thought Dean Morgan had already shit all over my day, it got worse.

"Babe! There you are, have you been hiding from me?" Alex was such a good actor it was actually scary. If I didn't know what I knew...

"Fuck off, murderer," Mattie hissed at him when he drew close.

We'd barely made it three steps inside the dining room, and my gaze locked on Jordan's across the room where he sat at our usual table. His jaw clenched tight, and when Alex slung his arm over my shoulder, I gave the New American prince a small head shake.

As much as I'd love to see Jordan and Rafe beat the shit out of Alex, this wasn't the time or the place. Not while my own future and freedom were so precarious.

"Now, now, Matisse," Alex chided my best friend, "don't get your knickers in a twist just because I've seen Violet naked and you

haven't."

The leer he raked down my body with that statement made my skin crawl. The fact that I'd had sex with him would honestly haunt me for the rest of my days... however long that might turn out to be.

"What do you want, Alex?" I whispered while turning to face him with a pasted-on smile. I'd hoped that might dislodge his arm from around my shoulders, but if anything he just took it as an invitation to hold me closer.

The smile he gave me back was so genuine. So content. Holy shit, he was a fucking sociopath.

"I can't show affection to my girlfriend in public? After we've been so *close* it's starting to look a bit suspicious that we're never together. You wouldn't want anyone questioning our love, would you?" He tilted his head to the side, looking genuinely concerned. I stared up at him for an uncomfortably long time, searching his ocean-blue eyes for any trace of the cold-hearted, lying bastard I knew him to be. But I found nothing. He was that fucking good.

Mattie nudged my elbow, breaking my concentration. "Vi, let's get some food. We need to discuss that assignment, remember?"

I blinked at her, but Alex was the one who replied. "Oh, of course. That assignment." His mouth twitched with a mocking smile, making it clear he knew there was no assignment. "Well, I wouldn't want to interfere with your classwork, Violet. After all, we can't have the future queen of Australasia flunking out of Arbon Academy. What a scandal that'd be." He laughed at his own shitty joke, and I forced my lips to curve into a humorless smile.

"Uh-huh," I replied, and really, I felt like I deserved a damn medal for even managing that much. "See ya."

Stupid me for thinking he'd just leave it at that and let me slink over to my table, away from him. Nope, Prince Alex of Australasia needed to really drive his point home, so the next thing I knew his lips were on mine.

I shouldn't have been surprised. It was the same controlling bullshit he'd been pulling every damn second we'd been near each other since I'd confronted him. Yet, there I was, gasping in shock as he kissed me in the middle of the damn dining room in front of all our peers.

Alex pressed his body into mine, running his hands down my sides and groping my ass as he slipped his tongue past my lips. My

moment of stunned surprise passed quickly, though, and I bit down ever so lightly, warning him.

My silent threat to bite his fucking tongue off must have been clear because he released me long enough to thread a hand into my hair.

"Careful, Violet love," he whispered in my ear, his voice husky but so soft not even Mattie would hear him, "I quite like it rough." A roll of his hips reiterated that statement, and I internally gagged at the idea he'd just gotten hard from forcing me to kiss him.

"Enjoy lunch, girls," he said in a louder voice, knowing full well we had an audience. Of course we did. He was a fucking crown heir, and I was a ballot winner. We were literally the hottest gossip in the whole Academy. "I'll be seeing you later, gorgeous." He smacked a hot, wet kiss on the curve of my neck, nipping the skin lightly with his teeth, then laughed under his breath as he walked away. It wasn't a cheerful laugh, either. It was a dark sound, one that spoke to all the stains on his soul, and it sent a shiver chasing down my spine.

My hands balled into fists at my sides as I followed Mattie over to our table, where Jordan, Rafe and Nolan were all watching us with laser-like intensity.

"What?" I snarled when Rafe scowled at me as he gave my hands a pointed look.

He arched a brow—probably at my tone—and just shook his head. "Nothing," he lied. "Your lipstick is smudged, though."

My brows dropped into a scowl of my own, and I uncurled one of my fists long enough to flip him off. "I'm not wearing any, dick-head, but thanks for making an already shitty day even shittier with your foul attitude."

"Whoa," Luca commented with an awkward laugh. "Alex must be a pretty shitty kisser if that's the mood he puts you in."

Oh crap. I'd been so focused on the way the guys had been staring at me—at the way Jordan and Rafe had been staring at me—I'd totally forgotten their other friends were at the table. Friends who *didn't* know Alex was a two-faced, cheating piece of shit who'd threatened to kill me on several occasions. Friends who potentially couldn't be trusted.

The effort it took to wipe my face clear of all the anger and frustration was immense, but Mattie was already coming to my rescue.

"Oh please, Luca," she snickered, "you can't recognize sexual frustration when you see it 'cause you never get girls all worked up like that. Vi is just shitty that she can't go chase Alex down and ride him like her personal pony. Right, babe?" She gave me a playful nudge, and this time my laugh was genuine. She'd deliberately called me *babe* like Alex had, and it seemed to clean the word of all his creepiness.

"Yeah," I agreed, giving a small laugh, "something like that." I shot a lightning fast look over at Jordan... and Rafe. Damn my body for still being attracted to that bastard. "Actually, I'm not really hungry after all. I might just go over my notes for tomorrow's chem lab."

Mattie frowned at me like she wanted to call me on my bullshit, but I was already escaping the dining room. After everything with the dean and then Alex, I needed a second to just *breathe*. I wasn't going to get that while sitting at an awkwardly tense lunch with the guy who wanted to date me, his best friend who had fucked me until I saw heaven, and a bunch of clueless bastards who thought I was dating someone else entirely.

I let out a groan when I was a decent distance from the dining room and scrubbed my hands over my face. "When did life become so complicated?" I asked myself, wondering for the millionth time *why* I'd decided to enter the ballot in the first place.

Footsteps on the marble tiles alerted me to someone approaching, and I released a heavy sigh.

"Violet," Jordan called out, and I turned to face him. When I'd heard someone following, I'd initially expected Mattie. And then when I'd realized it wasn't a girl, I'd assumed Rafe had come to pile on *more* assholery.

"Jordy, hey." I gave him a weak smile, wrapping my arms around myself. Of all my new friends, he was actually the one I'd most wanted it to be following me. "What's up?"

He tucked his hands into his pockets and dipped his head, looking at me with those coffee-colored eyes in an almost coy gesture. "I just... I know you wanted a moment alone. I just wanted to... uh... fuck it." He looked both ways up and down the hall—making sure we were alone, I guessed—then reached out to me and clasped the back of my neck.

This time when I found my lips pressed to someone else's, it inspired a totally different reaction within me. I froze, but not because

I was disgusted or horrified. I froze because I wanted to savor every single second. Jordan was kissing me, and it was a damn fairytale moment.

Except, he wasn't a mind reader and pulled back abruptly, misreading my inactivity as a rejection. "I'm so sorry, Vi. I shouldn't have—"

"Shut up and kiss me again," I cut him off. But I didn't wait for him to initiate this time. Nope, I was a strong, independent woman who owned her own sexual desires, and holy crap, did Jordan fall into that category. I threaded my arms around his neck as our mouths caressed, and when my lips parted to deepen the kiss, he made this unbelievably sexy sort of groan that had me wanting to jump his bones right then and there. Yeah, it wasn't the most romantic of sentiments, but I've never claimed to be a princess.

We kissed for longer than we should have. Considering everything with Alex and the ballot and... *everything*... it was foolish and risky to just stand there kissing like we didn't have a care in the world, but he seemed just as reluctant as me to end our embrace.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, husky and breathless when we finally parted. His lips continued to trace my jaw with feathered kisses. "I shouldn't have kissed you without your permission. I just couldn't stand the idea of him being on your lips a moment longer."

Holy crap. My heart did this weird fluttery thing, and I found I needed to swallow before I could find the words to reply. "For the record, Jordan? You definitely have my permission. One hundred percent."

I couldn't see his face, but I could feel him smiling against my skin as he kissed the bend of my neck. Of course he'd seen Alex kiss me there, too, and was erasing that unwanted touch with his own.

"Cool," he replied, then sucked in a sharp breath and shifted back with a pained look on his face. "I can't believe I just said that. That's the best I had? I've officially lost all my smooth." He groaned, hanging his head and shaking it mournfully while I tried really hard to bite back a laugh.

"I should go," I said, reluctant as all fuck. I didn't try to hide that emotion when Jordan looked back up at me either. I wanted him to see me. The real me. "If anyone sees us here..."

He grimaced, but nodded. "Yeah, I know. We should step up our plans to deal with all of that soon. I don't know how long I can hide

how I feel about you.”

Ugh. There went my heart doing the flippy thing again.

Jordan kissed me once more—quickly this time—and I grinned like a lunatic the whole way to my next lecture of the day.

CHAPTER 12



Over the next few days, the weather decided it wanted a shot at second winter, sending massive snowstorms across the academy grounds.

"It's, like, almost fucking summer," I complained.

Mattie snorted. "Well, sure, but here there're no real seasons. The weather just does whatever the fuck it wants."

"It's crazy to think I've been at Arbon for almost five months," I said.

The time had flown by, and if it weren't for the Alex situation, I'd be living my best life. Alex, Brandon, Claudette. I needed to rid myself of those fuckers and get back to the good times.

Like making out with Jordan, who I literally could not stop thinking about.

"Have I told you lately how happy I am that you won the lottery," Mattie said, breaking me out of my sexy thoughts. "I couldn't have chosen better myself."

I shook my head at her. "We should stop referring to it as a lottery and more as a genetic Russian roulette, since apparently there's nothing random about it at all."

Mattie looked around suddenly, probably to ensure there were no ears close enough to overhear. "This Alex thing has to be dealt with soon. I can't watch him maul you like that again."

I swallowed roughly, bile on my tongue. "Imagine how I feel."

I'd never been more grateful to Jordan. His touch... taste. The way he'd taken the time to find me and help me erase Alex. It was the mental cleanse I needed to regain my composure.

A group of chicks appeared at the end of the hall, walking in our direction. When they got closer, I realized it was Claudette and her band of bitches.

I hadn't seen her, not really, since everything had gone down with Alex. I found I wasn't even remotely angry at her about that—I kind of felt sorry for the moron. But the Brandon thing.

That still had me raging.

Speaking of...

"Brandon will be back from his family home tomorrow," she said, deliberately loud enough for us to hear. "Be interesting to see what happens when he takes his place here again."

Her gaze locked with mine, and I could see she was silently telling me that this time he was going to kill me.

I smiled back, and it was enough to wipe that look off her face.

She didn't even know she'd handed me everything I'd been waiting for—a chance to kill the son of a bitch.

When they were out of earshot, I swung my palm reader up and typed the same message to Rafe, Jordan, and Nolan.

Me: **When is the next event? I need in. Also, I need Brandon in.**

Mattie was reading over my shoulder, and we both waited for the replies.

Jordan: **You don't have to take that bastard on alone. We got your back.**

Swoonie fucker. But also, he needed to come to terms with the fact that I was no princess in need of a savior. No white knights needed apply. I had this shit handled on my own. Although it was nice to have someone at my back, as long as they didn't want me to run and hide.

Nolan: **No.**

Angel: **If I help you with this, what are you going to do for me, Cinderella?**

Jesus.

"Why are we friends with them again?" I asked Mattie. "I have to go to this fucking special study session in a minute, and I really don't need their shit on top of it."

She patted my shoulder. "I'll handle them. I'll also be close by if Alex tries anything. Let's just get this out of the way."

It was Thursday, and since Alex had missed Tuesday—thank you whoever had kept him busy—this was the first of my "special study

sessions."

My new classes had been okay so far because I'd managed to ignore Alex, even when he'd been sitting right beside me. I couldn't keep up with any of the subject matter though, mostly because I'd just been dropped into third year classes. But no one seemed to give a fuck. I'd actually gotten an A on a quiz that I'd only written in half the answers for.

Dean Morgan was taking this shit way too far, but I was on the ride now and couldn't just jump off. I needed to see it through. Arbon was no longer the dream of a better future I'd hoped for, but I'd be damned if I ran off now.

"Come on," I said quickly, ignoring the next few buzzes of my palm reader as the guys sent more messages. "I don't want to be late. I can't have the dean thinking I'm not taking this seriously."

I also wanted them all to live in a false sense of security, thinking I'd just buckled under their pressure. It would make it so much sweeter when I wiped them from the face of the Earth.

Mattie followed me into the room I'd been assigned for private study sessions with Alex. The prince was already there, sprawled back in his chair, a decent spread going on. Normally that would be my undoing, but he was literally repulsive to me now. My skin crawled at the sight of him.

"You can leave, Matisse," he drawled, not looking up from his palm reader. Whatever he was typing into it had almost all of his attention, but he somehow knew I wasn't alone.

Mattie snorted out some fake laughter, like this was hilarious. "Yeah, not gonna happen. I seriously need to study as well, and since this is a study session, there's no reason I can't be here."

Alex got to his feet, his eyes lifting from his palm reader for the first time. They were cold and hard. "I'm not going to ask you again. Leave, Matisse, before I have to hurt Violet."

It was my turn to snort out some laughter. But mine was genuine.

Alex shot a look in my direction. "Yeah, I know you're Violence, a fucking psycho, according to the gossip. But remember, I control every aspect of your life. The dean... he'd be happy to remove you from Arbon if pushed a little."

His words cut off my amusement. Not the threat, but the fact that he knew I was Violence.

Gossip?

Was that why people had been treating me a little different lately? I'd thought it was the whole Alex thing—she's with a crown prince, be nice to her. But maybe, just maybe, that small amount of respect had been because of my purple persona.

"You won't get her kicked out," Mattie drawled. "You need her."

Alex took a step closer, and I sidled in front of my friend. She shot me a withering look but didn't argue. "If Violet is no longer in Arbon, she'll be stuck in the Switzerlands with no money and no way to get back to New America. She'll need me, and I will put her right where she belongs." His eyes met mine. "In Australasia. In my bed."

I shook my head. "Yeah, I'd rather sleep in the snow, thanks."

Mattie pushed up behind me. "And she will always have options now. I have plenty of money; I can fly her wherever she wants."

Alex growled at her. "You'd start a war? Over this..." He waved his hand at me, and I tried really hard not to be insulted.

Mattie didn't even bother to answer, she just stepped around me and dropped her books on the table. "Let's study," she said.

I followed, staying as far from Alex as I could. It made no difference; he just moved his shit and sat on my free side, boxing me in between him and Mattie.

No matter how much I shifted, he just followed, so I eventually gave up, choosing to ignore him as best I could.

"You need help with anything?" Mattie asked as she opened her book.

I shook my head. "Nah, my classes seem to be easier than ever."

Alex grinned beside me, and I clenched my fists as I imagined punching his teeth in.

My palm reader buzzed a bunch of times, but I wasn't about to read those messages with this leech at my side.

Motherfucker. What I'd give to get Alex in the fight ring. I bet it'd be all kinds of satisfying to slice that smug smile off his pretty face. I'd be totally willing to pay for the cleanup if it meant ridding the world of one of the *worst* future monarchs around.

"You gonna check those?" he asked, indicating to my palm reader's flashing lights.

I shook my head. "Nope."

For lack of any better ideas, I flipped open my shiny new textbook—Econ 302, for fuck's sake—and started reading. Or I pretend-

ed to, anyway. Damn, economics was boring. Or maybe it was the fact that I'd been dumped straight into a third level class with zero understanding of the subject on a basic level.

Ugh. Whatever. I just needed to get through the next hour without giving Alex any reasons to fuck my life up any worse. Then I could meet Jordan in his room and... uh... strategize. Yep. Strategize.

Naked.

"Mattie, just go," Alex drawled, snapping me out of the decidedly dirty daydream I'd just engaged in. Yet another reason to junk punch the fucker. "I promise I won't accidentally push Violet down the stairs if you leave us alone."

Mattie gasped, and even my jaw dropped. The way he so casually referenced Jasmine's death—sorry, Jasmine's *murder*—was legitimately shocking.

"You sick fuck," Mattie snarled, leaning on the desk to hiss at him over me. "If you think I'd give you even one second alone after a comment like that, you're more screwed in the head than I gave you credit for."

Alex just shrugged like her scathing anger meant exactly nothing to him. "Suit yourself."

Something about the way he said that, then immediately turned to his palm reader to send a message set off alarm bells in my brain.

"Alex," I snapped. "Don't."

He blinked at me with those gorgeous blue eyes, a picture of fucking innocence. It wasn't hard to see how I'd fallen so hard and so fast for his fake ass.

"Don't what, sweetheart?"

"Don't do whatever the fuck you're doing. Just don't. You've done enough. You've changed my whole schedule so that I'm forced into *your* classes, which totally screws my own degree credits. You've forced me into this bullshit study period. You've made it abundantly clear that you hold my future and freedom in your slimy grip, so whatever the fuck you just did on your palm reader? Undo it. Mattie sitting here or not doesn't make any difference to how much I fucking hate you." My voice remained calm and quiet as I said this, and I gave myself a mental pat on the back for that. Because as much as I despised him now... he'd hurt me. And that wasn't something that healed overnight.

He grinned, and Mattie's palm reader lit up with an incoming call.

"Too late," my psychotic ex said, and Mattie cursed. It only took one look at her pale face to know whatever he'd done was bad news.

She bit her lip, staring at her palm reader before flashing me a distraught look. "It's my mother," she told me, her voice edging on panic. "I'm sorry, Vi. I have to—"

"Take it," I ordered her. "Go. Seriously. I'm a big girl, and Alex knows better than to try and manhandle *Violence*, right?" I shot a snarky glare in his direction, but he just grinned like the cat who caught the canary.

My bestie scowled, but her hands were shaking as she tossed her things into her bag and hurried out of the library.

"What the fuck was that all about?" I demanded, whirling in my seat to confront Alex. "What the hell did you do, you shady bastard?"

"Me?" He spread his hands out like he had no idea what I was talking about. Damn, I wanted to hurt him. Physically. "I think you're starting to see monsters in every closet, Violet. Maybe Matisse's mother just wanted to check in on her daughter."

I stared at him for a long moment, searching desperately for that devil inside—the devil I *knew* to be inside—but he had seriously the best game face I'd ever seen. If I didn't loathe him so much, I could have learned a thing or two.

"Bullshit," I spat. I slammed my textbook closed, having not understood a single word, and stuffed it in my own bag. My chair scraped the floor sharply as I pushed back from the table, and Alex's hand shot out to grab my wrist.

"Where do you think you're going?"

My eyes narrowed into a poisonous glare. "Anywhere but here. Got a problem? Tell the dean. I'll be sure to tell him you've been sleeping around with Claudette and endangering her betrothal to Rafe. You know, the most powerful heir in the world? Yeah. Let's see how that goes down." I forcefully yanked my wrist out of his grip. "Don't fucking touch me again, Alex. You make me sick."

I made it all of three steps away from the study desk before his chair crashed to the ground. A shocked gasp was all that left my lips as he grabbed a fistful of my hair and slammed me face first into a bookshelf. It was more a power move than anything intended to in-

jure me, and despite the dull ache in my eyebrow I didn't think it'd leave a lasting mark.

Fuck, I wanted to make him pay for that cowardly move, though. But I knew it wasn't that easy. Resorting to physical violence against a prince would not solve my problems. I needed to be smarter than that to win this battle. I needed to think long term, beyond the short satisfaction of beating the shit out of him. For now, that meant letting him manhandle me and allowing him the illusion that I was some helpless, scared little girl.

Alex's psychotic chuckle rolled over me as he pressed his body to my back, crushing me against the shelves in an attempt to prove who was in charge. Hot tip, it wasn't me.

Not right now, anyway.

"Silly little Violet," he murmured, his lips caressing my earlobe even as his grip on my hair tightened to the point of painful. "You seem to have forgotten your place. Maybe someone needs to leave an anonymous tip with the Swiss Guard. It's quite the crime for a commoner to own a steel bladed weapon, don't you know? Especially at a college full of royal heirs." He tsked in the most condescending way that made my blood boil.

"That would fuck both of us, Alex," I reply, clenching my teeth with anger. I remained dead still, not trying to buck him off or punch his lights out. Why play my hand when all he wanted to do was assert a bit of pissy dominance? I'd learned a long time ago that my pride was only damaged if I allowed it.

For what seemed like the thousandth time, I reminded myself that my problems couldn't be solved by beating the ever-loving crap out of him. A move like that only ended one of two ways. Either I killed him, and then I was responsible for killing the crown heir of Australasia... Or I didn't, and it just made my own situation worse with his petty anger and revenge tactics. Nope, right now, as much as I hated it, Alex held too much power over me and my freedom.

He hummed a thoughtful sound. "But would it? Stupid, lovesick Rafe would never let them execute you, and I bet it'd be *really* easy to get them to release you into my custody."

My stomach churned, and nausea made me dizzy. Custody would give him total control over my life—where I went, who I spoke to, what I spent my money on. But then again, was that really

any different from his current plan to make me his personal baby machine?

"Of course, it doesn't have to be like that, Violet." He released my hair and spun me around to face him. "All I need to know is that you're not going to cause any trouble for me. The lottery has run this way for generations and is controlled by much bigger players than you or I. Don't make waves because your feelings are hurt."

I seethed. "So, sit down and look pretty? That's what I'm expected to do?"

He laughed, throwing his head back with mirth. "Oh, babe. No. I also expect you to spread your legs on cue. Think you can handle that?"

Vomit threatened to come up. "I think I'd prefer to take my chances with the Swiss Guard, thanks." I tried to slide out from between him and the bookcase, but he pressed his body harder against me, trapping me.

This time when he laughed, it was that awful, dark sound. His villain laugh, as I was starting to think of it. "You gonna force my hand, Violet? You didn't have any problems taking my cock two weeks ago. You were practically begging for it, as I remember." His hips rocked into me, and I realized with utter revulsion how hard he was.

"I thought I was *in love* with you two weeks ago, Alex," I hissed at him, my words dripping with scorn. "Or with the person you pretended to be. Now I know better, so get the fuck away from me before I make you."

His mocking smile said it all. Sure he'd heard *gossip* about Violence; he'd even connected the dots and correctly guessed she was me. But he hadn't witnessed my fight firsthand. He hadn't seen the bloody pulp I'd reduced my nameless, faceless opponent to... all the while picturing it was Alex. He was a damn fool.

"How about you stop with the posturing and empty threats and use those lips for something far more valuable?" he suggested and actually reached down to unfasten his pants.

I wished I was making this up.

"Oh hell no," I spat, reaching down between us and grabbing a solid fistful of his balls—through his pants, mind you. "You need a lesson on how to act like a decent human being, Alex." I was snarling now, and my fist tightened enough that Alex's eyes went

wide and he stopped breathing. "I personally don't have the time or desire to teach you, so we'll do it the easy way. Listen *real* carefully because I won't repeat myself. Try to force me into a sexual situation one more time, and I'll personally rip your balls clean off your body, then shove them down your throat. Ever seen someone bleed to death from their missing scrotum, Alex? I have."

Just to drive my point home, I gave a little yank and twist, drawing a satisfying yelp from my loathsome ex-boyfriend.

"Glad we understand each other," I whispered, then released his junk and shoved him hard enough to send him sprawling on the floor. "I almost feel sorry for Claudette."

With one last disgusted sneer, I stepped over his groaning, fetal-positioned body and hurried my ass out of the library.

When the heavy doors swung shut behind me, I broke into a run, and by the time I'd arrived at the dorms, my whole body was shaking with tremors. I knew that I could beat Alex down in a fight, but this was so much more than that. He was a powerful heir who could destroy every aspect of my life, and I couldn't kill him or I'd end up in prison or executed.

He fucking had me.

Without even realizing it, I'd let him into my head. My body's reaction was a clear reminder that I could never outrun my past, that the scars of shitty foster homes and even shittier foster parents would stay with me for a long, long time.

Sniffling, I knocked on the door I'd arrived at.

"Hey," I croaked, when the door opened, and even though I'd promised myself I wouldn't cry over that fuck, one or two tears escaped. "Can I come in?"

CHAPTER 13



Rafe stared at me, his face blank and unreadable, but not cold.

Stepping back, he opened the door and allowed me inside. Moving past him, I didn't look around, knowing he wouldn't want me prying into his personal shit.

I actually didn't even care what was in here, and I had no idea why, of all people, Rafe was the one I'd run to. Jordan made more sense, especially with Mattie currently out of commission.

Speaking of. "Is she okay?"

Rafe always seemed to know everything. I was praying he wouldn't let me down with this.

"Alex was two minutes from creating an international incident between Australasia and the Guays. And in that situation, one is a superpower, and the other is... not."

Spoken matter-of-factly.

"But she's okay?"

He nodded. "Yes, Violence. She's fine. It was averted by her leaving the room and Alex calling off his family."

He watched me closely, those glittering eyes mysterious, his body looking ripped as fuck in his white button down with the sleeves rolled up. Like, why would he do this to my poor hormones? All men knew this was chick-kryptonite.

"When's the next fight?" I pressed him.

He stepped closer, and I sucked in a deep breath, trying not to let show how much he affected me. "Did you not read my messages?" he asked softly. Deadly.

I cleared my throat, crossing my arms to try and protect myself. "I didn't have a chance, what with being assaulted by my ex-fucking-boyfriend."

When I lifted my palm reader, my hands were shaking, and I jumped as Rafe reached out and wrapped his hand around mine, engulfing it. Heat coated my palm as I closed my eyes briefly to get myself under control.

"Why do you let him do this to you?" Rafe murmured, so close now that I could smell him. He smelled fucking delicious, dark and spicy. His scent was as dangerous as he was.

"He holds all the power," I whispered back, my eyes opening to lock with his. "I could kill him, sure; I probably have the skills to take him down, but then what? I'll be hunted and executed for that crime. He knows there's nothing I can do, and that makes me vulnerable." My voice got harder. "I hate being vulnerable more than fucking anything else in the world."

He yanked me closer; it was so sudden I had no time to brace myself. I landed hard against his chest.

"I know exactly what you need," he said, the smallest of smiles playing across his lips.

Fuck.

Yes. Please may he be saying what I thought he was saying, because I needed that sort of distraction more than I needed air.

"Follow me," he said, and then he let me go and disappeared into his walk-in wardrobe.

I blinked at that, because... the closet...?

Okay.

I was a few steps behind, and when I got in there, I slowed, swallowing hard at the bare back in front of me. Rafe had just shucked off his shirt, and as I watched the play of muscles, those curling tattoos that marked his body, I nearly bit off my own tongue so I didn't moan.

He pulled on a tight black tank, leaving those arms bare.

Uh, wait a minute. Was he getting dressed again?

This wasn't exactly what I'd thought we were doing.

Spinning around, he threw another shirt my way.

"Come on, Violence. It's time for you to train."

Well, fuck.

* * *

HE LED me onto the soccer field, but we continued on through that, ending up in a large gym crossed with a dojo. I paused at the door, breathing in that familiar scent—sweat, chalk, and deep heat. Some of the panic that had been thrumming through my body faded. A hundred memories hit me, and I wondered if a portion of my unease over the past few months had been because I'd stepped away from this life.

The indoor running track, mats, weights, and a bunch of other shit that I'd used every day for the last ten years were scattered about, and I was so here for it.

"I had no idea this room existed," I said breathlessly, looking around with a gleam of excitement. "I've missed training."

Rafe let out a low laugh. "I figured."

I wasn't exactly dressed for it, clad in Rafe's shirt that was miles too large. I'd tied it in a knot just under my breasts, exposing my stomach, and I wore my skirt with boy short underwear beneath, so I wasn't in danger of flashing anyone. But still.

Whatever. He'd seen me naked.

"Wanna run?" he said, and I could have orgasmed right then from how fucking sexy this dude was. In some ways, I needed him to be an asshole to me because I couldn't fall for Rafe. Not really.

He was unattainable to me, and the longer I spent time in this world, the less I wanted it. The royal life. Fucking no.

I had to remember that.

Rafe started out slow, but I needed to forget. So as soon as I was remotely warmed up, I let loose. Pushing myself hard, I flew around the track. My bare feet were not the best for this surface, but I didn't care.

Rafe kept pace with me, not even breathing heavily. He was super fit from soccer, and there was no way I'd outpace him. Not ever. Especially while I was out of practice.

I didn't embarrass myself though; we ran for an hour. When I was done, my lungs aching as I sucked in air, I felt a sense of achievement.

"Can I use this whenever I want?"

Rafe's smile was slow, a smirk that continued on to a full-blown grin. "Yeah, I think I can arrange that."

I snorted. "What? No return of favor required?" I hadn't forgotten his message when I'd asked to be in for the next fight.

He crowded into me, his huge body drowning out the fucking light and oxygen, shooting me off center. "What are you offering?"

My pussy clenched. Bitch was literally trying to jump out of my skirt and fuck him. But I'd never traded sex for favors before, and I wasn't about to start now. If Rafe and I fucked again, it would be because neither of us could help ourselves.

I pressed my hand to his chest, trying not to dwell on the hard planes that caressed my skin. "I'm not one for favors, Rafael. If you want something from me, just fucking ask."

This was whispered through gritted teeth, and the only reaction I got was a predatory grin in return. And a second to suck in a breath before his lips slammed into mine. A groan escaped, and then my hands were tangled in his shirt as I yanked him closer to me, my body needing five fucking seconds of this.

This erased Alex.

Jordan and Rafe erased Alex, and I hated how badly I craved their touch.

Our tongues tangled, and I opened wider, pressing against him to feel every hard line. His hands wrapped around my waist, and he lifted me higher, pulling me flush to his body. Needing something to do with my legs, I wrapped them around him and ground against him, my clit aching. Tingles shot across my skin and down my spine.

My entire body was burning up, and I couldn't think straight.

How in the fuck did he do this to me?

"Is this what you want, Cinderella?" Rafe drawled against my skin, his mouth moving down to my neck. "To forget?"

Fuck! Fuck!

I wrenched myself back, deep, lung-filling breaths choking out of me. "Fuck, you're an asshole."

He didn't smile. Or reply.

"You want to fuck or fight?"

Oh man. Decisions...

I wasn't sure I could make that choice, but I knew the safer option.

"Let's fight."

CHAPTER 14



“You walking funny?” Mattie asked, eyeing me as I hobbled out of my room the next morning. “Please don’t tell me Rafe visited.”

I groaned, his name evoking the ass-kicking he’d handed me yesterday. I’d been distracted. He’d been ruthless. And yes, I was walking funny.

“Don’t want to talk about it,” I grumbled. “And trust me, it was nothing fun.”

“I hope he looks as bad as you,” Mattie said with a grin.

I snorted. “Yeah, he’ll be hurting too.”

I’d gotten him more than once, and for that, I was patting myself on the back. Rafe was a formidable opponent, and sparring with him had pushed me to new places I hadn’t gone in my fights. I couldn’t wait to try it with weapons.

That was where I really shone.

“Ready for classes today?” Mattie asked, thankfully forgetting my pained expression.

I shrugged. “They’re sure to be a breeze.”

She looked closer. “What aren’t you telling me?”

I returned that stare. “What aren’t you telling me? What really happened with your family yesterday? What was the incident?”

Rafe wouldn’t give me more details outside of the “international incident” thing, and Mattie had done the same, refusing to tell me anything specific, just saying that it was handled and that next time Alex wouldn’t find it so easy to get rid of her.

She wrinkled her nose at me. "I told you it's nothing to worry about. Let's get some food."

When we entered the dining room, she led the way to our table, and I tried to be blasé, even though Jordan and Rafe were both there sitting side by side and distracting me about a million percent.

There was no one else at the table for once, and I was surprised at how comfortable I felt with the three royals.

Noles sprinted in a minute later, rounding out our five.

"Hey, love," he said, slapping a kiss on my cheek. "And sister." He did the same with Mattie.

I almost saw my spine with how hard I rolled my eyes. "Love?"

He shrugged. "You're family now, girl. And I love my family."

Jordan and Rafe were suddenly very interested in Nolan, and I blinked at the rumble that came from the New American prince. "Family better be all you're feeling when it comes to Violet," he said.

Nolan's smile was wicked as fuck, and I waited with bated breath for whatever was about to come out of his mouth.

"I knew you fuckers were gonna lay your claims." his eyes flicked between Jordan and Rafe. "And what do you know? You haven't killed each other in a bloody fight for her puss—uh—attention. Oh, very interesting indeed. Maybe you two aren't too alpha male to share." He crossed his arms, super satisfied. "This is exactly what I prayed for."

Mattie jerked her head at that. "You pray?"

Nolan's broad shoulders shook with laughter. "Yeah, not so much, but to get a little threesome action between our besties, I'd make an exception."

So, like, wow. This was exceptionally awkward, and I wanted to punch Nolan but also not make a big deal about it. Because in this moment, all I could think about was being between those two princes. I might be the one praying to God tonight.

Subject change.

"Next fight," I said, lowering my voice so I wasn't projecting this to anyone outside of our table. "You guys worked it so I can participate, right?"

Both Nolan and Jordan shot a look at Rafe, who just gave me a smug, slightly wicked grin.

"Did you agree to the terms, Cinderella?"

My teeth ground together so hard it was audible, and Mattie shuddered. "I told you," I growled at the prickish Swiss heir, "I don't deal in favors."

Those messages I hadn't read on my palm reader during the study session had been from Rafe. His proposed trade for getting me into the next fight? An undisclosed favor to be used any time in the future. Yeah, it was that open-ended and vague. Hell no.

Rafe just shrugged, kicking back in his seat and folding his arms over his broad chest. Damn him straight to hell, he'd rolled his shirt-sleeves up again. The tattoos on his forearms only seemed to highlight how strong his muscles were and made me want to—

"Come on, man," Jordan muttered, shooting his best friend a dark look and, thankfully, cutting off my train of thought before it really hit the gutter.

Rafe shot Jordan a look back, then sighed dramatically. "Fine," he said, turning that intense gaze back to me. "I'll give the deal some limitations, if that makes you feel better?"

I pursed my lips, but gave a small, tight nod. It didn't mean I was agreeing to his deal, but I was willing to listen.

"One favor, to be used before you graduate, and I won't ask you to kill anyone." He gestured like a benevolent ruler. "That's the best I can do."

My eyes narrowed, and I shook my head. "One favor to be used before the end of *this* academic year." I paused to think about what I was agreeing to. "No killing, maiming, nudity, or sexual situations. And nothing that could land me in prison."

Rafe's lips twitched with a smile, and Jordan looked furious.

"That's a fair amendment," the New American prince commented, prodding Rafe in the shoulder. "Accept her offer and quit being a fucking asshole."

Rafe's gaze hadn't left me for even a second, though. Had he blinked? I didn't think he had. Creeper. "Fine, Cinderella. One favor of my choosing, to be used by the end of this academic year, with no killing, maiming, or anything that could land you in prison. Deal."

He held his hand out for me to shake, and damn if I didn't move like I was under a spell, clasping his hand with mine and shaking once before my brain computed the words he'd left out.

Mother *fucker*.

"Bastard," I growled under my breath. "So, you'll sort it out? When is it?"

Rafe's lazy grin was all predator, and it made my nipples harden. "Unconfirmed yet, but it's looking like it might be late next Thursday night. But yes, you'll be on the cards. A deal's a deal, Cinderella."

I still scowled, kicking myself for letting him get by without all my conditions. "And Brandon?"

Rafe tipped his head to Jordan at this question, and his friend gave a small headshake.

"Not secured yet," Jordan told Rafe, then turned his attention to me. "I'm doing my best to line it up. The rumor mill has been running wild, though, and we think Brandon might be shitting the bed at the idea you could actually hurt him."

Amusement flickered through me at that idea, but... "Nah, that doesn't sound right. Brandon is so fucking arrogant he'd never believe the rumors that I'm Violence. I thought the whole lineup was supposed to be anonymous anyway. Don't we just need him on the cards, and then you guys can pull your strings to match us up?"

Nolan nodded. "Technically yes. Don't worry, New Girl. I'll get him there for you." He cracked his knuckles and looked downright evil. "One way or another."

I laughed because, holy crap, I loved my new friends. All of them. Even the dickish ones.

* * *

WALKING to my ridiculous new class World Politics 308 the following Monday, I found Jordan leaning on the wall outside the lecture hall. Considering he wasn't in this time slot, and Alex was likely already inside lurking around my seat, he could only have been waiting for me.

"Hey you," I greeted him, coming to a stop and adjusting my bag strap. "What's up?"

It must have been important for him to track me down here and not wait until our lunch break in just over an hour.

"Violet," he said, a slow smile spreading over his handsome face. "You look gorgeous."

My cheeks heated at the compliment, and I awkwardly shuffled my feet. "Um, okay. Same uniform I wear every day. But thanks, I think?"

Ugh. Alex breaking my heart had really messed with my flirting game. Big time.

"Yes, and you look gorgeous every day. Maybe I need to make a point to tell you that every day." He raised his brows, and I grinned.

"Okay, Casanova, what's going on?"

A little of the flirtation slipped from his face. "Ah, well, I had an idea I wanted to run past you, and I knew if I waited until lunch, then everyone would have their own opinions and ideas and..." He trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck and looking embarrassed. "Maybe I should have waited for the group."

Butterflies flapped around in my belly as I realized he wanted to see me. Just me. Alone. I mean, yeah, I knew he was interested and that kiss the other day had been... *everything*. But then nothing else had happened and I'd been wondering if I'd read too much into the whole situation.

"You know what?" I asked. "This class is pointless for me anyway. They're giving me As when I don't even answer the questions, so I'm sure no one will mind if I skip. How about you? Need to be anywhere?"

Jordan's face lit up, and I knew I'd made the right choice. "Nope, I have a free period now."

"Awesome. Let's go to your room? The study rooms off the library hold bad vibes for me." I shuddered, thinking about the way Alex had pinned me to the shelves and how I'd had to threaten him to get out of there without being sexually assaulted even worse.

Jordan frowned, walking with me in the direction of the dorms—away from my lecture with Alex. "Why? What happened in the library?"

I groaned. I'd said that out loud, and no one other than Rafe really knew anything had happened. "Okay, I'll give you the abridged version of events, but don't flip out on me. Deal?"

Jordan just cocked a brow and leveled me with a no nonsense glare until I started talking.

CHAPTER 15



“*I*’m going to kill him,” the crown heir of New America declared as we reached his dorm room and I finished recounting the events of my “study session” with Alex.

I smiled. “No, you’re not. Neither am I, no matter how badly I want to. We’re not going to start the next world war over my bruised dignity.”

Jordan wasn’t totally listening anymore, though. He kept muttering as he unlocked the door and held it open for me to enter. “I’m going to gut him with my daggers then braid his entrails into a belt and wear it as a trophy so everyone knows what happens to anyone who fucks with my girl.”

I froze just two steps into his dorm room, then swung around to stare at him. “Uh, what?”

Jordan frowned. “What? He deserves it.”

I shook my head. “No, not that. You just called me *your* girl.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Jordan shrugged, kicking his door shut with the heel of his shoe. “Well, you are. Kind of.” Wow, he was just going to own it.

My heart squeezed, but this time it was more of a painful squeeze than a love thing. “Jordy...” I released my breath with a heavy sigh. A headache was building behind my eyes, and I rubbed at my forehead to try and hold it off. Stalling for time, I sank down on the edge of his bed.

“I know,” he said before I could continue with... whatever I planned to say. “I know, we haven’t discussed anything, and I know

Alex really fucked with your trust." I snorted a bitter, humorless laugh of agreement. "And I also know there's something between you and Rafe..."

I stopped breathing.

"I just want a chance," he finished, his voice soft but threaded with hope and sincerity. "I'm not asking you for promises or commitments... just a chance. I really like you, Violet."

My heart squeezed again, but this time it was accompanied by those flappy fucking butterflies that made me want to go all doe-eyed and flirty. Fucking hormones were going to be the death of me, I swear.

"I feel like such an asshole for saying this," I said, leaning back on my hands so I could peer up at him. "I really like you too, Jordy."

A relieved smile washed over his face, quickly replaced with a small, thoughtful frown. "But?"

I bit my lip. "But Alex shattered me. I don't think I can put myself on the line like that again so soon, and I really, *really* don't want to drag you into all his drama and bullshit."

Jordan's lips tightened, but he gave a small nod of acknowledgement. I loved that about him. He *listened* to me and didn't immediately dismiss my opinions simply because they didn't line up with his own.

"And?" he prompted.

I sighed. "And..." I dropped my face into my hands, scarcely believing I was admitting this aloud. "There's... *something* between me and Rafe." As soon as I said it, I panicked that I'd just totally fucked up my prospects with Jordan and hurried to backtrack. "It's probably nothing, just, I don't know. Curiosity. Or like when you get an itch in your heel and you can't quite scratch it, so you just keep thinking about it, you know? Like that. I'm fairly certain we will be at each other's throats again in about three days; I just don't want to lie to you. And I don't want to feel like I'm cheating on anyone if... you know... if anything happened."

Jordan was silent, watching me, but there was no defeat on his face. "Let's just keep going as we are and see how things eventuate. Rafe and I are aware of each other. There're no secrets. And no commitments from anyone, right?"

It was like he was handing me my every dream in a single package, but I was a realist—there was no way this wasn't going to ex-

plode in my face eventually.

Did I care though?

Staring into his sexy-as-fuck face, his arms braced behind him on his bed, drawing attention to the heavy muscles, it occurred to me I might be slightly shallow and selfish because in this second, I wanted to give it all a shot.

And if it blew up in my face, I'd handle it like I did with Alex. By beating the shit out of Rafe.

"What did you need to tell me?" I asked Jordan, standing up to aim for a casual lean on his dresser, trying to draw some normalcy back into this moment.

He stood, too, and moved toward me. And because I was turned on, not threatened, I didn't step back. I let him press that fine-as-fuck body against mine, and I swallowed hard at the roar of lust slamming into me. "I told you," he murmured, leaning down so his lips were scraping across my jawline. "We need to give this a shot. No promises. No commitments. Just... see how it goes."

My pussy clenched at those drawled words and the obvious lust in his voice.

"I also have an idea about how to deal with Alex, but... I'll tell you after."

"After what?" I asked breathlessly.

He lifted his head back, a wicked smile across full lips, and I gasped as his mouth slammed into mine. For a moment, I stood frozen in shock. Not that I hadn't seen it coming—I wasn't fucking dense—but just... wow. That kiss we'd shared after the fight, after I'd been fucked six ways to Sunday by his best friend, had been overshadowed by everything else going on. And then the one in the hallway... that had really been about erasing Alex.

This though, this was just about me and Jordan.

"Is this... okay?" he asked, pulling back a fraction of an inch. "Did I totally misread the signals here?"

"No!" I blurted out, then cringed. "I mean, yes, totally okay and no, you didn't misread signals. Sorry, my brain was just taking a second to, um, go all girly and shit. Can we try that again?" My cheeks were hot with embarrassment, and a tiny wave of panic flooded through me that I'd totally killed the moment. But Jordan just grinned and cupped my neck with his hand, threading his fingertips into my hair.

"We can try that again as many times as you want, Violet," he murmured, his voice husky with desire. "You have no idea how badly I've been wanting to kiss you."

This time when his mouth met mine, I wasn't fucking around. I kissed him back with all the pent-up tension I'd been feeling for him since that night he'd first shown an interest. Longer. If I was being totally honest with myself, every interaction I'd had with the New American prince had been fanning my crush hotter since the day we'd met.

My hands were all over him, pushing and pulling, desperate to touch him freaking *everywhere*, and our clothes were just getting in the way. Obviously, they had to go.

"Violet," he moaned against my mouth when I started unbuttoning his shirt. He'd already ditched the tie and blazer somewhere—if he'd even worn them at all today—so it was just the crisp white shirt and navy blue trousers in the way of what I wanted.

I grinned into his kiss, nipping playfully at his tongue, then sucking on his lower lip until he groaned again. "Jordan," I replied, teasing. My voice was low and breathy, drenched in lust.

He pulled back just an inch, cupping my face and peering into my eyes for an extended breath, before shaking his head. "I should do the responsible thing and put the brakes on this... ask you out on a real date and do things the right way..." He trailed off as I started kissing the side of his neck, nibbling at his bronzed skin.

"The right way sucks," I commented, humming as I sucked his neck hard enough to leave a mark. It was a bit juvenile, I'd admit, but a primal part of me wanted to mark him, even if no one could know it was me.

Jordan released a quick breath as he lifted me by the waist and perched my ass on his dresser. He crushed his body closer, and I let out a noise of excitement and encouragement as his hard length ground against my core. "Yeah, you're right," he replied in a whisper. "Fuck that."

I laughed as our clothes found the floor in what could have been record speed, leaving me in just my bra and panties and Jordan in a pair of tight black boxer briefs. Needless to say, they left *nothing* to the imagination, and I was practically panting with the need to feel him inside me.

"Holy shit, you're perfect," he murmured reverently as his hands skimmed my curves and his eyes devoured every inch of me. "This is a bit surreal, Violet."

I nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. "You're telling me," I whispered. "If it weren't for Alex, I'd think I was living in a fairytale."

Jordan claimed my lips again, kissing me slower this time, but the ripples of heat it sent searing through my body were lighting me up like an electrical storm. My legs had found their way around his waist like an independent action, and I shifted my hips, grinding against him.

He made a pained groan, then shifted his grip to the backs of my thighs, lifting me from his dresser and spinning us around. Two steps across the room and then my back hit the mattress with Jordan settled between my thighs.

"It could still be a fairytale," he told me, shuffling down my body and hooking his thumbs through the sides of my panties. I just wriggled my hips, urging him to take them off, and thankfully he obliged.

It wasn't until he'd stripped them off my legs and tossed them aside that I found the brainpower to reply. "How so? I can safely say he's no Prince Charming."

Jordan chuckled, sliding his palms up my naked thighs and spreading my legs apart. The intensity of his gaze on my pussy was almost tangible, and I squirmed with need.

"Just think of him as your evil stepmother," he suggested, bending his head to lay a kiss on my inner thigh. I sucked in a sharp gasp, his hot breath teasing me like nothing I'd ever experienced before, but I gripped the sheets and waited, rather than forcefully slamming my cunt onto his face. That'd just be rude.

"Or an ugly stepsister," I muttered, amused at the analogy. "I guess that works."

"Mm-hmm," Jordan hummed, placing his mouth against my core and licking the length of me in a way that made my heart stop and my back arch. "But in *your* fairytale, your prince charming doesn't give you lame gifts like glass slippers."

I was almost past the point of words. Almost. One of my hands threaded into his hair, and I moaned when his mouth found my clit, sucking it between his teeth.

"What do I get instead, then?" I asked in a panting whisper.

Jordan looked up at me from between my thighs, his eyes full of wicked mirth. "Multiple orgasms, my princess."

"Oh," I gasped, my lids flickering closed as he slid a finger inside me, perfectly harmonizing with his mouth on my clit. "Yeah, that works for me."

Jordan laughed one of those totally masculine, self-satisfied kind of laughs, then went to work becoming my prince charming.

"Are you okay?" he teased some minutes later, kissing my stomach as he shifted out of the death grip my thighs had pinned him in throughout my orgasm. I'd wriggled out of my bra at some point, and he sucked gently on my nipple next.

I groaned, pulling him up to lie beside me so I could kiss his lips. He still tasted of me, but it was hot. It reminded me of the way he'd just eaten me out like I was his last meal on earth. Fucking. Incredible.

"Okay doesn't even scratch the surface," I whispered back. My voice was hoarse from the screaming I'd just done... but we'd only just started. I skated my fingertips down his chest, stroking all the hard planes and ridges of his muscles until I reached the elastic waistband of his briefs. "My turn."

I freed his throbbing cock from his underwear, shoving them out of the way with one hand while stroking him with the other. Jordan hissed through his teeth as my thumb circled his tip, smearing his slick fluid around and stroking at the tight ridge under the cap.

I loved the reactions I was getting out of him. Even when he'd been going down on me, his body had been so clearly responding, and it was a heady, powerful feeling.

Shuffling down the bed, I placed a hand on his tight abs, pushing him flat so I could take him in my mouth. My tongue repeated the motions my thumb had just taken, then I sucked him in deep. Jordan moaned, his hips bucking up to meet my motions, and I gripped his base, stroking in time with my mouth until he cursed loudly.

"What?" I asked, giving him a mischievous grin while my hand kept pumping his shaft. I was kneeling between his legs, my ass in the air as I sucked him, but the pained look on his face made me curious. Especially when he indicated over my shoulder.

I turned my head to look at what he was pointing at, then snickered a laugh. Somehow I'd managed to position myself directly in

front of his mirror, so while I went down on him, he could see *everything* from behind.

"Nope," he grunted, "that's too much torture."

He gripped my arms and tugged me up the bed, flipping me over onto my back and settling between my thighs again. This time, though, there were no clothes to get in the way.

"Violet," he breathed, meeting my eyes with such intensity it hurt my fucking soul. "Fuck, I need you."

I hitched my hips, gasping as his tip found my entrance, but he didn't push forward.

"Jordy," I protested, running my hands down his abs, then grasping his waist. "Don't be a tease."

He hesitated a moment before replying. "I was just thinking I don't have any condoms..."

I froze for a second, then relaxed again, remembering my involuntary IUD. "Uh, well, thanks to Alex's paranoia that I'll cheat on him, I'm safeguarded against pregnancy."

Jordan ran his tongue over his lower lip, looking crazy sexy and all kinds of hungry as he looked down at me. "It's academy policy to check for STDs every couple of months, too," he told me, "and I haven't been with anyone since the last test..."

"I have," I replied honestly, but Jordan already knew that. Then again, if the entire student body was getting tested pretty regularly, the risk of anyone having anything was low. "Up to you... but I'm pretty eager to continue."

Clearly Jordan agreed with that opinion because a second later he was so deep inside me I was seeing stars. Holy fuck.

He paused for only a moment, his shoulder muscles all bunched and tense as my pussy clenched around him, but then he kissed me like I was the center of his fucking universe and it drove me *wild*.

My legs hooked around his waist, pulling him down while my hips bucked up, taking what I needed with primal ferocity as our tongues danced over one another. He caught up, then took control, thrusting into me hard enough that the headboard smacked the wall.

It made me laugh, which then dissolved into moans and gasps as he shifted his weight back, hooking his hands under my thighs and spreading me wider. The new angle saw the head of his cock hitting my G-spot, and I could sense another orgasm on the near horizon.

"Violet," Jordan panted, his eyes shiny with pure, undiluted lust. "Touch yourself. Make yourself come on my cock."

My heart raced, and I bit my lip. Who knew Jordy was a dirty talker? It was hot as *fuck* though, and I was nothing if not obliging. I snaked a hand down between us, finding my clit with practiced ease and rubbing it like I'd done a thousand times before. He watched me with those hungry, predatory eyes as I made myself come, my pussy tightening and pulsing around his dick and making his breathing spike almost as fast as my own.

"That was insanely hot," he moaned as I came back to Earth. He was still pumping into me, slowly, tortuously, and I knew we weren't done yet. "One more, baby."

He pulled out of me completely, and I protested at the loss. But he just laughed and flipped me over, pulling me up on shaking hands and knees before plunging back in from behind.

The sudden change of position while I was still shuddering through the aftershocks of my last orgasm did exactly what he intended. Before the room even stopped spinning, I crashed over the cliff into another crazy intense climax that made me howl and thrash on Jordan's cock.

He cursed, then grunted, grabbing onto my hips with bruising strength and slamming me down onto him as he found his own release with a satisfied roar.

We collapsed together, not even pulling apart. Sticky come coated my inner thighs and my whole body ached, but nothing could make me move from that spot. Fucking. Nothing.

I guess Jordan really was my Prince Charming, after all.

CHAPTER 16



“Wait, you said something earlier about dealing with Alex?” I asked a little later, trying to catch my breath. I was still a boneless mess but somehow found the strength to turn my head and meet Jordan’s intense, heated gaze.

“So I did,” he agreed, with a smug smile. “Before you distracted me.”

I gasped, faking indignation. “Me? Distract you?”

Jordan gave a small shrug with one of his smooth, bronze shoulders, then let his smug grin spread wider. “Yep,” he replied, dragging his gaze over my body, “you’re very, *very* distracting, Violet Rose.”

Groaning, I dragged the sheet up over my nakedness before we both got distracted *again*. “Tell me the plan. I’ve been fucking dreaming about putting Alex in his place, but beyond beating the shit out of him—”

“Which gets us nowhere,” Jordan commented, and I nodded.

“—I’ve got no better ideas.” I quirked a brow at him and sat up slightly, propping myself up with an elbow. “So tell me.”

“Okay, so you know how I’m kinda good with tech stuff?”

I rolled my eyes at his modesty, remembering all too clearly how he’d debugged my palm reader so I didn’t need to worry about my digital fingerprints being recorded. “Uh, yeah. Kinda. Sure.”

He flashed a quick smile, tucking an arm over his head to get comfortable. It took a whole shitload of willpower not to follow the movement of his muscles and drool all fucking over them.

"Right, so this plan is in its really early stages, but I wanted to tell you first," he started, with a small grin.

I smiled back, trying *really* hard not to make it a lusty one. "'Cause you like me." I was teasing, but he took me seriously. Reaching up, he snaked a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me in for a long, lingering kiss.

"I really like you, Violet." His voice was husky and low, and it did all kinds of sexy things to my lady parts. "But back to the plan."

I cleared my throat, mentally shoving the arousal aside for five freaking seconds so he could tell me what he'd come up with for Alex. "Yes, the plan. Go."

"So, I've been thinking a lot on this whole princess ballot system, about how they seem to be using it to make genetic matches for royals who don't have a peer match." He paused, his mouth tipping in a frown. "Or royals who lost their genetic match to murder."

I cringed, thinking of Jasmine.

"Anyway, it got me to thinking. They couldn't possibly be testing fifteen million people just to select *one* match. That's a gross imbalance of resources to result, right? The cost and manpower it'd take to conduct the tests, then process them... it doesn't add up." He was becoming more animated as he spoke about this, shifting up in the bed, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "So I started digging around on the internet. Subtly, don't worry."

"I wasn't worried," I replied with a teasing smile. "If anyone can cover his tracks in the digital world, I'm thinking it's probably you. Which, I might add, totally busts the whole stereotype of what tech geeks look like. If I had guessed two months ago, I definitely would have pegged Nolan for the nerd of your group."

Jordan laughed. "It's *our* group now, gorgeous. And what would that make me? The charming athletic star with a heart of gold?"

I snorted, thinking back to those first meetings I'd had with Jordan. "More like playboy prince with a bed full of women," I muttered, shaking my head. "But stop deviating off topic. Tell me more."

"Right, so I've been doing a bit of snooping, and I think I've found the database where all the results are being stored. Obviously they won't be running another ballot for another five years, but I think the database from your round is doing more than just sitting there collecting dust." He paused, and I waited patiently—okay fine, *impatiently*—for him to get to the point. "There was evidence in the

servers that they're actually using it to match up other couples as well, rich people, those who will pay good money to guarantee a genetic match resulting in healthy heirs." He raised his brows and I gasped.

"Holy shit. People would actually pay for an arranged marriage?" The idea shocked me, but it shouldn't have. Of course people would do that. In a world where fertility was a dying asset, of *course* someone had found a way to monetize it. "And let me guess. Only one party would be aware of this transaction?"

Jordan shrugged, but the grimace on his face probably mirrored my own. "I don't know, but I can guess."

I shuddered. "Gross."

The whole thing was layered in ick. It was slimy and devious and... "Wait, how does this deal with Alex?"

Jordan's face brightened. "Ah, well, I couldn't find an easy way to dig any deeper than I already had, not without setting off alarms and security alerts and all that crap. But that in itself gave me an idea. What if I could develop a, uh, *code* that makes it look like Alex was the one accessing these confidential files? Two for one. My code can transfer the entire database to me, wipe the original server clean, and frame Alex for the whole hacking crime." He beamed with pride at his idea, and I had to hand it to him... that was pretty great.

"A *code*, huh?" I teased. "Just call it what it is, Jordy. You're creating a virus."

He shrugged, looking smug. "Semantics. So, what do you think?"

A wicked grin curved my lips, and I played out the scene in my head. Officials banging on Alex's dorm room door, dragging him out of the academy in restraints, the cell door slamming in his smarmy face...

"I love it, in theory," I told Jordan, and his smile slipped a bit, "but will it stick? I mean, his family is one of the most powerful monarchies in the world—after yours and Rafe's, obviously—but I'm pretty sure his father could just snap his fingers and get Alex released."

Jordan wrinkled his nose. "Possibly, yes. But wouldn't it be interesting to see who is involved in the whole ballot farce? I don't think all the monarchies are in on it. I'm at least eighty percent sure mine isn't... but I guess you never know, right?"

He had a point. "Let's do it."

"Yeah?" He grinned, looking all kinds of excited and sending butterflies erupting through me.

I leaned in close, kissing his lips lightly as I nodded. "Yep, let's frame that bastard."

Jordan groaned, deepening our kiss. "Fuck, Vi, revenge is so damn hot on you."

My laugh held an edge of evil, and I kind of loved it. "You think so? Maybe you should show me..." I slipped my hand under the bedclothes, finding his hard length and grasping—

A sharp knock on the door jolted us from the haze of arousal that was settling, and Jordan scowled in the direction of the sound.

"Go away!" he shouted, clearly not caring who was at the door. "I'm busy!"

Dismissing his visitor from his mind, he grasped me around the waist and hauled me into his lap with a feral growl. His fingers threaded into my hair, and he tugged my face to his for a deep kiss until... yep, that fucker—whoever it was—knocked again.

"Ignore it," Jordan whispered, rocking his hips and grinding his hard length against my core, making me moan. "They'll go away."

Fine by me, I was all for ignoring the intruder. It'd be all too soon that I'd need to leave Jordan's room and face reality once more. His plan to deal with Alex—even temporarily—would probably take a while, and in the meantime I'd be back to faking a happy relationship with that asshole in public. Meanwhile, trying to hide my *private* relationships with Jordan and—

"Jordan!" the person at the door barked, knocking again. I froze, cursing. I knew that voice. "Unlock the damn door; we have a problem."

The crown prince of New America made a frustrated sound in his throat, but captured my lips in another bruising kiss before responding.

"Go away, Rafe!" he shouted back, not taking his hands from my body for even a second. If anything, he seemed *more* aroused.

I gave him a suspicious look. "Jordy," I whispered, teasing, "does it turn you on to have me naked in your bed while Rafe is right there?"

He flashed a naughty grin, using his strong grip on my hips to position me just so. The tip of his cock breached my entrance as he

ground against me, and I gasped. "Fuck yes, it does," he whispered back, kissing me hard. "I love having one up on that bastard."

That should annoy me. It should make me feel used, like I was nothing more than a pawn on their chessboard... a prize to be won. But it didn't. I knew Jordan, and I knew he didn't actually think of me like that. The fact that it'd piss Rafe off? Well, that was just an added bonus on top of the mind-blowing sex.

The banging on the door increased, but it just made me chuckle as I sank down onto Jordan's cock with a groan.

"Jordan, open the fucking door!" Rafe snarled, but his friend wasn't listening. Instead, he palmed my tits and bit his lip as I ground harder. "Dude, come on. We need to talk."

Something in Rafe's tone made me pause, and I gave Jordan a small frown of concern, glancing at the door. He just shook his head, though.

"Ignore him," he urged, capturing one of my nipples in his mouth and sucking for a moment. "He'll go away in a second."

But nope. A moment later, there was a distinctive click of the door unlocking and then *bang*.

"What the *fuck*?" Rafe snarled, filling the doorframe like some kind of avenging angel and glaring at us like we were... okay, sure, we actually *were* fucking. Whatever. Doors get locked for reasons.

"Dude!" Jordan shouted, grabbing his sheet and tossing it over me with lightning speed. "What the hell are you doing? I said I was busy!"

The door slammed shut, but I wasn't stupid enough to think that was Rafe leaving. As it was, I had to find my way out of the sheet before I could glare my own indignation his way.

"You sure don't waste any time, do you, Cinderella?" Rafe sneered at me, his eyes narrowing with... I didn't even know. Anger? Disgust? Why was he so fucking hard to read?

Whatever, I was well overdue another verbal sparring with this prick. "Well, a girl has needs, and I sure as shit wasn't coming back for seconds with *you*, Angel." I curled my lip as I delivered the implied insult to his skills in bed, and his jaw twitched.

"Oh stop it," Jordan snapped. "Rafe, quit acting so shocked. We discussed this. Besides, you guys were a one time thing, right? Just an adrenaline fuck after Vi's fight?"

That... *was* what we'd said. Wasn't it?

"Wait, you discussed this? As in our sex lives?" I scowled at both of them. "Not cool."

Easing off Jordan's cock, I shuffled to the edge of the bed, keeping the sheet tucked firmly around my naked body as I searched for my clothes. Seriously, how had they ended up spread so fucking far around Jordan's room?

"No need to act modest on my account, Cinderella," Rafe purred, all snark and malice. "It's nothing I haven't seen—or tasted—before."

Against my better judgment, my cheeks heated and my stupid-ass brain took me on a trip down memory lane.

"Just because my judgment was impaired *once* doesn't mean it ever will be again," I replied with ice and venom, locating my skirt and shimmying it on under the sheet. It sounded hard to do, and it was. Still, I refused to give Rafe the satisfaction of seeing me naked again... despite what he'd walked in on.

Jordan groaned at our bickering, slid out of bed—clearly not giving two shits who saw his naked ass—and tugged some pants on. "You two are as bad as each other. So, what was important enough to pick my lock and bust in here?"

Rafe frowned at his friend. "I didn't pick the lock, bro. I have a key." He held it up to demonstrate. "It just seemed rude to use it without knocking first."

My jaw dropped, and Jordan scrubbed a hand over his face while clearly fighting a laugh. "So, what is it? Vi and I were right in the middle of something." Jordan's eyebrow raise would have said it all... had Rafe not just seen it for himself.

Ugh, fuck. Now I'm blushing.

"Clearly," Rafe commented, scooping up my bra from the floor near his feet and dangling it from his fingers. Fucking hell. "I came to let you know that the charity case was missing, but I see you found her already." His dark gaze rested on me for way too long, like he could see through the sheet with X-ray vision or some shit. Or maybe that was just a convenient excuse I was telling myself to justify the way my nipples hardened under his stare.

"Thanks, I was looking for that," I snapped, stomping across the room to snatch my lace garment from his hand. Unable to stop pushing his buttons, I gave him my back and dropped the sheet—allowing Jordan a full frontal view of me in nothing but a plaid skirt. Bit

porno? Yep, totally. His tortured groan and wicked smile backed it up, while I slipped my bra back on and tried, then failed, to fasten the hooks.

"For fuck's sake," I muttered under my breath after missing the eyelet for the second time and totally ruining the sexy thing I'd been aiming for.

Warm fingers pried the fabric from my hands, and I froze.

"You look like you need help, Cinderella," Rafe murmured in my ear, and damn it if my whole body didn't quiver as his fingertips brushed my spine and his breath feathered my neck.

Yeah, that had backfired.

"Thanks," I snapped, jumping out of his grip the second I felt my bra hook close.

He huffed a small laugh. "*Anytime.*"

Wow, like that wasn't a loaded statement.

"One other thing, Jordy," Rafe continued, like he hadn't just chucked a roman candle down my pants and set it on fire. "I just heard who some of the special guests are for the Spring Ball."

I frowned, trying to follow what he was talking about as I tugged my blouse on and buttoned it up with shaking hands. "The school dance?"

Jordan gave me a nod. "Yeah, it's tradition to invite important guests—some crap to do with alliances and politics because Arbon tends to secure the majority of royals as students."

"Most, but not all. So, often invitations to the Spring Ball are extended to other royals or aristocrats," Rafe continued, giving a small grimace. "I just heard Meghan is going to be attending with her guardians."

Jordan heaved a sigh, but I had no idea who Meghan was.

A cold chill of dread pooled in my belly. What if Meghan was Jordan's betrothed?

"It gets worse," Rafe said, and Jordan pulled a pained face. "I also found out that Zach's somehow managed to secure an exchange student position here for the rest of the academic year."

This one I knew. Jordan cursed, running a hand through his hair, then he clenched a fist like he wanted to punch something. Or someone. Probably Zach.

"Has anyone told Mattie?" he asked, showing—once again—that he was constantly thinking of everyone else. So cute. "She needs to

know.”

“I’ll go tell her,” I offered, tugging on my socks and locating my left shoe.

Jordan huffed as he finished dressing himself. “We all will. We need to fill the others in on our plan for Alex, too.”

I grinned at his implication that I had any hand in *his* plan but agreed anyway.

Round two would have to wait; we had crappy news to deliver to my bestie.

CHAPTER 17



Mattie had been less than excited when we told her that Zachary Westbridge would be back at Arbon Academy in a matter of days. Still, she handled it well, vowing to pick up some random guy—or girl—in front of her slutty fiancé just to give him a taste of his own medicine.

Jordan's virus idea cheered her up a whole lot, though, and I all but forgot about the mysterious Meghan until we were leaving Mattie's room hours later.

"Hey," I said, pausing Jordan with a hand on his arm as we approached the junction of hallways before the boys' dorms. "Who's Meghan? When Rafe said she was coming to the dance, you looked, I don't know, annoyed? Should I be worried?"

Jordan wrinkled his nose, but shook his head. "Not at all, gorgeous. She's... uh wow. I mean, this shouldn't really come as any shock given what we know, but she's my betrothed."

My brows shot up, and my lips parted. Of course, the logical part of my brain knew he had a fiancée. *All* the royals did. And if they didn't... well, apparently that was what the princess ballot was for.

Still, no one had mentioned Jordan's intended—outside of Mattie's cryptic words. But she was right, no girls pawed at him every meal break like Claudette did to Rafe. Part of me had hoped maybe she didn't exist.

"Oh," I said. Yeah, that was the best I could manage. My heart was at my feet, and my stomach was rolling with reality. Jordan was engaged... which meant I'd just had sex with an attached man. Oh fucking hell, I was the *other woman* in this scenario. Rafe's engage-

ment to Claudette didn't count. She was a raging cunt who'd tried to have me killed.

Jordan shook his head, though, and laughed. "It's not like that. I promise. Meggy is like... She's like my sister. I legitimately can't picture ever marrying her. Ever. Ever, ever, ever." He shuddered dramatically to drive the point home, and I allowed it to lift my spirits a tiny bit. "I can see you're still doubting me, but please, Violet, trust me. Meghan is *not* someone you need to worry about. I'll introduce you at the dance, and you'll understand."

"Okay," I replied, cautious and skeptical. It wouldn't exactly be the first time a crown prince at Arbon Academy had played me for a fool, would it? "If you're fucking with me, you know I'll kill you, right?"

Jordan smiled this gorgeous, blinding smile that I badly wanted to kiss. Or would if I wasn't suddenly second guessing everything between us..

"I'll buy you new blades myself," he promised, snaking his arms around my waist and leaning down to kiss my lips ever so softly. "Want to come back to my room? I think we left something unfinished earlier." He raised a brow, and my pussy fluttered with excitement. Greedy bitch.

"I wish," I groaned, "but despite the way Alex is fucking with my course schedule, I do still want to graduate with a degree from Arbon Academy. Which means I need to study. Raincheck?" I was lying—my grades were basically guaranteed now—but I was feeling really overwhelmed and needed a minute to get my head straight.

Jordan kissed me again, deeper this time and almost changing my mind. But then he released me with a sigh and nodded. "I'll take that raincheck, gorgeous. See you at breakfast."

I stood there for way longer than I needed to, watching him walk down the hallway towards the guys' dorms. My stomach was a mess of butterflies and knots, and I had no idea which was more prevalent. I'd *just* been burned by Alex. It was way too soon to go sticking the crumpled remains of my heart back out there.

Maybe we could just keep it casual, though. Maybe with that looming question of my attraction to Rafe, I could guard my emotions with Jordan.

Yeah, right.

On my way back to my room, I was lost in many thoughts. Sex, espionage, viruses, international lists to purchase the perfect reproductive match. I mean, was this some sort of fucking movie or real life? Royals did not live like normal people, that much was no secret, but at the same time, I had not expected this level of insanity. Not in, like, five months of being part of this world.

Turning the final corner into my hall, there was no one in front of me, and I appreciated that I was in one of the farthest wings. Out of sight. Private.

A hand wrapped around my forearm, yanking me to the side, and while I was prepared to fight, they were as skilled as me, wrapping two arms around me and effectively trapping both of my hands.

I still had my feet though.

Throwing myself back, I cracked my assailant under the chin, hard enough that I saw stars and he swore.

The moment I heard that familiar voice, I stopped my assault. It took my heart a bit longer to calm, though.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Rafe?" I whispered-yelled, wrenching myself out of his grip.

He'd pulled me into one of the secret tunnels through an entrance I hadn't known was there. It was close to my room, and I made note of the exact panel for future reference.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing with Jordan?" he snarled back.

I blinked, trying to figure out his tone. The shadowy alcove hid his expression for the most part, and I only caught a sliver of annoyance and frustration in his voice.

"Are—" I cleared my throat. "Are you jealous?"

He laughed, an immediate reaction, the sound low and husky as it traced chills down my spine. "Ah, my lovely little Cinderella." He was so close now, his finger stroking down my cheek. "You'd love that, wouldn't you?" he breathed.

My heart started hammering in my chest again, and I had to clench my thighs at this assault on my senses. His smell, that feel of contained rage, the tingles on my skin from where he'd touched me.

It was too much.

"I don't want to cause trouble between you two," I said, sounding stupidly breathless. "That's not my intention at all. I just... Jor-

dan is really grea—”

My words caught again as his knuckles grazed across my nipple, one and then the other until they were stiff peaks straining against the thin material of my shirt.

“Jordan is great,” Rafe drawled. “He’s my best friend for a reason. I don’t trust many people in this world, but Jordan... he’s family.”

I was so fucking confused and so fucking turned on that it took every ounce of my control not to moan as his hand dragged even lower.

“You’re going to break his heart,” he whispered, lips against my ear. “And then I’m going to break you.”

That hand, which had been tracing my body, lifted and stroked my throat. It was partly threatening and a lot arousing.

“I care about Jordan,” I managed to choke out.

Rafe’s laugh was dark. Dangerous.

In a move faster than my sluggish brain could track, his hand was under my skirt, fingers stroking the dripping moisture between my legs. There was no stopping the moan this time as I rocked forward into that touch.

“You care about Jordan,” he mocked, “but you’re soaked for me.” Jesus. Fuck.

I couldn’t think, I couldn’t breathe, but there was a part of me that was sure Rafe was just using me to prove a point.

Well, two could play that fucking game.

My right hand shot out, cupping his long hard length. He could spout all he wanted that I was soaked for him, but he was like a fucking baseball bat in my hands, so hard that it had to be painful.

“I think you might care more than you’re letting on,” I said, tilting my chin back, gaze clashing with his.

I licked my lips, trying not to moan again as his fingers slid inside, finding my G-spot instantly. His lips were on mine then, cruel and biting, but I didn’t care. I needed this orgasm more than I needed air.

Then, fuck Rafe, because I was leaving his dumb ass here.

Our kiss deepened, and I widened my stance, giving him more access. It took me almost no time to come, the swirling sensations low in my stomach exploding as Rafe and I kissed like we’d die if we didn’t. It was a little desperate and a lot fucking hot.

As I cried out against his lips, he stiffened in surprise, like he hadn't expected me to come so quickly.

Before he could respond, I wrenched my mouth back and stepped away so his hand fell from my skirt, then I took off down the hall.

"What the fuck, Cinderella," he growled, his voice fading as I exited the secret tunnel and sprinted to my door, sliding inside in the next few seconds.

Take that, you fucking asshole.

Violet: One

Rafe: Zero

It was fun to count orgasms, especially when I was in front.

CHAPTER 18



“*T*his is wrong,” I groaned into my pillow, mind full of angsty shit.

Mattie laughed so hard I had to lift my head and glare at her. “Girl, I think you mean it’s so *right*. There’s literally no other way to describe it. You’re fucking with two of the most powerful, hottest princes in the world. I mean, you should be patting yourself on the back.”

I glared at her, hugging that same pillow to me. “But I don’t want to be stuck between them like this. I mean, how do I know what to do? *What* am I doing? I’m still messed up from Alex, and the last thing I need is more complicated dudes in my life.” I shook my head. “No, not dudes. Princes. Two fucking princes and all their baggage in my life.”

Rafe and Jordan were the perfect distraction, but a few things about this situation didn’t sit right with me. Firstly, both of them were “engaged,” yeah, sure, it was in name only and no one seemed to care, but it was a thing for me. Secondly, there was no way a commoner like me would end up as one of their princesses, so was this all pointless? A waste of time?

Was I going to get my heart really broken this time? I mean, Alex had bruised it, for sure, but I was starting to see that our relationship had been superficial.

Rafe and Jordan, though, there was something deeper there.

“Just have some fun,” Mattie said to me. “None of us know what tomorrow brings, so why don’t you just enjoy the sex and attention and worry about the rest later?”

Easy for her to say. "I'm not sure I can keep my heart separated," I admitted. "I mean, not that Rafe has indicated I'm anything except an annoying gnat in his life, but..."

I groaned again. I actually had no idea what I was saying.

Mattie threw a small cushion at me, shaking her head.

"You need to get out of your own head, girl."

I snorted. "Wish I could."

Fuck. I really wished I could.

* * *

THERE WAS no one on the running track a few days later, and I took full advantage, pushing myself harder and faster than I had in a long time. My muscles enjoyed the stretch and strain, and I was happy to feel some flexibility and strength return after too long without exercise.

I moved on to the bag next, hitting it hard and fast, taking out my frustration on something that couldn't fight back. It was less than satisfying.

When I'd been punching the bag for an hour, muscles fatigued as fuck, my palm reader buzzed. Glancing down, sweat pouring off me, I stopped what I was doing to focus on the message.

Angel: **Fight tonight. 9 P.M. Don't be late, Cinderella.**

The buzz of adrenaline almost knocked me to my knees. My exhausted knees.

"Shit," I muttered. I never would have worked myself so hard if I'd known that fight was tonight, but... it'd be fine. I'd skip out on my afternoon classes, have a nap, and by tonight I'd be good as new.

I'll be there.

I messaged him back, and then I went to get myself ready.

A shower followed by sleep was the exact ticket I needed, and by the time 8 P.M. rolled around, I was more than ready. The purple outfit slid on like a second skin, my mask and wakizashi blade the final touches. I didn't bother to cover my blond hair. I hadn't last time either, and judging by the way I was being treated by some students and staff, those who knew about the fights knew exactly who Violence was.

At 8.30 P.M a knock sounded at my door, and I opened it to find three black-clad, mask-wearing, mysterious and sexy dudes standing there.

I mean, not so mysterious because I would know Jordan, Nolan, and Rafe anywhere. I almost couldn't believe I'd mistaken Rafe for anyone else the first time. Their eyes were each distinct, and I needed to up my observation game if I wanted to stay alive in this new world.

"Ready?" Nolan asked, sounding uncharacteristically somber. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Jordan nodded at that like he wished I'd reconsider. Neither of them truly understood, and that was okay. I got other things out of my relationships with them. But Rafe, he got it.

"Don't baby her. She doesn't need it, and she could kick both of your asses," he growled.

I eyed the impressive physiques of all three and wondered if I could take them all. I wasn't stupidly overconfident; I knew I had weaknesses that could be manipulated if someone studied my moves, but I was fairly certain not many fighters tonight would have the years of training and discipline I did. And none of them had had my sensei as their teacher. He was always my secret weapon.

"Let's do this," I murmured, stepping out with nothing more than my Violence persona and the key to my door, tucked into a small pocket on the edge of my outfit. Jordan stopped me, though, before I got it properly secured.

"Let me hold that. I'm not fighting tonight."

I shrugged, handing it over. I trusted him, and this was a fairly big step in proving that.

The four of us walked in silence to a hallway I hadn't been in before. The panel in this wall was harder to open and took two of them. "That's why you all picked me up," I noted as we stepped through.

Rafe nodded like he was impressed I'd managed to put two and two together to get four. "The location moves every time, and with the new threat level of the resistance being raised to a three, we're being extra cautious." He shrugged. "In truth there are so many different passages that it's nearly impossible for anyone to track this without inside knowledge."

"And yet it was tracked last time by the Swiss guards."

Rafe made an annoyed sound, sending chills across my skin. He could be scary with the way his chest rumbled and his aura darkened. I'd never met anyone who contained so much dark energy before, and I couldn't help but think of the way I'd left him in that secret alcove.

The way he'd brought me to orgasm with barely any effort.

He hadn't retaliated, not yet anyway, but I knew he was biding his time. I would pay for what I did, and part of me couldn't fucking wait to find out what he'd choose to do.

Yeah, I had issues.

"Think your guard will give us any trouble tonight?" Jordan asked him, and I forced myself to stop thinking about punishment and focus on the now. I needed to get my head in the game if I wanted to fight.

"No," Rafe said shortly. And that was it. He didn't elaborate and apparently no one else had questions.

"How do you know?" I snapped back because I wasn't as good at holding my tongue.

His steps slowed, and he took a deep breath before facing me. Our gazes held.

"Because usually when I tell someone to do something, they fucking do it. You're about the only person who seems to take my orders as suggestions."

I stepped into him, and I had no idea why I did that— my feet were moving before my brain caught up. "There was one place I took your orders," I reminded him, my voice husky.

The blue of his eyes went midnight dark, and I flinched as his hand bit into my hip. Not in a violent way, nope, it was all sex, and I was so fucking here for it.

He leaned down into me. "I remember," he drawled by my ear. "And don't think I've forgotten about your little episode, Violence. You and I will be sorting that out later."

Thighs clenching, pussy spasming, heart fluttering.

I was so fucked.

Swallowing hard, I forced myself to step away from him, laughing lightly. "Do your best," I taunted before I started along the path again.

Focus. Focus on the fight.

Rafe could not distract me, especially not if I was fighting Brandon tonight. I knew it wasn't locked in yet, but I was holding out hope that someone would make it happen.

I needed to end that fucker.

CHAPTER 19



It was as crowded in the newly set up fight area as it had been last time. Hundreds of faceless, nameless, black-clad individuals. The four of us had split up before entering, and now I wandered through the crowd, drawing lots of attention and ignoring most of it.

Being the only purple-clad person in a sea of black pretty much guaranteed I'd stand out. Not to mention I'd near killed my last opponent. And I was a chick.

The perfect trifecta to give me all the stares.

"All fighters to the designated area behind the rings," a voice called over the loudspeakers.

Pushing through the crowd, I headed in the direction of the multiple fight rings that had been set up. On the way here, the guys had told me that tonight there would be three fights happening simultaneously, followed by the main event—the one that got all the attention.

No doubt it'd be Fallen Angel again, and I wasn't even angry about it since he was, without any doubts, the most skilled opponent I'd ever fought against.

And it hadn't even been a real fight.

I couldn't imagine what it must be like when he completely let loose and gave it his all.

Part of me wanted to fight him in one of these events, one day, just so I could really test myself. For now, though, I had more pressing matters to worry about.

Scanning the fighters, it was impossible for me to tell if any of them were Brandon. He had no real standout features; he wasn't tall and broad-shouldered like Rafe and Jordan, and had no particularly interesting facial features and an eye color that was instantly forgettable.

I might not even know as I fought my opponent if it was him, and that made this very difficult. I wanted to kill Brandon, legitimately wipe him from the face of the Earth, but I couldn't do that to someone else.

I had to be sure before I made any serious moves.

There were twenty of us behind the three fight rings. I caught sight of Rafe because, unlike Brandon, his height alone had him standing out.

I didn't go near him, though. I knew better than to out him, and since we were often seen together in real life, it was best that I didn't act familiar with any of my friends.

The announcer called up the first six fighters.

"Dragon versus Blades in ring one," came the mechanical voice. "Frost Bite and Broken Glass in ring two. And Justice versus Violence in ring three."

I didn't startle at my name. Rafe had whispered to me before I'd stepped into this area that I would be fighting at least twice tonight so I needed to pace myself.

It was almost nice, a warning of sorts, but I didn't need it.

Two fights was nothing.

I moved toward the ring that had the three marked on the middle of the bouncy floor and launched myself up and over the fence that separated the fighters from the audience. It felt like there were a lot of people crowding close to this area, and I forced myself not to run my hands over my braid to check if it was still in place, a nervous gesture I'd spent years retraining myself to not do. My hair was a sore point for me, though, with my sensei harping daily about how I was giving someone ammunition to use against me. He'd suggested I shave it close to my head for a true monk-like existence.

I'd declined, vain bitch that I was.

Justice chose that moment to dive over the side barrier, perfectly rolling across the floor to come up right in my face. The fighter was a good six inches taller than me but seemed slender, like he had long-distance running muscles.

That didn't mean he wasn't strong, and he'd likely hold more endurance than most of the bulkier fighters. I wouldn't underestimate him.

No one that fought here was going to be an easy opponent.

Our fight commentator was making the usual intro bit, but I wasn't listening. I'd zoned him out completely because nothing he could say would help me win. Nope, I was laser-focused on my opponent. Justice.

He held himself well, loose and ready, showing his training. I took all the time I could, slowly drawing my blade while scanning him for weaknesses.

"Tanto, right?" Justice commented, nodding to my blade. I was actually kind of surprised he knew what that was. He was wrong; my baby was actually a wakizashi with a twelve inch blade, but he was close. "You know how to use that, little girl?"

Oh, that was a shame. Just when I'd gained the slightest bit of respect for my opponent, he went and ruined it with some misogynistic bullshit.

"Guess you're about to find out," I murmured, giving a small shrug. I didn't move around like lots of fighters did to warm up or cover nervous jitters. I found that the less I moved around, the more it unnerved people. Going against the norm always seemed to have that effect... even outside the fight rings.

Justice smirked as he reached out to one of his friends and took a slightly longer blade from him. It was nothing special. Just a knife. A long, sharp knife, but that was it. Based on the dull gleam off of it, it didn't even look to be high quality.

From the corner of my eye, I caught Rafe's distinctive frame hovering near the edge of my fight ring. Two steps to his left... yep, there was Jordan. I'd know those eyes freaking anywhere.

Justice lunged at me, swiping with his big-ass knife. My reaction time was quick, but I was still only human. He'd caught me off-guard and nicked the flesh of my upper arm, drawing blood.

"Motherfucker," I cursed, spinning out of the way and mentally berating myself. Stupid-ass hormones had just nearly gotten me killed. Maybe it was a bad idea to fight with those two watching me.

"Pay attention, sweetheart," Justice mocked, twirling his weapon around in a showy, arrogant move. "This is supposed to be a warm-up for my next fight. So don't make it too easy, yeah?"

Anger burned through my veins, but I wasn't stupid enough to let that emotion rule me. Our fight had begun, and in this place there was no room for any emotions. At all. Internally I was a cool, calm void.

A deep breath filled my lungs, and as I exhaled, I moved.

Spin, cut, step, dodge, strike, *breathe*. Repeat.

The movements came like second nature to me, and before I'd even broken a real sweat, Justice was flat on his back with my boot on his chest and my blade pressed to his throat.

"Yield," he squeaked, displaying his hands in a clear sign of surrender.

Frowning, I blinked a few times to bring my awareness back to the present. Justice's crappy knife was several feet away, and blood dripped down his face from a vicious gash in his forehead. My elbow ached a little, and I found a vague recollection of striking him with it in lieu of slitting his throat.

I didn't move. Not for a second. Not until the fight commentator got in my face and declared me the winner.

As I sheathed my wakizashi and exited the ring, I rolled my shoulders, muscles moving easily. Justice was right; that had been a good warm-up.

Now I was ready to kill a girl-bashing bully.

* * *

THE NEXT ROUND of fights was announced just minutes later, and my name wasn't called. But that was actually a blessing because when the commentator announced the names for ring two, I grinned.

"Subtlety isn't his forte," Jordan murmured in my ear, having appeared from the depths of the crowd with some impressive stealth.

I snorted a laugh. "No. I never would have guessed that Brandon Morgan—son of Dean Morgan—would call himself *The Dean*. Arrogant fuck."

"Arrogant, rash, sloppy... you'll see." He rested his hand on the small of my back, and I resisted the urge to lean into him.

He steered me closer to the ring I'd recently vacated, and we positioned ourselves in the shadows to watch the fight. It was like a

preview of what I was about to face... if my guys had managed to come through and match us up.

Fuck, I hoped they had; I was basically drooling at the idea of drawing that prick's blood.

The fight started, and I had a worrying thought. "What happens if he loses this round?" I asked Jordan, shooting him a quick look before returning my attention to the ring. Brandon had just taken a hard hit to the jaw, which made me equal parts satisfied to see him beaten and concerned this would cheat me of my own chance.

Jordan paused before responding, long enough that I knew what he was going to say. "If he loses, you won't fight him next round. Losers don't fight again in the same event; it's just bad business." He sighed, his sharp gaze traveling across the excited, cheering crowd in the underground arena. "And there's a whole lot of money changing hands on these fights."

Huh. That hadn't even occurred to me. Back home, people only placed bets on the main-event fighters, and even then it wasn't major money. No one had enough to spare.

"Did people bet on my fight?" I asked, curious. Brandon's opponent slashed at him with a set of Bagh Nakh—also known as Tiger Claws—and my nemesis narrowly escaped being gutted.

Jordan's fingertips skated down my spine, and I shivered. "Of course they did, gorgeous," he replied with a small laugh. "Even with the display you put on at the last fight, I still tripled my money tonight."

My jaw dropped, and I tore my attention from Brandon's fight long enough to gape at Jordan. "*You* bet on me?"

His lips curved up in a smug smile. "Vi, I'll *always* bet on you."

He held my gaze for a long moment, broken only when the crowd erupted and someone bumped into us.

"Cut it out, you two," Rafe snarled. "Practice a little bit of tact while we're all supposed to be incognito."

I rolled my eyes, but he melted back into the crowd before I could snap back at him. Much as I hated it, he was right. I shot Jordan a regretful look, then created a bit of distance between us.

"And the winner is..." the commentator started, and my breath caught in my throat. I'd stopped watching Brandon's fight, and now my view was obscured by a group of huge-ass men. Fuck, *fuck*. Who had won?

"...The Dean. Who the fuck saw that coming?" This last part was muttered, but I'd shifted close enough to hear him, and I snickered a laugh.

"Did you see that?" Nolan asked, sidling up to me. I shook my head, and he grimaced. "Dickhead won by dirty tactics. Someone 'accidentally' threw a glass bottle into the ring. Bengal tripped on it, and Brandon used the advantage to checkmate him."

Whoa. Brandon cheated? Why was that not surprising at all?

"Watch out for stray trip hazards then?" I replied with a sigh. "Got it."

Nolan jerked a nod. "Five minutes until next round. You ready?" I nodded. "You need anything?" I shook my head. "Alright, stay limber and for the love of all that's holy, make that bastard bleed." He paused, giving me a feral kind of smirk. "Otherwise we'll have to intervene on your behalf."

"Don't you fucking dare," I growled, jabbing him in the ribs with my elbow. "Revenge is mine. You start thinking about how we can get Claudette in the ring for next fight night."

Nolan laughed. "Yeah, sure. Claudette risking a broken nail. Let me get to work on finding a unicorn to shit out rainbow ice cream while I'm at it."

He snickered at his own joke as he merged back into the crowd and left me alone once more. They were seriously good at doing that, which made me wonder how long they'd been attending these clandestine fights. Also made me wonder just how deeply they were involved, given how easily Rafe had managed to get me on the bill.

"Okay folks, are we all ready for round three?" The main commentator bellowed his words into a microphone like he was some kind of performer. Hell, maybe he was. With everyone disguised to varying extents, the commentator could well be a celebrity or a royal himself.

Excitement warmed my belly, and I rolled my shoulders in preparation. A small part of me worried that maybe the guys hadn't made it work, maybe I'd end up fighting some other arrogant dick with sloppy footwork and heavy fists.

But then... "Violence versus The Dean!"

Fuck yeah.

Wait, which ring?

CHAPTER 20



As it turned out, I didn't need to worry. Enough people either stepped out of my way or nudged me in the right direction. In fairness, my violet-colored Violence costume really did make me stand out a bit.

"You can't be serious," Brandon—ahem, sorry, *The Dean*—sneered when I stepped into the ring with him. "I'm not fighting a *girl*. What kind of joke is this?" He looked around, condescending laughter radiating from his whole form. Fucking hell, even with the mask and black outfit, even without the *stupid*, obvious persona, it would've been dead clear that this was Brandon Morgan. He just oozed a special sort of assholery.

"Are you questioning this ancient organization?" the announcer asked, sounding legitimately surprised. "You know the rules. No one requests or denies an opponent. You fight or you forfeit, and if you forfeit, your name is blacklisted and you never fight again."

No one could see his face, but Brandon's eyes narrowed at that. It was abundantly clear he didn't like having that sort of ultimatum thrown in his face.

"Are we good to go ahead?" the announcer pushed.

Brandon nodded once, his fists clenching at the same time, before he forced himself to relax. From one of his loser friends on the sideline, he grabbed a pair of short blades, the sort that you fought with one in each hand. He wouldn't have the reach of my baby, but double the blade was always something to keep an eye on.

"Let's get this over with," he muttered.

I didn't reply. I didn't move or twitch. My wakizashi was in my hands, and that was the only sign I gave that I was even remotely ready for this fight.

I'd waited a long time to match up with this asshole. An asshole I'd had to let beat me. Who'd filmed his cruel brutality and shared it around.

An asshole I was going to destroy.

He lunged at me first, driven by his need to take control. His ego required that of him. Of course I'd expected it, so I was ready this time. Ducking low and to the left, I slid past both of his blades, angling my body to cruise right between them and come up behind him.

The first slice of my blade hit something hard on his shirt, flinging it back at me. I was close enough to see that this fucking piece of shit had sewn some sort of micro-fine Kevlar into his outfit, one that was impervious to even the unmatched sharpness of my wakizashi.

"Take any opportunity to cheat, why don't you," I murmured.

They had quite a few rules here, and one was that your clothing couldn't protect you any more than your opponent's. If he had Kevlar, so should I. But Brandon's was so well designed that it was nearly impossible to tell. Thankfully, I spotted a few flaws. A few places where the fabric moved differently.

He was already swinging again, and I was reluctantly impressed with his skills. He knew his way around those blades, but his cocky confidence was going to be his downfall.

My wakizashi swished with a flash of silver, clashing against his, and I felt his flinch at the bite I took from his right blade. Yep, his Kevlar might be state-of-the-fucking-art, but my sword had been gifted through a long line of warriors. It never dulled and was made from Damascus steel, forged in a way that was so rarely done, there were only five of these swords in the world. If I had enough time and power in my swing, I had no doubt I'd even take out his body armor. Thankfully, I didn't need to.

Stepping into him, my sword pushing both of his back, I pivoted, dropping to my knees. I ran my wakizashi down his right side, aiming for every vulnerable point he hadn't armored.

Brandon cried out, dropping his right-handed blade before he tried to swing at me with the other. I was on the ground though, out

of his reach and rolling to a safe distance before I bounced to my feet.

"Who the fuck are you?" he snarled.

Clearly, he was the only dumbass who hadn't put it together to know I was Violet, and I had a sneaking suspicion it was because he thought of me as that poor, pathetic loser bleeding on the floor in front of him.

"You should know me," I said calmly, watching as he dropped his right arm down to try and protect that injured side. Blood had spattered across the floor, more appearing as he moved, and even I was impressed with the level of damage.

"I have no idea who you are."

He wasn't focused on me like he should be, giving me the perfect opening to rush him, using my momentum to smash right into him, sword first.

It cut through a gap in his shirt, piercing his chest. I couldn't easily get to his heart, not from this angle, but I hurt him badly.

He threw me off, and I rolled effortlessly to end up across the ring. Noise exploded, and it was like my ears had just started working again. I'd been so focused on the enemy before me that I'd completely forgotten we weren't alone here.

"Get up," Rafe snarled, his face down near mine. "Stop playing with him, V. Finish him off."

I blinked at him, and in that stare, I realized what he was saying. He was giving me permission to kill Brandon, and he'd help me cover it up. All that power and the resources I didn't have... Rafe was going to lend me his.

Some girls wanted flowers, but this... this was my fucking date material.

With a nod, I flung myself up, fingers tightening around the handle. But Brandon was halfway across the fight arena, bleeding everywhere and hunched over like he was barely able to stand.

"The Dean forfeits the match," the announcer calls. "He is henceforth blacklisted from participating or watching these nights. Strip him of his weapons."

"No!" I shouted, rushing forward. "Finish, you fucking coward."

Brandon spun around, and I wished I could see his face to try and figure out what his endgame was here. I mean, he didn't have to forfeit and give up all rights. He could have just tapped out once I

had him down. Or he might have expected I'd knock him out. That was what usually happened, so there was no way he knew...

His lips curled, and I had a flash of insight. He did know...

He'd figured out who I was, and he knew I planned to kill him.

This was a bitch move to save his own neck.

A smile tilted up my lips, and I deliberately swung my blade around, letting his blood fly off it in a pretty arc. "I don't need an organized fight to finish you," I said, low enough that only he would hear over the noise of the crowd. "There's nowhere you can hide." I leaned in really close, and he flinched. "I'm really going to enjoy this. Good luck, Brandon."

A pained moan left his lips, and his hands pressed to his injured side. No one helped him from the ring, and I stared him down the entire ten minutes it took him to haul his ass out of there and disappear through the tunnels.

"Come on, V," Nolan said, appearing out of nowhere. Those green eyes of his were sparkling—he'd enjoyed that fight. "Time to watch the master at work."

Ah, that could only mean one thing.

It was the main event.

Fallen Angel was fighting.

CHAPTER 21



When I watched Rafe move about the fight ring, I marveled at his skill.

How the fuck was he even real? No one, and I mean no one I'd ever seen in my life, moved like he did. He fought with dancing, fluid strokes of his body, using it as a weapon. I saw no blades on him, even though his opponent had a pair of short throwing axes, which were pretty much useless against someone as fast as Rafe. That was Goat God's first mistake. His second was calling himself Goat God, and his third was fighting at all tonight.

Rafe dispatched him in about forty seconds, leaving the Goat bleeding and broken with one of his own axes embedded in his thigh.

"I mean, if people are paying money for these fights, they really should find someone better for Ra—uh—Fallen Angel," I murmured to Jordan and Nolan, who were lingering near me.

Nolan snorted. "They've tried. It's reached the point where no one decent will sign up to fight him, and he's left with the idiots who want to prove themselves."

That was a problem because I had to admit, watching Rafe fight had my body wound up tight, and I really wanted to see more than half a minute of action.

Although there was a remote possibility I might orgasm from that, so maybe this was safest.

"So, it's over now?" I asked as people started to move. Quickly, without acknowledgement of each other, the crowds dispersed. It

was much less insane than the last couple of times when guards had broken up the fight.

"Do you think Rafe meant it when he said he told his guards not to come looking for this again?" I couldn't think of what reason he would have given, but he'd seemed sure they wouldn't show up.

Jordan shook his head. "That's not what he meant. No one in the Swiss Guard knows about this part of his life. I'm guessing what he did was give them something else to focus on, and they had no time to worry about this stuff. His father allows Rafe a fair amount of power and control already."

"Probably explains why he's such an overbearing asshole," I muttered before I slipped away from the guys, making my way with the crowd. Jordan's laughter followed me.

When I got into the main hallway, I started to follow the arrows—not that I needed to. Quite a few students were making their way back. I got a lot of looks, and I almost wished for a black cloak to cover my purple ass.

Standing out was great, if it didn't put a massive target on your back.

My weapon was still in my hand though, so I doubted anyone was going to take me on right now.

Of course, there was always an idiot in the crowd who had to show the woman who was boss.

"What makes you think you can play with the big boys?" a dude walking nearby sneered at me. I had no idea who it was; he wore a face cover like everyone else.

I slowed, twirling my blade as I smiled at him. "Hmmm, maybe the fact that with both 'big boys' I fought, I kicked their asses."

He wasn't smiling, and I continued on my way... only to have him wrap a tight hand around my arm, yanking me toward him.

For fuck's sake. Here we went again.

"You should learn your place, bitch. You have a cunt, you don't fight."

A snort of laughter left me, even though he was holding tight enough to leave massive bruises. "What about if you are a cunt? Because that would rule you out," I said in a sing-song voice.

Never let them see you sweat.

Before he could reply, I swung the hilt of my weapon, using the hand he'd stupidly left free, and slammed it down on his wrist. I knew the best place to hit to break a bone, and sure enough, I was rewarded with a satisfying crack.

Asshole howled, dropping me on instinct as the pain overwhelmed him, but he shut the fuck up when my blade pressed against his throat.

"I should kill you right now," I said, with no humor in my voice anymore. "Leave you in this fucking maze to bleed out. No one would find you. No one would miss you." Everyone else had cleared out when we stopped, so it was only the two of us here now.

And that made my threat all the more terrifying.

A whimper was his only reply.

"Come on, Violence," a low drawl said from behind me. "Leave this sorry excuse for a human to crawl his way back. You have bigger fish to fry."

The dick on the ground looked between Rafe and me, and I was shocked I hadn't heard him approach. I'd been sure we were alone, but that sneaky bastard was fucking Spider-Man or something, scaling walls and blending into the night.

"F—Fallen Angel," the loser stuttered out. "Was just"—he swallowed hard—"trying to make her stop fighting. It's not a place for bitches."

Rafe swung his leg out and kicked him straight in the face, shutting him the fuck up.

I shrugged, sheathing my weapon for the first time. "See, I didn't overreact. He got what he deserved."

Rafe's lips, visible under his mask, twitched just a little. I took that for a win.

"You are well named, Violence," he said, sounding amused. "Murder is your first thought when someone pisses you off."

I shrugged. "What can I say, most of the time, people respond to death threats better than a stern lecture."

He stepped closer, towering over me, but fear was the last thing I felt racing through my body.

"You don't have to tell me," he murmured. "I was born in violence and there I have stayed."

What the fuck does that mean?

I knew so little about Rafe, but I had guessed before now that there was darkness in his past. No one was the way he was without being burned in the pits of hell and surviving. I knew that for a fact.

"Who hurt you?" I whispered and almost immediately wished I could take that question back.

Rafe wrapped his hands around my arms, but unlike the previous asshole who had already crawled his way out of the tunnels, this didn't enrage me.

I wanted this biting grip.

"What makes you think I'll share my past with you?" Rafe said close to my ear, voice hard. "Why do you fucking torment me so?"

I wasn't quite sure what that last part meant, and I couldn't even recall what the first part was because my head was all kinds of fucked up with him this close.

"What do you want with me?" I breathed back, waiting for him to push me away.

Only he didn't.

Before I could blink, he'd hauled me into his arms and slammed me back against the rough stone wall. He yanked my purple catsuit down, leaving me in my black sports bra. Rafe pulled my sword out and sliced along the black material, so close I could feel the edge of my blade, but somehow he didn't break my skin.

My tits fell free, and he stared for many seconds, his eyes dark and stormy. "Fuck," he muttered before he lowered his head and sucked one peak into his mouth. He laved at my right breast first, followed by my left, leaving me a moaning, turned-on mess.

It was the fighting. Seeing it. Being part of it.

I was fucking wet before this had even started, and add in Rafe... I had no fucking chance.

My hands clawed at his shirt, the black material bunching in my fingers as I yanked hard, getting it over his head. Our masks remained in place even if we were half naked. Somehow that added to the entire fucking vibe.

Rafe lifted me a little, and I ignored the pain in my back from the rocks. I was too wound up to worry about pain. The pleasure was dominating my senses.

He got the bottom half of my suit off, sliding it down so it was off one leg and then the other. He had to lower my feet to the ground to

do so, and when he dropped lower, his face was pressed right to my underwear-clad pussy.

I groaned as his tongue stroked right across my aching clit, working it through the material, making my knees weak as I pressed both hands into the wall to keep some balance.

He dug his hands around my thighs, forcing them further open, and my back arched to accommodate. His tongue traced along the edge of my bikini line, slipping under and tasting the wetness pooling there. My underwear disappeared in the next instant, and he fucked me with his tongue until I unraveled under his touch. He must have learned from last time though, because he didn't remove his hands, keeping me prisoner against the wall as he drew every last ounce of pleasure from me.

"Rafe, fuck," I groaned, rocking harder against him, needing more.

I was never gonna have enough.

He was as skilled with his tongue and hands—and especially his dick—as he was with fighting.

A true master.

He spun me around, putting my face against the hard stone and both hands firm against the wall as he caressed my exposed ass. Normally I was not about ass play, but having Rafe stroke me like this, I was reevaluating my stance on that.

His fingers spread my legs farther apart, and I could feel the long hard length of his cock against my pussy. He was a little too tall for this to be comfortable, but that didn't matter since he was able to lift me and slam inside without faltering.

"Fuck," he groaned again, the first word he'd spoke since we started this. "Ever since you fucking left me in the hall, I've wanted this."

"Is th—this my punishment?" I moaned in return, voice breathy.

Rafe's laugh was husky, low, and filled with darkness. "No, Violence. This is the prelude to your punishment. So pay attention."

"Not possible," I bit out as he changed the angle, shifting my hips higher. Three more strokes and I was once again on the edge of an orgasm, my body tightening as swirls of pleasure surged in my center.

Rafe didn't let me get there though, pulling all the way out, slowly, before slamming back in again and changing the rhythm. My

body desperately tried to adjust, needing that high it was chasing. But he changed the pace again, his strokes differing, and when he pulled out again, I was once again standing on my own two feet, pressed against the wall, chest heaving as everything inside of me shook and cried for more.

Spinning around, I shoved him. "What are you doing? Be man enough to finish me."

His lips twisted cruelly, but he didn't back away.

"Life is a competition, and you are learning how much I like to win."

Fuck!

I wanted to scream, but since I was standing here naked, one leg of my fucking costume bunched around my ankle and a motherfucking mask on, I decided that I was done playing this game. If Rafe wanted to throw down a challenge, I was going to take it.

Our faces were close, so he didn't notice at first as my hand slipped down between my thighs, fingers stroking across my wetness. It wasn't until the moan slipped from my lips, that his eyes left mine, locking on the way I was playing with myself.

If he wasn't going to give me the release I needed, I'd take it for myself.

Fuck Rafe and his fucking games. Okay, sure, I might have sort of started it, but this was so much worse, and I was super-pissed.

Time to show him just how easily I could come all on my own. Good thing I'd had plenty of practice.

And Rafe handled it right up until my eyes fluttered closed for a brief moment and a breathless groan escaped.

Then he punched the wall.

CHAPTER 22



Rafe sucked a sharp breath through his teeth and glared at me like I was to blame for all his issues.

"Oh suck it up, princess," I muttered under my breath, wrapping the strip of torn t-shirt fabric a little tighter around his hand than it really needed to be. "Nothing's broken, as far as I can tell. You just need some ice." I quirked a brow at him, trying to hide my amusement. "Surely the big bad Fallen Angel has had split knuckles before?"

Okay, in fairness, it was a bit worse than that. I was pretty sure I could see bone.

Rafe just grunted a pissed-off kind of noise and jerked his injured hand out of my grip. "I told you it was fine. You're the one who felt the need to play Florence Nightingale, Violence."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah well, no one forced you to go punching a brick wall."

With his good hand, he grabbed my jaw, bringing my face to his so our foreheads touched. "Yes. You did."

His intense gaze held me fast, like I'd been immersed in quick-dry concrete, forcing me to see all the conflicting emotions in his eyes. There was too much going on in there for me to easily unpack, but one thing was abundantly clear. Rafe still wanted me. Badly.

"Sure I did," I replied with a nervous laugh, wrenching my chin free of his grip and forcing my limbs to obey me once more. "Come on, we should go."

I stooped to swipe my blade from the floor where Rafe had dropped it, and bit my lip against the way my suit moved over my

naked breasts. Stupid fucking Prince Rafe had cut my bra in two, and I hadn't been able to find my panties anywhere in the dark corridor. So that meant I had redressed in my paper-thin catsuit with nothing underneath.

Neither of us spoke as we made our way through the dark tunnels, but I couldn't help watching him from the corner of my eye. The tension in his shoulders was more than just pain from his hand, and it made me all kinds of smug.

Legit. The sight of Rafe punching a brick wall as I made myself come right in front of him would stay with me *forever*. Hottest. Thing. Ever.

Not that I'd ever tell him that. Homeboy had a big enough ego as it was, and I was starting to think the universe needed me to take him down a few pegs.

A sound ahead made us both freeze.

I tilted my head at Rafe, meeting his eyes with a silent question. Fight or hide?

His eyes narrowed a moment, like he was weighing our options, but the decision became irrelevant.

"Relax, Fallen Angel," the vaguely familiar voice called from the shadows ahead. "It's just me." Footsteps sounded, drawing closer, then Zachary Westbridge emerged from the darkness. He was dressed all in black, like he'd been attending the fights, but his mask was missing.

"I come in peace," he said with a sarcastic lilt, his hands held up in mock surrender. "Just needed a word with *Violence*."

"No," Rafe snapped, taking a step forward and kind of shielding me with his body. I mean, it worked. He was probably double my size, and the lighting was shitty. "Fuck off, Zach."

Instead of arguing back, Zach just laughed like this was the reaction he had expected from Rafe. Or... from Fallen Angel. I couldn't tell if Zach knew who he was talking to or not.

"Oh come on, you know you can't hide your pet from us forever. The society has *rules*, and you agreed to them all when we let her fight." Zach propped his hands on his hips, his stance relaxed and confident. Whoever this society was, they had to be the ones running the fights. I'd thought it was the resistance, though.

Either way, it looked like Zach was a member. How did that work?

"Not. Now." Rafe bit the words off, his voice rumbling with the thunder of his rage.

Zach's spine straightened the slightest bit as his whole demeanor shifted. Suddenly he radiated menace and authority.

"Step aside, Fallen Angel." His voice was pure ice, and it was clear he didn't get questioned often. At least, not in his current role. Whatever the fuck that was.

More shocking still? Rafe did what he was told.

Sort of.

He took one *very* small step to the side. Just enough to "obey" without being a totally whipped bitch. I snorted silently because it was such a fucking Rafe move it was actually funny.

Zach knew it too, judging by the long-suffering sigh he released with a clenched jaw.

"Prick," he muttered, then turned his attention to me—still half-way hidden by Rafe's black-clad form. "You fought well tonight, Violence. Really well. Who trained you?"

Instantly, my walls went up. I mean, more than they already were because I'd have been a fucking moron not to be on guard in this unusual situation.

"Just... a friend." I kept it as vague as possible without outright refusing to answer. If Zach, the man-whoring asshole, really did hold the power to ban me from fights, I didn't want to risk landing on his bad side.

He gave me a tight smile. "Well, I'm glad Fallen Angel convinced you to fight again. You made quite an impression during your debut." His eyes flashed with a kind of feral gleam that I could only explain as greed. He'd made money tonight, no question about it. But hang on a second...

"Fallen Angel... *convinced* me?" I repeated, shooting Rafe a dark look from the corner of my eye. He wasn't looking at me, though, as his murderous rage was fully seated on Zach. "Yep, he sure was *convincing*." Like how he extracted a favor out of me in exchange for *letting* me fight. Motherfucker was always going to get me in! "Was that all? We, uh, have places to be."

A leering grin pulled at Zach's lips as he eyed my exposed neck. "I just bet you do. All that adrenaline..." He licked his lips—not even joking. Licked them like some kind of excited voyeur. "I'll cut to the chase. Our society wants to extend a membership invitation to

you, Violence. A woman of your considerable skill would be quite an asset to our ranks."

My brows shot up, surprise holding my tongue long enough for Rafe to react. A split second later, Zach's body slammed into the wall with Rafe's injured hand wrapped around his throat.

It shouldn't have been hot. It really shouldn't. But fuck if my catsuit wasn't a bit damp between the legs from watching the blood seep through my makeshift bandage when he tightened his grip.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he demanded of Zach, his voice a threatening rumble. "There are *rules*, like you just reminded me. She's only fought in two events."

Zach, for what it was worth, didn't look scared or, really, anything more than pissed off. He placed a hand against Rafe's chest and pushed him firmly away, letting a silent war for dominance play out in their angry glares.

When Rafe took a micro-step away and released the other guy's throat, I allowed the breath I'd been holding to puff out.

"Two fights that senior members of the society were present at," Zach replied, as though he hadn't just been threatened with strangulation. "They were impressed. The offer has been made, and that's my job done." He shot a pointed look at me, past my guard dog's broad shoulders. "Think about it, Violence. The resistance could be the home you've always been looking for."

Shock washed over me like an ice-cold wave, and I said nothing as Zach disappeared back into the darkness without any further explanation.

The society was the *resistance*? And they'd just issued me an invitation into their group.

Wait...

"You're part of the resistance? Or you at least know people who are," I hissed at Rafe. "You're a fucking prince. They're trying to take the monarchies down."

He shook his head at me. "Not here. This is no place to discuss this shit." He started to move. "Come on; Jordan will be pissing himself with worry that we're not back yet."

My hand shot out, and I grabbed his wrist, halting him. "Not so fucking fast, Angel-boy," I snarled. "I need some answers. Right freaking now."

The stubborn fucking look on his face told me he wasn't playing ball, but I was never going to be that girl who blindly accepted a bland "trust me" just because she was getting good orgasms out of the deal. Nope, Violet Rose Spencer was no pushover.

"Tell me, or I swear to fuck, I'll sneak into your room while you're sleeping and tattoo 'little bitch' right on your forehead." My grip on his arm was like steel, and my voice was even harder.

He shifted slightly, peering back at me like he wanted to check if I was serious.

"Where would you get a tattoo gun?" he teased, but I was so far from being in the mood for games.

"You want to fucking try me, Rafael?" My threat dripped from every word, and his body stiffened with the slightest tell. He believed me, and it was a damn good thing because it'd be such a shame to mess up his pretty face. I'd still do it, though.

A heavy sigh gusted from his lungs. "Fine. But like I said, not here. It's not safe... which that weasel-dick bastard Zach damn well knows."

"Fine," I shot back, my jaw clenched in anger and frustration and... fear. "Where, then?"

He gave me a small headshake and flipped his palm reader open. "Come on. I'll tell the guys to meet us there."

* * *

UGH. I should have guessed where he would take me.

"They might be a minute," Rafe told me, stepping aside to allow me into the secret underground apartment that I'd been inside of just once before. After my last fight night... when Rafe and I....

Ugh.

"You want to shower or something?" he suggested, closing the door after us and setting the lock. From what I'd seen—this time I'd been paying attention—the door was locked with a keypad entry. Jordan and Nolan must also have the code.

"No," I snapped, totally helpless to stop my mind's looping replay of the scene from the last time we were here. How I'd threatened to take care of myself in the shower, and it had ended with Rafe—"I just want answers, okay?"

He shrugged, but his eyes gleamed with amusement and the vicious slant to his lips held a fraction of a tease. Fucker.

Seconds later—thank all the gods—the door clicked unlocked and opened to admit Jordan... alone.

"Where's Nolan?" Rafe asked, on the same wavelength as me.

Jordan shrugged, looking between the two of us. "No idea, I came straight here when I got your message. What's going on?"

Rafe frowned, then looked at his palm reader when another message came in.

"Noles?" Jordan asked him, and Rafe nodded.

"Not coming. Mattie had a few too many drinks, and he doesn't want to leave her alone when Zach is in the academy." His gaze came back up to rest on me, then he spared a quick glance for his best friend. "Guess it's just the three of us then."

He reached behind him to flick the door lock once more, and my stomach sank.

Locked into an underground apartment with the *two* guys I've been fucking? What could possibly go wrong?

Straightening my spine, I pulled on my big girl panties and shared my death glare equally between them. Fuck it. Own the situation, Violet.

"Alright, first one to answer all my questions gets his dick sucked. And, go."

CHAPTER 23



“*Y*ou okay, girl?” Mattie asked with concern as I slumped in my chair and rested my forehead on the dining table.

I groaned, threading my hands through my hair like I could hide under my own arms. I hadn’t bothered straightening it, but thanks to Mattie’s Miracle Balm—which she kept me well stocked with—my usually wild-birds-nest of curls was just sexy and disheveled.

“No,” I answered. All the words sitting on the tip of my tongue hurt because I couldn’t tell her. I couldn’t tell anyone. Jordan and Rafe had made that painfully clear last night when they’d finally started spilling their secrets.

The resistance. They were part of *The* resistance. In a very small capacity, and mainly so they could keep tabs on it for their families, but also because they didn’t totally love the way the monarchy ran the world. Nolan was a new recruit, but they seemed to think Mattie didn’t know. Since she didn’t fight, they’d been able to keep this part of their lives from her, even though she clearly had *some* knowledge of the resistance. My bestie was the kinda girl who kept her ear to the ground, even if the boys around her didn’t notice.

But still, I’d promised to keep their secret, and now I also had to keep something from my best friend. I wasn’t happy about it at all.

I still couldn’t quite comprehend that the three princes were involved with an organization that had been secretly waging war against the monarchies since... fuck, since the Monarch War. And now they wanted me to join them.

No, scratch that. Rafe and Jordan were vehemently against me joining, but the underground fights were entirely run by the resistance—sorry, *The Society*—and I'd made a splash.

Mattie grunted a pained noise. "I hear that. I haven't been this hungover in *years*."

Despite having the weight of a thousand secrets resting on my shoulders, I snorted a laugh at her. "I heard Noles left you to sleep it off in the bathtub after you vomited all over him." I raised my head just enough to give her a teasing grin.

Mattie groaned again, screwing up her perfectly made-up face. "Don't remind me."

I laughed again, sitting up a bit more in my seat. Seeing her hungover was helping to distract me from all the heavy shit from last night. After the guys had told me everything I needed to know—or everything they were permitted to tell me—I'd bailed, citing the need for time to process.

Instead, I'd just lain in bed staring at the ceiling all damn night, then fallen asleep about five minutes before morning.

"Good morning, ladies," Nolan greeted us, sitting down in the chair beside me and scooting closer, bumping my arm.

"Ow!" I hissed, jerking away and holding my arm protectively. I'd managed to compartmentalize my pain for the better part of the night, first with Rafe fucking me in the tunnels, then with all the information bombs he and Jordan dropped on me. But when I'd gotten back to my room, the ache had started setting in from where Justice had nicked me with his blade, and my first aid skills were somewhat lacking.

Nolan shot me a sharp look, and I gave him a small headshake. Sure, Mattie knew I'd been fighting, but she didn't need to know I'd been hurt. It was just a surface wound, anyway. No stitches needed... I hoped.

Mattie was oblivious, though, looking up at our waiter with heart eyes as he delivered coffee.

"I know why my darling twin looks like warmed-up roadkill today," Nolan commented, teasing his sister, "but why do you look so awful, New Girl?"

My eyes narrowed. "Gee, thanks."

His grin split wider. "Keeping you humble, gorgeous."

I sighed and rolled my eyes, reaching for one of the steaming coffees. "I was up late with Jordan and Rafe." It was the truth without spilling any confidential information.

"Damn, girl. Nice work," Mattie snickered, sipping her drink. "No wonder you're walking all stiff today."

I frowned, confused, then clicked on what she thought I'd meant. Ah fuck.

"That's not... I didn't..." I trailed off, shaking my head as my cheeks flush with heat. I would've liked to pretend it was embarrassment, but there was a healthy dose of arousal in there, too, at what Mattie was implying. Rafe and Jordan... and me... *all night*.

Groan.

"Well, Violet's rampant sex life aside, we should discuss the new transfer students. Or student." Nolan gave a small grimace, and I suddenly recalled that Zachary Fuckface was transferring here. Shit, how could I have forgotten? Looked like I'd be right under the resistance's nose after all.

How many others here were secretly part of it as well?

Before we got around to discussing the transfer student, a hand rested on my shoulder, caressing the side of my neck, and my unconscious reaction was to lean into the touch—thinking it was Jordan. But the sour expressions on Nolan's and Mattie's faces told me otherwise.

"What's this about *our* sex life, darling?" Alex purred from behind me, his grip tightening with a silent threat. "Have you been sharing all our dirty little secrets with your friends?"

"Oh fuck off, Alex," Mattie snarled, slamming her coffee down hard enough to slosh brown liquid into the saucer. "You're not welcome here."

"Ah, that's a shame. I always thought the Guays had such hospitable people too. Certainly your mother is always available for a nice chat whenever I call her." His voice held that unhinged, don't-fuck-with-me tone that turned my stomach. This bullshit was between the two of us, and he needed to leave Mattie and Nolan alone.

"Stop it," I snapped, giving my shoulder a shake to try and dislodge his grip. "And take your hand off me before I break it."

Alex laughed a hollow, humorless sound but didn't remove his hand. "Ah, my love. Such *violence*. Come on; I need my loving girlfriend to help me with something."

I was so, so tempted to tell him to go fuck himself with a cactus, but I couldn't forget the look on Mattie's face the other day in the library after Alex played dirty and started some bullshit with her mom.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed back from the table, and this time Alex let me shrug his hand from my shoulder... only to wrap it around my waist when I stood. Fucker.

"Catch you later, friends," he said to Mattie and Nolan, giving them a smug grin.

I bit my lip hard enough to taste blood, just to hold the fury inside. Alex's sudden appearance reminded me to check in with Jordan to see where he was up to on his virus plan. Seeing Alex hauled away in restraints—no matter how briefly he stayed locked up—would really put a smile on my face.

His hand stayed on my waist as we exited the dining room, and my skin fucking crawled. I hated that I needed to maintain the appearance of a happy couple with him. I hated that he held so much power that I had no idea how to combat. I hated... *him*. He'd totally fooled me with his nice-guy act. He'd made me fall in love, and the what-ifs would forever stick with me.

What if I hadn't overheard his conversation with Claudette?

What if he'd managed to get me pregnant?

What if I'd ended up trapped in Australasia with him and for the rest of my life I'd been forced into whatever arrangement he wanted because I had nowhere else to go?

I shuddered, and he pulled me closer.

"Game face on, my lovely Violet," he murmured in my ear. "Would hate for anyone to think the newest ballot winner wasn't getting her happily ever after."

"Fuck you, Alex," I whispered, with a fake smile pasted on my face. "You make me sick."

He laughed softly. "Not what you were saying when I was tongue fucking your tight cunt, darling."

I stiffened, revolted at the reminder, but he just laughed again and steered me out of the dining room and right toward—fuck my life—Rafe and Jordan. The two gorgeous princes were in the middle of what looked to be a very heated discussion, and I silently prayed for the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

"Violet," Jordan said, seeing me first. His gaze shot to Alex, and his brow dropped in a scowl. "Are you okay?"

"Of course she is, Jordy," Alex answered for me, and I seethed. Men who spoke *for* their partner always gave me the icks.

Jordan cast a quick, disgusted sneer over Alex, then turned his gaze back to me, his eyes softening. "Violet, I was asking *you*."

The implication was clear, and based on the way Rafe folded his strong arms, he was backing Jordan up. If I gave them the word, they'd rescue me from whatever Alex was up to, no matter what the cost.

"I'm fine," I replied with a sigh, "just looking forward to disinfecting my skin later. Hey, how are you going on that project?"

Jordan's brows lifted slightly, and the corner of his mouth curled in a knowing smile. "Really good, actually. I'm hoping to get it finished this afternoon."

Hope flared, and I bit my cheek to hold back my gleeful grin. "That's great! Hopefully it won't take long to get the results."

"As fun as it is to make idle chitchat with people I despise, we have somewhere to be. Come on, babe." Alex gave my waist a firm tug, and I reluctantly let him lead me away.

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes, me because I didn't care to make conversation with him. Ever. About anything. It was a waste of breath.

"Since when did you and Jordan work on projects together?" Alex demanded when we reached the male dorm wing. "You're not even in the same year."

I rolled my eyes. "So? I'm not in the same year as you, yet suddenly I'm taking 300 level courses."

He narrowed his eyes at me, suspicious. We were out of sight of the dining room and most of the students, but still, he kept a possessive hand on my waist. I didn't even bother trying to peel him off me because he'd probably pull some bullshit excuse out.

"Violet, if I find out that someone else has been putting their hands on *my* property," Alex told me in a scary calm voice, "I'd be inclined to cut those hands off at the wrists. Don't think to underestimate my reach."

It was almost laughable. Here I was worried he somehow knew Jordan and I planned to frame him for breaking into a highly classi-

fied server and stealing the data files. All he could think about was whether some other guy had been warming my bed.

"I'm not your property," I spat in reply as we reached Alex's dorm room and he opened the door. "What are we doing here, anyway?"

Instead of answering, he just shoved me into his room and slammed the door shut behind him. The only thing that saved him from a broken nose and knee to the balls was the fact that he didn't lock it.

"Get in," he ordered me, nodding to his huge bed. His hands worked his tie, loosening it and tugging it off before starting on his shirt buttons.

I shook my head. "No way. I thought I made it pretty fucking clear I'm never sleeping with you again, Alex."

The look he gave me was like I'd just farted out my mouth. "Get in the fucking bed, Violet, or Matisse and Nolan will pay for your disobedience."

I blinked rapidly, feeling the sting of his threat like a physical blow.

Fuck me. Why'd I have to go forming friendships? I knew better. Friends made you vulnerable. They gave your enemies leverage where otherwise they might not have any.

Alex smiled the kind of smile a shark might give a clown fish. "Now you're getting it. I may not be able to touch those other two lovesick fools—yet—but the Guays are way, way, way down the ladder. Easy to crush with one's boot."

And there it was. He couldn't touch me because I had no property, no title, no political aspirations and he wouldn't stand a chance in a fair fight. He couldn't touch Jordan or Rafe because, right now, their kingdoms were more powerful than his. But Mattie and Nolan? They were sitting ducks. Collateral damage. Fucking *leverage*.

God damn it all to hell.

But still, where did that leave me?

"I'm not letting you fuck me," I finally replied, looking carefully to the side as he stripped his shirt off.

The coy smile on his face as he approached me, shirtless, was the same one he'd used on me a hundred times. The same smile that used to make my stomach flip and my heart race. The one that said I was his whole universe and no other woman could ever compare.

"Come on, Violet," he murmured, sounding... sincere? "Do you really feel nothing for me, anymore? We were in love not so long ago. Those feelings don't just disappear overnight." He reached up and gently stroked some hair out of my face, just the same way he'd done when we'd been dating.

Damn him. Memories assaulted me, pausing my need to murder him.

He seized the moment, untucking my shirt from my skirt and flicking several buttons open before I snapped myself out of it.

"Stop it!" I snarled, my hand cracking across his face when he tried to unzip my skirt. "It was fake, Alex. All of it was *fake*. You were sleeping with Claudette, for fuck's sake!"

I backed away from him, tugging the sides of my shirt closed even as I shook with pure rage. It was mostly at him, but also at myself for that brief moment when I'd let those memories back in.

"We all make mistakes, Violet," he replied, not looking apologetic in the least. "Let me make it up to you..." He reached out, and I smacked his hand away.

Alex's ocean-blue eyes flared with anger. I braced myself for a fight, but it never came. Instead, his palm reader flashed and blipped with an incoming call, and he froze.

"Get in the bed," he barked at me, his whole demeanor shifting into aggression and menace. "Now. Or I'll get Mattie expelled."

There was no way in hell I'd let him rape me, but something else was going on here. He almost looked afraid as he swiped a hand through his blond hair and stared down at his wrist, so I did as he instructed.

When I was sitting against the headboard, he slid in beside me and tugged me sharply until we were flat on our backs, sharing a pillow. Then he answered his call.

The holographic image that projected from his palm reader into the space before us made me almost swallow my own tongue, and a chill of dread settled over me. If I'd had any doubts that this ballot bullshit was bigger than the two of us, this confirmed it.

"Mum, Dad," Alex greeted the gorgeous, golden-haired couple on the image, "you kind of caught us at a bad time..." He gave his parents a sly grin, implying that we'd been fooling around when they called.

Bile churned in my stomach, and I could feel how pale I must have gone. Hopefully they just chalked it up to a bad hologram signal or intimidation at meeting the King and Queen of Australasia for the first time.

"So I see," Alex's father, King Steve the Fourth, grinned lasciviously. It was gross as fuck, considering I was supposedly in his own son's bed right now. "This must be the mysterious Violet. She's even more beautiful than you let on, son."

"Oh," Queen Sheila gushed, pressing a hand dramatically to her chest. "Oh, you two make just the most gorgeous couple. Oh, honey, don't they look good together?" She pawed at her husband and then turned back to us on the screen. "You two will make just the most beautiful babies, I can already tell."

My whole body stiffened, and I would have bolted out of the bed had Alex not snaked an arm around my shoulders to hold me still.

"Mum, you're embarrassing my girlfriend," Alex chuckled, and I swallowed the rage and frustration and disgust threatening to engulf me. I couldn't afford to lay it all out there, though. Not if the king and queen of our world's third most powerful kingdom were in on the whole thing. I needed to play it smarter than that.

"Oh nonsense, darling. I'm sure Violet is just dying to start a family with you. It's what every little orphan girl dreams of, isn't it? Becoming a princess?" Alex's mother bubbled with excitement, seemingly totally oblivious to the insult in her words. Me? I was fucking stunned speechless. Was this bitch for real?

"Mum, seriously," Alex chastised, and I almost believed that he was embarrassed for me. Almost. Damn, his acting skills were good. "Do you mind if I call you guys back later? Violet and I are late for our economics lecture." He affectionately pressed a kiss to my head, reinforcing the idea that we were late because we couldn't keep our hands off each other.

"Of course, son," his father replied with a smug smile. "We'll let you get back to it." Wink. Ew. "And Alex? The clock is ticking. Don't disappoint me."

Alex's frame tightened beside me, but his relaxed smile didn't slip even a fraction. "Of course, Dad. I'm working on it." Without waiting for his parents to reply, he ended the call and let out a long sigh.

"What. The. Fuck. Was. That?" I asked him, shifting out from under his arm and trying *really* hard to contain my shock. "The clock is ticking? That better not mean what I think it means."

Alex remained where he was, reclined against his pillows, shirtless, with his arm tossed above his head. Fucking hell. It should be illegal for the bad guys to be so gorgeous.

"It's exactly what you think it means. Dear old Dad wants me to get you either locked into a marriage contract, or better yet, pregnant, before the end of the school year."

I barked a sharp laugh because it was either that or... I didn't even know. A mental breakdown?

"It'll be a cold day in hell before I ever let you stick your dick in me again, Alex," I informed him with total sincerity. I scurried off the bed and rebuttoned my shirt with shaking fingers.

Logically, in the back of my mind, I acknowledged that he hadn't been pushing the issue anywhere near as hard as he could've been. In fact, he'd been kind of leaving me alone for the most part.

It was suspicious, and I made a mental note to mention it to Jordan just as soon as he could erase Alex's touch from my skin.

My ex-boyfriend just shrugged, reached over to his bedside table, and grabbed a small velvet box. He tossed it over to me, but I didn't catch it. Instead, I let it land on the comforter in front of me and stared at it like it was poisonous.

"What the fuck is that?" I demanded.

Alex let out a sigh, like I was being dense. Okay, sure. I was. "Lesser of two evils, Violet. Make smart choices."

Without waiting for me to open the box or even for me to respond, he climbed out of the bed and disappeared into the bathroom. Seconds later, the sound of the shower running reached my ears, and I released the breath I was holding.

Curiosity pulled at me, and I picked up the velvet box, even though I already knew what I'd find. My fingers pried the lid open, and my heart stopped beating for a second.

Nestled in a bed of black velvet was a ring with the largest diamond I'd ever seen. It was so huge it would take up most of my knuckle, not that there was a chance in hell it would ever touch my finger. The jewelry was typical Alex in that there was nothing special or personalized about this ring. Huge rock, square cut, no other adornment.

He didn't know me at all, and this was just another show of money and power, neither of which I was interested in.

Dropping it like it was a snake about to bite me, I backed away, looking anywhere but at that fucking box.

How could this be happening? In this freaking century. If anything, the monarchies had taken us back ten decades instead of forward into the future.

The twenty-first century had seen the abolishment of most monarchies, and arranged marriages had not been the norm, but somehow all of these years later, after the Monarch War and everything, we were back to this bullshit.

Well, not today. Not with me. I'd die first.

CHAPTER 24



Alex left me alone for the next week, and I spent my time avoiding everyone—scurrying to classes; hiding from the nurse, who'd taken to knocking on my fucking door at ten at night; and listening to the student body rave about the big dance that was coming up next week, on Saturday. The Spring Ball was Arbon's first chance this year to show off to the monarchies, and they were wasting no time revamping the entire school to make it a showpiece. Or more of one than usual anyway.

I personally was freaking the fuck out because I had almost no doubt that Alex's parents would be there. Along with Rafe's, Jordan's... Jesus, I had to stop fucking princes. They were too complicated for my life.

During my last class on Friday, the buzzing of my palm reader distracted me, and I glanced down to find a new message.

Jordan: **It's done.**

Fuck. Yes. This was the first good news I'd had in days, and I needed it desperately. He'd run into a few snags in making sure the virus would not be traced back to us at all. It required him to use the school server, ping it all over the world, scramble the data... I'd tuned out the rest of his explanation because this sort of thing was not my strong suit. It was Jordan's, though, and I trusted he had done an exemplary job at ensuring its success.

Kinda helped that he had the best tech at his fingertips and probably the best teachers growing up.

Me: **Great work.**

I didn't reply with anything incriminating, just in case they decided to investigate anyone other than Alex. I was already regretting my big fat mouth mentioning a "project" to Jordan the other day. Hopefully Alex was too stupid to put that together with this frame job. It'd be better all around if he wasn't suspicious that this had anything to do with us.

Wishful thinking, no doubt.

Jordan: **Meet me after class. Rafe's glass cage of emotions.**

I silently snorted out some laughter at that. Apparently Jordan was the only other person privy to knowing about Rafe's secret escape from the world.

The rest of whatever class I was in now passed super slow. I'd stopped paying attention. Stopped taking notes. I wrote my name on the test papers and handed them in, only to get a top mark back.

It had actually turned into a game now of how bad I could be and still pass all my classes.

So far I'd discovered that even if I didn't turn up to class, I'd receive full marks, but I also had Alex up my ass about appearances, so I'd taken to showing up. And that was all.

When it was over, I hurried out of the room before anyone could stop me.

"Violet," Alex called, waving from the back of the class. Moron. He knew by now that I was always the first out, and still, he'd been too lazy to hurry.

"Not a dog, Alex," I yelled back. "I don't come when you call."

A few students nearby that could hear us snickered, and I knew I'd pay for that later. Honestly, I had zero fucks left to give.

Dashing down the hall, I took the longest route to the secret room with all the windows and the peaceful view. The room was empty, but someone must have been there earlier, since the fireplace was roaring, sending warmth around the space. The harsh winter months had disappeared a while ago, but it had become apparent that it never actually got hot here. Not like back home.

A longing for home slammed into me, something I hadn't really had before this point, but I missed the simplicity of my previous life. Missed my friend. Missed my freedom.

I might have been poor and an orphan, but in many ways, what I was now was much worse.

"Hey," Jordan said, distracting me from my morose thoughts. I swung away from the window and that mesmerizing view to focus instead on his darkly gorgeous face. "We ready to do this?"

I was nodding before I even said a word. "Fuck, yes. I am so ready to have Alex out of my life. I've been lucky so far; he's left me alone, no doubt so I can come to terms with my new reality. But that's gonna end soon. I mean... his parents..."

I hadn't really told any of them what had happened in Alex's room, not in any sort of detail, but they had seemed to understand enough to know that his parents were bad news and them being involved was a huge problem.

"How long is this going to take?" I asked, stepping closer as Jordan started to set up a bunch of equipment. He was pulling it from a large metal box, and in all honesty, I had no fucking clue what any of it was.

"It's going to take a few hours to send out, a few days to take effect, and a week or more to be discovered by the authorities and traced back to Alex," he said, his focus on wires and small black boxes that were all hooking into each other. "These devices will amplify the signal so that I can reach the main servers across the world and infiltrate the network as quickly as possible."

Like last time, this was the point where I started smiling and nodding.

After he was finished explaining, I realized how much work he'd put into this project. "Thank you," I said, "for helping me. You didn't have to—this isn't your problem—and I need you to know how grateful I am."

It wasn't just the work either; he could get into a ton of trouble if he was discovered. He was really putting himself on the line for me, and I didn't know how I could ever repay him.

He lifted his head, hands still wrapped around the black cord he held. "You don't get it yet," he said softly, "but you soon will."

Huh?

"Get what?"

The smallest smile teased the corner of his lips. "Your problems *are* my problems."

I had to swallow hard as a sudden burst of emotions took me by surprise. Jordan and his sweet talking was going to be the death of me. And unlike Alex, who had laid it on thick in the beginning, there

was a sincerity about Jordan that spoke of someone with an innate good nature.

No wonder he was best friends with Rafe. They were yin and yang. The perfect balance.

One a little too dark, the other a little too light. Together, though, they were perfect.

Jordan went back to his tech shit, and I spent time watching the view again, the mountains soothing me in a way I hadn't felt in a while.

"Okay, I'm ready," he said, leaning back and admiring his work. "Just waiting on one final piece. Should be here soon."

He settled in next to me, close to the fire, and in the silence we watched nature. Time passed, and I leaned against him, the soothing way he was playing with my hair sending me to sleep. At some point I felt him move, and he draped a soft and warm throw over me as he spoke to whoever had entered the room.

Somewhere deep in my subconscious, I knew it was Rafe. This was his secret place, after all. I tried to fall back into that cozy sleep place I'd just been in, but as they talked more, I found myself listening in.

"Our little princess is tired," Rafe said, and surprisingly enough, he didn't sound like an asshole. There was almost affection in his voice.

Jordan made an unhappy rumble of a sound. "I don't think she's sleeping well. We need to end this fucking asshole once and for all."

"Told you we should have just killed him," Rafe said nonchalantly.

Jordan snorted. "And I didn't disagree, but that's messy in a way we don't need right now. We have to be smarter about this, make sure we're around to keep her safe—to keep all of our families safe."

Rafe didn't reply, and it sounded like he was tinkering with the machinery. Whatever the missing piece was, it must be ready to go now.

I knew I wasn't getting any more sleep, I yawned and stretched, rolling over and to lift my head like I was sleepy and confused. Two sets of eyes locked on me.

"Hey," I greeted Rafe, trying really freaking hard to shove my dirty thoughts aside. No matter how good of friends these guys were, I seriously doubted they'd be cool sharing a girlfriend long

term. They were both too alpha. Even Jordan, despite his relaxed nature.

Not to mention the sheer scandal if it all got out. Two crown heirs both fucking the same penniless vagrant? A ballot winner, no less. I'd probably find myself strapped to a concrete block at the bottom of the Atlantic before the newspapers even printed.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep," I said to Jordan with a small smile. "Did I miss anything?"

He shook his head and crossed back over to me, sliding into the warm space at my side and draping his arm over my shoulders. "Nothing important," he replied before cuddling me into his side and kissing my hair. "I'm glad you got a bit of sleep. You've looked so exhausted this week."

I yawned, wriggling around until I was comfortable with my head resting on Jordan's shoulder and my feet tucked up on the seat. It should have been awkward, snuggling with my secret boyfriend in front of my occasional angry-fuck buddy, but it wasn't. It felt oddly calm.

"I haven't been sleeping much," I admitted.

Rafe shot a dark look at Jordan, who made a disgruntled noise.

"Don't look at me like that," he chided his friend. "It's not me that's been keeping her up."

My face flamed, and I cleared my throat. There went that peaceful calm.

"Not... like that. Just from Alex and..." I sucked in a deep breath, running it all through my head with lightning speed. I hadn't told them about the engagement ring or about Alex's dad and his ticking clock. But it was all becoming too much for me to shoulder alone, and what had Jordan said? My problems were his problems now? Let's hope Rafe felt the same way.

"Alex gave me a ring." I blurted it out, then wrinkled my nose in distaste. Saying it out loud was even more cringe-worthy than it had sounded inside my head, and the stunned look on Rafe's face made me instantly regret telling them. I couldn't see Jordan's expression, but the tension radiating through his body kinda clued me in.

"What kind of ring?" Rafe demanded, looking... panicked? Nah, that must've been sleep deprivation reading his expression all wrong.

I rolled my eyes. "A nipple ring. Idiot." That answer was pure sarcasm, and I made sure it was clear in my deadpan glare. "He gave me a fucking diamond engagement ring. A huge, ugly, billion-carat stone. Apparently his father—King Steve—wants him to either marry me or impregnate me before the end of the school year."

Rafe flipped a table. The low coffee table that held scattered papers with Jordan's handwriting all over them was upended and landed with a crack of breaking wood.

"Dramatic, much?" I remarked, leaning on my strongest defense mechanism. Snark. "Neither option is going to happen. Obviously. Once this virus that Jordan activated works, Alex is going to end up in a whole pile of shit for hacking confidential files. Right?"

"Temporarily," Rafe snapped, his chest heaving and his fists clenching. He wanted to hit something. Bad.

Jordan shifted away from me and swiped a hand through his hair in a telltale gesture of agitation. "We need to work on plan B," he muttered, mostly to himself, then looked up at Rafe. "Did you cover for me with coach?"

It took me a second to understand what he was talking about, but then it clicked. Friday afternoons were soccer practice before the game on Saturday. Jordan must have skipped it to stay with me.

Rafe gave a jerking nod, his brow still furrowed. "I did, but he was still pissed. There've been more resistance attacks, and all the increased security has Coach on edge."

"Why are they attacking?" I asked the princes, since they were on the inside. In a manner.

The pair exchanged a look. "Truthfully, these are not official Society-sanctioned attacks," Jordan told me. "Not that we're involved in everything, but from what we've heard, these might be some extremist wings of the group acting off book, so to speak."

Great. Just fucking great.

Rafe's jaw was tight, and I could tell there was something more that he needed to say.

"Do you know more about this?" I asked him.

Rafe shook his head.

"You're holding something back," Jordan said as he crouched down to start tidying the papers up. "I can tell."

I nodded. "Me too. Spill it, Angel baby."

Something flashed across his face when I said that, but it was gone again too fast for me to name. Weird.

"Coach told me about Zach..." he started, and Jordan groaned.

"Please don't say what I think you're about to say," he begged. "It's bad enough we have to see him during Society events, but... Just no. "

Rafe grimaced. "Sorry, bro. I couldn't get his transfer stopped in time. He got a permanent spot here... and a place on the team."

"Fuck!" Jordan yelled, slamming his hand into the already broken table and sending the papers flying once more. It occurred to me that I'd never seen him fight... but I got the feeling he could be pretty badass. Maybe he wasn't as "light" as I'd thought earlier. There was some darkness there too. I liked it. "I'm sorry, Violet; I need to go and speak with my *brother*. Are you—"

"Go," I told him, waving off whatever concern he was about to express. "Deal with Zach. I should be going to bed anyway."

His eyes darkened, the amber tones fading into midnight. "Tempting," I heard him murmur, but he didn't push it, just leaned over to press a kiss to my lips.

My mouth parted slightly, inviting him in, and he wasted no time, his tongue sweeping across mine. Whatever sleepiness I'd been feeling faded, but with Rafe watching us, it wasn't the time to get lost in this moment.

Later. Definitely later.

When Jordan left, I couldn't stay there with Rafe's enigmatic stare on me. "So, you all good here?" I asked, swallowing hard as I did my best to avoid direct eye contact.

Rafe's voice was a warm wash of sound. "Yep, I'll be here a while finishing this up. We'll send a message to your palm reader when it's all set in motion. Did Jordan tell you it'll probably be a week or so before we see the full effect?"

I nodded, stifling a yawn.

"Yeah, he explained the whole chain of events, blah blah. I kind of zoned out when he started talking all tech."

I thought I heard a little snort of laughter, but when I finally jerked my head up to see him, there was no expression on his face.

"See you later," I said in a rush, hurrying off.

This time I knew for sure it was laughter that followed me, but I didn't turn back.

To say I was in a bit of a daze walking to my room would be an understatement. I really hadn't been sleeping well, and it had taken that small nap to really showcase how tired I was. Apparently I had to stop pacing my room at night and actually try sleeping if I wanted to feel rested.

Who knew?

When I turned the last corridor to my room, I let out another huge yawn, the sort that took over my whole face and closed both eyes.

It was a stupid move, letting my guard down like that; apparently Arbon had made me soft. I sensed the presence a moment before I felt the prick of a needle in my neck. Quick and sharp, it bit into my skin, the burn of whatever was injected heating along my artery.

"Fuck!" I cursed, swinging around and smashing into whoever was behind me.

But it was too late. I got only one good hit, heard a surprisingly feminine cry, and then my legs buckled and everything went black.

CHAPTER 25



I'd never had an issue with anesthesia. Any time I'd required it, I'd woken up afterward with almost no side effects. This time, though, as my eyes shot open, I was rewarded with a pounding headache.

There was no disorientation, and I remembered that I'd been ambushed, putting me immediately on alert. My eyes darted around as I catalogued my situation.

Laid out flat on a semi-soft surface. Ankles bound. Wrists bound. Head held down by something strapped over my forehead.

It took me another few seconds to figure out what the familiar surface was, and the moment I did, chills of dread ran across my skin, filling my gut with cramps as I jerked at both my hand and ankle restraints. I was on a bed in the medical wing.

"Ah, you're awake, Ms. Spencer."

The creepy nurse's face swam into view as she peered down at me. She wasn't smiling like she enjoyed this; instead she wore a professional face as if this was all part of her job.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I cried, still trying to work my ankles free. "This is kidnapping and deprivation of liberty."

She clucked at me, her expression unchanging. "Please, Ms. Spencer. You know that by agreeing to come to Arbon, you gave up all medical rights to your body. You've been ignoring my summons for weeks now. This is the next logical step."

I blinked at her, some of my movements slowing. "You wouldn't know logic if it bit you on your fucking ass," I snarled at her. "I think you meant psychotic."

She busied herself then, fiddling around with some of the instruments on a metal table beside me. I couldn't see what was there, but I recognized the sounds.

Since she was turned away somewhat, sorting out her torture devices, I focused more fully on escaping. Many years ago I'd dislocated my thumb during a fight, and ever since then, it had been looser, allowing me a wider range of movement. It wouldn't help me get out of the bands—they felt high quality, with both a buckle and a strap holding me down—but I might have a shot at reaching my palm reader's emergency call button. Jordan had programmed it to his number, and if he didn't answer, Rafe's. So if I could just get to that button...

"Not the right suturing kit," I heard the nurse mutter, and I was a little distracted by that.

"What do you plan on doing with me?" I asked, hoping to both delay and distract her while I wiggled my thumb into position to hit that button.

She moved a little closer so I could see her deadpan expression more clearly. "I'm going to remove your IUD and install a tracking device. For your own safety of course."

I cleared my throat, trying to stay reasonable. "And, uh, why are you removing my IUD? I only just got it in, and I'm pretty happy to keep it until I finish my studies. Babies and college are not the best mix, amiright?"

Joking was the perfect cover for the screaming terror I felt at her words. Also the fury. This cunt of a nurse better hope I never got free in her presence because she would no longer have working fingers to perform these atrocities on anyone.

She waved me off with a dry, unamused laugh. "You'll be finished soon, and then you'll be a wife. Your duty is to produce a strong, powerful heir. Anything else is unnecessary. Best to get started now too, just in case."

I tried to murder her with my gaze, but she didn't even notice, once again organizing her things. That was okay though; I'd finally wiggled and worked my aching thumb into the right position, and I pressed it as best I could against the button. I thought I heard the small click that indicated it had engaged, but I couldn't be sure.

"Does Alex know you're doing this?" I asked, trying my best to keep my breathing even. "Does he know that you've drugged and

kidnapped me, holding me against my will in the medical wing? Because I don't think my *fiancé*"—I choked over that word but got it out—"would be happy about me being treated like this."

As I was shifting my finger back into a position that didn't feel like it was being dislocated, I paused as I scraped over the buckle. Shit, it wasn't as sophisticated as I'd originally thought. It was actually one I'd had used on me by my sensei before, and I knew how to get free.

I'd just need a few minutes.

"Call Alex here right now," I said, trying to sound more forceful than I felt. "I'm the future leader of the Australasians, and it's in your best interest not to piss me off."

She paused, like that fact hadn't occurred to her at all. With a annoyed huff, she lifted her palm reader and dialed a number.

Alex answered on the first ring.

"Hello, Your Highness," the nurse said primly. "Could you please meet me at medical wing five?"

There was an extended pause, and then a simple. "Yes." before Alex hung up.

Meanwhile, I now had extra incentive to get my ass out of here before my "fiancé" showed up. He was probably the one who'd set this bitch up to ripping my shit out, and I'd find no rescue there.

Not that I needed one. Violet Spencer had been born of despair, and I no longer believed in fairy tales.

Especially when they pertained to princes.

Give me the devil any day.

It took Alex all of two minutes to make it to the room, and he must have sprinted the entire way because he was breathing heavily, and considering how fit he was... At this point I was almost certain that my distress call hadn't gone out, but since I'd managed to get the first loop of the strap off by scratching at it with my thumb, it was all okay.

When Alex saw me strapped to the bed, he turned his glare on the nurse.

"What the hell are you doing to her?"

She huffed again, crossing her arms over her chest. "Exactly what I was ordered to do. Violet must have her IUD removed and a tracker implanted."

Alex crossed his arms too, and I was surprised to see some rage on his face. "Ordered by whom?"

She blinked, and I was cursing my lack of head movement because I could only see a small sliver of both their faces.

"By your parents of course," she said stiffly. "And the dean. Final approvals for all medical go through him."

It looked like Alex took a menacing step toward her with fists clenched, but I couldn't quite tell from my angle. "And what if I told you to stop right now?"

This question was delivered coldly with barely any emotion in his voice. You could have knocked me out with a fucking swift breeze, though, I was so stunned.

Was he actually trying to help me? What in the fuck?

She twittered about, grabbing up some paperwork and thrusting it at him. "I'm sorry; the orders come from above your head."

Alex swung around to glare at me, and I could see in his expression that he was saying this was my own fault for not conforming. For not falling in line.

"Just..." He cleared his throat. "Just don't hurt her. Be gentle."

Then the fucker turned and left the room.

Well, fuck. He hadn't done or said anything I'd expected from him, but at the same time, he'd just left me here. He could have helped, but he'd chosen not to rock the boat.

Well, fuck him. Like I'd said before, I wasn't waiting to be rescued. I had this shit sorted.

At that second, I freed the strap completely, and I held my breath as it fell loose and clinked against the metal side of the bed. Thankfully, in the same moment, the nurse grabbed her equipment tray, the clink of instruments hiding the sound of the strap.

"I promise it won't hurt," she said as she moved closer to my legs. "I will numb you up completely before removing the device and inserting the tracker."

"Mighty fucking big of you," I said, letting all my sarcasm fly free. "You're a regular saint."

She focused on me like she was trying to figure out if I was being serious or not before shaking her head and moving down to my left leg. She started to unstrap that buckle, needing to move my legs further apart to do her thing. This distraction, though, gave me the perfect opportunity to reach up with my now free hand and unstrap my

head. As soon as that was free, I did my other hand, all in the same amount of time it took this dumb bitch to get my ankle free.

Oh well, she'd saved me from having to do that in a second.

When she straightened, reaching out for the long-assed needle that was perched in a metal tray, I swung into action, cracking her right on the temple hard enough to knock her to the ground and hopefully into unconsciousness for a few minutes.

By the time she hit the floor, I'd already started working on my strapped ankle, and when she staggered back to her feet, I was on mine too, ass hanging out, hospital gown on, and the knowledge that she'd undressed me strong in my mind.

"How fucking dare you," I snarled. "You should be ashamed to call yourself a woman."

Stepping into her, I cracked her again, this time on her shoulder blade. She cried out, crashing backward and sending her tray of torture tools flying.

"Women should never hurt each other; we have enough trouble protecting ourselves from the men in this world who want to dominate and control us," I said, taking a step after her as she scrambled to her feet.

"I'm just following orders," she cried, trembling in front of me.

It was a front though, a distraction as she reached for the needle that had fallen down.

She underestimated me though. No way would I let her get the drop on me again.

Moving faster than she expected, I got to the needle before her, lifting it and jamming it straight into her thigh. She cried out, but I didn't plunge the liquid into her. Nope, I jerked the needle to the right and broke the tip off, leaving it embedded in her leg.

The nurse screamed, clawing at the puncture wound, and I took the chance to smash my fist into her face again. And again. I did this over and over, burning rage fueling my blows, and it wasn't until I saw the red on my hands that I registered exactly what I was doing.

"Shit," I cursed, forcing myself to release Nurse Reller and gagging when her head hit the floor with a sickening thump. "Oh fuck. Fuck. No, no, no, this is bad. This is really freaking bad."

I'd only ever lost control like that twice before. Once before I'd had any formal fight training, and once after I discovered Alex's betrayal.

Swallowing past my panic, I reached out and felt around for the nurse's pulse, sagging in relief when I found it.

"Holy shit," I gasped, wiping my face on the sleeve of my robe. Sitting back on my feet, I reached for my palm reader and firmly pressed down the emergency button. Surely wherever Jordan—or Rafe—were at this time of night, they shouldn't be more than a few minutes away.

The thought crossed my mind that if someone walked into the infirmary and found me crouched over the nurse's bloody, beaten form, it might not look so good. It might look like exactly what it was. I'd just beaten the school nurse half to death, and now I needed help from my two playboy princes to cover it up.

As a precautionary measure, I got up and hauled a filing cabinet in front of the door. It seemed like an easier option than hauling Nurse Reller into a closet. She weighed a fuck load more than I'd have imagined, not to mention all the blood I had no hope of cleaning up.

After the door was secured, I turned to pacing the floor. Fretting. It didn't even cross my mind to just call anyone, and maybe that spoke to the level of panic running through me. Not over the violence, because that was like second nature to me. But the implications of this... This? Beating the academy nurse unconscious? Pretty sure that fell under a whole other jurisdiction than a simple academic suspension.

I didn't know how much time passed, but when the filing cabinet jerked as someone slammed into the door, I startled in fright.

"Violet!" Rafe shouted through the tiny gap he'd created in the door.

I didn't spare any time to question why it was him responding to my emergency beacon and not Jordan. It didn't matter. I just rushed over and pushed the heavy cabinet out of the way, letting him into the room.

His sharp gaze scanned everything as I slammed the door closed again and leaned my whole weight against it. The disheveled medical bed, the restraints, the tray of medical implements, the bloody, unconscious nurse, and then me—in a damn hospital gown with nothing underneath and skin probably pale as a fucking ghost.

My tongue darted out, licking my dry lips. "I need your help."

"I see that," he replied, as calm as a summer's breeze. "Maybe you should tell me what happened here, Vi."

Vi. Huh. I couldn't even be sure which version of me he was addressing when he shortened my name like that. Was he speaking to Violet, the girl secretly dating his best friend and pushing his buttons every chance she could get? Or was he talking to Violence, the killer?

Trouble was, I'd never actually killed anyone before—not for lack of wanting to, but for lack of resources to clean up the crime. Somehow, I doubted this was the right time or place to change that track record.

"Uh," I started, licking my lips again. Why were they so fucking dry? Was it a side effect of whatever drug that crazy bitch had stuck me with? "I... she... Um..." My thoughts were so scrambled, and it was hard to grab hold of just one. To just *explain* the line of events as they'd happened. Logically, I knew that also had to be a lingering effect of the drug, but it didn't make things easier to deal with in the heat of the moment.

A sharp knock on the door saw me damn near jumping out of my skin, but when Jordan entered the room and wrapped me in a tight hug, well, everything seemed calm again.

"Violet," he breathed, stroking my hair while I clung to him like a life raft. "Baby, what happened here? We need to know before we can do anything."

I nodded into his chest, understanding what he was saying but not wanting to leave the warm comfort of his embrace. I allowed myself just a few more moments, then took a deep breath to reactivate my tough-girl exterior and stepped away from him.

"Okay," I said softly. "This is... this is all I know."

I told the two of them everything I could remember, from getting jabbed in the neck with a needle, to waking up strapped to the medical bed, to Alex walking away and washing his hands of whatever Nurse Reller wanted to do to me... and finally, to how I'd freed myself.

"It's okay," Jordan assured me, closing me into another warm hug and melting my hardened walls once more. "Sweetheart, it's okay. We'll take care of this, I promise you."

While Jordan whispered sweet nothings in my ear, my eyelids flicked open just in time to see Rafe pull an eight-inch dagger from his belt and slice it across Nurse Reller's throat.

I didn't react. I didn't even flinch. Blood sprayed out in an arc, coating the sterile whiteness of the infirmary. Just like that, the resident rape-y nurse died with barely a gurgle and I just relaxed further into Jordan's embrace.

What the fuck did that say about me now?

CHAPTER 26



Blood mixed with water and stained the tiles of my shower red. It pooled and swirled, disappearing down the drain. It seemed so easy to wash away the blood. Just a bit of water and it was gone. Like tonight had never happened.

"I should have finished her myself," I finally said, tearing my eyes away from the blood running down my drain. It wasn't my blood—for once—but that simple fact seemed to be tripping me up more than normal. Nurse Reller wouldn't have stood a fucking chance against me in a fair fight, but then, it hadn't been a fair fight, had it? She'd drugged me, strapped me to a table, planned to violate me against my will...

"Too bad," Rafe replied, his tone holding no sympathy. "If you wanted to kill her, you should have done it before you called me."

Anger crackled through me, and I pumped soap a bit too aggressively into my hand, almost knocking the bottle off the shelf. "I didn't call *you*," I snarled. "And I didn't *want* to kill her."

Rafe snorted a laugh, meeting my gaze over the frosted shower glass. "Sure you didn't, Vi."

I swallowed a growl of anger as I spread the soap all over me and scrubbed with a rough loofah. Like scrubbing four layers of my skin off would help to remove the feeling of being violated.

"Look," Jordan said, ever the peacemaker. "The fact remains that she couldn't be left alive. It was too risky. Not only could she have reported Violet for physical violence, she could have tried the same bullshit again. Who knows what might have happened if that sedative had lasted longer."

I huffed, dousing my hair in water. The fact that they were both lurking in the bathroom hadn't escaped my notice, no matter how shaken up I was about what had happened with the creepy nurse. The glass door of my shower was frosted enough from knee to neck that they couldn't *actually* see anything... but still.

"What happens now?" I asked, when my hair was wet enough to shampoo. I wasn't taking any chances on finding a stray droplet of blood later. Every freaking inch of me needed to be spotless. "It wasn't exactly the cleanest of deaths."

Yeah, I was throwing stones inside my glass house. I'd already splattered the infirmary with blood before the guys had even shown up. But Rafe slitting her throat like that sure as fuck hadn't helped matters.

"I've called some of my people in," Rafe said, drumming his fingertips on the marble vanity top beside him. He was sitting beside my en-suite sink, his dark head against the mirror but his gaze locked on me. No matter how much he tried to pretend it wasn't.

I bit my lip, not replying as I carefully massaged shampoo through my hair, rinsed it out, then squirted conditioner into my palm.

"You guys don't have to babysit me," I finally said, smearing the cream between my palms, then rubbing it through my hair, starting at the ends, then working my way to the midsections. "I'm fine."

"No one said you weren't," Jordan replied. He was sitting on my closed toilet seat, flipping through screens on his palm reader at an impressive speed. Every now and then, though, I could feel his eyes on me. Worried. Caring. Hungry.

"Can we speed things up on the virus?" Rafe asked his friend. "I'd feel better if he was in a holding cell before the Spring Ball." By "he" he clearly meant Alex. When I'd told them about his part in Nurse Reller's plans, they'd both looked worse than murderous.

"Agreed," Jordan murmured, still typing and scrolling at a rapid pace. "I'll see what I can do. In the meantime... Zach is going to be a bigger problem than we had prepared for."

Rafe let out a long sigh, closing his eyes. I paused in rinsing my conditioner out because I was pretty sure that was the first time I'd ever seen him show *any* sign of weakness. For the briefest of moments, he looked exhausted.

Sometimes I forgot who I was friends with. Jordan was the crown prince of New America, destined to rule the second most influential kingdom in the world. Rafe? Rafe quite seriously held the weight of the universe on his shoulders. When his father either abdicated or died, he would be our planet's most powerful monarch. It was no fucking wonder he was such a prickly bitch at the best of times. I wouldn't trade places with him for all the money on Earth.

"He's not going to easily convince me to be a Society member," I said into the dead air, addressing Jordan's earlier comment. "And why would they even want that, me being an orphan and all...?" I was assuming that's what he meant by Zach being an issue. Or maybe I was way off.

Jordan gave a small laugh, looking over at me from his palm reader display. "Babe, you were practically fucking *born* to be in the Society, no matter how much we'd rather you stay out of it."

Rafe scoffed a laugh of his own. "He's right. You even have an ancient royal surname, like a big old *fuck you* to the monarchies. The upper level members of the Society are probably frothing harder than they did the day Jordy and I joined."

That reminded me. "I was wondering how that worked," I admitted. I'd officially finished washing every damn inch of myself and hesitated a moment before tossing my modesty and insecurity out the metaphorical window. "Pass me a towel?" I shut the water off and cracked the shower door just enough to poke my hand out.

Jordan was engrossed in whatever he was doing on his palm reader, so Rafe slid off my vanity and approached with a towel in his hands. The look on his face, though? Pure evil.

"Rafe," I snapped when he stopped with it just out of my reach. "Pass me the damn towel."

The corners of his mouth tilted up, and his eyes flashed with challenge. "Come and get it, Cinderella."

Muttering curses at him, I shoved the shower door open and reached for the towel. But he pulled it out of my reach at the last second, forcing me to chase it. Naked.

"What are you doing?" I asked him in a quiet voice, grabbing at the towel and ending up pressed to his chest.

Rafe just smirked, releasing my towel and bringing his hands to my waist. His head dipped, and I gasped, my eyes darting to Jordan a split second before Rafe's mouth met mine. He kissed me long and

hard, his hands sliding over my wet skin to grab my ass and I squeaked in surprise.

"Rafe," I breathed, pushing back an inch—as far as he'd let me go. "What are you doing?" I looked over to Jordan again and found him staring at us, his palm reader forgotten for the moment. His face was carefully neutral, but when his eyes took in Rafe's hand on my naked ass, his jaw clenched.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Rafe whispered back, grabbing my earlobe between his teeth and sending shivers of pure, undiluted desire coursing through me. "I'm staking a claim." His lips caressed my neck, sucking the flesh and dragging a small, involuntary moan from me.

Dammit.

Jordan stood up abruptly, closing the display on his palm reader, then stalking out of the bathroom. The door slammed after him, and I shoved Rafe away from me.

"Why did you do that?" I demanded, scowling at him as I wrapped the towel around my naked body. I needed some form of armor, even if it was just a bath sheet.

He gave a one-shouldered shrug, swiping his thumb over his lower lip, like he was still savoring the taste of my mouth. "Knowing something in theory and seeing it with your own eyes can sometimes elicit very different responses. It was about damn time he faced reality."

I scoffed, grabbing another towel out of the vanity and rough-drying my hair. My glare fixed on him in the mirror, but he didn't look even the slightest bit remorseful.

"Oh yeah?" I pushed. "And what reality is that, exactly? That his best friend is an insensitive asshole?" Yes, I was shoving all the blame onto Rafe, despite the fact that I'd kissed him back.

Rafe chuckled, a dark, self-deprecating sound. "Oh, beautiful girl, he already knew that." He stepped closer, crowding me against the vanity and laying his hands possessively on my waist once more. "But the reality is that I *want* you, and I'm no longer satisfied with quick hate fucks in dark corners." His gaze met mine in the mirror, and I shuddered at the dark desire reflected back at me. "And Jordan needed to know... that you want me, too."

He dropped a light kiss to the bend of my neck, then left the bathroom.

I stood there a long time, staring at myself in the mirror and wondering how in the gods damned hell Rafe thought *now* was a good time to push the issue of our love triangle. Now. After the three of us had just killed the academy nurse in the middle of the night.

Not that it was an actual love triangle. That implied there was love involved, and I wasn't stupid enough to go putting my heart on the line again so soon. Not with the two biggest playboy princes in the whole academy. No way.

CHAPTER 27



When I'd finally emerged from the bathroom, the tension between the boys was gone and things seemed almost back to normal. Almost.

A part of me wondered if maybe Rafe had been right to push the issue. I didn't want to be deceiving Jordan in any way—all cards on the table so to speak—and it wasn't like he hadn't been aware there was a thing with Rafe. Hell, we'd even talked about it briefly. But this was undeniable proof that the "thing" was still happening. Jordan was now very much aware that he wasn't the only prince currently in my life.

No hurt feelings was my new motto.

The next morning both guys showed up on my doorstep dressed in their soccer uniforms and escorted me over to Mattie's room. Rafe made sure she knew I wasn't to wander off alone at any point. Like I was a toddler or some bullshit.

"What happened last night?" Mattie asked me when my guard dogs had left us to warm up for their game. "They're next level protective today."

I sighed, flopping down on her bed and covering my face with a pillow. There was no reason I shouldn't tell her about the whole thing, unless it somehow implicated her in the murder.

I trusted Rafe to cover it up, the same way I trusted Jordan to send that virus out undetected, but they were both human, and sometimes mistakes were made.

Mattie suffering for my mistake was not cool with me.

"Vi," she said softly, and I lifted my head to meet her gaze. "You've been distant lately, and I've been giving you space with everything that's happening, but... is it me? Did I do something to upset you?"

Fuck. "No!" I said immediately, shifting closer to her. "Fuck no, Mattie. You're the best friend a chick could hope for in this royal-infested world. From day one you've had my back, and I couldn't be more grateful that I met you."

My chest hurt, and when she threw her arms around me, everything inside of me went all gooey.

The decision was made for me then. I couldn't keep her in the dark about everything.

"Okay, you're gonna wanna sit for this," I said as we pulled apart.

She looked down at the obvious fact that we were already sitting on her bed, and a burst of laughter left us both. "Whatever it is," she said, her humor fading, "you know I will still have your back."

"I know," I said, nodding. "And I've been trying to protect you a little from the drama of my life, from any repercussions of my actions, but I hate not talking to you about everything. I promise to stop hiding shit."

Taking a deep breath, I proceeded to tell her everything that had been happening lately. The fight, Alex and his threats, Alex's parents, the virus we had set into motion, her fiancé's offer regarding the resistance, and finally, the fucking creepy, rapey, cuntsey nurse.

To give her credit, Mattie managed to keep her expression neutral for most of it, but she lost it at the end, launching to her feet and stomping around the room.

"What in the actual fuck?" she snarled, jerking her hand out and smashing it into the lamp on the side of her table. "I knew I hated that bitch for a reason. I'm so glad you guys"—her voice lowered to an angry whisper—"killed her. Should have made her suffer for a little longer before striking the final blow."

I blinked, and then blinked some more. "You're not... freaked out by who I am? By the violent streak that lives below my surface and occasionally gets away from me?"

Mattie snorted, looking like a princess, but not sounding like one at all. "Girl, are you fucking kidding me? I'm proud of you. You've fought for survival, and you're here, stronger than ever, able to take

on Brandon and those fucks who want to threaten your existence. If anything”—she paused, shaking her head—“I’m jealous. I want to be as tough and capable as you are. I mean, I’m not part of the Society like Rafe and Jordan, and Nolan, apparently, who is going to get his ass kicked, when I get my hands on him, for keeping this a secret from me. But the truth is, I have no problem with what they’re doing. We haven’t loved the monarchy for a long time. We wish to be more like you, Vi. Exceptional.”

My stupid lips started to tremble as my eyes burned. “You’d better not make me cry, bitch,” I said, sniffing and trying to get my shit under control. “Also, I love you, and you’re as badass as they come. You do it in a different way than me, and most of the time, I’m sure it’s more effective.”

She looked a little misty around the eyes too, so we both shook that shit off, got out of her room, and headed toward the soccer stadium. Lots of students were in the hall with us, most of them dressed in the maroon and white colors of our team, and I felt safe enough to not be looking over my shoulder for five minutes, especially with a very obvious increase in guards and security scattered about.

“How come the guys never travel away for games?” I asked. “I mean, it’s weird, right? Because all the other teams travel here.”

Mattie lifted an eyebrow at me in quite the impressive show of facial muscles. “Girl, you think our boys would be forced to go to another school?” She laughed. “Nope, everyone comes to them so as not to disrupt their study and school schedule. I think they have about three away games a year, and that’s for the massive carnivals that are held in a completely neutral place not connected to any of the schools. We should be due for one soon, actually.”

Hmmm, a carnival sounded kind of fun. I mean, I was imagining cotton candy and rides and popcorn, but something told me that a soccer carnival was not quite as bright and candy-filled.

When we’d reached the stadium and made it past the bag check and scanner, I blinked at how full it was. Not that they ever had a bad turnout, but this was super packed. Maybe even more than against Princeton.

“Who are they playing?” I asked.

Mattie shrugged. “Uhhh, I think...” Her eyes suddenly went huge, gaze focused over my shoulder. Turning, I found myself star-

ing at the scoreboard. Arbon Royals was on the top, and right below: Australasian Eagles.

"Fuck," I muttered. "So, could that mean...?"

Sure enough, right there in the top box that usually the dean used to watch the games were two familiar royals.

"Alex's parents are here," I said in a rushed whisper. Mattie knew everything that'd happened that day now, so my panic was no surprise to her. But she also knew exactly what to do.

Reaching out, she grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly. "Smile," she muttered between bared teeth. "Don't let them know you're worried."

Right. Right. Easier said than done, but she was already leading me toward the seats saved for royals, near the field.

By the time we sat, I had gotten my shit together, wearing a blank face and fake smile. Mattie had her palm reader out and was typing something rapidly. "Warned Rafe, Noles, and Jordy," she whispered. "Alex's family are renowned for their cruelty. All of us need to be on high alert, and you are never to be alone again. Not until they leave."

"How long will that be?" I muttered while somehow keeping my smile plastered across my face.

Mattie took a second to answer, and that could not mean anything good. "With the ball next weekend and the day of travel each way between Australasia and the Switzerlands, I'm guessing they're here until at least next weekend."

"Fuck," I groaned.

The Spring Ball. In the chaos of getting kidnapped and almost killing the creepy nurse, it had kind of slipped my mind that we'd soon have a ton of senior royals in our midst.

Staying out of the way of Alex's parents for an entire week was going to be fucking impossible. Not to mention they had a lot of power, even outside of their own country. I could do my best to avoid them, but if I was called to meet with them, I'd be going or I could risk severe punishment.

"Breathe," Mattie advised. "Let's not panic yet. Take it one day at a time. Hopefully they have lots of meetings set up on this side of the world and they spend the next week flying their private plane around, returning only for Saturday."

"With my luck, there's no way that will be the case," I muttered, but a part of me hoped that she was right. I mean, surely they were too busy to worry about me. Of course, they'd probably start investigating the nur—

I bolted upright in my chair. "I need to talk to Rafe and Jordan," I said quickly. Nurse Psychotic had gotten her orders from the Australasian royals, and then the next day they showed up? That couldn't be a coincidence. Somehow I didn't think they traveled for every away game.

Mattie grabbed my forearm. "It's too late. You'll have to wait until after the game."

Sure enough, the teams were streaming onto the field, and for once, Rafe and Jordan were front and fucking center. Both of them stormed out and stole every ounce of my focus.

Their gazes slammed into me—it was clear they'd both been looking for me—and relief hit all of us at the same time. We were okay. We were alive.

We'd worry about the other shit after this game.

Retaking my seat, I didn't remove my eyes from them. Jordan took off for our goal, but Rafe remained where he was, keeping me in sight for a few minutes longer. If he kept that up, it was going to be really fucking obvious soon, but at the same time, I'd never felt safer knowing they were close again.

And then Alex ruined it, clapping Rafe on the shoulder and saying something to him that made the Swiss prince all ragey and tense. Alex laughed, shooting a deliberate look in my direction and blowing me a kiss.

Fuck's sake.

Rafe stalked away from the Australasian prince, anger radiating from every step, and Alex just waved up at his parents like the golden boy he pretended to be.

"Somehow," I muttered to Mattie with a pained groan, "I doubt I'll survive the week without meeting King and Queen Cruel and Unusual." I kept my voice quiet because the last thing I needed was to be arrested for treason, but damn, I was in a shitty mood now.

Mattie gave me a sympathetic look and squeezed my hand in hers. "Would nachos and wine help?"

"Fuck yes," I replied with an enthusiastic nod. "Let's go now before they get busy at the concession stand."

Mattie stood with me, and we made our way out of the seating. If we were quick enough, we'd probably still make it back before the game really started.

There was only a short queue at the food counter, and I waited for the nachos while Mattie went to collect us each a glass of deep red wine. Only the best for the children of kings, I guessed.

I felt the movement behind me a moment before someone struck out. After the nurse though, I was on high alert. No one was getting the drop on me again. Sidestepping enough so that their hands only grazed me, I spun fully to see who was attacking me.

Claudette.

Fuck this bitch. "What did you do to Brandon, you little slut?" she hissed. She dove forward, claws extended in a move designed to rip my face apart. I shifted again, so fast she didn't have a shot at reaching me, and my cheek grazed the side of the concession stand because I had nowhere else to go. But that was a small price to pay to get into a position where I could reach her. I latched onto her wrist, securing it in a deadlock.

"Let me go!" she screeched, flailing her free hand around until I increased the pressure on the one I held captive. Her thumb was pinned by my grip, almost touching her own wrist, and it'd only take a small adjustment to break it. Fuck, that was tempting. "You can't do this! I'm a princess! I could have you arrested!"

She was raving, but the academy staff member running the concession stand looked concerned. I needed to wrap it up quickly before he decided to call for assistance.

"Listen here, you diseased whore," I said in her ear, keeping my voice low but deadly threatening. "Stay the fuck away from me and stay the fuck away from Rafe. Unless you want to find out firsthand what happened to Brandon?" I let out a cold, bloodthirsty chuckle. Brandon hadn't been seen around the academy since the fight night, presumably because his face was too bruised to be easily explained. He was still on my list, though. He'd get his.

"Rafe?" Claudette whimpered. "Don't you mean Alex?"

I scoffed. "No. He's all yours. You two were fucking *made* for each other."

I was about to release her, but then... fuck it. I snapped her thumb and left her in a howling pile on the floor while I collected my steaming nachos.

"Girl," Mattie exclaimed, standing there with a glass of wine in each hand and a wide-eyed look of awe on her face. "Firstly, that was so badass I think I just came a little bit. Secondly, the guys are going to freaking *kill* me when they see your face. Dammit, Vi!"

I touched a hand to my cheek, feeling the ache of a bruise forming. "Oops."

Mattie groaned but didn't look back at Claudette's crying and wailing even once as we walked away. Good girl.

CHAPTER 28



I'd never thought much about the monarchy of Australasia. For one, it was on the other side of the freak-ing world, and as a poor orphan, I wasn't getting there any time soon. And two, well, mainly just the number one reason. It was too far away to ever really register on my radar, and it wasn't until I'd met Alex that I'd even crossed paths with anyone born there.

After my first introduction, I'd expected them all to be evil assholes. I mean, look at their king and queen and heir. So I was surprised to find their team played a super clean game, no cheating, fighting, or catcalling.

"This is the most professional game I think I've seen," I said to Mattie at halftime. She grimaced.

"Oh yeah, Australasians are super disciplined in general. They look like hot surfers, but they're soldiers at heart."

"Lots of beaches, right?" I said, trying to recall the few things I knew about them. "And weird animals."

Mattie laughed. "If by *weird* you mean *able to kill with a single bite*, then yep, that's about right."

Kill with a single bite. Well, that explained their monarchy. They were just as lethal.

My palm reader buzzed, and I lifted it to find a message from Alex.

Dinner with my parents after the game. Not a request.

My heart beat like a fucking jackhammer in my chest as I quickly showed Mattie. "I can't get out of it," I said softly. "What freaking

excuse would be good enough to bail?"

Her eyes were wide, but she didn't immediately panic. I could see she was running it over in her head, no doubt trying to find a protocol I wasn't aware of.

"Don't answer him yet," she murmured. "We need to check with Rafe. He might be the only one with the power to supersede their request. I'm just not sure how it can be worded so as not to raise suspicion."

Jesus. This was not my week. Month. Year. If it kept going this way, I'd just call it "not my decade" and be fucking done with it.

"Should I tell the guys now, give them a chance to work it out?" I asked, putting my head right next to Mattie's.

She pursed her lips. "It's a close game. Maybe just wait until they're finished, and that way we won't distract them during the second half."

"Yep," I nodded, "good plan. These moody bastards hate to lose, and I'd rather not be the reason they were distracted."

Her laughter was a welcomed relief after the tension.

Of course, my palm reader felt like it weighed a freaking ton with Alex's message just sitting there. I wanted so badly to tell him to go fuck himself, but that wouldn't help. I had no power. Curse words wouldn't do anything but make my punishment greater.

So I would wait.

The second half passed in a blur. I spent most of it tapping my leg and thinking murderous thoughts. The blatant manipulation of my life had gone on long enough, and I was done playing Alex's pawn. Could the Society... the resistance, whatever the fuck they called themselves... could they help me escape the fate of a ballot winner?

Or would that just be a trap of a different making? Exchanging one cage for another wasn't ideal, but Alex was never gonna happen. That much I knew for a fact.

Mattie jumped to her feet screaming, and I blinked, focusing on the game again.

Only it was over and we'd won, three points to two.

"Rafe scored," she said, shooting me a smug grin. "And you totally missed it. He's not gonna be happy."

I snorted. "I'll pretend I saw it. Did anything unusual happen that I should comment on?"

Mattie threw her head back and laughed. "How about the fact that when he scored, the first place he looked was at you?"

Well, shit. No point in lying then.

My palm reader buzzed.

Alex: **First warning, Violet.**

I hit ignore again, quickly moving through the names to my group message with Rafe, Nolan, and Jordan.

Alex wants me to have dinner with him and his parents tonight. Mattie said one of you might have a legitimate excuse I can use not to go. Something that won't cause wars or get me executed. And... go...

As soon as I hit send, Mattie and I started down the stands, following the cheering crowd. It had been an exciting game, and I was surprised to see Alex exchanging friendly handshakes with a lot of the Australasian team. He clearly knew them from somewhere. Maybe school in his younger years?

I mean, how was it that he could have friends like that, be so personable at times, and then have this straight up asshole streak deep inside.

Growing up with those parents, though, an airhead of a mother, who no doubt was there to chirp about and look pretty, and an evil, arrogant tyrant of a father.

Alex had probably turned out okay, considering the circumstances.

When we were near the exit, my palm reader buzzed.

Angel: **Do not fucking leave this stadium.**

Jordan's came a second later.

We got you, sweetheart. Wait for us just inside the main entrance.

Yin and yang at its finest.

Mattie and I waited, crowds pushing past us, already planning how they would celebrate tonight. There was the usual afterparty at Drake's place and a few other smaller events that would be scattered around to avoid detection. No one showed the sort of tension that was swirling inside of me; instead they looked young and carefree and happy.

I felt like I was a hundred years older than most of them.

"Are you gonna tell them about Claudette?" Mattie asked as we waited, leaning back against the closest wall.

My hand rubbed at the mark on my face, happy to note it barely even hurt now. Nothing more than a surface graze. Sensei had taught me many times that it was sometimes necessary to inflict a small wound on oneself to ensure that you were in the position of control. Of power.

Claudette had learned that lesson today.

"Yeah, might as well. If she decides to go to the dean, I'm gonna need their backup."

"Can't go to the dean if she's dead," Mattie muttered, straightening as her twin came into sight.

Nolan wrapped his arms around both of us. He was still damp and smelled of his musky aftershave, having clearly jumped in and out of the shower in record time. He wasn't the only one; Jordan and Rafe arrived seconds later.

Nolan released me so that Jordan could yank me into his arms, his alpha side coming out to play and turning my legs a little weak. Thank fuck the Australasian royals were gone so they didn't witness a bunch of guys getting huggy with me.

"You okay?" he asked, pulling me back and looking me over.

I nodded. "Yeah, totally fine. I haven't even seen Alex in person, just got the messages."

Rafe was a little back, bag slung over his shoulder, eyes like blue glaciers. "What happened to your face?" he asked slowly.

I narrowed my eyes at the observant fucker. Only Rafe would have noticed that tiny mark. "Claudette attacked her from behind," Mattie said in a rush. She shot me an apologetic look, and I just shook my head.

"Yeah, I was busy at the concession stand. I heard her before she got a hit on me, but I grazed my face getting into a better position to break her thumb."

Rafe moved then, finally, edging Jordan out of the way. "Should've been her neck," he muttered, lips close to my face. Then he shocked me by pressing them to the graze, just the briefest of kisses, before pulling away.

I swallowed hard when our eyes met. "Might be worth it for that," I murmured, unsure about the strong rush of emotions I was feeling.

"What should she tell Alex?" Mattie demanded, bringing the focus back to that. "I mean, obviously she can't go and have dinner

with the insane would-be in-laws that tried to have the nurse forcibly rip her vagina apart.”

Nolan screwed his nose up. “Sis, please. The word vagina is so fucking fifth grade, can’t we refer to it as a puss—”

She punched him, and it was actually nicely done. Maybe Mattie had more skills than I’d been giving her credit for.

“Even more worrying,” Jordan said, ignoring the fistfight between the twins, “is that they’re going to try and find the nurse. They’ll want a progress report. If they think she hasn’t followed through on their plan, they’re only going to have another member of the medical staff step in.”

Rafe, still dangerously close to me, was the one I waited the most impatiently to hear speak. I needed to know his plan. I needed him to save the day on this one because I couldn’t pull rank in a royal arena.

He didn’t let me down. “It’s possible that I can take a trip to my parent’s estate tonight for some royal matters,” he started. “And I might have to bring Jordan and Violet with me to help. I’ll speak to my mother and see if I can get an official decree in the next hour, and that way the King and Queen of Australasia won’t be able to argue.”

He was turning to leave, so I reached out and grabbed his arm. “I—Uh, is that a good idea? I mean, what if your parents are as horrible as his and they have me killed for using the wrong fork or something?”

Rafe’s lips twitched, and I wondered what he would say to my blunt statement. “Vi,” he murmured, his hand wrapping around my shoulder and pulling me close, “my parents are good people. I promise. I would not take you where you were at any risk.”

His eyes darted over my head. “To make it even safer, I’ll request Nolan and Mattie too. That way it’s not obvious this is anything more than me taking my friends home for a week to hang out before the ball.”

We were alone in the stadium grounds now, but I still didn’t expect him to capture my lips like he did. “I’ll keep you safe,” he promised as he pulled away. Then he all but pushed me into Jordan’s arms. “Don’t let her out of your sight,” he warned before he lifted the bag he must have dropped at some point, threw it over his shoulder, and turned and stalked away.

Mattie let out a low shriek, clapping her hands. "Rafe's place is un-fucking-believable." She clapped and bounced. "You're going to die when you see it. They're somehow in the mountains but also right beside a huge lake, and it's heated all year from an underground... something. I don't know, lava or some shit, and we can swim as much as we want."

She carried on a ton more about his home, but I was distracted by Jordan, who still had his arms around me and was tracing his hands across my back.

"Are you okay?" he whispered in my ear, his breath warming my skin with tingles. "Want me to smother Claudette with a pillow while she sleeps tonight?"

I grinned at the idea, then looked up at him to see if he was serious. "You'd do that for me?"

All traces of joking faded from his eyes as he pressed a light kiss to my lips. "I'd do fucking anything for you, Violet. Killing that self-important bitch would be a damn privilege." His voice was laced with dark violence, and my pussy clenched with arousal.

Fuck me. I really was going to hell.

"Hey, you two." Mattie snapped her fingers, regaining our attention. "Are you paying attention?"

"No," Jordan answered for us both, and I snickered. My cheeks were warm with pent-up desire, and I could barely focus on anything except the need to get him alone. Soon.

Nolan screwed up his nose at us, teasing. "You two are so sickening. I'm amazed Rafe hasn't lost his freaking mind yet. His alpha-male instinct must freak right the fuck out every time he sees you guys touching."

Jordan laughed him off, but I was inclined to agree. I'd been thinking the same thing just last night in the bathroom, when Jordan had walked out in a silent fit of rage after Rafe marked his damn territory on me.

This whole lust-triangle was destined for disaster, but I just couldn't bring myself to end it. With either of them.

Did that make me selfish? Yes, probably. But we all had our faults.

"Oh shit," Nolan cursed, his eyes widening. "Incoming."

Jordan and I separated with a quick step, creating enough space between us that no one would suspect anything. It killed me to do it,

but I shuddered to think what might happen if Alex's dad found out I was fucking other princes and *not* his son.

"Violet!" Alex barked from the direction of the locker rooms. He was stalking toward us, and his face was a mask of fury. "Why haven't you answered your messages? I told you it was nonnegotiable."

His whole tone and body language dripped with rage and disdain. He wasn't even pretending to be that easygoing, laid-back prince charming I'd fallen for on my first day at Arbon.

"Whoa, Alex," Nolan commented, raising his brows in mock surprise. "Is that any way to speak to your girlfriend?"

"Oh fuck right off, Nolan," Alex sneered. "As if she hasn't told you four every little detail. Did she tell you about how she was in my bed just a few days ago, too?"

"You mean when you blackmailed her into getting her shirt off, then pretended to have been fooling around when your parents called?" Jordan clapped back. "Yeah. She told us. We don't keep secrets."

Alex's face darkened, clearly pissed that his attempt to stir shit had been thwarted. "Well, I hate to break up the party, but Violet and I have places to be." He grabbed my arm and gave it a sharp tug, making me stumble a few steps away from my friends.

Jordan's hand shot out, snagging my other hand and stopping Alex from forcefully pulling me from the field. Which would be great, except now I felt like a chew toy between two angry dogs.

As subtly as I could, I extracted myself from both of their grips and took a step back. "Stop it. I'm not going anywhere with you, Alex. I'm certainly not going to meet your creepy parents and play happy family after the shit you pulled last night."

A dark shadow passed across Alex's face, and a frown pulled at his brow that hinted at more concern than anger. Still, he had walked away and left that psycho nurse to do *whatever* she wanted to me while I was restrained and helpless.

Of course, he didn't need to know that Nurse Reller had met a rather unexpected end to the night. As far as he knew, I'd had my IUD forcefully removed and a tracking device inserted.

"If you'd taken the damn ring, maybe it wouldn't have come to that," he snapped, his concern washing away and morphing into irritation. "You brought it on yourself. Now stop acting like a brat. If

you think what the nurse did was bad, you really don't want to keep my father waiting."

My skin prickled with anger at the threat, but what the fuck could I do about it? I couldn't exactly solve this problem with my blade. Couldn't challenge King Steve of Australasia to a fight to the death. The whole thing was way over my pay grade.

"She can't go with you," Mattie answered for me while my mind whirled. "Sorry. Queen Jacinta invited us all to visit with her at their residence in St. Moritz. We leave in an hour."

She was fudging the details a bit, but as plausible as it sounded, I wouldn't be contradicting her.

Alex's eyes narrowed. "Since when? There would need to be a royal decree to take so many heirs from the academy at once."

Nolan smirked, smug as shit while folding his arms over his chest. "Check. I bet you'll find it posted on the announcements board."

I stiffened. He was taking a huge risk. What if Rafe hadn't spoken to his parents yet? What if they were still writing the letter or it hadn't been published? The announcements board was accessible from our palm readers, so it'd only take Alex a few seconds to check it...

He didn't turn on his palm reader, though. No doubt he knew we'd pulled a rabbit from a hat and didn't need to verify it in front of us all. Instead, he looked shrewd.

"You leave in an hour?"

Mattie nodded. "There about."

Alex flashed his teeth in an unkind smile. "Fine. I guess you'll just have to meet my parents dressed as you are. Come on, darling." This time when he grabbed my wrist, it was like being caught in a vice, and he wasn't stopping for anything as he started dragging me toward the stadium exit.

"Wait, Alex, stop!" I protested, stumbling to keep up while trying to pry his fingers from my wrist. I could just break them, but explaining *that* to King Steve sounded as fun as a jalapeño enema.

We'd just reached the corridor outside the arena when I breathed a sigh of relief.

Rafe.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he demanded, storming toward us with fury radiating from every pore. "Take your hands

off her, Australasia, or I'll have you arrested on domestic violence charges."

Alex paused a moment, clearly uncertain whether that was a legitimate threat or not. Rafe sensed that indecision and pushed harder.

"Did you forget whose kingdom you currently reside within? My authority surpasses yours *completely*, Alex. Here in Arbon even more so than anywhere else. Take your fucking hand off Violet. Immediately."

Alex shook his head, not wanting to back down to his long time nemesis. "Her presence was requested by my father. Are you really going to risk an international scandal over some orphaned slut? She's not even *that* good in bed."

Rafe didn't take the bait. He didn't even flinch. Instead, he projected the image from his palm reader into the space between us.

"I think you'll find, Alex, that a royal decree from the Queen of The Switzerlands surpasses your father's desire to leer and intimidate over dinner. What was that you said about an international scandal?" Rafe's eyes gleamed with victory, and Alex practically vibrated with fury as his eyes scanned the official document displayed. "The transport is ready now, so we've decided to leave immediately." He reached out and firmly peeled Alex's fingers from my wrist, then tugged me to his side. "But hey, be sure to pass along our sincerest apologies to your parents, won't you?"

Alex's scowl was so deep I briefly worried his eyes might disappear, but when he spat some curses at Rafe and stomped off like an angry child, I just laughed.

When he was gone, Rafe let out a long breath and looked down at me. "Are you okay?"

Startled at the sincere question, I just nodded, rubbing at my wrist. "Thank you. You saved my ass there. I owe you one."

Rafe gave a lopsided smile, his eyes unreadable. "Jordy's right. You still don't get it." He shook his head, amused. "Come on, we've got better places to be."

CHAPTER 29



Turned out that not only was Rafe's home the "most amazing place ever," to directly quote Mattie, but the rich bastard also had his own private plane.

"It's your parents', though, right?" I asked as he ushered us on-board. He hadn't even let any of us grab clothing or a freaking toothbrush, saying everything would be provided and it was safer to leave immediately.

"Rafe?" I pushed when he didn't answer my question.

I was currently standing in the middle of the most luxurious airplane I'd ever seen, heard of, or experienced. It surpassed Royal Air One in a way that made that aircraft look like it was a crappy commercial model.

"Just sit, Vi," he said, pushing me toward the huge, cream-colored captain's chairs. There were a dozen of these same chairs, and there looked to be some rooms toward the back of the plane as well.

"How long is the flight?" I asked, finally taking my seat.

"About forty-five minutes," Rafe said. "This is my smaller Jetstream. Well, the modified version that can take off and land on short runways. I only use the big guy for long-distance flights."

I nodded before shaking my head at the insanity of it. "Yeah, totally get that. Once, long ago, I had both an old beat-up skateboard *and* a set of blades, and sometimes, I chose which one to use when I needed to get out of the orphanage." I waved my hand between us. "You and me, basically the same."

The way he was looking at me, he didn't seem to see our differences. Not in this moment. But maybe a few days back with his fami-

ly with me not having a clue how to fit it would bring it home to him. The very thought had me sick with nerves, but I did my best not to think about it.

Our friends buckled in around us, and I wasn't surprised that Rafe and Jordan took the chairs closest to me. Rafe sat across the aisle, where I could have leaned over and taken his hand if I'd wanted, and Jordan sat right in front of me, even though he basically shifted all the way around to chat with me over the back of the headrest.

"You okay with flying?" he asked, eyes somewhat serious.

I nodded. "Yeah, I mean I have one experience to base that on, but I never freaked during that first flight. I was probably in a little shock, though, thinking I'd just scored the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Nightmare more like," Mattie called from the chair behind me. "But I can't be upset you arrived. I've waited a long time for a friend like you, Violet Spencer."

I cleared my throat to hide my emotions. Mattie was getting really good at mushing my heart up and leaving it all battered in my chest. In a good way. I hadn't even realized there was a good way to feel like this, but here we were.

Rafe studied me as I struggled to compose myself. I could feel that biting gaze burning into my face. I had grown to both love and hate the way he made me feel, but in this second, I couldn't imagine living without the buzz he created across my skin.

Jordan too. The caress of his stare was different, but no less welcome.

"Welcome aboard, Your Highnesses. Please fasten your seatbelts; we are due to leave in two minutes."

I straightened at the announcement, noticing that there was one male steward securing things in the cabin, and obviously pilots in the front of the plane, but for the most part it was just the five of us, setting out on an adventure.

"I could get used to this," Mattie said. I turned my head to find her leaned back, arms above her head, blanket—where the fuck had that come from?—draped over her. "Might take a short nap before waking up in paradise."

I laughed. She was a princess, but clearly Rafe lived in a step above her normal luxury. If only she had any clue how many steps it was above my normal.

Like she'd called the steward, he silently appeared, fancy face mask and some sort of spritzing spray in his hands. Mattie took them with a smile before squirting that shit all over herself and settling the mask on her eyes.

"It's a moisture mist," Rafe said, lips twitching. I must have looked like a stunned fish with my mouth opening and closing. "Flying is quite dehydrating."

He lifted his head and made a hand signal to the steward, and in seconds I had my own little spray bottle, plus some cream, a face mask that was lined with the softest material I'd ever felt, and a few other things probably not necessary for a short flight.

"Whatever you need," Rafe said. "Just ask."

Jordan snorted from his seat. "You're playing unfair now, bro. Wait until we're on my home court."

Rafe just shot him a smug smile. "Even there, I'll win."

I eyed Rafe with suspicion. "This new nice version of you is creeping me out. What are you up to?"

He laughed. The fucker actually laughed, and I didn't like what it was doing to my insides—twisting and pulling at them, rearranging the place I'd kept Rafe since almost the first moment he'd insulted me.

"I've never been accused of being nice before," he said as his laughter faded. Those blue eyes, though, were lighter than I'd seen for a long time.

"You're happy to be going home, aren't you?" I murmured, putting the pieces together.

I expected a brush-off; Rafe wasn't one for a touchy, "share your feelings" moment. But he surprised me.

"Yeah, I am. I haven't seen my brother and sister for many months, and my parents are getting on in years. I like to see them as much as I can." He was staring at his hands, a contemplative look on his face. "Once upon a time, my home was a prison. When that changed, all of us embraced a different view of everything. Now we hold on to what's important with a ferocity that scares most people."

He lifted his gaze, and I barely managed not to gasp at the intensity there. "Does it scare you?" he asked softly.

Jordan was silent in front of me, but he was watching this closely, without interrupting his best friend.

"You piss me off, Prince Rafe," I said without hesitation, "but for the most part, I'm not scared of you. Not in the way you might expect, anyway."

He was about to reply when the plane started to move, the pilot announcing some more shit about winds and distance and turbulence. I missed most of it over the pounding of my heart, so loud it was drowning out all other sound.

What was fucking happening here?

Was Rafe playing some sort of game? Was it just a competition with Jordan that had his attitude changing?

Did I even care what it was? Or should I just ride out this time in my life, enjoying the moments I had?

"Stop thinking so hard," Jordan said with a laugh. "I promise, whatever is running through that beautiful head of yours, you definitely have it wrong."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What makes you say that?"

His smile grew larger. "On instinct, you almost always expect the worst. You're realistic to the point of pessimism. And I get it, I really do; you were not raised to expect good things to happen to you. But this is not the same, Violet. It's not."

Dude already knew me better than he should.

"Time will prove it," Rafe said suddenly from the side. "Only time will prove it for her, J. Let her have her thoughts."

This one knew me as well, as if that didn't pile more freak-out on top of my already healthy load.

I mean, I'd spent most of my life avoiding close relationships; even people I considered great friends like Meredith I'd always kept just on the outside of my deeper feelings. But these two, and Mattie and Nolan, they had all crept in.

They'd crept in without me even noticing, and now...

Now I had everything to lose.

CHAPTER 30



I didn't use the fancy mask or the fancy face spray and creams, but I did end up agreeing to answer twenty questions with Jordan, much to everyone's amusement.

"How many countries have you visited?"

I snorted. "Uh, two. New America and the Switzerlands."

He winked. "Knew that, but I wanted to warm you up with an easy one."

"How many have you visited?" I asked, returning his snort.

He had to think about it for a minute. "I think almost all of them. Lots of royal engagements growing up, especially in my younger years."

"I can't imagine it," I said, shaking my head. I legitimately couldn't. "We grew up worlds apart. How the hell am I even here now?"

"Not all of our worlds were that far apart," Rafe said without inflection.

I nailed him with a stern look. "Are you going to explain that or just continue with your random cryptic statements?"

He tilted his head like he was considering it. "I think I'll continue being cryptic," he said decisively.

I fought the urge to punch and kiss him. I really wanted to do both.

"Okay, next question," Nolan said, interrupting. "Who is better in bed, Rafe or Jordan?"

His green eyes were alight with mirth, but beneath that, I could genuinely tell he wanted to know.

Two sets of eyes, other than his, were locked on me, and I fought against the nervous smile that wanted to cross my face. "I'm definitely not answering that," I finally said. "I agreed to play with Jordan, not you."

Nolan turned pleading eyes on the New American heir, but only got an annoyed glare in return.

"Okay, so what is your favorite memory?" Jordan said, bringing us back on track.

I had to stop and sift through all my memories. "Outside of events at the academy," I finally said, "It was when my sensei gifted me my wakizashi blade. I had been working for months to prove myself worthy of the weapon, and at times, I never thought I'd make it."

I could remember the moment with a startling clarity. My emotions had been so strong, so biting strong, that I doubted I'd ever forget.

My greatest achievement.

"You wield it like the old masters," Rafe said. "It's right to be proud of that achievement."

One more compliment from him and I'd probably die of shock. Or possibly jump him right here on the plane.

Thankfully Jordan asked me more questions, most of them easy to answer.

My favorite drink: Water or grape juice.

My favorite food: Fruit Loops. The one treat I got growing up, and one of the few cereals to survive the Monarch War.

What I wanted to be when I graduated Arbon: Sports therapist.

Then a few harder ones...

My worst fear: Small, dark spaces. Rafe knew the reason why, but no one else did yet. They didn't push me, but I knew they wanted to know. Thankfully, like true friends, they let me be.

And finally, the one that had been breaking my heart for most of my life: Where did I see myself in ten years?

It was the age-old question, the one asked to try and give someone goals and something to strive for. Or years to dread.

"I—" I cleared my throat. "I used to think about that question, and... honestly, for a long time, I just hoped to still be alive. And sometimes, in my darkest moments... I hoped I wouldn't be."

Fuck, that had slipped out when it shouldn't have. It was too late to take it back now, so I hurried on, pushing through the tense silence.

"Now, I'm just hoping to be happy. Content. Maybe have a little money and my own place. Working in some job I don't completely hate."

Simple dreams, but I was a simple girl.

"Not fucking married to Alex," Mattie piped up, lifting her mask. I wasn't sure if she'd been sleeping or just pretending to, but either way, I was glad for her breaking up the tension-filled moment.

"And especially that," I said, shaking my head.

"Never gonna happen," Jordan growled, and I had to admit, it was nice to see that fire. He might have a gentle side, but I knew there was a will of steel beneath it. When it came out to play... yeah, I liked that a lot.

"Please take your seats, we will be landing in approximately eight minutes."

The pilot's voice filled the cabin, but since none of us were out of our seats, we didn't move. The flight so far had been smooth; I'd almost forgotten I was even on a plane.

As we descended, I closed my eyes, composing myself as best I could. I was about to meet the most powerful royals in the world. And I was wearing jeans and a pretty knit sweater. I had hardly any makeup, hair down in long, unruly curls, and zero knowledge of etiquette. Oh, and a fresh bruise on my face. Fantastic.

Arbon had not prepared me for this because the royals were not treated that way at the school. I mean, some of the staff bowed and addressed them with formal titles, but for the most part, they were just like any other student.

It wouldn't be the same here, and my mind was blanking on what I should do. Did I bow? Curtsy? Wait for them to address me first before I said anything?

This was not going to be pretty, and I could only hope they would forgive my ignorance.

"Make sure you tell me when to bow or curtsy and shit," I muttered to Rafe from the corner of my mouth. "And what fork to eat with."

"Stop stressing," was his reply. "You'll be fine."

Yeah, right. Story of my fucking life.

The private airfield we landed at was still about thirty minutes away from the palace. Apparently it was hard to get a long enough runway up in the mountains, so the next leg was in a fancy black SUV.

Rafe held the passenger door open for me, and I shook my head. "No, it's okay, I'll get in the back."

Before I could push that further, he wrapped his hands around my waist and basically threw me—somewhat gently—into the seat, and then he... was getting into the driver's side.

Shit. I hadn't expected that.

Didn't princes have staff to do shit like that?

"I like to be in control," he said as way of answering my confused expression.

Our friends piled into the back, all of them rubbing their hands together at the chilly air. We were clearly more elevated than at Arbon, with the huge, snow-capped mountains all around us as the car started to wind along a narrow path.

We eventually moved onto a wider, more established road, and I spent the drive with my face pressed to the window, taking in the absolutely spectacular views.

I'd never seen anything like it, white mist coating most of the land as we ascended into the mountains.

When Rafe's home finally came into view, I actually gasped, pressing a hand to my mouth. Mattie hadn't exaggerated; this was the sort of palace fairy tales were written about.

"You grew up here?" I whispered.

The sprawling estate was nestled into a mountain range, and we drove down toward it, giving me an uninterrupted view. It was exactly as Mattie had said, a huge, crystal clear blue spring surrounded one side. The side we were approaching. Steam rose in attractive arcs above that water, and I was already imagining how delicious it would be to swim there.

The palace itself was very white and very modern, with lots of sharp angles, high ceilings, and glass from ceiling to floor so that from the inside, one would not miss any of these views.

It went on further than I could see, and even though it wasn't like the castles depicted in long-ago movies, it was definitely as large as any of those royal abodes. Security waved us through the gates, and I noted there were dozens of the smartly dressed men and women

scattered about. They were wearing the same uniform as those who had crashed the fights.

I averted my eyes so it wasn't obvious I was checking them out. I knew, logically, that none of them would know I had been at the fights. But it still felt like I should be keeping a low profile.

"You're safe," Rafe said, turning the wheel to pull into a large circular entryway. "No one will hurt you here, and best of all, none of the considerable enemies you've amassed in your short time in our world can reach you here."

I laughed. "Very reassuring, thank you."

When the car stopped, someone opened Rafe's door, bowing as they did. "Welcome home, Your Highness," the young man said. He stepped back then, allowing Rafe to exit the car.

My door was opened by a different attendant, and I was greeted as Ms. Spencer. I blinked at his formal tone. "Thank you," I replied as he stepped back to let me out.

Out into a fucking world that was not for me. But I was going to enjoy it all the same.

Here's hoping I didn't lose my head in the process.

CHAPTER 31



King Felipe and Queen Jacinta were both waiting for us in the formal entry. The entrance had glass walls on either side, one showcasing mountains for days and the other a small section of the hot springs. I couldn't gawk at that, though. I was about to meet some royals.

Rafe didn't wait to be introduced, hurrying forward to throw his arms around his petite mother. He was a big guy, and it was clear from looking at his father where he got it from. But his mom, she was stunning, like a perfect doll, standing all of five feet two.

She had black hair like Rafe's, and her features—eyes, hair, skin tone—were all bronze. Rafe's dad, though, was the one sporting bright blue eyes. From seeing him on television, I'd always thought his eyes were midnight blue, but they must lighten and darken with emotions, like Rafe's. Because right now they were quite bright. He also had silvery hair and was a picture of health, looking handsome and robust. He was Rafe in thirty years, and it was a good look.

I was surprised when he embraced his son in the same sort of warm hug, and I was starting to see that this royal family was nothing like the creepy Australasian one.

"Where are the twins?" Rafe asked as we waited a little back.

His mother shook her head. "Jean is swimming, and Lucy is having a lesson. We haven't told them you're coming; we wanted to surprise them both. They're going to be so excited."

Gah, this family. They had to stop being so nice—on first impression—or I might beg them to adopt me.

Rafe must have remembered we were still there; he stepped back and turned to wave us closer. Jordan got the same hugs as Rafe, and it was clear he'd spent a lot of time with this family. Mattie and Nolan were treated as somewhat familiar, receiving warm smiles, and then that left me.

I sort of fumbled through a curtsy, Rafe's smirking face on me the entire time.

"Oh, please, no, sweetheart," Queen Jacinta said, waving my ridiculous attempt at etiquette off. "We don't stand on anything too formal inside our own home."

She took a step closer to me, hand held out for me to take. "We're so happy to finally meet you, Violet. Rafe has told us a lot about you."

I resisted the urge to side-eye glare at him because he should have warned me about what they did and didn't know.

"It's an honor to meet you," I replied, swallowing hard. "Thank you for welcoming me into your home."

Rafe's father laughed. "Any friends of Rafe's are always welcome here; you can remember that."

Hmm. That was a little odd—almost felt like there was a deeper meaning there. Or maybe not.

"Thank you, Your Majesty," I said formally.

His eyes twinkled, and I couldn't figure out how any two people were so instantly likeable—not to mention attractive, down-to-Earth, and running a tip-top kingdom. No wonder they were the most powerful nation on the planet. Who could say no to them?

"Now then." Rafe's father—King Felipe—clapped his hands together and raised his brows expectantly. "We've got about half an hour before the twins work out that you're here. Shall we have an aperitif and discuss the rather disrespectful communication I just received from King Steve?"

My stomach dropped to the floor and rolled.

Rafe shot a quick, reassuring look at me. It didn't work. I was about three point four seconds away from vomiting with anxiety right there on Queen Jacinta's designer shoes.

"Mattie, Nolan, you know the rules," King Felipe said, giving the Guay's twin royals a pointed look, to which they looked resigned. "You can go find your rooms and wash up for dinner. We'll keep this brief."

"Yes sir," they both huffed, disappointed but not angry at being effectively dismissed.

I was all kinds of confused. They knew everything that was going on. Why were they not being included?

"Jordy, my boy," Felipe continued, clapping Jordan on the shoulder like the New American prince was his own son. "Nothing has changed with your authorization?"

Jordan flashed the king a winning smile. "No, sir, not that I'm aware."

"Good." The king nodded. "Shall we?" He indicated for us to follow him, and Queen Jacinta hung back, taking my arm so that we walked together.

"It's not as bad as it seems," she told me with a gentle smile. "But when our kids are friends with the next generation of future world leaders, certain protocols and permissions must be observed. The leaders of the Guays haven't given their children authority to enter into political alliances or negotiations on their behalf, so unfortunately they must excuse themselves when we speak on international conflicts and treaties."

I nodded slowly. I didn't *totally* understand, but my friends did. So that was all that mattered.

Queen Jacinta smiled again and patted my hand on her arm. "I'll get you a drink. You look like you need it."

The empty armchair beside King Felipe was clearly intended for Queen Jacinta. So, with my head reeling, I sank down onto the soft white sofa in the only logical seat left available. Between Rafe and Jordan. Damn, if I didn't sit there like I had a steel post glued to my spine.

"Violet, there's no need to look so panicked," King Felipe assured me with a kind smile. "We already know a lot of the story from Rafael, but without the security of face-to-face communication, we've been hesitant to delve any deeper."

If anything, that made me panic harder. I licked my dry lips and shot Rafe an accusing look. He talked about me with his parents? What the hell had he said? That I was some annoying, gold-digging slut chasing after a prince and a title? I mean, obviously not. They wouldn't be treating me so kindly if that had been the case, but... I doubted he had been gushing over some girl he was into. Rafe and me... we were just sex. Right? Friends with benefits at best.

"Why don't you give us an abridged version of events, Violet?" Jacinta suggested, coming over and setting a tray of small glasses on the table. They were all filled with a clear liquid, and when she handed me one, I could smell peaches.

"Uh..." I looked to Jordan and Rafe for reassurance, but both of them were casual and relaxed. Trusting. Not only were they confident that Felipe and Jacinta were the kind of people we could trust implicitly, they also trusted me to speak for myself without my *boyfriends* chiming in.

It was refreshing.

I sucked in a deep breath. "Okay. Abridged version." To collect my thoughts, I took a gulp of the drink, then started coughing as it burned the whole way down my throat. It was deceptively potent, but exactly what I needed to get this story out in the open.

Keeping my eyes locked on the table between us, I started telling them everything. The ballot, meeting Alex, the creepy nurse and the forced IUD insertion. I glossed over the whole relationship I'd had with Alex, back when I'd thought we were in love. I also glossed over the relationship I'd had with Rafe—the one where he was nasty as fuck to me and I took every opportunity to piss him off more.

When I came to the part about overhearing Alex and Claudette, my voice hitched, but a warm hand grasped mine, providing silent strength. So I continued. Only after I got to today, with Alex's parents demanding to meet me, did I trail off and swallow the rest of my peach-flavored firewater.

No one spoke for a moment, then King Felipe made a thoughtful sound and turned to Jordan. "Tell me more about this virus you created. Can you be sure it won't be traced back to you?"

"Yes, sir," Jordan answered with complete confidence. He then went on to explain the more technical specs of his design—details that Felipe seemed to both understand and be interested in—while I tried to calm my body down from the brink of panic.

"Here," Rafe murmured, his voice a soft rumble as he released my hand and passed me another glass of liquor. He took my empty one and replaced it on the tray, while his mother watched us curiously. "You okay, Cinderella?"

"Mm-hmm." I nodded. My cheeks were warm, and for the first time I didn't care about the stupid nickname. At some point it had stopped being an insult and was now almost a term of... endear-

ment—something his mom seemed to notice too, her gaze lingering longer on us than was comfortable.

Jordan continued his discussion with Felipe about the virus, the hacking, the data... but something kept bugging me—the one part of my story that I'd left out, and I was dying to ask the guys more about it.

The Resistance.

Rafe and Jordan had said they were part of the group to keep an eye on happenings for their parents, but since no one had mentioned it out loud, I wasn't sure how much their parents actually knew. On instinct I'd decided it was safest not to say anything, no matter how much I wanted more information.

But then King Felipe was the one to bring it up when he asked, "Any new intel about the Society?"

Despite my slightly fuzzy head from the potent drink, I was paying very close attention now.

Rafe stretched his long legs out, relaxing into the couch. "Nothing new from my last report. Their attacks are ramping up, but it seems to be an extremist wing that's taking some matters into their own hands."

"Any truth to the rumor that they've developed a new version of the natural disaster technology?" Queen Jacinta asked. She was nothing like Alex's mom, in that she was smart, shrewd, and contributed plenty in the small political discussion I'd been privy to.

Jordan and Rafe both shook their heads. "Nothing in the official channels," Rafe said.

The king and queen didn't look reassured by that, and I wondered if a natural disaster technology was good or bad. I'd have to remember to ask about it later.

The conversation moved on to less heavy topics after that, and around halfway through my third peach drink, we wrapped everything up.

"Leave it to me," King Felipe told us with a decisive nod. "I'll do some investigation of my own. In the meantime, I'm sure it goes without saying that I don't want either of you to leave Violet alone at the academy? I get the feeling Steve has something more up his sleeve, and he needs Violet and Alex to make it happen. Nowhere is safe outside these palace grounds. Understood?"

Both Rafe and Jordan nodded their understanding, and I let out a small sigh of relief. There was something so... comforting, knowing we weren't tackling this alone. We had support. Powerful support. This wouldn't just be a case of three teenagers toppling corrupt kings, and thank goodness for that. Those stories were a bit too far fetched, even for a girl living her own fairy-tale adventure.

"Raffa!" A high pitched squeal pierced my ears, and Jordan hauled me out of the way just in time to avoid going down in a tangle of limbs with Rafe. His twin siblings piled on top of him like puppies, and the sound of his laughter touched my soul.

CHAPTER 32



The next few days passed all too quickly. Queen Jacinta had extended her invitation for the rest of the week, but we all had to return to the academy by Friday, ahead of the Spring Ball on Saturday.

"Is it terrible that I don't want to go back?" I asked Mattie as we changed into our swimsuits in the room we shared. Despite the Swiss palace being enormous, they had very few unused rooms due to the fact that they provided accommodations to all their household staff and security teams. It was surprising, in the best way, and something that I would forever admire Jacinta and Felipe for. It was a measure of their generosity, and seemed to have a very positive impact on their employees' attitudes.

"It's understandable," she said, adjusting the straps on her eight pieces of string masquerading as a swimsuit. We'd had a bunch of clothes and toiletries provided to us, and Mattie had wasted no time grabbing the designer-and-skimpy line of options. I'd gone with more casual.

I mean, I was wearing a bright red bikini, but it covered all of my tits and most of my ass. Mattie could not say the same.

Throwing on coverups and flip flops, we left our room and followed the path that led down to the private springs we'd been using. This was for the royal family only, and we hadn't run into anyone else in the times we'd used it.

"How is it that Rafe is such a prickly bastard," I wondered aloud after thinking about it constantly over the last few days, "and yet he

has such a wonderful family? I honestly expected them to be monsters, creating that little ball of delight that is their son."

Not that Rafe had been anything less than amazing during our time here, going all out to make sure we were having a great vacation. But who could forget those first few months of asshole attitude? There had to be a reason someone was like that.

Mattie's lips twitched, and she took a moment to look around to make sure we were alone. "His parents are wonderful," she said softly, "but his grandfather was not. When he was the king, this land was vastly different, and... Well, it's not my story to tell, so I won't say much more. But just know that this family has been forged in fire, and that's why they carry their strength so elegantly."

I swallowed hard, all of a sudden feeling sick that I'd judged Rafe so harshly for his actions and attitude. Mattie didn't exaggerate things like this. She also wasn't overly dramatic. And that meant...

Fuck.

"The twins?"

They were incredibly cute and funny, and I adored hanging out with them. Lucy-Liun was legitimately a mini, female version of Rafe, and she obsessively loved her big brother, hanging off him all the time.

Jean-Luc was like Rafe too, especially in personality. He was reserved and protective, keeping an eye on his sister, even when no threats were around. They were very grown up for only being eight years old. And that added more dread to what was already accumulating in my stomach.

"They were too young," she said simply. "Rafe and his father copped the worst of it. The crown heirs."

I tried to remember when the grandfather had died, passing the throne on to his son, but it wasn't immediately coming to me. Clearly within the last twenty-one years since Rafe was that old.

"Should I ask him about it?"

Mattie looked torn, and we both fell silent as we reached a set of doors that were opened for us by two uniformed guards. The chill of the outside air hit us, and since the sun had almost completely set, it was only getting colder by the minute.

"Quick, we need to get our asses in the water before we freeze," she gasped.

Our pace picked up, flipflops slapping against the gorgeous travertine floors that lined the outside of this area. I heard the cat-calls of the guys before we reached them, and it was with no surprise I found Nolan cannonballing off one of the large, rocky overhanging's.

These natural springs had not been altered from what had been built into the land by nature itself. The castle had been molded to fit around them, and they were beyond spectacular. The sight took my breath away, forcing me to stand there in awe until I got too cold and had to move forward.

"Just be careful," Mattie whispered, and it took me a second to realize she was answering my question from before. "Rafe... Don't push him too far. He has a line."

I nodded, understanding exactly what she was saying. I could ask about his past, but if he refused to answer, it was safest not to push him. Didn't mean I'd follow that, but I definitely understood.

Rafe's reticence was mostly the reason why I considered us nothing more than fuck buddies. If you didn't let someone go deeper beneath your skin than a little P in V, then there was nothing more there. Jordan pushed me for more. For deeper.

Rafe did not.

Why this was bothering me so much, I was so not ready to examine.

"Get yo' asses in the water," Nolan called before he catapulted himself off the ledge again, disturbing the peaceful calm of the eerily blue waters.

Mattie and I hurried to the small hut that had places to hang our robes and stash our flipflops. There were tons of towels and other items there for our use as well, including snacks and a sound system.

Right now it wasn't on; all of us had grown accustomed to the stunning silence of this area. Silence and Nolan's obnoxious catcalling.

I stood there a second, shivering my ass off in nothing more than a two-piece swimsuit, then hurried into the water. I sighed in relief as the warmth wrapped around my legs and then my thighs, like a bath. It was almost too hot at first, but as my chilled skin adjusted, everything inside of me relaxed.

"These waters are rumored to have healing properties," Rafe said, swimming like a fucking fish and popping up behind me.

Shark might be more accurate, silent and deadly, the apex predator.

"Is that why your family built your home here?" I asked, keeping an eye on him as he circled around me. The springs weren't that deep here, but I did have to bob up and down to keep my mouth out of the water. It tasted sort of salty, but not in a bad way. And my skin had felt amazing after each time I'd swum here.

"My great-grandfather was the one who owned this land originally," he said, gaze on me, the fading light highlighted behind him. "We lived here with Grandfather, but this wasn't how the house looked. It was ugly, all stone and harsh lines. Big and imposing, it blocked out the natural landscape, rather than working with it. Dad had that shithole knocked down the second his father died. We've never looked back since."

Fuck. Perfect timing to ask some of my questions.

We were alone—Mattie, Nolan, and Jordan were all rock jumping—and he'd brought it up first.

"Your grandfather," I said softly. "He's the reason this was a prison?"

He stopped swimming and lifted himself out of the water to stand straight. I was distracted by the fucking massive expanse of smooth, muscled skin, tattoos, and the way the water hugged and loved him, running in arcs all over his body.

Rafe smirked, no doubt noticing the way he affected me, and I quickly shrugged it off. He pushed in closer to me then, and whatever cool I'd managed to recover was lost in the hard body that was crowding mine.

"Did I ever tell you that red is my favorite color?" he murmured, lips scraping across my jaw, tongue following as he caressed my skin.

A choked, breathless laugh left me. "Would have guessed black."

"Like my soul?" he asked, pulling back a little. "Or maybe my heart."

He shifted, like he was going to move away, and before I could stop myself, my hand shot out, grabbing onto the waistband of his swim shorts. Why the fuck I'd decided to grab there, so close to his dick I could practically feel it under my hand, was beyond me. All I knew was that I needed him to stay.

"Your soul is not black," I said harshly. "Or your heart. I've known evil people, Rafe. I've loved them and suffered for it. I know the difference between someone who is a moody bastard with a problem tolerating the weaknesses of others, and someone who is straight up dark."

He kissed me. It was hard and fast, and I gasped, releasing his shorts as I was pulled firmly against his chest.

"Fuck," I gasped again, unable to catch my breath. "What are you doing to me?"

He took my lower lip between his teeth, biting down almost hard enough to break the skin. "Anything I fucking want," he replied. His tongue slammed into my mouth, taking what he wanted, just as he'd said, and I gave it willingly.

"Raffa!" A high pitched squeal echoed across the pool, and Rafe's pained groan made me laugh.

"Go away, Lucy!" he shouted back at his little sister, barely sparing her a glance before dipping his head to kiss me again. Silly boy, he should have known better.

"Ewwwwwww!" The little girl's shriek sounded a whole lot closer now. "Are you and Violet *kissing*?" Her utter horror made me dissolve into giggles, and I sank into the water to escape her prying eyes.

Rafe, though, turned on his little sister with murderous rage. Fake murderous rage, I was pretty sure, but she didn't know that. The little princess let out a shrill scream, bolting when her big brother jumped out of the spring and chased after her.

It was cute as shit seeing him play with his siblings like that. But also, what a little cockblocker! I needed to keep my eye on young Lucy-Liun.

"Rafe gone to murder the munchkin?" Nolan asked with a laugh, swimming over to me with Mattie and Jordan not far behind. "That kid loves him so damn much."

I grinned. "I know. It's weird seeing this side of him."

"We all have our layers, New Girl," Nolan told me with a wink. "But you know what this party needs?"

"This is a party?" Mattie asked with sarcasm.

Nolan just rolled his eyes. "Anything can be a party with the right company, sister dear. And booze. It needs booze."

Mattie smiled broadly and nodded. "Hell yeah, it does."

"Well, come on then, womb mate. Let's get some drinks!" Nolan jerked his head in the direction of the palace. It wasn't like they needed to get out of the water or anything; there was a little service window where the water met the side of the palace that they could just swim right up to. Still, Mattie wrinkled her nose.

"You don't need my help, Noles. Just go order from one of the staff."

Nolan flicked an apologetic glance at Jordan, then grabbed Mattie by the shoulder. "Come and help me get drinks, Mattie," he repeated, speaking slowly and clearly as if she were hard of hearing. "Now, Mattie." He gave her shoulder a tug, and she rolled her eyes.

"You're acting really weird, Nolan," she grumbled, but swam away with him to get those ever-so-important drinks.

I snickered a laugh. "He really is acting weird," I commented to Jordan, agreeing with Mattie. "What's going on?"

He shrugged, gliding closer to me in the warm water. "I might have asked him to distract her for a few minutes."

My brow hitched, and butterflies started flapping around in my belly. "Oh yeah? And why's that?"

Taking my hand in his under the water, he swam leisurely backward, pulling me with him until we reached the far side of the springs, as far away from our friends as we could get while still inside the hot water.

"Because I've missed you, Violet," he finally replied in a soft voice. "All week I've been trying to steal a moment alone with you, but..." He trailed off with an exasperated sigh. I knew what he meant, though. Between sharing a room with Mattie, tea with Queen Jacinta, and games with the twins, alone time had been nonexistent.

"Hmm," I murmured, swimming closer to him and snuggling into the embrace of his arms. "Well, how long does it take for them to get drinks?"

"Not anywhere near long enough," he lamented, "but I'll take what I can get."

The way Jordan kissed me always seemed to turn me into a puddle of goo. The dance of his mouth over mine, the way he nibbled and caressed my lips and his hands roamed my body made me feel like the whole center of his universe. Like I was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Like he cared a hell of a lot more about me than he should for this casual thing we had going.

It was a worrying thought, but I shoved it aside to deal with later. Mattie and Nolan would be back any moment, and I didn't want to waste even a second of our time alone.

"You have *no* idea how badly I've needed that this week," Jordan whispered as his lips moved to my neck and my back rested against the cool stone at the edge of the spring. "It's like I've been in withdrawal. And I'm wondering if Rafe assigned the rooms deliberately."

I snickered at the idea, then quietly admitted that *did* seem like something he'd do. If he couldn't get any sex while in his parents house, no one else could either.

"Jordan..." I groaned in warning as his hands found the scrap of fabric masquerading as my bikini bottoms. "Mattie and Nolan will be back any second now."

Still, when his fingers rubbed me through the wet cloth, I didn't move away. In fact, I arched into his hand, encouraging him to keep going.

"Shh," he laughed, pressing light, teasing kisses to my lips. "So long as you're quiet, I can make you come before they get back over here."

I whimpered, but who was I kidding? I needed the release just as badly as he needed to give it, so I looped my arms around his neck and kissed him deeply, relaying my consent silently.

He pushed the crotch of my briefs aside, sliding two fingers into me and rubbing at my clit with his thumb, and I jerked against his grip.

Holy shit, it was like he had a sixth sense or something because there was *no* fumbling around for the right spots. I wiggled against his hand, panting as I nipped his neck, begging for more.

"Shhh," he shushed me again with a breathy laugh. "You don't want Nolan to hear us. He'll want to watch."

I whimpered but bit my lip to hold the worst of the noises back as Jordan fucked me with his hand, working me into a frenzy within moments. Right as two shadowy figures appeared in the steam, I spasmed and bucked with my climax, but Jordan generously swallowed my screams with his mouth.

"Guys, seriously?" Mattie called out, wading ever so slowly closer with a tray of drinks in her hands. "Quit making out. I'm so not down to being the fifth wheel if this turns into an orgy situation."

Jordan laughed at her joke, easing his fingers out of me and righting my bikini under the water. Thank god it was already getting dark and there was little chance of anyone seeing anything amiss.

Noles and Jordan traded some joking insults with each other, and Mattie handed me one of the fruity cocktails she'd had the bartender whip up for us. When Rafe returned soon thereafter, the five of us just spent the next few hours splashing and laughing and getting way too damn drunk.

It was heaven, and I refused to think about what waited for us back at the academy. Nothing could douse the happiness I felt in that moment.

CHAPTER 33



The journey back to Arbon Academy was mostly silent, though not in an uncomfortable way. The five of us had bonded on a whole deeper level over the week we'd spent with Rafe's family. It was more just a pensive kind of quiet.

On the plane, after we'd reached cruising altitude, Rafe had unbuckled our seat belts and pulled me into his lap. That was it. Just pulled me into his lap, looped his arms around me, and stared out the window silently until we were told to return to our seats for landing.

It was a sweet gesture, but it sparked something painful in my chest. I knew I was playing with fire with this thing going on between him, Jordan, and I... But I couldn't stop. I couldn't walk away from either of them, no matter how badly it was destined to end.

We'd made our return to the academy as late as possible without breaking the dean's strict instructions, but it meant that the whole campus was asleep by the time we got in.

Nolan and Mattie wished us good-night and both disappeared into their dorm rooms, leaving me with my two princes.

"Thanks for this week," I told them as we reached my door. "It was... amazing. Thank you for sharing your home with me, Rafe."

He gave a nonchalant shrug, not meeting my eyes as he replied. "Not a big deal, Cinderella."

I bit my lip to keep from calling him on his bullshit. "Okay, well. Thanks anyway. See you guys at breakfast?"

Jordan quirked a brow, brushing past me as I opened my door and entering my bedroom.

"You didn't seriously think we were leaving you alone tonight, did you?" Rafe asked, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "Catch up, Vi. You remember what my father said?"

Trust no one. Nowhere is safe outside this palace.

That included the academy. I knew that. But...

"Both of you?" I asked, following them into my room and closing the door carefully behind me. "Might be a tight squeeze." I forced a laugh, and it fell really fucking flat.

Jordan ran a hand through his hair, giving me a sympathetic look. "Violet. You're not safe here. Not when Alex and his dad are willing to let the nurse literally drug and violate you. What's next? They rape you? I'm sorry, we're not leaving you alone for even a second. Either of us."

I didn't know where to look. I didn't know what to think. But a huge part of me was literally hyperventilating at the thought of having both of them in this room with me.

"Okay, I trust this is safest," I said softly, not stupid enough to push this issue out of my own discomfort. "But how is it going to work?"

Jordan gently shoved me toward the bathroom. "You can shower and change, and then we'll all crawl into your more-than-big-enough bed and try and get some sleep."

I swallowed hard, attempting to stop what I was thinking from spreading across my face.

"Okay, sure, sounds good," I said in fake casualness. "Absolutely fine."

I managed to walk my way to where my pajamas were and grab out a soft pair of shorts and the matching tank top. Clean underwear and we were good to go.

When I closed the bathroom door, shutting out those two perfect, gorgeous faces, I sank back against it.

I mean, this really wasn't an issue in the larger scheme of things. I was *doing stuff* with both of them, we'd all been naked—we could freaking sleep in the same bed. I just had a scary suspicion that the fire I had been playing with up to now, trying to juggle both princes, was on the edge of a raging inferno.

And I wasn't sure I could handle the heat.

The shower helped relax me, and when I was done—hair braided, face clean and moisturized, legs shaved; basically everything I

could do to delay the inevitable—I left the bathroom.

Jordan and Rafe were chatting, both of them leaning back on my headboard, long legs stretched out in front of them. *Jesus.*

A girl could get used to this.

“Bathroom’s free,” I said, and Jordan jumped to his feet, brushing a kiss across my face as he passed me.

Rafe also got to his feet, eyes dragging along my baby pink pjs, and from the heat there, one would think I was in the sexiest, skimpiest underwear in the world. I cleared my throat. “So, uh, thanks for taking my safety so seriously. I’ve never had anyone really give a fuck before. Not like this. So... yeah, thanks.”

I was rambling. I was fucking nervous for the stupidest reason.

“Come here,” Rafe ordered, holding his hand out. His face dared me to disobey him, so of course, that was exactly what I wanted to do.

The darkness in his face deepened, as did the butterflies in my stomach.

“Don’t make me come to you, Violence,” he drawled, eyes turning stormy. “Promise you won’t like it if I do.”

I tilted my chin back. “Hmmm, you might be wrong there. I think I’ll like it a lot.”

His lips twitched, the smallest of smiles appearing.

“How about a compromise?” I burst out before he could follow through with whatever he was going to say next. “I’ll meet you halfway?”

He took a long time to answer, and I heard the water turn off in my bathroom as Jordan finished up with whatever he was doing.

“I don’t compromise,” Rafe finally murmured, almost like he was surprised. “But I will for you.”

And then he took a step forward. I did the same thing, and in two more steps we stood right before each other.

“This is going to get you in trouble,” he said, fisting the thin cotton of my tank.

I snorted. “What? My pajamas?”

Rafe’s smirk grew more pronounced. “Well, yes, but also your smart mouth.”

I gave him my own full smile back. “Hmmm, I think you’re starting to love my smart mouth.”

He leaned down. "You might be right about that." He said it so softly, but I heard him.

Just as our lips touched, the bathroom door opened, and Jordan strolled out. Wearing just his fucking underwear. He had on boxer briefs, the tight kind, and I blinked as Rafe laughed.

"Well played, asshole," he said before he brushed a light touch across my cheek and left to take his turn.

"Come on, Vi," Jordan said, holding out a hand to me. Meanwhile I was busy watching the way those boxers cupped him in all the right places.

I wasn't strong enough for this. Not. Strong. Enough.

Jordan led me to the bed, pulling back the covers so we could crawl onto the heavenly softness of my mattress. Truthfully, after sleeping in Rafe's castle for a week, it wasn't quite as luxurious, but still damn nice.

And I was exhausted.

"Maybe I'll sleep tonight," I pondered out loud. "I grew up sharing a room with a lot of kids, and it's been much harder to rest since coming to the academy."

Jordan, who was on my right side, rolled over so he was facing me. "We'll keep you safe. You can sleep without worry tonight."

I turned my head to see him better, just the light of one lamp illuminating his face. "This feels like a dream," I whispered. "I don't want to wake from it."

He shifted forward until our lips met, and I could have cried at how perfect it was.

This is what I had meant with the dream thing. Something this incredible... it was destined to end.

By the time Rafe was done, Jordan and I were almost asleep, but I felt him crawl in on the other side of me, pushing me over a little as he wrapped his arms around me. Even in my drowsy state, I felt that he too was clad in nothing more than boxers, and I let out a low groan before I could stop myself.

Both princes stilled on either side of me, which I could feel because they were pressed against my body.

Long, hard lengths of skin on skin.

"This is a bad idea," I half joked.

"Shut up and go to sleep before I show you how bad it can be," Rafe said harshly, his breathing a little accelerated.

I was never going to be able to sleep like this. Seriously. My heart was about to beat out of my chest, and my vagina was about to go rogue and jump whichever dick she found first.

"Violet," Rafe warned, like he could hear my thoughts.

With a deep breath, I closed my eyes and tried to think of anything other than the two princes.

Anything.

A warm hand landed on my stomach, another on my thigh. Neither of them belonged to the same person, and both of them moved in slow, hypnotic strokes across my skin. It was soothing, somehow, and I felt a little more tension leave as my eyelids drooped.

I had been tired for a long time, and maybe, just maybe, Jordan was right. I was going to sleep tonight.

The next morning, I woke to slow strokes across my spine, and my face was buried in someone's chest. I didn't open my eyes, wanting to enjoy this moment, the sensation of being held and touched like this.

To say I was surprised that all three of us were still in bed would be an understatement. I'd expected Rafe to leave early this morning, but maybe it was actually too early for that. I squinted a tiny bit to find the room was still dark.

"You awake, Princess?" Rafe drawled, his voice close to my ear. Rafe was the one I was half-sprawled over, but I'd somehow managed to get my legs tangled with Jordan's. He had been asleep, only waking when Rafe spoke.

"What time is it?" I asked huskily.

"Too damn early," Jordan replied, rolling onto his side and hauling me against his chest. "Go back to sleep."

I snuggled into his embrace, fully agreeing. Rafe kept hold of my hand that had been draped on his chest, linking our fingers together in that cute, *couple* kind of way. It hurt my soul because every sweet gesture, every new depth we uncovered in this... whatever the fuck this was... it took me two steps closer to getting my heart broken again.

Suddenly consumed with negativity to the point of feeling physically ill, I extracted myself from Jordan's arms and wriggled off the bed. Dodging two sets of curious eyes, I stretched my arms over my head and yawned.

"We should get breakfast or something," I suggested like a totally awkward loser. Ugh, there should be a handbook on how to handle waking up in bed with two playboy princes who'd both become intimately acquainted with my vagina.

Right when the weight of their assessing stares was getting next level uncomfortable, my palm reader buzzed against my wrist with an incoming call, and I sighed in relief. "Thank fuck," I muttered under my breath, checking the caller before clicking *answer call*.

"Hey girl," I said, turning away from the delicious meals lying in my bed. "What's up?"

"What's up?" she snapped back, her voice carrying through the room, seeing as I'd answered on loudspeaker. "What's up with *you*, dirty bitch? I've been trying to get hold of you all morning, and neither Jordan or Rafe were in their rooms. Know anything about that?"

"Uh..." I couldn't help myself; I shot a look at the two of them. Damn them straight to hell, they just looked casual as shit, grinning at me all smug-like. "Wait, all morning? What time is it?"

"Almost one," she replied, and the background noise sounded like she was in the dining room. "Want me to grab you some food to go? Alex is here with a face like a smacked ass, so I *don't* recommend coming down yourself."

"Shit," I cursed, running a hand over my loose braid and tugging the end anxiously. Mattie and I had hair and makeup appointments in less than half an hour, and I still had no idea what I was wearing for the Spring Ball. Mattie swore she had it all taken care of, and I was sure she did. But I still wanted to have some idea whether to prepare for a pink meringue dress or not.

Mattie just laughed and said something about bringing me coffee before ending the call, and I whirled around to glare at my bodyguards.

"Did you know what time it was?" I demanded, uncertain which of them I should be glaring at harder.

Neither of them looked shocked, so I was going to assume they did. Bastards.

"You slept well, though, didn't you?" Jordan pointed out with a yawn. "And so did we."

Exasperated, I threw my hands in the air, mentally tallying all the things I needed to do. "Mattie's on her way," I told them. "Let her in when she gets here?"

Without waiting for them to agree, I scurried my ass into the bathroom and closed the door tightly behind me. If I were being totally honest, the biggest reason for my frayed nerves was still in my bedroom. Both of them. But that was an issue for future Violet to deal with.

We had a ball to prepare for, and—regretfully—I had my ex-boyfriend's parents to meet.

CHAPTER 34



"*Y*ou look stunning," Mattie breathed, her eyes wide as I turned to face her. The hair and makeup artists had just finished, and I had to admit... they'd done an incredible job. My dress was purple, a deep, rich color that reminded me of berries. It was tight at the top, the material crossing over my body with a single shoulder strap. And the skirt, it was full and puffy. Proper princess mode.

"How did you get it to fit so perfectly?" I asked, twirling and admiring myself like a proper narcissist. I mean, legit, if there was one moment you needed to be self-focused, it was when dressed like a freaking supermodel.

"I measured you while you were asleep," she replied casually.

I stopped twirling, blinking at her. "I mean, that's..."

"Creative? Ingenious?"

"Creepy," I said with a snort of laughter. "Super fucking creepy, but I can't complain about the end result."

Mattie shrugged like she didn't really care about the creep factor of her actions, then grinned. "In all seriousness, you don't sleep long or soundly enough for me to try anything like that. I stole one of your dresses, and the designer worked from that."

That did make more sense. Especially recently.

"You did pretty good with your dress as well," I said with fake casualness. "I mean, if you're into that whole glamor queen, goddess, dropped-from-the-heavens sort of look."

Mattie wore gold, the sort of shimmery gold that caught and held the eye without need for any further adornment. Unlike mine, hers didn't have a full skirt; instead it was slimline, skimming and hold-

ing to her body and showcasing her very impressive assets. It was low cut in the front, tits way out for the world to see, and to make it even more intense, was equally low cut in the back.

If by *equally*, I meant *right down to the top of her ass*.

Her hair was dead straight, her eyes winged like motherfuckers, and with gold shimmer on every inch of exposed skin, one might think a literal goddess had been dropped in their midst.

"This is my favorite designer," she said with a twirl of her own. "Cami Loren. She is a legit genius, and I won't wear a gown not by her."

I looked down at my own. "Is mine by her too?"

Mattie looked at me like I was insane. "Uh, yes. That's why it's so fucking bangin'!"

There was a knock on the door then, and I jumped because I'd sort of forgotten that the real world was waiting out there and that Mattie and I hadn't just spent hours being plucked, prodded, made up and dressed so we could stand around her room and admire ourselves.

"Our dates have arrived," Mattie squealed, hurrying over to open the door.

"You mean your dates. I have to make an appearance with Ale..."

My words dried up as I got my first look at the two princes in the doorway.

Fuck me sideways and dead.

Rafe and Jordan. Side by side. Both in fancy black suits. Their outfits were clearly custom made to fit their broad shoulders and tapered down to slim hips. Jordan actually wore a tie with his, but Rafe's was open collar, and as he moved, I caught a tantalizing glimpse of bronze skin.

"Jesus, Violet," Jordan said as he stalked closer to me, his long-legged strides eating up the distance between us in seconds. "You look unbelievably beautiful."

He caught and held my gaze, and it was like he'd never seen another chick in his life.

The intensity...

I swallowed hard. "Thanks. I mean, this is all just a fancy designer dress and Mattie's makeup chick. I didn't really do anything."

Rafe's laugh was low and raspy, and I almost arched my spine as that sound caressed my ears.

"The wrappings have nothing on the present," he said, finally moving closer. Side by side with Jordan, it was obvious he was a tiny bit taller, a little broader, and a lot darker. But Jordan more than held his own, one of the few men in the world—that I knew of anyway—who could come close to touching the Fallen Angel beauty of Rafe.

His fighting persona was an apt description.

"I already hate tonight," I whispered, some of my vulnerability appearing. "Watching you two dance with other women, having to touch Alex, that fucking piece of shit."

Knowing my luck, Brandon would be there too, probably teaming up with Claudette to commit some atrocity toward me.

I mean, I hadn't seen his pathetic face since the fight, but no doubt he'd had time now to lick his wounds and would be raring for some revenge.

Rafe wrapped his hand around the back of my neck in a sudden, possessive sort of move. Now normally, with anyone else, I would have fought against this type of hold, but with Rafe, I just wanted to step closer. Press against him. Have him strip this fucking dress, which had taken ten minutes just to get on, right off me.

A low rumble filled the space between us, and I realized it was from him. "Tonight is the last night we do this with Alex," he said softly, but with a deadly undertone. "After this, I don't care what we have to pay, we are going to end this bullshit."

Hope. It was a dangerous line to walk because when it was dashed, the pain was beyond devastating. But in that moment with Rafe, I believed what he said. This was the last time I'd have to endure Alex, the last time I'd be forced to touch or kiss someone I detested to keep myself alive.

"Okay," I whispered. "I can do this. I can do this for one more night."

Rafe's grip tightened, not that he was hurting me, but he was forcing me closer and closer. Jordan didn't move, so I was touching both of them.

"That's my girl," Rafe murmured, before he leaned in and kissed me. When he let me go, his hand falling from my neck, I almost groaned at the loss of contact.

Jordan came to the rescue, distracting me with a kiss of his own. "The virus should complete tonight anyway," he told me when he pulled back. "If it all goes to plan, Alex will be out of your life for at least the few months it'll take his family to sort that mess out."

A few months wasn't much, but I'd take it. Jordan's idea would at least buy us some more time for a more permanent plan after Alex got himself out of this one.

There was another knock on the door, and I knew it was time for us to get moving.

As I straightened, Mattie hurried forward and fixed up my lip-gloss, and then we were ready to go.

Nolan hurried inside the room. "Sorry!" he called, giving his sister a hug. "I got my underwear stuck in my zipper, and it took me twenty minutes to free myself without breaking my dick. Was a fucking mission with a cock this size, let me tell you."

Mattie hauled her arm back, but Jordan grabbed her hand before she could land her strike. Jordan was her date for the night, Rafe and Nolan were going solo, and I was on my way to a date with the devil.

My palm reader buzzed, and I knew it was Alex. Fucker had timing, that was for sure.

Alex: **Waiting at the front entrance. Do not arrive with those fucking assholes.**

Every word chafed at me, and I was having some doubts I would make it through tonight after all. Hurrying back to the mirror, I took a second to look the dress over again, this time with different eyes.

Rafe's face appeared behind mine in the glass. "You don't need your weapon," he said, a smile finally gracing his face. "I'll be there."

I narrowed my eyes. "How did you know?" I waved him off before he could answer. "Never mind. You always know everything. Observant bastard."

Universal truth about Rafe, nothing got past him.

My palm reader buzzed again, and I sighed because there was no avoiding it any longer.

Time to suck it up and do my duty.

One last time.

CHAPTER 35



If anyone asked me, I'd deny it. But deep down, as a little girl huddled alone in the cold, feeling the clawing pain of hunger in my belly, I'd pictured what my life would be like as a princess. It seemed like such a silly, little-girl fantasy, but in a world of monarchies, I was sure I wasn't the only one.

Nonetheless, for all those dreams and fantasies I'd had, nothing—and I mean *nothing*—could have prepared me for an actual royal ball.

I'd entered the room as stiff as a board, my fingertips barely touching Alex's arm in the vaguest display of being a "couple," like he'd demanded. But the second I stepped inside, my breath caught.

The huge space had been transformed into nothing short of magic. Blossoming trees lined the walls, and thousands of fairy lights and candles created a soft, twinkling glow that reflected off the myriad of jewels, crowns, and glittering dresses worn by the guests.

"Quite the insult that the king and queen of New America won't be here tonight," Alex said snidely, glancing around.

"Jordan's parent's aren't coming?" I asked. Until this moment it hadn't occurred to me—and it really should have—that the royals from my monarchy might have been here tonight. Jordan hadn't mentioned anything at all, no doubt because he'd already known they couldn't make it.

"Yeah, they had a conflict in their schedule or something," Alex said, sounding like he didn't believe it. "Guess that makes my parents the second most powerful monarchs in the room, should the need arise for anyone to pull rank."

Thank fuck King Felipe and Rafe were here because if the Australasian monarchs had been the most powerful, we'd all be in big trouble.

We moved farther into the incredible room. I'd already spent more time than I wanted with Alex, so at that point, I jerked free of him and made my way over to politely greet some of my teachers. I'd done what he'd asked. I'd turned up on his arm and pretended for prying eyes that we were still together, but I'd rather walk on broken rocks barefoot than spend the whole evening watching him act.

He'd ruined enough of my Arbon experience so far, I wouldn't let him take this magical ball from me too.

"You're doing well," someone commented in a quiet voice, startling me as I refilled my glass of champagne from an open bottle. The bubbling liquid sloshed, but I managed to recover before it ended up all over my dress.

"King Felipe," I exclaimed, blinking up at him. "Hi. I mean, uh..." I looked around, uncertain what the protocol was for greeting a king in public. I mean, we were on friendly terms privately, but were there rules and shit for a situation like this? And more to the point, why had no one told me?

He gave me an amused grin. "You're fine, Violet," he assured me. "I've been keeping an eye on you tonight and had to commend your slick ability to dodge the Australasian prince. I think to the unsuspecting eye, it would just seem like you're a social butterfly."

I swallowed my bitter laugh with a sip of my champagne. "Well, thanks. This ball is incredible; I just wish..." I trailed off, biting my tongue against what I wanted to say.

King Felipe was an observant man, though, and no fool. He gave me a knowing smile. "You just wish you were here with the person you truly cared for. Or, perhaps, *people*?"

My face flushed hot, and I had no words. Was he angry? He didn't *seem* angry, but then how would I feel if I were in his shoes? He was always going to have his son's best interests at heart.

"I'm not one to go telling you how to live your life, Violet," he said gently, refilling his own glass from the bottle I'd left on the table, "but Rafe is a different man when you're around. He dealt with a lot of heavy darkness as a child, things he never, ever should have been exposed to, and it's a dark shadow he's carried with him into adult-

hood. This week with you in our home is the lightest I've ever seen that shadow over him." He paused, sipping his wine and scanning his eyes around the room. I knew when he found Rafe because his face softened and his eyes warmed. Anyone could see how much he loved his son.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, not sure what I was apologizing for *exactly*, just that I needed to.

King Felipe shook his head. "Nothing to be sorry for, Violet. You need to follow your heart, same as we all do. Just try not to break my boy's when you do finally make your mind up? Either of them."

Jesus fucking Christ. No pressure, or anything. He clearly thought of Jordan as family too, so really... I was fucked.

Neither one of us spoke for a few moments, and I couldn't help following King Felipe's line of sight. Across the room, Rafe and Jordan stood together with some of their other friends from the Royals soccer team, chatting and laughing. They were such good friends... Was I risking more than just a broken heart? Their bond of friendship was stronger than casual sex with some girl from the wrong side of the tracks. Wasn't it?

Claudette sidled up to Rafe, pawing at his arm with her hand that *wasn't* in a cast, and a selfish spike of satisfaction shot through me when he shook her off.

"King Felipe, may I ask you something?" I spoke before really processing my thoughts. But then, he'd told me during the week to always speak my mind around him. He nodded, and I pursed my lips in thought. "Why is Rafe still betrothed to Claudette? Knowing what you know... it's just not adding up. I didn't pick you and Jacinta for the arranged marriage kind of parents. Not to mention..." I trailed off then because what I was about to say next was treading a line with so many royals in the room, including Claudette's parents, the king and queen of the Britains.

Felipe snorted a dry laugh. "Not to mention she's an insufferable, spoiled brat with a mean streak a mile wide? I'm all too aware." He released a long, tired-sounding sigh. "I can't tell you everything, Violet, you must understand." I nodded quickly. "But please trust me when I say Jas and I will never force our kids into a marriage they aren't happy with."

A small amount of anxiety shifted from my gut. It was a question that had been bothering me all week, having seen how much the

king and queen of the Switzerlands loved their kids. The idea that they'd force Rafe into a marriage with the likes of Claudette, all for political alliances, it didn't fit with the people I'd gotten to know.

Reading between the lines? He'd done it to maintain their alliance with the Britains long enough to secure whatever he needed in regards to the satellite system still controlled by the Britains. Beyond that, I suspected he'd find some very convenient excuse for the betrothal contract to be ripped up.

"Good," I murmured, and King Felipe shot me an amused glance.

"Glad you approve, Ms. Spencer," he joked. "Care to take a look at my policies on climate change or the development of the deadlands next?"

I grinned back. "I'd love to. Just leave it on my desk by close of business?"

King Felipe laughed, but moments later the smile slipped from his face and he stiffened, looking at someone behind me. "Steve," he said, and I froze. "Lovely to see you. Is Sheila here?"

"She is," Alex's father replied, his voice deep and musical like his son's. "I'm sure she'd love to catch up with Jacinta."

"Ah, that's a shame," Felipe replied, sounding anything *but* regretful. "Jacinta decided to stay home with the twins. Next time."

"Mmm yes," King Steve said like he couldn't care less, "Next time. Violet, my dear, you've been a hard woman to pin down tonight."

I turned a forced smile on Alex's slimy father and tried to hide my shudder of revulsion at his sexual innuendo. "King Steve," I said, keeping my voice calm and respectful, "what an honor to meet you in person."

His eyes flashed with something, but it was gone again in an instant. "Yes, well, I'd hoped to get to know you after the soccer match last weekend, but I understand you had better places to be." The reprimand was clear, and my stomach rolled with anxiety.

Thankfully, though, I still had the world's most powerful king on my side. "Yes, we're so sorry about that mix-up," Felipe apologized for me, sparing me the need to lie. "You know how our lovely queens can be when they get their minds set on something."

"Mmm," Steve murmured, and I got the distinct impression Queen Sheila didn't do *anything* without her husband's approval or permission. Poor woman. "Violet, may I have this dance?"

My stomach sank. People had been dancing all evening, waltzing like we'd stepped back in time a few hundred years, but I'd so far avoided making an idiot of myself.

"Uh," I stammered, frantically searching for an excuse. Trouble was, any kind of denial would be taken as an insult, I could just sense it. "Sure. But I should warn you I don't know how to dance. It wasn't something covered in my foster homes growing up."

That look was on his face again before he could hide it. It spoke of his disgust that the perfect "broodmare" for his son, the future leader of his country, had begun her life in the dregs of a foster home. He covered it quickly enough, but I was good at reading people.

I'd known exactly what he was thinking.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it," he said with all the condescension in the world. "You only have to follow my lead. That's always the most important part."

And I could read between those lines, too.

King Felipe's face was like a stone, and I was finally catching a glimpse of the core of steel that allowed him to lead the most powerful monarchy in the world. "Thank you for the delightful conversation," I said to him, nodding my head respectfully.

"The pleasure was all mine, Violet dear," he replied. "I will find you again soon, and we can continue."

Gah, I loved Rafe's dad just a little bit in that second as he made it clear to Steve, the jerkwad, that he would notice if I disappeared.

"Looking forward to it."

Before anything else could be said, King Steve wrapped a firm hand around mine, pulling me forward. Once I started to walk, he placed his hand on the small of my back, and I legit wondered if I might not throw up on him.

The entire family made my stomach churn like I'd eaten really bad food. If these were the genetics I was matched up too, I was starting to wonder if I might not be a little fucked up too. Because they were all horrific.

"So," he said when we reached the main floor. "Want to tell me why you've been avoiding my son all evening?" Gone was the false politeness as he jerked me closer, his hand biting into my waist as he used the other to grip my hand. "I don't appreciate being kept wait-

ing, and I especially don't appreciate you making my family look like fools."

We moved, both of his hands bruising me, but I kept my face calm like I couldn't even feel it. It would take more than a strong grip to break me.

"I've just been trying to meet everyone," I said, forcing a smile and an air of casualness into my words. "It's important to form alliances, don't you think?"

He examined my face, and in turn I did the same to him. He looked a lot like his son, but his eyes were smaller and mean. With Alex it was hard to tell he was an evil bastard, at least at first, but his father wore it clearly on his face. His blond hair had no mark of age in it, not a single gray that I could see, but the blond was also a little unnatural, as was his smooth forehead. Something told me that this king was vain and, unlike Felipe, was not aging into a handsome and distinguished older gentleman. Nope. He was fighting every line and mark.

And it hadn't done him any favors.

"What would you say to returning to Australasia with us when we leave here?"

I almost faltered then as my brain tried to figure out if he'd just said that. "Oh, as wonderful as that sounds"—lies, all fucking lies—"unfortunately I cannot leave school again. I need to catch up on the classes I missed."

His smile—smirk actually—sent chills across my skin. "Sweet child, you really don't need Arbon any longer. Your one goal was to secure a future, and yours is set. You'll carry the future heir of the Australasias. There's really no loftier position you could reach."

He didn't say I would be queen, just that I would carry the heir. I wondered if he intended for me to actually marry his son or just be locked up in their dungeon, raped, and forced to give birth.

What a delightful man.

"My education is important to me," I said to him, still trying to appear unfazed by what an absolute monster of a human this fuck was. "I'd like to finish it before I have any children. If I decide to have children at all, of course."

I couldn't help myself with that last line, even knowing it was going to cause me all kinds of trouble.

His brow bunched, shadows crossing his face. "You really have no choice. The king must produce an heir, and Alex is to be king."

There was a command in his voice.

"Maybe I'm not the right partner for Alex, then" I suggested.

More darkness, and his grip was actually super painful now. I was going to have bruises worse than from my last fight.

"You have no choice, you gutter trash," he muttered. "You'll shut your mouth, do as you're told, and maybe you won't end up like Jasmine."

I swallowed roughly. "Jasmine fell."

We all knew that wasn't true, but I wanted to hear what he'd say.

"She did," he confirmed, that fucking smirk back. "After she decided to get pregnant by someone who was not her betrothed. It was a terrible tragedy."

"So she *was* pregnant?" I pushed. "By whom?"

A smug look crossed his face. "She chose to try and elevate herself to queen earlier than she should have. The father over the son. She forgot her place."

What in the...? Was he saying what I thought he was saying? Before I could ponder the idea that Jasmine might have been pregnant with King Steve's baby and he'd killed her for it, I was jerked against him so hard my body was plastered to his.

I could feel the slight bulge in his pants pressing my stomach, and I fought down the scream that was rising in my throat. I was about five seconds from losing my shit and beating the fuck out of this king, but if I did that, I would sign my own death warrant. And I had too much to fucking live for.

There was still hope that I would figure out a way to get out of this. I had powerful friends and allies. I was not alone and I would not let this king scare me.

Moving as fast as my hands and body could, I managed to twist out of his hold, putting a few feet of distance between us. He blinked at me like he was trying to figure out what had just happened.

"Thank you for the dance," I said. "It's been truly enlightening."

He opened his mouth to say something, but I was already gone, pushing through the crowd as I tried to hold my shit together.

I couldn't stay in here a second longer. I needed some air, but I was also afraid to wander around alone. Clearly King Three-inch-

dick had big plans to lock me down, and I couldn't let him get his hands on me. I'd disappear never to be seen again.

My palm reader buzzed.

Angel: **Jordan's room. Now.**

With a quick look around, I slipped out of the ballroom, lifting the skirt of my dress so I could run along the halls. Before I made it close to Jordan's though, a dark shadow stepped onto the path in front of me, and I just managed not to kick Rafe in the head.

"You're lucky I'm wearing heels," I said shortly.

His hands shot out, rubbing along my arms. "You're trembling," he said, fury vibrating his voice.

I shook my head. "Yeah, had a rather unpleasant conversation with Alex's father." I leaned in closer, pressing myself to Rafe like that would erase slimy Steve's touch. I really loved this dress; it was a fucking shame I'd have to burn it now. "He basically implied that he had Jasmine killed because she deliberately got pregnant with his child and tried to blackmail him into becoming queen."

I mean, there was a lot of reading between the lines there, but I was pretty sure that was the message he was putting out there. Rafe and I remained close as I whispered everything to him, and if anyone strode past, we probably just look like we were young lovers making out in the dark.

"That's what my parents suspected happened to Jasmine," he growled. "Apparently in their younger years, Steve was well known for his wandering dick."

I breathed Rafe in slowly, trying to calm the pounding of my heart. "He asked me to go back to Australasia with them. Said I don't need to worry about school because I'm going to get pregnant with heirs and there's nothing more important for me to do with my life."

Rafe's chest rumbled under my cheek, and when I tilted my head back, even in the dim lighting it was clear how dark his eyes had gotten. "You're about to cause an international incident, Violet Spencer," he murmured, his lips grazing mine as his hands continued to caress my back, calming me down.

"I wanted to kill him," I confessed. "Every time he opened his mouth. Every single time he touched me inappropriately, I thought about the dozens of ways I could end his life. It would have almost been worth it."

"I want to kill him, too," he murmured, eyes lifting to stare over my head. "But you did the right thing. Now is not the time. We have to be smart about it when it comes to powerful monarchies." His voice got deeper. "But if I'd had to see him paw at you like that for one more second, I might have taken the fucking risk and dealt with the fallout."

Whatever had caught his attention over my shoulder arrived right behind me, and I sighed as Jordan's arms came around me. He was half-hugging Rafe at the same time, but neither of them seemed bothered about it, focusing on me.

"We need to get back in there," Jordan finally said, pressing a kiss to the side of my head. "Meghan wants to meet Violet, and I have heard a few people speculate as to where Rafe went."

I pulled away, looking at them both. "Meghan? As in your betrothed?" I swallowed roughly, wondering if I was a big enough person to meet the chick engaged to the guy I was somewhat, kinda, crushing hard on.

Jordan shook his head. "It's not like that. We're friends... like siblings at best. She knows how I feel about you."

Wow. Okay. How did he feel about me? I'd also like to know.

He glanced at his watch. "We gotta get back," he said before I could push him more about his feelings.

"Shit! Are we going to get into trouble?" I asked, shoving thoughts of Meghan, his sibling-slash-fiancée, aside. Or trying to at least.

Jordan shook his head. "Rafe and I are safe. But I don't want anyone looking your way, so let's sneak you back in."

"Don't let Steve or his fucking son anywhere near her," Rafe snarled. "Or I won't be able to stop myself from ending the current royal reign in Australasia."

Jordan gave a grim nod. "Agreed."

"Macho men," I grumbled, "I'm perfectly capable of slitting throats myself, you know?"

The three of us started making our way back toward the ball, but a shadowy figure stepped out into our path, blocking the way.

"Excuse me," Jordan said politely, but the man stepped closer, holding up his hands to show he wasn't armed... I think.

"Ms. Spencer," the stranger said, and his voice seemed familiar. "Could I have a word?"

"Mr. Wainwright?" I asked, coming closer so I could see his face in the dim light. "What are... I mean, hi. This is unexpected."

The older man gave a tight, uncomfortable smile and shot a quick look at Rafe. "Highness, I need to speak with Ms. Spencer. On orders."

As the personal assistant to the dean, he certainly didn't outrank the royals, but they seemed to understand what his vague words meant. Rafe still stiffened and scowled.

"Please, Your Highness." Mr. Wainwright was firm. "You know this is important."

"Fine," Rafe said on an exhale. "But we will be nearby, so don't pull any shit."

The older gentleman looked relieved and indicated that I walk with him *away* from the ball. Fine by me, really. The less time I had to risk King Steve putting his hands all over me, the better.

Mr. Wainwright led me out to one of the small courtyards, where low stone benches sat dotted around a perennial garden.

"Please, sit, Ms. Spencer," he invited me, indicating to one of the benches.

The night air still held a sharp bite of cold, and a shiver swept through me as I arranged my ballgown to sit down where he'd pointed. Hopefully what he wanted to talk about wasn't going to take long, or I'd turn into a very pretty Popsicle.

"What did you want to talk about, Mr. Wainwright?" I asked when he also sat on the bench, clasping his hands in front of him. Movement from a nearby window caught my eye, and I spotted Rafe and Jordan hovering just out of hearing distance. Unless I screamed, of course.

My companion cleared his throat, checking his wristwatch. "I understand several interested parties have their eyes on you tonight, Ms. Spencer, and your absence will have already been noticed. So, I'll cut to the chase, as you Americans like to say. Have you thought any further on the offer made by the Society?"

I kept my face carefully neutral, while on the inside confusion and curiosity warred with each other. *Mr. Wainwright knew about the resistance?* Was everyone part of it?

Was the dean?

Maybe this was all a trick to get me thrown into jail if I said the wrong thing. I had to be very careful about how I responded. "I'm

not sure what you're talking about, Mr. Wainwright," I responded in a cool voice. I'd rather insult a member of the Society than land myself in prison for trusting the wrong person.

He gave me a tight, understanding kind of smile. "Of course. I was asked to touch base with you as perhaps your previous point of contact was considered less than... uh... less than trustworthy among your circle of friends. I assure you, this organization *is* going to better the world. For all of us, not just those who were born into wealth and power."

I pursed my lips, thinking. "It sounds like you have things pretty sorted out," I commented slowly, still letting the gears of thought churn. "You have a lot of influential members... even crown heirs. Why do I get the feeling the Society is chasing me just a little harder than they would any other new member?"

Mr. Wainwright inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Because, Ms. Spencer, we are."

A non-answer if I'd ever heard one, and I still wasn't sure I could even trust Wainwright, despite having a good vibe about him pretty much from the start. Mattie was freaking right, all along. There was something seriously fishy with him.

"If Rafe and Jordan could be here..." I suggested.

They would know who I could trust.

He opened his mouth to reply, when a commotion through one of the courtyard windows caught our attention. It was a troop of Swiss guards, but they were coming *from* the ballroom on a perpendicular corridor to where Rafe and Jordan waited, so my princes wouldn't have seen them yet. More worrying, still, was that they seemed to be escorting a prisoner.

I stood up, trying to get a better look, and my movement drew Jordan's attention. He stepped through the doorway, arching his brows at me—asking if I was okay.

There was no time to warn him, though, as the guards approached the junction that would bring them out almost on top of Rafe.

I picked up my skirts, rushing forward to find out what was going on, and caught the tail end of Rafe's conversation with the guards.

"...I totally understand," he was saying. His voice was calm and collected—as always—but there was a hint of a feral grin on his face.

"Well, that's very disappointing to hear. Hacking and stealing confidential files from the Danish monarchy is a very serious offense. I can't imagine what Prince Alex was thinking."

"Fuck you, Rafe!" Alex snarled.

My eyes widened as I drew closer until I found him in wrist restraints but still thrashing against the guards holding his arms.

"I know you were behind this! You're going to *pay*." His threat was delivered with pure venom, and his dark glare shot to me. There was no doubt in my mind it was *me* who he wanted to pay for this infraction. Well, fuck that. I was just about done playing the sweet, dumb charity case.

One of the guards smacked Alex in the face, and the others rumbled with anger.

"Never disrespect Prince Rafael again," the guard snapped. "We don't care who you are. You're on Swiss land, and all kinds of nasty things could happen before King Steve manages to free you."

I gaped in genuine shock at the guard's behavior, but Rafe and Jordan looked smug as fucking cats. The guards proceeded to haul Alex away, and I stared after them, my jaw open, until someone cleared their throat.

"Ms. Spencer," Mr. Wainwright said, looking anxious. "I think we should continue this conversation another time. I'm afraid I have somewhere to be."

Without really waiting for any response, the silver-haired gentleman hurried away, heading for the academy entrance.

"That was strange," Jordan commented. But not as strange as what happened next.

It was the sound that reached us first. A low, rumbling roar that escalated quickly. The marble floor beneath us began to tremble, and a picture slipped from the wall, its glass shattering on impact.

"What's happening?" I asked, panic welling up in my throat.

Jordan grabbed me at the same time as Rafe, both of them shoving me back into the courtyard, then dragging me as far from the walls as possible. Once in the middle of the open space, they tugged me to the ground and covered me with their bodies while the whole world continued to shake and shudder beneath us.

"It's an earthquake," Rafe shouted to be heard over the rumble and crash of breaking objects. "I think."

"How is that even possible?" I demanded, huddling under their warmth and trying to get a grip on my anxiety. "Do the Switzerlands get earthquakes often?"

There was a pause, neither one of them replying for a beat, and the earth continued jostling us around like a washing machine. Then...

"Nothing's impossible," Jordan said, sounding full of dread and resignation.

A deafening crash sounded, and the whole world went dark.

CHAPTER 36



When the sound receded, it became eerily silent. The air around us was thick and dusty, making me cough and choke when I sucked a too-deep breath, and I pushed the boys off me in a desperate bid for more oxygen.

"Violet," Rafe rasped, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I replied, not even pausing to check if I was, in fact, okay. Fine white powder coated every surface, including us, and I gasped when I saw what I'd come from. The whole east side wall of the courtyard—the exterior wall to the corridor I'd just watched Swiss guards drag Alex down—was gone. Or... not gone so much as it had completely collapsed. A section of an upper level of the stone palace had collapsed and crushed the lower level. Chunks of rock and plaster the size of people had landed a scarce few feet from us. Had they hit us... I shuddered to think. Broken spine, crushed skull...

"Jordan?" I exclaimed, tearing my eyes away from the closest hunk of debris. "Where's Jordan?"

"Here," came his groaned reply. Somehow he'd ended up behind a topiary horse and was slowly picking himself out. I breathed a sigh of relief, noting nothing more than superficial scrapes on his face and hands.

"What the fuck just happened?" I asked the two of them as if they had any answers for the cataclysmic event we'd just experienced. Thank fuck we hadn't been indoors, or it all could have ended so much worse.

"Natural disaster technology," Rafe said, voice flat. "My mom was right."

Shit, and I finally had my answer from that day. It was bad. Very fucking bad.

I sucked in a sharp gasp. "Mattie and Nolan! Rafe, your dad!" I scrambled to my feet, and white plaster powder sloshed off my huge skirts in waves.

Rafe caught me before I could tear across the debris, heading in the general direction of where the ballroom had been only a few moments before. "What are you doing?" I snapped, trying to wrench my arm free. "Our friends are in there. Your father!" I waved at Jordan. "Even Meghan." Thank God his parents hadn't been able to make it.

Rafe growled and got right into my face. "I fucking know that, and I'm worried too. But running in there without thought is going to get you killed. And that's not happening on my watch."

"We can't lose you, Violet," Jordan said. "You need to stay with us, just in case there's another quake."

I huffed. "Okay, fine. But I'm not staying here."

"Never said we were," Rafe replied as he wrapped his hand around my right one, Jordan took my left one, and they started dragging me along a different path than the one I'd been about to take.

I noticed that they stuck to the middle of the space, away from large objects, and their faces were alert as they looked around constantly.

"So this natural disaster technology," I whispered, "it created this? This... earthquake?"

How was that possible?

"Maybe it was a bomb..." I mean, an explosion could rattle the land and walls like that. Surely.

Rafe shook his head, leading us through an archway to the main wing, half the stone of the doorway now lying on the ground. My heels caught on the rocks as I wished for flat shoes.

"It was definitely an earthquake," he said softly, pausing briefly before moving again. "And since the damage looks to be focused right where the ball was, this was definitely man-made."

I spluttered, and Jordan covered my mouth quickly, no doubt to shut my stupid ass up. They'd just told me this was an attack, and I was reacting poorly.

So I pulled myself together, focusing like I'd done so many times in the past when the world went to shit.

"What else can this technology create?" I asked in a low voice, managing to sound calm.

Rafe took a second to meet my eyes, and his were, unsurprisingly, very dark. "In theory: tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes, fires, floods. You name it, there's supposedly been something invented to unnaturally set forth the disaster. All monarchies are aware of this, but until this moment, it was assumed to be nothing more than a resistance rumor."

The area where the ball had been was just ahead, and my heart galloped at the sight. Rafe was right; it had been focused there. Everything was in shambles. Half the walls looked to have been blown out, the floor was broken, and there was no way I could make it across in these fucking heels. But I was going to try because people I loved were in there.

"Mattie and Nolan," I sobbed before I could stop myself. Fuck. Fucking fuck. I would not survive if my friends were hurt... or worse.

Rafe lifted me into his arms when my shoes got caught for the fourth time. I would have kicked them off, but then my feet would get cut to shit.

"Did the resistance do this?" I asked as the first body came into view. It was a man, one we didn't know, and he'd been literally cleaved in two by a stone pillar. Dead, blank eyes stared up but wouldn't see anything ever again.

"If this was the resistance," Jordan said, voice harsh as we spied more dead, "then it was nothing sanctioned by the main Society."

"Those fucking extremists have gone too far this time," Rafe muttered, gently placing me on the ground, then reaching down to feel for a pulse on a prone girl. She had black hair, even though it looked grey with all the dust, and she wasn't moving. "Clearly they decided to take some drastic measures to ensure the end of the monarchy."

There were a ton of royals here tonight. Actual senior royals. Taking out this many at once... it would devastate the global control of the monarchies.

"Do they care that you guys are princes and you're part of it?"

"Some protested when we joined, but since we pretty much stick to ourselves and fight, they use our power for what they need and forget the rest," Jordan said, head moving as he took in more of the bodies.

I nodded. "So, you're the fringe dwellers of the society."

They both nodded. "Zach is quite high up and a total dick." Jordan scowled. "He could've had something to do with this."

We reached a section that was a little more cleared, and the sound of screams reached my ears. It was hard to tell at first, but now it was obvious that we hadn't yet entered the main part of the ballroom. Once we reached it, there was utter chaos. "Stay near us," Rafe shouted as the guys moved faster.

We had to duck under a half-cracked doorway to get inside, and when we did, I swallowed hard. Holy fuck, this was exactly how I imagined a war zone would be. People were everywhere, hundreds... thousands, I couldn't even tell. There were blood and bodies scattered about, and those that weren't dead were running around trying to figure out what the fuck had happened.

"Stick together," Rafe said again, pushing his way through the people. He and Jordan used their bulk to keep me from getting smashed about too much, but I was pretty good at dodging blows myself.

"We need to split up," I finally said when it was obvious we weren't getting far. "We need to find the twins and Rafe's dad."

"No fucking way," Rafe said.

There was no time to glare at him, so I did exactly what he would kill me for later. I took off to the right.

"Violet!" Jordan and Rafe both yelled after me, but I was busy pushing my way through the crowd, heading for the bar. Or what was left of it.

I was confident that's where King Felipe would be, in the vicinity of where I left him, and when his body came into view, tears streamed down my face. He was covered in what looked like a plank and some rocks, blood pouring from a wound on his head.

Dropping to my knees, I reached out and pulled off what I could before I pressed my fingers to his throat. It took me a couple of tries, but I found a weak pulse.

"Dad," Rafe said, sliding in beside me. His eyes met mine, and I started crying like a fucking waterfall had spurted from my eyes because the devastation on Rafe's face broke me in two.

"He's alive," I choked out, "but his pulse is weak. He needs medical assistance right now."

Rafe's palm reader was up, and the message he sent out was red. I had a feeling that would get someone here ASAP.

"I need to get him out of here so the helicopter can land," he told me. "You find Jordan and stay with him. I'm not kidding, Violet. This is life and death."

I choked on my next breath, the dust and tears making it next to impossible to breathe. "Okay," I murmured. "I'll find him."

I helped him lift his dad, even though we knew we shouldn't be moving him. In this situation though, he would definitely die if we didn't move him. This way there was at least a chance.

"I should come with you," I blurted out as Rafe turned away.

He shook his head. "As fucked up as it sounds, you're safer in here with all these people around. Those assholes might be lying in wait, and you're not a member yet."

So much of that didn't make sense. If these guys were huge extremists, no doubt they gave zero shits that Rafe was a part of their group. He was a prince, and all royals must die or something. He couldn't fight while carrying his dad, who was no small dude.

Everything was adding up to him needing my help.

Before I could argue, and we really didn't have time for that, Jordan and Nolan appeared beside us. "There you are," Jordan exclaimed, worry in his voice and face.

By the time I turned back, Rafe was already gone, and all I could do was cry and pray he made it to the medevac in time.

"Felipe?" Jordan asked, grabbing my hand.

I shook my head. "He's hurt bad. Rafe called in a helicopter. I—I don't know if he'll make it in time."

He hugged me closer. "He will. Felipe is as tough as his son, and I'm pretty sure nothing in this world can kill Rafe."

I had to have faith that what Jordan said was true, or I wouldn't mentally survive the next little while.

"Where is Mattie?" I asked Nolan, giving him a hug at the same time because I was so relieved to see him alive and somewhat uninjured. Outside of a scrape on his cheek and some blood on his hands, he looked okay.

"She's alive," he said in a rush. "She sent me a message right after the quake, but I haven't been able to find her anywhere. And now she's not answering her palm reader, either."

Fuck. "We should keep looking," I suggested. "Maybe she got hurt or lost afterward in all this chaos."

As we moved away from the bar, a bloodcurdling scream, louder than the dozens of other screams, drew my attention to what probably used to be the center of the room. A familiar figure stood there. At first I thought Claudette was alone, her red dress shimmering in the low light from a few scattered candelabras that had managed to survive the quake. A shadow rose up beside her, and it was clear that this had caused her panicked shriek.

"What the fuck?" I asked, lurching forward as that figure swung a blade, slicing right through the princess's neck, silencing her in one swift move.

Jordan and Nolan took off, and once the shock of what I'd just seen passed, I did the same. *Did someone just kill Claudette?*

Rafe was right. This was definitely a planned event to get rid of the royals, and that could only mean one thing.

He was in big fucking trouble out there on his own. I was torn, though; I had to leave Jordan and Nolan to go after Rafe, but... They could both hold their own, and having seen that murder, would be aware of the danger. Plus they were together.

At this moment, Rafe needed me more, and if I stopped to tell them what I was doing, it might be too late.

Not to mention they'd never let me go.

CHAPTER 37



It was surprisingly easy to get out of the main ballroom area. The majority of the carnage was focused toward the back of the room, where all the seats and special thrones for the royals had been. Once I got free from the crowd, I found myself in familiar hallways that were barely touched by debris at all.

How was it possible to have such a destructive and accurate weapon? It had been able to pinpoint to the very fucking room. Even as I tried to imagine it, it seemed impossible not to take out the entire building at the same time.

While I hurried in the direction of the school's helicopter pad, I tried to call Mattie. The palm reader was still so foreign to me that it was never my first thought when trying to find my friends, and in this case, it proved useless with no answer on the other side.

God, I really hoped she was okay. I needed her and Felipe to be okay.

A buzz drew my attention, and I quickly read the message.

Jordan: **Where are you? There's resistance everywhere; get your ass back here.**

I didn't stop running. He'd only reiterated what I already knew: Rafe needed my help.

A second later it buzzed again.

Jordan: **Meghan is dead.**

No! Fuck. As much as I hadn't wanted to meet her, this would devastate the New American prince. And I couldn't even be there to comfort him.

Me: **I'm so sorry, Jordy. I'll be back in a second. Stay safe.**

I wanted to add so much more, but there wasn't time. I had to focus on my current task, and the rest would have to wait.

My legs were aching so I kicked off my shoes, yanking the dress up, as I sprinted up the stairs that led to the roof. Thankfully it was on this side of the academy—that would have given Rafe a shot at getting his father there in time.

My hands smashed against the security door, one that was locked from the outside only, so it opened easily for me. I burst out into the night, the fresh air assaulting me after being inside with all the dust.

Gulping in lungful's, I hauled ass across the wide expanse of roof, following the distinct sound of a helicopter.

Please be okay. Please be okay.

The mantra ran through my head like a prayer.

When I passed the main control tower, the huge red medevac chopper came into view. Rafe was at the side, and it looked like they were stabilizing his father.

Thank fuck. He was okay, and his dad wasn't dead yet. I could tell by the way everyone was crowding around him hooking up all the shit. I could get back now, comfort Jordan, check on Nolan, and find Mattie, who'd better be okay.

Just as I turned, the sound of another chopper drew Rafe's attention. Mine too.

Looking up, I was surprised to see it wasn't red with the distinct medical logo on the side.

It was black, stealthy-looking, with a sharper nose and wicked-looking blades, the kind that could go into the types of terrain the medi-chopper couldn't.

Was this some sort of specialist...?

Before I could even finish the thought, half a dozen black-clad people repelled off the side, landing right near Rafe and surrounding him in seconds. Turning from his dad, he shouted something, and the medevac took off, dodging the black helicopter with ease. Rafe immediately launched into action, throwing swift fists and dodging blows from the other men. That was my best hint that they weren't friends.

This was the enemy, and he was vastly outnumbered.

I hurried forward, determined to help, even though I was dressed terribly to be of much use in a fight. This would be the last time I wore a ballgown, no matter how amazing they were.

The urge to shout his name was strong, but I knew that distracting him could prove deadly. So I refrained, instead planning my attack as I approached on silent feet.

Rafe had managed to take out half of them by the time I dove onto the one closest to me, disabling him in seconds. Then I moved onto the next. For a minute, I had hope that we could take them out together.

But we hadn't planned for the black helicopter though, the one that clearly held more people than the six who had dropped. Two more repelled out, one of them shooting Rafe right in the neck with a dart.

I saw it fly. I screamed his name. And our eyes met for a moment before he crashed to his knees.

Then it was all over. The two black-clad figures scooped up the prince, struggling to hold his bulk. But they got to the ropes and the helicopter hauled them up, moving higher than I could reach.

"Rafe!" I screamed, racing along the roof in the hopes I'd find a spot with enough elevation that I could get to him.

I almost made it too, but the dress caught around my feet, and I sprawled just when I might have been able to jump. Sobs caught in my throat as the beast took off into the night; the last thing I saw was the light on its tail disappear as it faded into the darkness.

Getting to my feet, I called Jordan on my palm reader.

"Violet!" he answered after one ring. "Where the fuck are you? I'm going to smack your ass, sweetheart." His voice was somewhat playful, but I heard the husky tone. He was not doing okay.

A sob escaped me, but it died under a torrent of rage. "I'm on the roof. Helicopter pad. Can you get up here?"

I could feel his confusion in the extended pause. "Yes. We'll be right there."

"Hurry," I said before ending the call.

With red tinting my vision, I slowly made my way back to where the black-clad bodies were strewn. Rafe and I had hurt them, but they weren't dead. That meant they could tell me where the fuck Rafe had gone.

Reaching the closest, I ripped his mask off to find a dude a few years older than me with blond hair, pale skin, and a long scar on his right cheek. His eyes were closed, so I slapped him once. He jolted back to consciousness a few seconds, and a few hits, later.

"What the...?" he coughed out in a heavy accent. "Who are you?"

My hand wrapped around his throat, cutting off words and air. "You have five seconds to save your life," I murmured. "Tell me where they took Rafe, and I will let you live."

He struggled and bucked against my hold, but I'd positioned myself on his body so he couldn't get free. When he was fairly purple in the face, I released my hold, allowing him some precious oxygen.

"Where is Rafe?" I repeated, barely resisting the urge to choke him out again. Unfortunately, it was hard to talk when being choked, and I needed him to answer me.

"Resistance," he coughed. "They're waiting for you."

This didn't surprise me. They'd clearly been studying me and knew my weaknesses already. Rafe was definitely one of those.

"Do they have Mattie too?" I asked, rocking back on my heels.

He was finally able to lift his hand and rubbed it across his throat. "I don't know," he said. "We had our orders to bring one of the princes in, and this one was the first to present an easy target."

Yeah, right. Nothing about Rafe was easy, and if they hadn't ambushed him when he was distracted by his father... and most likely my presence... he'd have killed them all.

Like I was about to.

The guy knew it too as his eyes went wide, hands coming up like he could stop me.

"Violet!" Jordan yelled, heavy footsteps alerting me to his presence.

"Wait," the resistance dick said at the same time. "What if I could get you to Rafe? Like, right now, no need to wait for them to come to you with demands."

I paused, my hands flexing against his throat but not constricting yet. "I'm listening," I said as Jordan's footsteps pounded closer.

"There's another helicopter coming to pick the rest of us up. We can disguise you in one of our outfits, and you'll stroll right in."

Shit! I really wanted to kill this guy, but that was actually the perfect plan. If he wasn't trying to trick me.

"If you're lying to me," I said through gritted teeth, "you're going to wish I'd killed you on this roof. My punishment will be way worse than death."

He was scared of me. I didn't know why or how—if it was because of whatever expression I wore or if my reputation preceded me—but whatever the reason, it was useful.

"I agree to this deal, on one stipulation," I told him.

He swallowed hard. "Anything."

"Jordan comes too."

To be completed in...

Poison Throne

Royals of Arbon Academy Book 3

THE FINAL CHAPTER...



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They're waiting for you.

Those four words should have been a warning. They should have filled Violet with dread. But she was so focused on Rafe's disappearance, she forgot.

The resistance was supposed to be fighting for a better world. A group of freedom fighters formed during the Monarch War, pushing back against laws that would see everyone enslaved. For a while there, they gave hope.

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