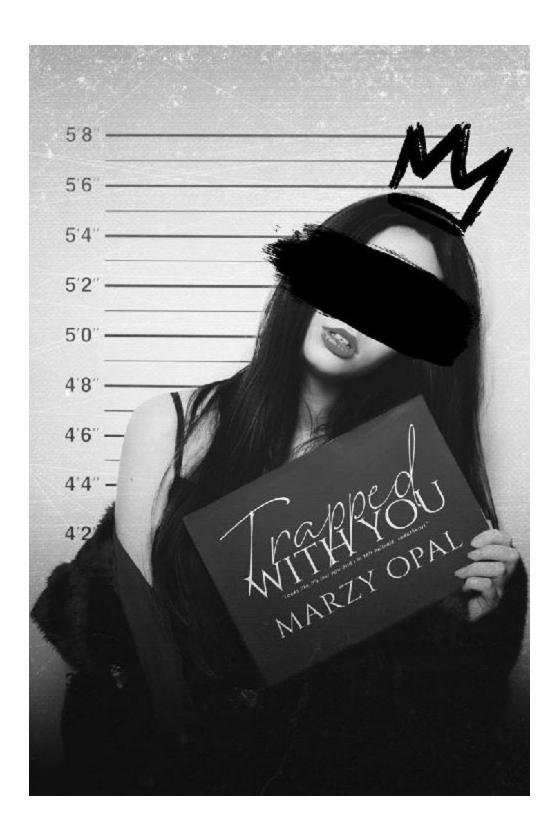
NITHY SOL

"Looks like it's just you and I in this hellhole, sweetheart."

MARZY OPAL



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WARNING

This book contains strong language, sexual content and other dark themes that may be triggering to some. Reader discretion is advised.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for picking up Trapped With You. I've been writing online for almost a decade and finally took the leap to publish my first novel, so it means the world to me that you took a chance on Ella and Cade's story. These characters are so beloved to me. They're crazy, wild, imperfect, but have big hearts. I hope you fall in love with them, and the story world of Montardor.

This book is dedicated to my readership, my ride or dies, my queens. I managed to publish because of you. Your love, support and dedication towards me and my characters has meant so much. Everything I write, I write with you in mind. You are never far from my thoughts, and always in my heart. Thank you for being a part of my journey and for helping me get one step closer to my dream.

Thank you for helping the original version of this story win a Watty Award in 2013. It was such a monumental moment for me and I will forever be grateful for every vote, every read, every comment. I will forever be grateful for you.

I love you to the moon and back. I have, for the last nine years. Happy reading, ladies.

Love always,

Marzy

PLAYLIST

21 Pilots - Heathens

Ariana Grande – Best Mistake

Ariana Grande – Bad Decisions

Ava Max - Sweet but Psycho

Beyoncé – I Miss You

Beyoncé & Jay-Z – Bonnie and Clyde

Beyoncé & Jay-Z – Part II (On The Run)

Drake – Shot For Me

Eminem ft. Rihanna – Love The Way You Lie

Eminem ft. Rihanna – Monster

G-Eazy & Halsey – Him & I

Jay-Z ft. Rihanna and Kanye – Run This town

Jhené Aiko – The Worst

Jhené Aiko – 3:16AM

Kehlani - Gangsta

Nelly Furtado – All Good Things

Nicki Minaj - Grand Piano

Rihanna – Desperado

Rihanna – Disturbia

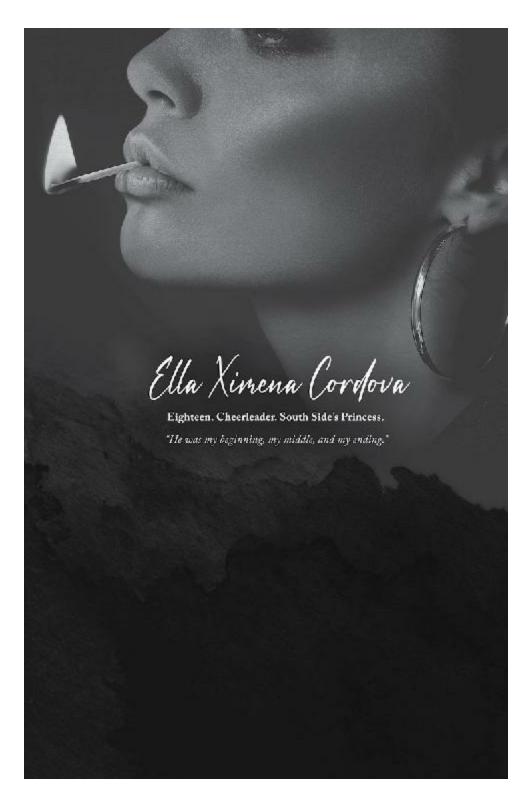
Rihanna - Skin

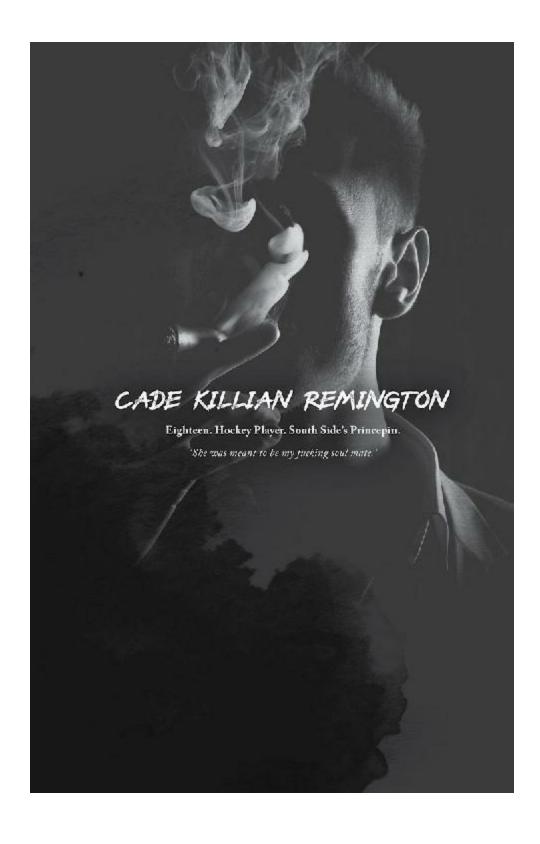
The Carters - Heard About Us

The Weeknd - Call Out My Name

Travis Scott ft. Kendrick Lamar - Goosebumps

Travis Scott - Highest In The Room





PROLOGUE

August 7, 2012 6:37 p.m.

CADE, 16

The first time I saw Ella Ximena Cordova, she was perched on her stone balcony. Looking like a dark-haired princess, she perused the gardens with a bored look on her face, a joint neatly tucked between her fingers.

Her reputation, like mine, preceded her. Beloved daughter and heiress to a small empire. St. Victoria's co-captain of the cheerleading squad. South Side, Montardor's resident good girl who lived to please others.

Shiny. Expensive.

The complete opposite of me.

The Remington clan—my aunt Julia, Uncle Vance and their son Joshua —dragged my three-year-old sister Olivia and me to dinner with the Cordovas. They were long-time friends and business partners. Or something along those lines.

Before we entered their house, I asked to be excused. "I'll be a minute. I need a smoke."

"It's ill-mannered to keep them waiting, Cade," Aunt Julia said with a frown. To prove her point, she glanced at her Cartier watch and flicked her eyes my way, as if imploring me to understand. "We're already late as it is."

What she really wanted to say was: Why haven't you stopped smoking yet?

I almost added that we wouldn't have been late if Vance Remington hadn't insisted on fucking Julia Havilland in the cigar lounge before we left. I was walking to the kitchen for a snack before dinner—how uncultured of me, I know—when I heard them going at it like frenzied animals. Unfortunately, I lost my appetite and learned that my new adoptive parents had a breeding

kink. Thankfully, no one besides their butler caught me dry heaving outside the door. So, last I checked, being late was all on them.

Instead of saying that, I answered, "If I don't smoke now, I'm going to be cranky when we get inside, and I'm sure you don't want me to embarrass you in front of your *friends*."

Especially when it was the first time Olivia and I were being formally introduced to the Cordovas.

Aunt Julia gave her husband a concerned look, silently asking him to deal with me. It'd been two months since they officially adopted us. Paperwork that should have taken them months—hell, even years—to achieve in Canada, they did within days. Money was power and living with them had its perks (when I wasn't hearing about their sexual activities), but it was clear we had a rulebook of bullshit etiquette to follow at home and in public.

One of them being the no-smoking rule.

But it was the only way I could cope with everything. The stress. The nightmares. The aftermath of it all.

Joshua, my new brother, crossed his arms and leaned languidly against their Mercedes. He sighed, as if anticipating what came next. AKA one of Vance's lectures.

Sensing the tension, Olivia blinked at me with huge brown eyes. I ruffled her dark curls with a small smile. She didn't say much in general, and she chose not to say anything right now. Wordlessly, she dropped my hand and crossed over to join the others in solidarity. Aunt Julia picked her up and my little Livvy laid her head on her shoulder.

I was always the outcast. I was used to it.

"No, we are not waiting a minute, let alone a second, for you." Uncle Vance blew out a breath before cracking his neck. He was a tall, muscular, scary motherfucker, with dark hair and blue eyes like my own. And, while he had the ability to easily intimidate me, he rarely used it. "I asked you to stop smoking and you refuse to even try. I don't care if you start to get irritable during dinner. We are going in now."

And what he really wanted to say was: Why are you so ungrateful? I've given you a roof over your head, food on the table, a stable home, and you refuse to follow my one crucial rule.

My parental unit and siblings made their way to the front door, where the Cordovas' staff stood to greet them. I walked in the opposite direction, already pulling a cig out of my pocket. "Sorry, Uncle Vance. What did you say? You're cool with me smoking? Thanks."

I quickly stole to the side of the mansion and lit my cigarette, ignoring the chilling way Uncle Vance hollered my name. If I was going to socialize with randos and act like a fake prick (or whatever rich people did during dinner), then I needed to take the edge off.

I just took my first drag and parked my ass on a garden bench, right next to fancy angel statues, when I spotted her standing on the balcony.

Our gazes clashed from afar like a magnetic force beckoned us.

For a moment, I felt a little breathless.

She was beautiful, almost in a coy, dainty manner. Long black hair billowing softly, slender frame from years of cheerleading, and tanned skin all wrapped in a tempting red bow.

She tilted her head, eyeing me curiously. She brought her joint to her pouty lips and took a hit, frowning. Probably wondering why I was wearing jeans and a thick black sweater smack in the middle of ass-sweating August on the Canadian West Coast.

While *she* was wearing a loose, criminally short, white dress that looked threads away from flying off her if the big bad wolf so much as blew in her direction.

I couldn't keep my eyes off of her.

We continued to watch each other as we smoked. Her, as a challenge. Me, as I tried to figure out where I'd seen her before.

There was something familiar about her. Yet it didn't make sense. We ran in different circles, even if we were both from the South Side.

Oh, fuck.

It hit me as she leaned forward, bracing her forearms on the balcony railing and giving me the best view of her cleavage.

This was the girl I'd sold a baggie of marijuana to in the back alley of MacGregor last week. She was in disguise then, with a hood that barely shielded her face. But I knew—I just knew it was her.

Realization dawned upon her at the same time as me.

Instead of freaking out and running inside to tell Daddy Cordova that one of the dinner guests was her drug dealer, she simply arched an eyebrow at me. A flirtatious grin played across her face.

Utterly entranced by this girl, I hissed when ash from my cigarette tumbled onto my clenched fist. I thought I caught her chuckling, her tongue peeking out and wiping at her bottom lip.

She quickly finished her joint, then threw me a saucy wink before disappearing inside. Making this moment feel like a secret rendezvous between two people who were never supposed to meet.

Like an idiot, I stared at the place she vacated, my eyes conjuring her tight body and the air of confidence she left behind.

A strange feeling moved inside my chest.

This girl had shamelessly checked me out. But, above all, she was the first person in a long time to not stare at me with pity. Unlike so many of the people in my vicinity.

And maybe that's what put a smile on my face.

She made me feel like a normal sixteen-year-old for the first time this summer, rather than a broken boy whose skin harboured more lacerations than she could count on her pretty fingers.

There was a bounce in my step after I finished my cigarette and went to join my family on the front porch. Aunt Julia looked resigned, running her fingers through her blond locks, with Olivia in her embrace. Joshua seemed bored, and I entirely ignored Uncle Vance's angry expression as we entered.

Quiet excitement simmered in my gut at the prospect of seeing *her* again. I couldn't have known then that Ella Ximena Cordova would be the first

girl I'd ever love.

Or that she'd be the first one to rip out my heart.

CHAPTER 1

October 17 201/

Hell on Farth

October 17, 2014 11:40 p.m.

Ella, 18

There was a twisted tradition amongst the elites of St. Victoria.

Initiation Night.

A night that took place on the third week of October to usher in the Devil's holiday. A night that was both coveted and feared, filled with dares and fright-worthy pranks. A twenty-year long-standing tradition where members from the cheerleading and hockey teams broke into the school and made freshmen pledge their allegiance to a cause greater than them. An inauguration to establish their positions on the roster.

A night that gave students the excuse to behave immorally and feel like they actually peaked in high school.

Initiation Night was a rite of passage.

An honour.

A corrupted ceremony that called to the deepest, most depraved parts of these people's souls. After all, the Devil danced on everyone's shoulders and the populace of St. Victoria was notorious for waltzing with him.

That's what happened when your parents were affluent and you were bored, entitled, and snobby. Danger, drugs, and anything that brought you a temporary high were your best friends.

Restless energy and anticipation thrummed through the throng of thirty people gathered in the rumoured to be haunted foyer of St. Victoria, waiting for further instructions. Waiting for the night of debauchery to finally begin.

Centuries ago, St. Victoria was an established motherhouse—a convent, if you will. A hundred years ago, it was converted into a high school. It'd been mildly renovated through the years, but an eerie atmosphere was forever associated with the gothic-style building.

In daylight, it was bearable. At nightfall, it was a beast. Like the walls lived and breathed old wives' tales.

My eyes did a quick sweep, but darkness greeted me. It was broken up by wedges of light emanating from our torches. Fear of getting caught prevented us from turning on the lights once we snuck inside the school.

My best friend, Callie Mackowski, fidgeted beside me. "When are they going to start?" she whispered, running her hands up and down her arms. "I'm so cold."

"That's what you get for dressing up like that," I muttered teasingly.

Callie wore a simple white sheath with a red cape, and her legs were bare, save for a pair of ballet flats. With her pixie hair haloed around her face, she looked like an angel instead of a slutty Red Riding Hood. Callie loved Halloween, ergo this whole getup.

"I like your costume," Beau Mackenzie drawled from somewhere behind us.

I forgot he was here. Beau was a defenceman on the hockey team. A total sweetheart with dreamy blue eyes and blond hair who'd had a crush on Callie since we were eight years old.

I didn't have to see Callie's face to know she was blushing. "Thank you, Beau. I'm glad *someone* appreciates my outfit."

I rolled my eyes good-naturedly and went back to focusing on the scene before me. Most people were dressed in their cheerleading uniforms or hockey jerseys, and some wore gaudy masks and actual Halloween costumes.

I chose something less conspicuous, going with high-waisted skinny jeans, a black leather jacket, an orange knit bralette, and a small crossbody bag with necessities like my flashlight. Just to be safe, I pocketed my

signature black ski mask. There was no way in hell I'd risk getting caught if everything spiralled downwards. The consequences of my parents finding out that their goody two-shoes daughter had a rebellious streak involving bad shit like this wasn't worth the potential ass whooping.

They'd turn me into an example for my little brother Emilio by revoking my car rights, grounding me, and making my life an overall purgatory. Didn't matter that I was eighteen. I would remain a little girl in their eyes forever.

Giggles came from my right. A group of freshmen cheerleaders dressed as The Hex Girls took selfies with annoying duck pouts. A handful of juniors from the hockey team pretended to flash their muscles at them, Guy Fawkes mask lifted over their heads.

The chattering soon came to an end as Darla Hill—my co-captain on the cheerleading squad—cupped her hands around her mouth like a makeshift speakerphone and spoke. "Welcome to St. Victoria's twenty-first annual Initiation Night!"

The crowd cheered along with boisterous claps. Callie and I remained motionless, sharing a look of understanding. Darla basked in the attention, tossing her raven hair behind her shoulders with a beauty queen smile.

Beside her, Shaun Jacobsen the III, captain of the Rangers hockey team, roared, throwing his hands in the air. The cheering increased a few decibels and I cringed.

Shaun was what you'd classify as a class clown. He often came off as an airhead, but he had a heart of gold. We had a hate and love relationship, emphasis on the former. The last years of high school were packed with us pulling pranks on each other.

Tonight, Darla and Shaun were the ringleaders. Tradition called for both captains on either team to lead the night. Since Darla's ambitions juggled between becoming a reality star and an anchorwoman, I let her have the limelight. She could run the show with Shaun for all I cared.

I would much rather be an active participant in tonight's game.

"We are gathered here because we believe in carrying on the legacy that

was established by our predecessors," Darla yelled. "We are gathered to celebrate the new members of our team. And, most importantly, we are gathered to show you what it means to pledge your allegiance to this secret circle." A chant of *Rangers*, *Rangers*, *Rangers* sparked, until Shaun shushed everyone. "Loyalty and trust are the founding pillars of any relationship. Initiation Night is no different. You will demonstrate your trust by working alongside your teammates to complete each dare you are given. You will demonstrate your loyalty by never, *ever* speaking about this night to an outsider. Fail to do so, and you can kiss your position on the team goodbye."

Shaun picked up where Darla left off, his booming voice carrying through the horde. Newcomers listened with rapt attention while people like Callie and me, who'd done this three times over, simply stood by the sidelines, impatiently waiting for the game to begin. "The rules are simple. No filming or taking pictures. No talking, except to the person in your team. No breaking anything on school property, unless it's to draw dicks on Mr. Crowley's board." People laughed at that. "As for pranks, anything that isn't physical or involves breaking shit on campus is fair game."

Shaun's eyes met mine and he gave me a teasing glint. I openly flipped him off. "Fuck you, Shaun. Don't even think about it."

Our teammates chuckled.

I smirked, my eyes cutting towards the hockey players next to Shaun. I froze for a second, thinking I spotted *him*.

But my eyes were playing tricks.

He would never show up.

Shaking off the feeling of dread creeping over me, I zoned back into the instructions. Darla started listing off the prize. "Bragging rights within the secret circle, two crowns, and your name forever immortalized in the Black Book of Initiation."

Which was profanely hidden behind Sister Victoria's painting, on the wall beside her resting place, in the crypt below our feet. Ironic how our school's history was tied with saints, yet we, the students, chose to celebrate

the demons they sought to fight.

"Once Initiation Night starts, you must see it through. The first ones to finish all their dares win. Forfeiting is not an option. Choose to do so, and Shaun and I will assume you're leaving the team. There is no place for quitters at St. Victoria."

Shocked gasps and murmurs rose around us. Beau and Callie snickered before Shaun once again quieted the crowd.

I always thought kicking people off the cheerleading and hockey teams was a little too extreme. But Darla and Shaun insisted we stick with the rules set in place far before us. Darla and I actually had the power to kick anyone off the cheerleading team. Miss Nova, our cheerleading coach, was a doormat. If we wanted someone removed, all we had to do was whisper how xyz was slacking and, like magic, they were gone. It was the same with Shaun and his jocks. They could easily influence Coach Rory to kick someone off the team, for the sole reason that most of the kids at St. Victoria came from the kind of old money that talked and paid the faculty staff's salary.

Pure talent wouldn't keep you on the roster. Not when you didn't obey the rules set in place by St. Victoria's elites. Fun fact: the hockey team dropped one of their fellow mates for not abiding by the rules last year.

Essentially, Initiation Night was sacred to us, the same way enchiladas were sacred to *mi mamá*.

"Bathroom breaks are allowed. Darla and I will be here the whole time if something goes wrong. Remember, this isn't just a competition." Shaun gazed around the circle conspiratorially, his flashlight flickering. "This is a chance to prove yourself worthy of your team. Most importantly, a chance to form new ties and have a good fucking time!"

The crowd bellowed.

"One last thing. If, for whatever reason, the cops show up, run like hell. If we get caught, we take the fall together. If only *you* get caught, you take the fall alone without snitching on your comrades. That'll be deemed the ultimate sacrifice and your spot on the team is secured. As always, loyalty and

trust. Have I made myself clear?"

People pounded their fists against the row of lockers, creating a beat that mimicked the loud bass at a club. Or, at least, it had the same effect on my heart.

I loved Initiation Night. Something about it appealed to the thrill junkie inside of me. Other high schools were notorious for taking hazing way too far, but we toed between the line of safe and completely fucking insane.

The one part I didn't love, however, was the darkness looming over the campus. The lights out at St. Victoria would freak out even the seasoned horror movie loving fiend. It felt like Sister Victoria's ghost could make an appearance any second.

There was a rumour that Cassidy Johansson, a sophomore in the chess club, fainted last year when she stayed back to clean the crypt during detention. Apparently, she saw Sister Victoria glaring at her from her resting place.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little unsettled every year that I participated.

Darla asked all the Initiators to leave their phones with Callie.

I stepped to the side as Callie held out a brown tote bag. Students piled up, leaving their phones with her. Callie and Beau wouldn't actually be playing in the Initiation. Their roles consisted of sitting outside in his car, guarding our devices, and staying on the lookout for the authorities. They'd call Darla and Shaun if anything happened.

Hopefully, Beau and Callie would finally sneak in a make-out session. Better yet, maybe they'd fuck. My best friend had been shooting Beau comehither smiles since she learned the meaning of flirting, and he'd been dancing around her like a chicken for a decade. I hoped tonight there would finally be some action.

I waited until everyone finished dropping their phones in Callie's tote. After locking mine, I slid it into her cape pocket. "Please, take good care of it."

She winked at me. "You'll survive three hours without your phone. I got you, baby girl."

I loathed that nickname.

Callie suddenly looked nervous before whispering in my ear, "Don't look now, but Darla's been throwing daggers your way."

My hackles rose. A few seconds later, my eyes trickled over to my cocaptain and, true enough, Darla was giving me a glare.

This was nothing new.

Somewhere in the last year, Darla Hill decided she hated me. We stopped seeing eye to eye and the girl who'd been one of my best friends since I was three years old suddenly saw me as her enemy. Which was sad, because Darla and I were friends even before we met Callie.

The only reason I still played nice with her was for the sake of cheer.

We used to have an amazing friendship. Darla, Callie, and I were a trio. Now we were lucky if we tolerated each other on a good day. I never figured out what went wrong between Darla and me, and she refused to speak up.

My mind flipped through every moment we shared and came up with nothing. I never hurt this girl intentionally, but she constantly acted like I wronged her. Most of the time, she acted indifferent and formal towards me. It drove me nuts.

I tried to mend our bond in the beginning, until I realized you couldn't fix something you never broke.

Shaun and a centerman for the Rangers brought forth last season's hockey championship trophy. The golden intercity cup brimmed with folded pieces of paper housing the first dares and our team numbers.

Excitement and chatter increased. The anticipation was slowly coming to an end, and so were the butterflies in my stomach.

Before we could pluck out our first dares, Darla walked around with a chalice filled with red paint. She smeared three fingers dipped in red paint along the back of our hands, branding us with the customary scorch marks of the hellhound—the Devil's very own fingerprints. Another dramatic tradition

established years ago.

When she got to me, I extended my fist with an apathetic look.

"Do you pledge your allegiance?"

My jaw tightened. "Yes."

She kept her brown gaze fixed on me, cold and deadly, and scraped the back of my hand with three fingernails. Luckily, the bitch didn't break any skin. Didn't mean I was going to let her get away with it. I snagged her free wrist and swiped my fist over the back of hers, smearing my mark. "Oopsies."

She bristled but didn't say a word, moving on to the next person. Dismissing me like she'd done all year long. I grappled with my annoyance.

Right after Darla, with the trophy held in their hands like it was the Holy Grail, the guys came towards me. I plucked a folded piece of paper and Shaun leaned closer to get a better look. "What did you get?"

I flashed my torchlight over Shaun's ugly scrawl. Team number six. The dare read: The key resides in the land of fiction.

"Hm. Interesting." Shaun clicked his tongue before moving on.

I frowned at him.

The low whir of conversation started once again as people paired up with their partners. Squeals of content and disappointed groans wafted in the air. I tried to find my partner, walking around aimlessly and calling out to number *six*, but there was no one.

Callie and Beau looked at me, confused.

"You have three hours to complete your initiation," Darla said loudly. "Remember, Shaun and I will be waiting right here for the winners."

Shaun blew a whistle with his fingers. "Good luck!"

Bodies scampered around, jostling my frame until I was pushed against the lockers. The pitter-patter of footsteps resonated as people broke away to start their dares.

Everyone was in pairs, except for me.

"I don't have a partner," I deadpanned.

Callie rubbed my shoulder. "How is that possible?" She threw her

question towards Darla, who pretended to be busy with her phone.

Beau scratched his head. Shaun folded his arms over his brawny chest and leaned against a locker. He watched me with a calculating look before running his hand over his blond hair. "All thirty-two of you were paired. Sixteen teams. Maybe your partner got a head start?"

"Without me?" I hedged.

The Rangers captain shrugged in an exaggerated manner. "You never know," he said slyly.

I narrowed my eyes, about to speak, when Darla cut in. "Callie. Beau. Are you ready to leave so I can lock up?"

I wanted to bare my fangs at the nasty tone Darla used. Callie championed a smile and gave me a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. "You'll be fine. Start without your partner. You're going to kick ass and win this thing."

Callie and Beau left, hand in hand, looking so cute together. Darla galloped after them and locked up.

Every year, we got away with Initiation Night because Darla's mom—Diane Hill—was the principal. Initiation Night's tradition was started by the Hill women decades ago. As far as we were concerned, Diane had also participated in her younger days. Clearly she opted to turn a blind eye tonight. By 3:00 a.m., Initiation Night would be complete and everything would resume as normal once the weekend was over, come Monday morning.

No traces of the shenanigans that went on tonight.

"You got this, Ella," Shaun said.

I laughed without humour, my eyes riveted to the dare in my palm. I pondered over the words over and over again until they clicked in my head. *The key resides in the land of fiction.*

The library.

Without wasting time, I chased up the stairs of the east wing, shoving past a swarm of people and using my flashlight to guide me. They sneered through

their masks. I smothered a smile. I might be afraid of the dark, but my competitive side reigned supreme.

Callie and I won last year. The years before that, I remained runner-up. For my senior year, I was determined to be crowned winner again.

I entered the library through the...ajar opening.

Why was the door already open?

Behind me, it softly clicked shut.

Before I could turn the lights on, I noticed a figure standing against the bookshelves by the science fiction aisle.

So my partner was already here. No big deal. I wasn't offended that they left me. In fact, I should be impressed that they were quick on their feet—that they solved the riddle before me, right? Right.

"Hello?" I called out. "I know you're there."

My voice echoed in the stillness of the grand library. I used my flashlight to point where they stood before the tall body seamlessly melted back into the darkness with a soft curse.

Why were they hiding from me?

I padded farther into the library, hell-bent on finding them. My pulse pumped. I liked the chase. It scared and excited me simultaneously.

I'd unveil the mysterious presence that ran from me, like a magician snapping their fingers and yanking out the last party trick from their hat.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," I teased. "I promise I don't bite."

Well, not hard enough to tear flesh anyways.

A condescending snort followed. I stopped short, arching an eyebrow.

I spun around, casting light in a circle around me. Finding absolutely nadie.

Seconds trickled slowly and I got annoyed when I remembered we were on a time limit. "Not very nice of you to leave me hanging downstairs, eh?"

"Mhm." A husky male chuckle came and left as fast as the clap of thunder.

I paused, cocking my head. The tables felt reversed and I didn't like this one bit. I liked to be the hunter, not the prey. "Are we playing hide-and-seek like we're eleven years old again?"

"Mhm."

Another few seconds of me pointlessly searching for him.

Walking farther into a romance aisle, I grew irritated. "I really don't want to do this all night long. We can try to win this thing together or—"

Out of nowhere, a big hand pressed against my shoulder. I yelped out of my skin, plastering myself against the shelf behind me. My lower back throbbed with pain from the collision.

"Caught you," he whispered in the darkness.

My partner leaned against the opposite shelf.

Shaking, I flashed my light in his direction, all but blinding him. He threw a hand out in alarm to cover his face. "Jesus fucking Christ! Who does that? You could have said something instead of sneaking up on me and..."

The remaining words died in my throat.

The joke was on me. Like a magician, I plucked out the last piece of entertainment from my top hat, only to realize I had personified my own version of a nightmare. Not a cute, silly rabbit.

No. No. No.

"I see you're still as loud as ever," he taunted, almost in a sing-song voice.

Didn't hear you complaining the last time we screwed and I screamed your name.

"What an unpleasant surprise!" I attempted to say cheerfully, but the sound of my voice was flat even to my own ears. "Cade."

"Ella. Fancy seeing you here, Princess."

Memories associated with that nickname clawed to the surface like ghouls climbing out of a tombstone. I kicked them back to where they belonged with my size seven Prada boots. Back to the dark abyss of my mind.

Forget competition. Forget winning. I'd rather play Russian Roulette with a shotgun than be paired up with this lying prick for the next three

hours. I didn't care if Darla would have a bitch-fit because I was quitting. She could kiss my ass. My parents cut St. Victoria a generous check every year to ensure their daughter stayed happy, didn't bring home any complaints, and never got detention.

Which extended to my tenure on the cheerleading roster.

My position on the team was guaranteed. On these grounds, I remained untouchable.

"Where are you going?" Cade asked.

Away from you.

He deserved no answers from me. He should know better.

Cade put a hand to my shoulder again and I flinched, turning around and barking, "Don't touch me!"

Hurt flashed in those blue eyes. For a second, I forgot everything that happened in the past.

Three months. I'd successfully avoided him since July.

If I saw him at school, I whirled around and walked in the opposite direction. If we shared the same class, I sat in the seat farthest from him. If my parents invited his uncle and aunt for dinner, I made myself scarce. For three months, I tried to obliterate his presence from my mind.

Seeing him in the flesh, all that progress was ruined. Everything came rushing back to me, namely the infamous party where he threw everything to shit.

Cade bit his lip and gazed away, his eyes fixed on the large bay windows to our left. His tongue poked behind his cheek. A gesture he did to tame his annoyance—to stop himself from retaliating.

A thunderstorm began, torrential downpour crashing against the glass windows. The lightning ignited enough light to illuminate our faces for a split second.

For a moment, I lost myself as I stared at his profile. It was the first time I deliberately glanced at him. Something in my chest softened because I was a weak girl when it came to this boy.

His dark brown hair was longer on the top and cropped short around the sides. Long lashes framed eyes that were akin to a clear sky. His chiseled jawline was more prominent than ever—he lost the soft edge about a year ago —and then there was his skin, a hint tanner like my own.

Cade wore jeans and a leather jacket but donned a black hoodie underneath. Somehow, the attire only emphasized his height and athletic build. Like me, he carried no Halloween prop. But like me, I knew his black knit ski mask was probably safely tucked in his pocket.

This was a bad idea.

"We're forfeiting. This is a mistake." I put a hand up to silence him before he could speak. "Shaun and Darla won't do shit." *Mi papá* and his uncle Vance wouldn't let anything happen to our positions on our respective teams. "Let's just get out of here and end this."

Before we kill each other.

I didn't give him a chance to utter a word. Spinning on my heels, I headed towards the library door. Cade followed, keeping a safe distance. Refusing to use his flashlight. Making me do all the work.

When I tried to open the door, it was locked from the outside.

My chest puffed and my eyes widened. I tried again, twisting and pulling the handle in every direction. I went as far as kicking it (which I regretted, thanks to the stabbing pain in my toe) and even tried to push at the ancient wooden door with all my might.

But it would not budge.

"Oh my God." I fisted my hair at the roots. "I'm fucking stuck with you."

Behind me, Cade laughed without humour, unfazed. "I think you mean to say *trapped* with you."

I glared at him over my shoulder. "This isn't fucking funny. Help me!"

When he simply watched me with a passive look, like he was trying to understand something, I lost it. I started pounding on the door with my fists, praying someone would hear us. My palms were clammy and my pulse erratic.

Through the window, a team of guys wearing hockey jerseys passed, their faces covered in Guy Fawkes masks. They waved their fingers. I signalled for them to open the door from the outside. Jamie Callahan, a freshman, blew me a kiss. He and his teammate laughed faintly and ran away.

"This is a fucking joke." I snarled, yanking on the handle again.

"This is a fucking *competition*," Cade corrected. "What did you expect? That they were going to help us out? Everyone is in it to win it."

I dropped my forehead against the door, sucking in a sharp inhale.

Cade's heat engulfed me from behind as he stepped closer. Not touching me, as I asked. But I still felt his mouth near my ear, his breath stirring my black shoulder-length strands. "Looks like it's just you and I in this hellhole, sweetheart."

The magnitude of Initiation Night came crashing down on me. The competition was three hours long and I was paired with my very own Devil.

Cade Killian Remington, my ex-boyfriend.

CHAPTER 2

Mayhem in My Heart

October 18, 2014 12:13 a.m.

CADE, 18

Well, colour me fucking surprised. Out of all the possibilities, my karmainduced ass got paired with my ex-girlfriend.

When Shaun swapped Jamie's and my dares behind everyone's backs (knowing the rookie wouldn't oppose him), I thought my captain was doing me a solid by giving me an easier way to complete this hellish nightmare.

Wrong.

Shaun just screwed me over big time. He was aware of Ella's and my history, and he still felt the urge to insert himself and play my wingman.

I didn't need a wingman, much less someone meddling in my business.

It was Jamie Callahan who should have been in this situation with Ella. Not me.

When she called out the number *six* in the hallway, my stomach sank with dread, even as my heart bloomed with hope. Wanting to avoid a confrontation in front of everyone, I ran like a coward, trying to buy myself time. Trying to figure out how to deal with her when she wanted nothing to do with me.

I hated Initiation Night.

Two years ago, I participated and my last dare consisted of kissing my teammate, who just so happened to be Irene Black, a sophomore on the cheerleading squad. We were so close to winning first place that Irene said fuck it and kissed me. Crappiest kiss of my life, and it was done in front of

everyone present that night.

Including Ella, my new girlfriend, who had sported the most betrayed look on her face.

Irene didn't know I was dating her teammate secretly. Ella and I only became public a month afterwards. And, although my girl had brushed it off and forgiven me for the sake of the competition, I knew I'd deeply wounded her—wounded my Ellie.

Hence why I hated this tradition.

"Why are you even here?" Ella's voice was so soft, so low, that I strained to hear her.

She didn't turn around to face me, and I didn't make an effort to peer closer. We were best hidden behind our respective walls.

Don't. Touch. Me.

My chest burned with the searing words, along with everything else she'd spoken to me three months ago.

"Where else would I be?" I said gruffly.

The main reason why I was here was because my teammates begged me. Joshua was busy at home with his 'friend' Layla, so I didn't want to cockblock them...and I wanted to get a glimpse of Ella.

The crowd in the foyer was thick, so I bowed out before Ella could see me and bolt away. I swore she came out tonight solely for the fact that I wouldn't be here.

Guess again, Princess.

Ella wanted to uphold her status as Queen of Initiation Night. A stupid title, but it bore importance to her. Therefore, we were deep in this game, whether she liked it or not.

I would play nice.

She would also have to play nice.

Even though she'd rather sock me.

"It's too late to withdraw. Just work with me to get this shit over with, okay?"

She spun around, red hot anger in her eyes. "Don't tell me what to do."

I smirked, a part of me loving her reaction. Anger was good. Anger was better than indifference.

She shouldered past me, fuming. "Joder mi vida."

Fuck my life. My smirk fell and my gaze followed her silhouette as she walked over to the large windows showcasing the storm.

"You always wished we'd get paired together for Initiation Night. Now's our chance, baby girl," I teased, trying to ease the mood as I walked closer to her.

She snorted, hands on her hips and body angled away from me. "That was before I found out you had a community dick, you piece of shit."

Piece of shit. Piece of shit. Piece of shit.

Like I did for three months, I swallowed down my pain and hid my emotions.

A broken heart and a fiery temper were a dangerous combination and Ella Ximena Cordova harboured both. If given the opportunity, she'd probably gouge my balls with her witchy claws and feed them to Francisco Cordova's guard dogs.

"Aw, cute. Have you missed my dick? Is that it—you want another ride through the neighbourhood?"

I didn't have to see her expression to know it morphed into disgust. But I'd say anything to keep her in this state, farthest from indifference.

"I wouldn't fuck you if you were the last guy on earth."

A slow prickling ache began in my throat, spreading through me like poison. Self-loathing thoughts brewed to the surface until I grasped a hold of myself, breathing deep and uneven. "Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart."

Ella was like a restless creature locked in a cage, pacing, ready to screech at her captor through the bars. I understood the feeling too well. I had been living in solitary confinement with thoughts of her since she banished me months ago.

She could pretend I was her detainer, chaining her here for my own

amusement, but that wasn't the case. There was too much history and this place magnified all the feelings and emotions we hadn't dealt with.

We were stuck in a playground with demons that refused to let us find peace, and none of us held the keys to our freedom out of this desolate kingdom we'd found ourselves trapped in.

Ella ran an impatient hand over her face. "We need a plan."

"You don't say." I perched on a worktable, watching her striding back and forth in a straight line. Enjoying the sight of her thick ass—the one I loved to bite before we did grownup things—as she combed frustrated fingers through her hair. She'd recently chopped it straight by her shoulders. Before that, she used to have luscious black hair that fell past her waist. The kind I loved to knuckle as she sucked my—

Nope. Not going there. I adjusted myself before she saw that I hardened faster than a virgin seeing a female naked for the first time.

If my ex-girlfriend knew just how fast I entered *hornytown* when she was around, she'd dangle herself like a sinful treat in front of me every chance she got.

As revenge for something that was completely out of my control three months ago.

Ella wore her usual clear lip gloss, gold hoops, and perfume, but her neck was bare of the gift I'd given her. The edges of my heart curled on themselves, birthing a black hole in my chest and a shit ton of longing.

I cursed the day I saw her.

Nothing could compare with the pain of heartbreak. It consumed you whole. Made you wish you'd never experienced the four-letter word.

I sure as fuck wished I hadn't.

I warned Josh that opening up to Layla would get him nowhere. He never listened. If she broke his heart, he could go crying to Olivia for all I cared. Olivia, whose remedy of a broken heart was playing with Barbie dolls and hosting tea parties. I should know because I'd sat through my fair share after Ella broke my heart. They were a good distraction, but not the giant

bandage I needed to hold my insides together.

"This is all part of the Initiation," Ella muttered to herself. "The door was meant to lock. We're not *really* trapped."

"Figured that out, eh?" I pulled out a lollipop from my leather jacket pocket. Cherry flavour burst on my tongue. "The key resides in the land of fiction. We're looking for a key."

"I know that." She shot me a glare and smoothed a hand over her collarbone, wiping sweat like she was nervous.

Then she unzipped her leather jacket, like she couldn't breathe.

She should have kept it closed.

Because now *I* couldn't breathe.

The sight of her bare itty-bitty-model-skinny waist and small tits—the kind that fit my hands perfectly—covered in nothing but an orange bralette had blood rushing to my dick.

Ella knitted small tops and bralettes as a hobby before she decided to pursue it as an actual side hustle. Girls at St. Victoria raved over her creations. She also had the habit of dazzling the backs of her jackets with images and sayings. Tonight, her cropped leather jacket displayed a white-painted skull.

I knew her father had started preparing her for succession at his company. But she wouldn't take over for years. Therefore, she decided to capitalize on her passion and even thought of opening her own online store. I wondered if she ever did.

Ella was bright, and she'd be successful no matter what endeavour she chose next.

I had so many questions, yet no right to ask any of them.

So I bit my tongue and receded back into the shadows like I'd been doing for three months. Watching her from far away to make sure she was okay. Yet watching her close enough that if she ever turned around and sought me for answers, I'd tell her nothing but my truths.

Ella didn't notice my inner turmoil or my hard-on, thankfully, her attention snagged on the lollipop in my mouth. "Hey! Where did you get

that?"

"Shaun handed them out to all the guys on the team." I pulled it out of my mouth with a *pop*, rubbing it lightly against my lips. "Why, you want one?"

She and I both knew how much fun she had with lollipops.

"No! What I want is to get the fuck out of here and you're not helping by doing absolutely nothing—"

"Are you sure?" I wiggled my eyebrows. "I have an orange flavoured one too."

Ella's ears perked up. The girl was an orange fanatic. Orange accents in her bedroom. In her wardrobe. Hell, Daddy Cordova even purchased an orange Porsche Cayenne to satisfy his little girl. Not to mention that if you gave Ella the actual fruit, she ate it with the grace of an animal. Truly a sight everyone should witness, in my humble opinion.

"Yes," she snapped. "Give me one."

I shot it and she caught it easily. Ella wasted no time unwrapping it and sucking it through her pouty lips. Did I imagine the lollipop as my dick tip? One hundred percent. Did I feel like an asshole for visualizing it? Not at all.

She happily suckled on the sweetness and I shamefully pictured her on her knees, sucking *my* lollipop. Ella wasn't as unaffected as she pretended to be. Her eyes flitted over to mine and behind all her threats, lust remained a dark undertone.

I hadn't had sex since she left me because I wanted nobody but her. This was torture.

I wouldn't fuck you if you were the last guy on earth, my fucking ass. She still remembered what it felt like when I bent her over my motorcycle after a night of wickedness with adrenaline pumping through our systems.

Ella cleared her throat. "I'm going to start with the librarian's desk. Why don't you look over and under every worktable and chair?"

I rolled my shoulders and shoved my candy back into my mouth. "Sounds good."

"The less time I spend with you, the better," she muttered to herself. Ouch.

The time for an explanation was far gone. She didn't want to hear it and frankly, I didn't want to rehash that night either. Defending myself proved useless three months ago. Her ears were blocked by impenetrable barriers constructed by the jealous whispers of our circle.

So fuck them. Fuck her. Fuck the whole situation that got me into this mess.

The most valuable lesson I learned years ago: stop trying with people who want nothing to do with you.

Rejection burned deep when it came from those who mattered the most. Better they think the worst of your character than you feeling vulnerable again, trying to defend your stance. Especially when the echo of your voice wouldn't reach their steel walls.

Nothing was worth feeling an old wound ripping wide-open, only for more salt to be poured within. My body had once been covered with scabs all over. I wasn't fond of reliving the past.

But a masochist must live inside of me because I longed for this girl to know the truth even if my mouth refused to utter it.

I shook off her words and went about my task.

St. Victoria's library was nothing short of a relic. An old, massive, high ceiling with low candelabra chandeliers hanging from the rafters. Colourful mosaic windows and paintings that looked more sacrilegious than sacred in this gloomy atmosphere. High arches leading to rows of wooden bookshelves and small alcoves for study areas (and perfect for making out with your exgirlfriend) ran through the entire room.

I searched through every piece of furniture and found nothing. I could hear Ella's frustration on the other side of the library. Papers rustling and a keyboard roughly being shoved to the side resonated loudly. I even did another round of the library, flashing my torch over the walls and running my hand along the paintings and windows for anything out of the ordinary.

"Did you find anything?" I yelled after a few minutes of searching. "I've checked the chairs, the desks, the windows, the paintings. There's nothing!"

"There's nothing over here either!"

We were both growing antsy, and the clock was ticking.

"What is Shaun's favourite book?" Ella asked seconds later.

"Shaun doesn't read. Unless it's a picture book. *Playboy* or *Hustler*, if you know what I mean."

"Shocker." Carpet-muted footsteps sounded and then Ella was in front of me, lollipop poking the inside of her cheek. Just like my dick used to. "I've got a theory."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I think the key is hidden in a book. Land of fiction, get it?" She snapped her fingers like an epiphany struck her. "Oh my God. Darla loves Twilight. She never shuts up about the series."

"Shit, you might actually be onto something."

Excitement radiated as she dashed towards the romance aisle in a haste. I jogged after her and found her quickly scanning a bookshelf. "Aha!" She pulled out a hefty hardcover copy. Ella's own obsession with Twilight waned, but she'd made me read all four books back in our early dating days. Something about a werewolf and #TeamJacob.

The book fell open and smack in the middle of the page rested a bronze key.

"Got it!" Ella snatched it, along with the next dare. I stepped closer to her without touching her because she'd asked me not to. I shone a light on the small piece of folded paper, and Ella scrunched her nose. "Math. This is your department."

I plucked it out of her fingers, studying it.

I felt her watching me; I glanced up.

Maybe my nearness made her uncomfortable. I shuffled back discreetly.

The dare wasn't a riddle, just a mishmash of scattered numbers with the letter N written in the middle. The more I stared at it, the more sense it

began making. Potentially a locker number and combo in the north wing. "We're winning this, Ellie."

A tragic mistake on my part, dropping one of her old endearments so casually. From my peripheral vision, I saw Ella's whole body stiffen.

I waved the key in her face. "You want to do the honours?"

"Let's go get my crown." She stole it out of my hand, our fingers brushing. A shock of electricity sparked between us and we both flinched. Ignoring our dangerous chemistry once again.

When Ella unlocked us out of this godforsaken library—which was littered with too many stolen moments and happy memories—I felt like I could finally breathe.

This whole place brimmed with everything that was beautiful and once us.

But now tarnished beyond repair.

CHAPTER 3

Princepin and his Princess

September 4, 2012 5:55 p.m.

Ella, 16

Dacia Hill and Naomi Oduro led cheer practice after school with Miss Nova monitoring. New recruits gathered in the gymnasium, looking hopeful and nervous while doing ice-breakers with the team. Callie, Darla, and I—the only sophomores on the roster—tried to set the freshmen at ease. Cheerleading was a fun sport, more so if you were surrounded by teammates who genuinely wanted to form a friendship with you. Dacia and Naomi would graduate in the spring, and Darla and I would fill their positions for our remaining two years. Integrating ourselves amongst the new members was essential.

So was the fact that I needed weed for tonight's sleepover with the girls.

I shot a quick glance at the clock mounted high on the brick wall. Five minutes to six.

"Are you going to meet him soon?" Callie whispered low enough that the girls in our circle didn't hear. We were sitting on the floor, discussing answers to the questions.

"Yeah." I pulled my arms back and stretched.

"What excuse did you give Naomi and my sister?" Darla mumbled. Out of us three, she was the one most afraid of getting caught.

"That I have to step outside and give the babysitter Anna a call. Her little brother is friends with mine, so she's watching them tonight. I just want to make sure he's okay." Not a complete lie, honestly speaking. After I made my 'business transaction', I would call to check on Emilio.

"Seems legit. Who's your dealer, by the way?" Callie asked as she stretched her legs.

"I don't really know his name," I lied to my best friend. "I was given his phone number and that's about it. I text him; he shows up."

I didn't want to say Cade's name. I assumed he wanted his identity protected, considering he was now attending St. Victoria. Unlike Joshua, who went to Northwind High. There was already buzz surrounding Cade, but he hadn't attended many classes this week, so I was barely able to catch him in the hallways.

Which disappointed me, because I had every intention of becoming his new friend.

My head streamed with so many questions for this guy.

Why did he suddenly move in with the Remingtons? Julia and Vance were quite reluctant to share details of the newest members of their family. Why did he deal drugs? The Remingtons had enough wealth to run a small European country. And...why didn't he crack a smile at my jokes while Joshua guffawed during dinner? Even little Olivia, who Emilio quickly became obsessed with, grinned at me.

Strange how fixated I was with Cade's lack of a smile. He kept a neutral face throughout the entirety of the dinner four weeks ago. A small, fleeting smirk graced his lips every now and then, but he didn't say much. It made me wonder if life hadn't given him a lot to smile about.

Maybe he was shy. I understood that a lot of people came off as cold or stern, not because they were, but simply because they were too busy hiding behind their shells. Cade's small frown and curved shoulders spoke volumes. As well as the bashful glances he stole my way.

He was so cute.

It's like we were both in on a secret no one else knew. That moment on my balcony felt sacred, something solely for us to treasure.

Before I met him, I heard of Cade. Growing whispers of a young,

ambitious boy who was rough around the edges and sold illicit substances to East and South Side teenagers. A so-called bad boy who earned his reputation with the local gang. Apparently, he had been working for them since he was fourteen.

The first time I met him behind MacGregor's alley, he shattered every notion I had of him being a scary drug dealer. He bowed his head respectfully, spoke gently as he gave me my weed, asked me how my day was, then ensured I carefully crossed the street and made it back to Marnie's Shack, where my friends waited for me.

The whole time I kept thinking how precious his eyes were, how clean he smelled—like laundry and rain—and how he kept his gaze above my neck. Everything about him screamed good, versus the violent picture everyone had painted in my head.

All good boys had a bad boy side, and I was willing to bet Cade's would be my favourite.

At exactly 6:00 p.m., I left our small circle. Callie shot me an approving look while Darla chewed her nails nervously.

I texted Cade that I was waiting for him as I walked out of the gymnasium.

The warm September breeze greeted my bare legs like a pleasant balm. Gold melted into blue as dusk fell upon the city. St. Victoria's campus was perched atop a small hill, encased with a row of beautiful tall trees and trimmed hedges. The air swirled with the strong floral scent of the courtyard gardens. I stood by the school gates, kicking pebbles, anxious and giddy to see him, when my phone buzzed with a reply.

I'm sitting on the bench under the tree. Front of the school. — Guy who doesn't laugh at my jokes.

My heart rate doubled embarrassingly as I sped to my destination.

Cade sat in a manspread, his arms spanned out like wings along the back of the bench. From far, he seemed like an unbothered prince sitting on his wooden throne. Not a sixteen-year-old boy with a mysterious allure and whose haunted eyes spoke a story too complicated for others to understand.

He didn't see me coming.

They never did.

Cade's face was angled away when I startled him, popping on the other side of the bench. "Hi," I chirped, taking a seat next to him. "How are you?"

He jolted, muttering a curse under his breath. The curve of my mouth bordered on lunatic now. I loved that I got a reaction out of him.

"Good." He cleared his throat, casting me a sidelong glance. "You?"

I crossed my legs and stared at him, batting my lashes. "I'm doing great now that you're here."

That same heated look when he watched me from my balcony was back and he arched an eyebrow at my flirting. Not in a condescending manner. More like he couldn't believe me...and my interest in him.

Cade's eyes fell to my bare legs and slowly trekked up to my thighs, until they reached my skirt. He paused to stare a little longer than appropriate, like he wished to inch the hemline higher and glance beneath. Licking his bottom lip, he asked, "Do you just hang around in your cheerleading costume?"

"Uniform," I corrected, hiking a brow despite the blush creeping on my face at his blatant perusal. "And no, FYI. I cut cheer practice to come see you, gangster."

His body language shifted at the word, his chest bowing and back straightening almost proudly. He liked me teasing him.

His gaze rose to mine, pinning me with a blue that was so reminiscent of a sky before a storm. Three heartbeats travelled between us, suffusing the air with the kind of tension that forced you to swallow and bite your lips in anticipation.

I bit mine, but Cade broke away, inhaling unevenly as he combed fingers through his tousled strands. They were the colour of my favourite dark chocolate, piled longer on the top and cropped shorter at the sides. My fingers itched to run through them as we...

"Here you go." Cade reached into his jeans jacket and pulled out a baggie

of marijuana. His voice was thicker when he spoke, telling me that he felt *this* too and wasn't completely immune to my charms.

"How much again?" I already knew, but he had a soothing, husky voice and I just wanted to keep hearing it.

"For you? I'll make it free."

My heart rate tripled. I willed myself to act cool.

"Ooh," I drawled, snatching the goodies out of his outstretched hand. Our fingers touched and I swore I felt a zing of electricity. Cade's fingers balled into a fist, his Adam's apple rifling. "What gives, *querido*?"

"Let me rephrase: It's free, *if* you promise not to tell anyone that I deal. I don't need this coming back to my aunt and uncle." With a frown, he added, "What does *querido* mean?"

"Querido is a term of endearment. Tell you what—" I shifted the neckline of my cheer top to the side, enough to reveal my bra strap, where I tucked a hundred-dollar bill. The skin of my left shoulder was a little creased. Cade's eyes followed my movements, as if in a trance. "Here's what I owe you and I'll keep my mouth shut. Sounds good?"

He wordlessly took the money from me, his thumb sweeping over the hundred in a...caress.

I didn't want to leave yet. "I'm thinking we meet next week so I can buy more. Same time and spot. Make this a weekly thing. What do you say, Princepin?"

Too young to be a Kingpin, Princepin—courtesy of his street cred—suited him just fine. Charming, a little badass, and so uniquely his.

Cade looked taken aback by my new nickname but tamed his smile before I could see it. Damn it. "No can do. I'm selling you my last stash. I won't be dealing anymore."

"How come?" He had a solid standing on the South Side.

"I don't need to anymore." Now that he was living with the Remingtons, he meant to imply. Cade looked uncomfortable sharing too much with me. Fair enough, he didn't know me that well. Yet. "Uncle Vance requested I join

the hockey team, so I can't be around this stuff."

A lot of students at the school had a nasty drug habit—especially the jocks—but if there was one thing St. Victorians excelled at, it was hiding their secrets.

I respected Cade for moving away from that part of his life. Although I suspected he wasn't much of a user himself anyway. I played with my hair and he watched my black strands curl around my pointer finger. "So you'll be a Ranger now?"

He nodded, licking his lips again. He did that an awful lot. "Yeah, so I need to have a squeaky clean rep. I'd appreciate you keeping this to yourself."

"Your secret is safe with me," I flirted with a saucy smile, cocking my head. "I'll be cheering for you at your games, Cade."

First time I said his name out loud. It rolled off my tongue easily, the enunciation swirling in my mouth tartly and with a hint of sweetness. Cade Remington. An acquired taste, just like wine.

Cade stared at me in that way most people did when they tried to understand something beyond them. Kind of like an enigma.

"S-So have you played hockey before or..."

"Mhm. I stopped about two years ago." A gust of wind ruffled his strands and whipped his jeans jacket tighter against his torso. His scent—fresh, earthy, and something special to him—floated to me. "I was supposed to attend Northwind High like Josh, but they don't have a hockey team. My uncle wanted me to continue playing, so he enrolled me here."

I would give Vance Remington the biggest hug the next time I saw him. "I can't wait to see you play. Does this mean I'm your first friend here?"

He laughed a bit awkwardly, clearing his throat. I thought I caught a tinge of pink on his cheekbones, but the sun was melting beautifully and this moment was illuminated with rose gold. "Um, sure, if you want to call it that." He shot me a curious look. "You want to be friends with me?"

"Yeah. What's wrong with that?" I spoke a little too defensively. Was my interest in him coming off too strong? My mother said I was too passionate,

too forward sometimes. Maybe my energy was scaring him off.

"Ah, nothing." Didn't he believe me? I wanted to get to know him more. Cade plucked a cigarette and a zippo from his pocket. "Do you mind?"

Cigarettes? Yes. The occasional weed? No. I avoided smoking the former, but I couldn't tell him that. I was trying to get on his good side.

I shook my head, then watched in fascination as he rolled the cig across his lips before tucking it firmly in the seam of his mouth. He tilted his head, cupped his hand to shield against the wind, and flicked the zippo with a deft thumb. A small flame ignited and his gaze clashed with mine with burning intensity as he lit his vice.

Why did I find that hot? There was an elegance in the way he orchestrated his routine. A young, dark-haired, modern-day James Dean came to mind when I thought of this bad boy.

Cade took a drag, his cheeks hollowing, and all I could think about was his angular jawline and how handsome he looked with the tall trees and lowering sunset behind him, painting a beautiful canvas that was almost ethereal.

Blistering heat trickled over my nerve endings. Breathless, utterly speechless, I was ensnared in something far greater than mere interest, the universe whispered. Infatuation at its finest, woven precisely with the promise of something I could not acknowledge yet. It fuelled my thoughts anew, birthing a tempest I was prepared to brave.

Unconsciously, I leaned forward, feeling the pull of that same force—the one that had me rooted to my spot on my balcony. This guy, there was something about him that entangled me in my own curiosity. The urge to get to know him, see how his mind worked, ruled me ever since we crossed paths.

Could he be feeling this too?

Cade blew out smoke, his stance relaxing against the bench. I turned my body his way, sitting with my right foot tucked under my left thigh. It caused my skirt to rise up. He did not miss a thing.

"So friends?" I inched, my hand playing a small drumming pattern on my

knee.

He took another drag. Did I make him nervous? "Mhm."

"Friends know things about each other. What's your favourite colour? Mine is blue." It was actually orange, but the obsession with his baby blue orbs might be altering my choice. It was also another way to flirt with him.

"Don't have one." The small smirk on his full lips was a telltale sign that he enjoyed our banter.

"Everyone has a favourite colour."

"Black."

"That's a shade."

"Then blue, too." He stared at me pointedly, willing me to understand.

I grinned. For all intents and purposes, my eyes were blue right now. "Look at that, we're already in agreement. We're going to be best friends soon. Tell me, what's your middle name? Do you have one? Mine is Ximena."

"Killian," Cade rasped, French inhaling his smoke and gazing at me with hooded eyes.

I found that so hot too.

He didn't mind me talking his ear off either, it seemed. He looked like a guy of few words, but I suspected that would change when he opened up.

"Cade Killian Remington. I like the sound of that." I hummed. "How is it that I've never seen you before?" My family has been friends with the Remingtons since Josh and I were in diapers.

Maybe I was entering dangerous territory, but I didn't care. I wanted to know more about him.

Josh and Cade, despite similar colouring, couldn't be any more polar opposites. Cade's beautiful eyes were blue, unlike his cousin's earthy browns. Cade's height was shy of six feet, but still tall for a sixteen-year-old, just like Josh. But unlike his cousin, who had football bulk on him, Cade was much slimmer. The way he ate dinner four weeks ago, you'd think he'd been malnourished at some point in his life.

At Northwind High, Joshua Remington was the golden boy. The

football-playing class clown who made others laugh. Easy to talk to. Got along with everyone.

He didn't walk around with a chip on his shoulder like Cade.

And maybe that's why I was drawn to him like bees to honey. I always had a weakness for the broken ones. The bad boys. The ones you couldn't tame no matter how much you tried.

But I didn't want to tame any bad boy.

Especially not this one.

I liked fooling around with bad boys. They weren't afraid of showing me a good time; they weren't afraid to feel me up if I asked nicely. Or touch me in the kind of place where the sun didn't shine.

The kind of place that made me see stars if touched right.

I liked the edge they brought to my boring life. Something different than the privileged life that involved pleasing my parents at every fancy soirée.

"I lived with my uncle, on my dad's side, and his daughter Olivia, up until recently. The Remingtons took us in nearly three months ago. My mother and Uncle Vance were actually siblings."

"Oh." I tried to connect the dots.

Cade smoked quietly and I waited for him to elaborate. "Yeah," he said. "But my mom, ah, ran away to be with my dad. My grandparents disowned her. I was born a Brown. My mom didn't want to court my grandparents' wrath, so our families stayed away from each other."

My heart broke a little. Families were so important. I couldn't ever imagine being with someone my parents didn't accept, even though it was my life. Acceptance from those you loved was so valuable.

"I'm sorry to hear that, but thank you for confiding in me."

He nodded absentmindedly.

Many questions spun in my mind, and I filled most of the blanks. If Cade and Olivia were living with the Remingtons now...that meant Cade's biological parents were dead? What happened to Cade's dad's brother, Olivia's father, who he lived with up until recently? Did he die as well, since

Olivia lived with the Remingtons too? Joshua and Cade were first cousins, and Cade and Olivia were first cousins too. Not siblings like they'd been presented to us at dinner. Why had Julia and Vance suddenly taken in Cade and Olivia?

"Where are your parents, if I may ask?"

The silence dragged on, but I understood the gist of what he didn't say. I winced before he even said the words.

"They died when I was fourteen."

Before I could control myself, I reached out and placed a hand on his left one, fisted over his left thigh. "I'm so sorry, Cade."

His eyes traced from my hand to my face and when he saw my genuine remorse, he relaxed again. "Thank you."

I understood that Cade had wounds and scars invisible to the naked eye, just like so many of us. He was a lone wolf by nature because of the way life happened to him. A layer of gentleness and shyness rolled just under his tough exterior and maybe that's what I found so endearing about him. Our flame had just ignited and this newfound relationship would be a slow burn that I would relish.

"Well, I'm happy to know that I'll be seeing more of you around." I brought us back to safer grounds. "I think you're going to enjoy it here."

"I think I will too." Like the wind, those words caressed me softly and felt like an admission. Like Cade recognized *this* too.

"I should get back to practice. They'll be wondering where I've gone."

He nodded again, disappointed, but it only added to my glee.

Yet still no smile.

I learned that when you want something in life, you should flat out ask for it. No use beating around the bush. Most humans needed things explained to them at the base level.

"Cade, we've been talking for twenty minutes and I've spent a whole chunk of it smiling, while you've spent most of it ogling my skirt—which, thank you, I take it you like my cheerleading uniform—and staring at my

eyes."

Cade did a double-take in the midst of taking a drag of his cigarette and started choking.

"Even at dinner you barely smiled. I'm just wondering if you know how to or if I should teach you?"

"E-Excuse me?"

"Smile for me, please."

He covered his mouth, finishing his choking session in the comfort of his elbow. I appreciated people not coughing in my face. "W-Why would you even ask that?"

"Because I think you'd have a really nice smile," I said truthfully. "I've been wanting to see it since I spotted you from my balcony."

Time stopped as we locked gazes. I squeezed his hand in silent encouragement. Cade visibly gulped at the touch. A slow blush spread across his cheeks. Oh, my. He licked his lips again and I chalked it up as a nervous trait. One I found absolutely adorable.

And then it happened.

Slowly, Cade's mouth twitched and the left corner hitched up slightly. I beamed at my victory, and perhaps it was seeing my joy at something so small that caused a full-blown grin to bloom across his lips.

I was wrong.

His smile wasn't nice.

It was beautiful.

It gave Cade a youthful boyishness that was previously missing. A contrast from the usual hard set of his jaw. He shook his head, sputtering a small chuckle. "You're a little crazy, Ella."

"I think you like my type of crazy, querido."

A touch of wickedness entered his grin, filled with the kind of danger and zeal that could get me into trouble.

He morphed into South Side's notorious Princepin right before me.

My heart nearly skipped a beat.

Cade took another drag of his cigarette, tilting his head back. His mouth gaped open and smoke plumed out, curling high in the air. "You should head back before you show me any more of your true colours, Ella," he tutted darkly. "I think I'm beginning to see through you."

God, he might just be my type of crazy too.

"What makes you say that?" That invisible pull yanked me closer to him.

He tilted his head and our eyes met the way two turbulent waves did. "Daddy Cordova's little princess winking at me from her balcony, then playing the labelled good girl at dinner with her drug dealer and his folks—all while being high from the weed I sold her? Yeah, I see right through you, sweetheart."

"Caught me," I whispered teasingly, biting my lip. Cade's eyes followed the movement like a moth drawn to a flame. "So I'm a bit of a rebel. Sue me."

"Nah. I think I like you the way you are."

"I think I like you, too."

Cade chin-tipped towards the weed between us. "If ever you need more, I can get you in touch with a guy who sells."

"I think I'll pass." I got up, brushing out the creases in my skirt. Cade watched me as I rounded the bench and came to stand behind him, leaning down so I reached his earlobe. "Yours is the best I've ever had. I doubt anyone else will compare."

His body jerked taut as my whisper grazed the side of his neck, as if I lashed him with a whip. I almost laughed at how easy boys could be. I referred to the weed he'd given me. But he could imagine it as whatever he pleased.

"Oh, and, Cade?" I stole his cigarette and brought it to my mouth. Taking a drag, I handed it back to him. Traces of my pink lip gloss smeared around it. He gazed at me, mesmerized, dare I say. I blew smoke inches away from his parted mouth. "I'm not *always* a princess."

"Ella..." My name on his lips, tortured. I loved it.

I winked at him. "See you around, Princepin."

I sashayed my way back to cheer practice, knowing full well he was watching my ass in my skirt with that awed look on his face.

That night, I changed his name in my phone to *Mine*.

CHAPTER 4

October 18, 2014

Ngly Lies

12:39 a.m.

Ella, 18

We took a detour so I could pee.

Given the status of our relationship (or lack of), I should be weirded out that Cade stood outside the bathroom stalls, while my urine acted like a playlist for us in the background. But being together for so long removed that awkwardness.

When I emerged from the stall to wash my hands, Cade sat on the bathroom counter, rolling a joint and using his thigh as a makeshift table. I shouldn't care what he did after our breakup—much less about him destroying his lungs—but I couldn't help it. We'd made a pact that we would only smoke together for fun, and that too only occasionally.

Did Cade start smoking cigarettes again, even after he quit?

I noticed for the first time tonight that he wore his signature silver rings. An intricate, raised wolf head on his left hand middle finger, and two thick bands on his right hand thumb and pointer finger. I gave him the former as a one-year anniversary gift, often teasing him about being a lone wolf.

I thought he would have thrown away every personal item we gave to each other after our breakup.

I tried not to dwell on the tightness in my chest. Instead, I wrestled down my annoyance at the fact that he was casually rolling a fucking joint in the bathroom while we were running on a timer.

Cade peeked up and then glanced away fast, dismissing me. So to annoy

him, I fixed my gold hoops, checked my teeth, and reapplied my lip gloss. Making sure to smack my lips extra loudly. Purposely wasting time we didn't have.

It worked.

"If you're done looking at yourself, Princess"—he pressed through gritted teeth—"I'd like to go back to finishing this shit."

I rolled my eyes to mask how hard my heart hammered. *Princess*. That was all I'd ever been to him. No one else called me that.

Something suspicious like feelings (the ones I thought I already killed) fluttered inside of me. But my anger towards him overshadowed the glimmer of hope trying to reignite.

Fuck him.

"Sure." I smiled sickeningly sweet, in that bitch manner he loathed. "I'm just waiting on you, champ. Last I remember, you said you figured out the next dare."

His tongue poked the inside of his cheek. Smart man, he chose not to retaliate. He stuffed the rolled joint in his pocket and hopped off the counter in one fluid movement. Tall, lean, muscular body that made me blush. I looked away, staring at the yellow peeling wallpaper.

"It's a combo to a locker in the north wing. Let's get moving," he said.

I made a grand gesture—kind of condescending—as I swept my arms sideways in front of me. "Fellas first."

Cade's retaliation came in the form of crowding me against the wall, intimidating me with his height and muscles. I raised a brow, even though his proximity plucked at my heartstrings. "Being a bitch doesn't suit you, Ella."

"Neither does being cheated on. Guess we both have to live with it, eh?"

Frustration rolled off his body in waves and I soaked it in, letting it amplify my own. He had no right to throw insults my way when he was the reason we were in this predicament.

Cade ground his jaw, a muscle popping. I jutted my chin out. The distance between our faces was fictional, but there was nothing romantic

about it.

If Cade wanted war tonight, he'd fucking get it.

The petty monster inside of me was geared toward a battle. I wanted to throw more axed insults his way, just to watch him bleed and drown in his misery.

The same way I had months ago when he shattered my heart.

Did he even suffer after we broke up?

I mock-pouted and ran my finger down his torso, collecting his hoodie string and tugging. Cade didn't budge, blue eyes seized on my face. "What's wrong, baby? Cat got your tongue?"

"Forget it, Ella." Cade shook his head, displeased, as he ripped my hand away from him. This hardened version of me was a picture he didn't recognize.

He backed away, gaze falling to my neck, as if to take inventory of what I no longer wore. I smirked coldly.

He turned around and stalked out of the bathroom.

As if saying I wasn't even worth it.

And maybe that was what hurt the most. How quickly Cade burned everything we had to ash. How he didn't put up a fight for us.

For me.

The first month I cried over him. The second month I was numb. The third month, I projected every feeling of hate residing inside of me in his direction whenever I saw him. His shoulders tensed whenever I sat in the same classroom as him. His body deflated whenever his eyes bounced to the bleachers where I stood with my squad, cheering with less enthusiasm when he scored a goal via his infamous slapshot during the recent pre-season games.

Cade Killian Remington dug his grave when he betrayed me.

Now I was just trying to shove him where he belonged: six feet beneath the ground of the imaginary graveyard in my mind. Where I buried every judgemental stare, unwanted opinion, and betrayal. With a deep breath, I mended the small fissure in my armour and walked out of the bathroom.

I thought he would have left me, but Cade leaned against the brick wall right beside a crusty-looking water fountain. Waiting patiently for me. He toyed with his golden Zippo...the one I had gifted him for his seventeenth birthday.

A blank look fixed on his face as he stared ahead, but I knew he sensed my presence. He kicked off the wall and sauntered down the dark hallway.

I caught up to him with quick strides. My mask fell into place the second we spotted other Initiators loitering, pondering over their next dare. A handful of them cast us quick glances. Some chose to mind their own business, while The Hex girls openly gawked.

My grip on my flashlight tightened.

"They got paired together?"

"I heard he cheated on her."

"Damn, that sucks."

I brushed off every whisper, every look, the same way I'd been doing since our public breakup.

Everyone knew about us.

Cade and I used to be *that* couple—the *it* couple within these walls. We used to make out openly in front of others, not giving a single crap about PDA. I could not count on two hands the amount of times we skipped class to go fool around.

The confidence we exuded always had people moving out of our lane if they saw us strolling down the hallways. It made us feel untouchable. Invincible. Powerful.

I used to bask in these people's jealous-ridden comments and envious glares. It made me laugh. We had what everyone wanted: a tight, unbreakable bond, a best friend who knew every secret, and a lover who was down for anything, no matter how dark and twisted.

On the outside, my ex-boyfriend was a quiet, brooding jock and I was his

bubbly cheerleading girlfriend. Behind closed doors, he was a bad boy with a nasty mouth, and I was the bad girl with a rebellious side that rivaled his own.

And now we were nothing.

All because of a fateful night where he decided I wasn't enough to satisfy his dirty dick.

Even so, we portrayed a united front as we walked towards the north wing with our expressions stern and shoulders squared in pride.

The farther we walked, the more murmurs we encountered. We didn't engage with the other Initiators. Our barrier was impenetrable.

Cade may have traded his old cards for a new deck, but he never lost the edge he carried with him when he used to deal Mary Janes and Mollies on the South Side. If he had wanted to snap at them, he could. But, just like me, he knew these people weren't worth anything.

On our way to our destination, we crossed the foyer.

"Good luck, guys!" Shaun hollered a little too excitedly.

I flipped him off and Cade ignored his friend.

Darla didn't say anything, choosing to flick her face away like the sight of me repulsed her. Fine by me. I learned a year ago to stop worrying about the opinions of those who no longer cared for me.

Still, I was surprised no barbs were thrown my way. I would have thought she'd love to bask in my humiliation: getting paired with my cheating ex-boyfriend. It was a whole new low for me.

Quiet chatter followed us until we reached the locker in the north wing. I leaned against the one beside it, arms crossed and heels propped against the metal surface. A defensive stance.

Cade bent at the waist and touched the lock. He cursed, backing away and wiping his fingers on his jeans. "Fuck."

I didn't want to stare at his face, so I looked at his dark combat boots, feigning disinterest. "What is it?"

"They covered it with petroleum jelly."

True to his words, a thick glob was smeared all over the lock, blurring the numbers.

I dug into my crossbody bag and pulled out a pack of tissues. "Here."

He wiped the lock with one and inserted the combo he deciphered from the dare. A group of people skirted past us, saying something under their breaths that I just knew was offensive. They even had the audacity to whistle at us.

I ignored them.

Cade opened the locker with a clang. "Well, would you look at that?"

We both peered inside and our heads butted. I glared at him and he did the same. He flashed his torch inside and...

A black spider scurried out.

We shrieked loudly and jerked back. Our hands tangled in a haste, our hearts seeking comfort, even though our minds were no longer on the same wavelength.

Old habits and fears died hard and spiders were mine and Cade's biggest one.

Shaun and Darla cackled in the far distance.

Cade and I realized at the same time that we unconsciously held hands. He dropped mine like a sack of hot potatoes and I wiped mine on my jeans-clad thigh, showing him how much his touch grossed me out.

"Check in the locker. The dare should be inside."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Cade hissed. "I'm not looking in there again."

"It's your turn," I bit out. "I solved the first one. Stop being a coward."

"Don't call me a coward. You don't like spiders either."

We entered a stare down. Cade blinked first.

I won.

He murmured a prayer under his breath and gingerly tipped forward, the knuckles wrapped around his flashlight whitening. I pretended to patrol our surroundings...which were empty except for the Halloween garlands decorating the high arches of the hallway and our loud heartbeats.

Cade yanked out something that jingled. A red pouch.

"It was hanging on one of the hooks. I think it's coins." Cade thrust it my way.

I recoiled from it. "Open it."

"Fuck that. You do it." Translation: I'm scared there's another spider. "Stop being a *coward*, Ella."

Giving me a dose of my own medicine, I scowled at him and bravely undid the golden knot holding the pouch closed with the tips of my orange acrylics. Cade held his breath. So did I. We both stood apart, ready to bolt away in case another creature sped out.

The pouch brimmed with nickels. The next task lay folded on top of the pile. I plucked it out.

"When hunger strikes..." Cade read, frowning. *B4* was scrawled at the bottom right of the note.

What did that even mean? "I'm going to kill Darla and Shaun when this is over."

Not that it was their fault.

There was an entire rulebook on Initiation Night that was passed down from one pair of captains to the other. A lot of these dares had been in existence for a decade and got recycled every few years. Shaun and Darla weren't the ones who created the blueprint for tonight. It already existed way before we were born.

"Think fast." Cade snapped his fingers. "When hunger strikes, what happens?"

"I don't know." I threw my hands up and paced the corridor. "When hunger strikes, I get angry. I want to eat. I want everyone to leave me alone basically."

He scoffed and perched his weight against the open locker. "Don't I know it?"

The smooth, low tenor was charged with nostalgia and I hated it. Hated the reminder that there hadn't ever been someone who understood me, my needs, or my wants on the same level as this guy.

A pang echoed in my chest and I whirled away before he could see the sadness in me.

Why did you ruin us, Cade?

12:57 a.m.

When hunger strikes...You eat.

We figured out that B4 was the code for a snack in the vending machine.

I stood next to Cade, arms crossed and flashlight tucked under my armpit, while he counted the coins in the pouch. "It's exactly one dollar and seventy-five cents."

B4 was a chocolate candy bar. "I think the next dare is taped behind the Aero."

"You don't say, baby girl."

I hoped no one else had used the vending machine. What were the chances they'd craved an Aero, found our dare, and discarded it? Initiators were known to sabotage each other. Mischief was a big part of the night.

Cade slipped the coins in the slot and pressed *B4*. Slowly, the machine rumbled to life and we both watched in strained silence as the candy bar dropped down.

I crouched low and dug into the vending machine's tray. My fingers brushed over a piece of paper neatly folded behind the Aero. "Oh my God. We have it!"

Cade bent beside me, letting out a laugh laced with disbelief. He snagged the dare and let me keep the chocolate. How chivalrous of him. "This one was too easy."

"Right?" My eyes swung to him and I almost fell backwards on my ass when I took in the intensity of his stare. They said eyes were the windows to the soul, and Cade always made me feel as though that statement was personified when he made love to me.

My heart, which barely managed to calm down, thrashed in its cage. It

wanted to fly and land beside its companion—Cade's heart—and just rejoice in love, familiarity, and utter contentment.

But I wouldn't make that mistake again. Fool me once, that's my bad. Fool me twice, you're dead.

The fluorescent light emanating from the machine cast shadows over his features. I could never forget how handsome he was. From this angle, I saw every brown lash, every nuance in those gorgeous blues, and the subtle hint of stubble on his chiseled jaw. The last time we were this close was three months ago.

"You..." he whispered. A crease slashed the space between his brows. "You're wearing contacts."

Cade threw our past in my face once again, forcing me to acknowledge how deeply embedded we used to be in each other's lives. He knew the truth about my flawed gaze. And never, ever made me feel horrendous for it.

"Yeah, I fucking am." I rose up and brought us back to common grounds: hatred. "So what? Are you going to make a comment about my hair, too? Maybe I should dye my black to blond."

"Fuck," he spat, wrenching away from me. "Don't do this right now."

I ripped open the candy bar and popped two squares in my mouth. Cade hated when people talked with their mouths full. "What—You think I'd look ugly as a blonde? Never tried it, but I'm game. Maybe I'll look more like the girl I caught you with. That's your type, isn't it, *querido*? Blondes."

I didn't have any resentment towards the girl he cheated on me with. Not really. After all, she didn't have any loyalty towards me. But this motherfucker was supposed to.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he grated, looking pained. He drove his calloused fingers through his dark brown strands, running them back until he clutched the nape of his neck fiercely. He swallowed, like he was forcing down words that would cause more rift between us. "No. Fucking. Idea."

A few more lies wouldn't hurt, considering we were already in deep

waters.

I just didn't have the patience to hear them.

"Meh. Don't blame you. We all have a type, right?" I pretended to tap my chin thoughtfully with my finger. "You know, I think I prefer brunets with warm *brown* eyes...Kind of like Josh."

At the mention of his brother, Cade froze like a statue.

My smirk was fuelled by the fire running through my veins. It was enough to thaw and set him aflame.

"You know what the best part was?" I sauntered closer to him, my booted heels clacking against the floor and mimicking the thudding of my heartbeat. I brought my lips to his ear, letting my breath caress his skin in anticipation. Cade shivered. "He kissed like you, but *better*. I should have listened to my parents and dated his ass instead of wasting two years on you, eh?"

His tormented gaze clashed with mine as he absorbed my ugly lie.

With that parting taunt, I ripped the next dare out of his hands and walked away.

My pride intact.

An evil smile hanging on my lips.

My invisible crown in place.

And my broken heart?

Leaving a trail of blood in my wake.

CHAPTER 5

Unwanted Memories of a Lone Wolf

October 10, 2012 7:32 p.m.

Ella, 16

Cade was sneaking over later tonight.

Mi mamá made mouth-watering enchiladas and I scarfed down two full plates. After dinner, she banished me to the kitchen to do the dishes, because our maid had left due to a family emergency.

"You barely cook or clean. A true lady knows how to do both," mi mamá reasoned.

This was the 21st century. Why was a female's definition still being reduced to those two things? Cooking and cleaning shouldn't solely be our job. What about the fucking patriarchy? What the hell were they good for? Sad really, how women were such fascinating creatures composed of a multitude of layers, yet we oftentimes got labelled as hysterical and other undeserving labels.

My parents could be old-fashioned in some ways, but they were advanced in many others. For example, *mi papá* said he'd start training me for succession as early as next year at his company. He promised I would be part of the family business. It was my birthright. Not something Emilio would automatically inherit because he was the next male in line.

I was promised that, despite being a woman, there would be room for me at the table. My voice would be heard. My opinions just as valuable as any other person sitting on the board.

Women were the future leaders of tomorrow.

Bearing all that in mind, I dragged my little brother to do the dishes with me in order to ensure gender equality continued in this household. Better they start young, right?

Emilio buzzed with excitement as I sat him on the counter and handed him a cloth. After thoroughly rinsing each plate, I placed it carefully in front of him and he wiped it with diligence, working his fist in a circular motion with all the might in his little body.

"This is fun, eh?" I crooned to him, flipping the plate over so he could dry the back.

He gave me a toothy grin, nodding enthusiastically.

"Do you understand, *manito*?" I dried off my hands on a spare towel when we finished. "Boys do dishes and clean up after themselves too, Emilio."

"Sí, Ella." He nodded, blinking those big brown eyes at me. "Boys clean."

"There you go, Emy!" I gushed, yanking him into my arms and pecking all over his face. He cackled, loving when I acted like a kissing monster. Emilio's arms went around my shoulders as he muffled his boyish laugh in my neck. I closed the kitchen lights and carried him upstairs.

After his night routine was complete, my parents and I tucked Emilio into bed and kissed him good night. My phone lit up with a text message.

Be there in 20 mins. —Princepin

I pretended to yawn. "I'm going to bed."

Mamá and papá eyed me skeptically. It was only 9:00 p.m.

"I'm still sore from yesterday's cheer practice." A total lie. Cade was on his way to deliver the answers to this week's math assignment. Math was not my forte and Cade was a genius in all things numbers. Hence why he took it upon himself to help me on a weekly basis.

"All right, mija," mi papá said. "Go to bed and take some painkillers."

Once my parents retired to their bedroom, I tiptoed back into the kitchen, restlessness blanketing me. I couldn't wait to see him, so I prepared Cade's favourite: two *champurrados*—Mexican hot chocolates—with a dash of

chili.

My parents adored Joshua but remained wary of Cade. I noticed the fake smiles and suspicious looks they shot him whenever we had joint family dinners. They found it odd how Cade and Olivia plopped into the picture, and even more odd how the Remingtons remained tight-lipped on the subject of their newest children.

The gossip amongst the vultures in our community was that Vance Remington had an affair and finally decided to take in his bastard spawns. Vance and Julia, ever the power couple of our society, remained unbothered, much to everyone's chagrin.

Yet if my parents tried to get to know Cade, they'd realize he was merely a boy who stemmed from the rough side of town and did whatever he needed to survive. His hard exterior and downcast eyes spoke volumes.

They should be asking him things like: Cade, how are you today? Have you been eating well? How are you adjusting to your new home? How is your mental, physical, and emotional health?

Instead, they asked him surface-level questions that resulted in short, polite answers: Cade, are you liking your new school? Did you make a lot of friends? Are you having difficulty with any subjects? Are you looking forward to the new hockey season?

Could you blame him for struggling to open up?

Cade was a gentle soul with a lone wolf spirit. He was guarded, but once you broke down those barriers, a diamond shone underneath. I found that he blushed easily, wasn't rude, and unapologetically stated his mind if he felt comfortable around you. Though he did walk around school with a dark aura that yelled *don't-fuck-with-me*, I imagined it was there to ward off anyone who had the potential to hurt him.

Over the last weeks, Cade and I struck a friendship.

It began with me sitting beside him during math class the first week of school. I learned how smart Cade was when we worked on the handout. I told him he could be my best friend if he promised to help me out with my

math assignments. He chuckled quietly and agreed. Then it continued with us sitting under an oak tree during lunch, sharing a grilled fluffernutter sandwich from the cafeteria. We rested in companionable silence. We even began hanging out at Marnie's Shack after cheer and hockey practice, conversing about everything but his...past.

But we'd get there soon, I knew.

Pride filled me with the notion that I got to learn this complex, amazing guy in a way the outside world did not. He trusted me, but he was still learning how to give me more pieces of himself. The banter and chemistry between us unfolded with ease. I'd known so many of my friends for years, but something about this bond with Cade just felt different.

He understood me.

He smiled at me.

He laughed with me, too.

He didn't do that with others.

Callie and Darla had been my best friends forever, yet I'd never felt more comfortable with someone as I did with Cade. His energy balanced mine. He was the quiet, observant to my feisty, energetic self.

He was the calm to my storm.

He was perfect, period.

I had the honour of introducing Cade around St. Victoria. The hockey team embraced him with open arms for his talent and the girls on the squad found him hot. I saw them cheering a little too eagerly on the bleachers during the last home-opener game. Cade was a skilled defenceman with a scary slapshot, but their squeals had nothing to do with his ability to play hockey.

So I took it upon myself to stake my claim.

Now all the cheerleaders knew he was my new *boy* best friend. If you wanted to make a pass at him, you had to get through me first.

And I was one resilient bitch.

Cade Killian Remington was mine.

Back in my room, I dimmed the lamplights, lit some candles, and changed into baby blue high-waisted sweatpants and a matching knit bralette before a rattle at my balcony door caused me to flinch.

I peered over my shoulder and...Oh, my God.

Cade.

He was supposed to text me when he was downstairs so I could sneak him in. What was he thinking?

His fist rapped the glass surface and I hurried towards him. Wrenching the doors open, I gaped at him. "Are you insane?" I whisper-shouted, dragging him inside my room. He tripped as he toed off his shoes at the threshold. "How did you get up here?"

Behind him, dusk disappeared into pure darkness.

Cade's cheeks were pink from the cold. He shrugged off his schoolbag and dropped it at our feet. "I used the ladder conveniently placed at the side of your balcony."

I grabbed fistfuls of his leather jacket and shook him. "You could have died if you fell! Or, at the very least, injured! Don't do that again!"

He laughed, shaking his head. "I'm fine, Ella. I wanted to surprise you."

"That's some surprise!" I barked before lowering my voice. My heart jackhammered in my chest with fear. Usually, I was a thrill junkie, but not where his safety was concerned. What if his foot or hand had slipped? "That was reckless of you."

"Thought you liked rebellious behaviour?"

"Not when it means losing you...when I've just found you."

His mouth parted on a puh.

I closed my eyes, realizing I revealed too much.

Cade's throat worked with a difficult swallow.

Suddenly, he urged me into his arms for a soul-crushing hug. I wrapped my arms around his waist and inhaled his familiar, comforting scent.

The air between us charged with electrifying energy and I concentrated

on this newfound feeling of being touched by my best friend.

"I'm sorry, Princess. Won't do it again," he mumbled, laying his cheek on top of my head. His voice tickled my scalp.

It was the first time he called me Princess. I smiled, loving that he bestowed that title upon me.

I clutched Cade tighter, my forehead mashed against the place where his heart beat vigorously. "Okay, Princepin."

I could feel his smile against my middle part. He loved me calling him that. Maybe that could be our thing. Giving each other cheesy nicknames.

When we pulled away, Cade gingerly framed my face, over the strands of my black hair. "Ella, your eyes," he remarked breathlessly.

I frowned before it hit me. I took my contacts off before he came over. "Um, about that..."

"You have brown eyes, but your right one is tinged with blue." He continued staring at me in confusion. "How is that possible?"

Might as well rip the Band-Aid off. "I have sectoral heterochromia since birth. I've been bullied growing up because of my eyes. I just...I've been wearing blue contacts since high school to avoid being called a freak," I rambled. "If you think I'm one too, just say it now and we can get it out of the way. I know my eyes tend to make people uncomfortable."

"Sweetheart, you don't look like a freak and you don't make me uncomfortable. I love your eye colour. It's so unique."

It was my turn to swallow with difficulty. "Do you truly mean it?"

"I love brown; it's filled with riches. It's the colour of chocolate, of my hair, and of the very ground we walk on. I love blue, too; it's filled with spirit. It's the colour of the sky and this cute little outfit you're wearing," he teased me with a grin that I reciprocated. "Your right eye reminds me of the earth. The bottom half of your iris is brown and the top half is swirling with blue. In my book, you are not a freak. Your eyes, even with your so-called imperfection, are beautiful and anyone who says otherwise is just fucking jealous."

Oh my God.

I swooned in this boy's arms. My eyes, the ones he'd just called beautiful, stung with tears because no one in my life had said such awe-inspiring words to me. Not even my parents.

Cade took my insecurity, Molotov cocktailed it, and shot it far in the distance, where it burned away.

"You're so beautiful, Ella," he husked, thumbing my cheeks softly. "Please, believe me."

The sincerity in his voice undid me.

"I want to kiss you," I admitted, licking my lips. "Can I please kiss you, Cade?"

His consent mattered to me.

Cade blinked, as if in shock, still holding my face with his hands. He recovered quickly. "Y-Yes."

I leaned on my tippy-toes and pecked his mouth. It was soft. It was quick. A shot of electricity crackled through my veins. "I want to do it again, querido."

"Then do it."

I pressed my mouth to his, longer this time, holding a smile. Then I placed tiny little kisses along the crease of his full lips. I pulled back to gauge his reaction, feeling his chuckle reverberate against my chest.

He grinned in his signature bad boy manner. I morphed into a pool of mushy feelings.

"Kiss me like you mean it, Ella," he taunted, hand delving to the back of my head and grasping my hair roughly. A small sound escaped me. "Kiss me like the possessive girl who told her whole squad they couldn't make a pass at me."

My eyes widened.

How did he find out?

"Darla told me why the girls were being weird with me at practice," Cade answered my question, leaning down to lick my bottom lip. "Want me all for yourself, hm, Princess?"

"Yes. I'm greedy." I felt like a kid caught red-handed, dipping my fingers in a cookie jar I had no business touching.

Cade's eyes weighed down with pleasure as he smirked all confident, transforming into the renowned Princepin right before me. His husky whisper fanned over my parted mouth, "I want you all to myself, too, Ella."

Then he joined our mouths together in a titillating kiss.

Cade Killian Remington kissed me like he had a secret to share. With his lips, he expressed how he'd been dying to taste me since the moment he saw me on my balcony.

Passion and honesty were the foundation of this kiss. The confusion stemming from us dancing around the truth of what we were becoming in the last few weeks slowly bled out. It gave leeway to a fresh slate where we admitted we felt things beyond the simple friendship of a boy and girl.

I touched his cheek as he angled his head, capturing my bottom lip in a gentle caress. His tongue swept over my seam enticingly and I shivered, granting him access. Our tongues met languidly at first, like tango partners getting acquainted for the first time before they tangled together in an erotic dance. Tentatively, then more confidently, as we learned each other's flavour.

His hands explored the expanse of my bare back and another frisson ran through me. He stopped right before my butt. I could sense just how much he longed to touch me all over. So I gave him my approval by moving his hands lower. He gripped my bottom with powerful hands, groaning into my mouth like he found the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

Oh, he's so sexy.

I couldn't deny Cade, not when my own hands roamed over his rippled chest, mapping every hard plane of his stomach. My chest swelled with tenderness. He finally gained enough weight that he was healthy and strong in all the places that mattered. No longer the weak, malnourished form he tried to hide beneath his oversized hoodies when I first met him.

Our mouths sipped from each other continuously, the sound of our lips

coming together causing my toes to curl. Our tongues twined messily, almost sloppily.

This felt like my first real kiss.

I soared high in the sky until we broke away to breathe. Our panting breaths filled the space between us, and I landed back on the ground with no safety net to cushion my fall.

"The math assignment," Cade mumbled, hands curving over my waist. "W-We should get to it."

"Screw it. This is more fun." I used his shoulders to hoist myself and wrap my legs around his hips. Cade barely winced, his hands cradling my butt as he delivered a playful swat.

I liked that.

I pleaded with him to do it again.

"Oh, fuck." He kissed me again, more urgently, as he carried me farther into my bedroom. "You're trouble, Ella."

"I like trouble." Cade lowered us to the edge of my bed. I stayed in his lap and showered his jaw with butterfly-soft kisses.

"Don't I know it, you little troublemaker. You stole Shaun's clean boxers after hockey practice last week and drew a bunch of dicks during art class, didn't you? Right before shoving them back in his locker. You're crazy."

"He deserved it. He played a prank on me first," I explained, not feeling bad at all. "And you like my type of crazy, *querido*."

"I do," he said with a twinkle in his eyes. "I really do. I've been wanting to kiss you since I first saw you. You're such a breath of fresh air. From the very start, you've treated me like a normal person. You didn't look at me with scrutiny like the others. You took it upon yourself to make sure I made friends at St. Victoria. You broke down my wall when all I've ever wanted was to hide behind it."

My fingers stroked his temple. "I'll always be there for you. You don't ever have to hide from me. Or...change for me."

Cade exhaled roughly and laid his forehead to mine. "Thank you, Ellie."

"Ellie?"

"It's my new nickname for you."

"I like it." Kissing him, I pried his mouth open and sucked on his tongue. He tasted like a cherry sucker. He moaned and it was so attractive.

Cade swatted my ass again, panting. "I-I know you like it. I like it too."

"As much as you like my cheerleading uniform?" I bit his jaw.

"Oh yeah." He laughed, reclining back against my blanket and taking me along so I landed on top of him. Cade grazed the exposed skin of my back with his knuckles and even toyed with the strap of my bralette.

"Where does this leave us?" Now that I'd kissed him, I never wanted to stop.

"You're still my best friend, but with kissing benefits. You're my Ellie, my sweetheart, and my princess," he whispered mischievously.

Not South Side's—his princess. "So nothing really changes. We're okay?"

"We're okay," he confirmed. "Now you just have a free pass at kissing me whenever you want." He rubbed my butt, then patted it lightly over my sweatpants, like he just couldn't get enough.

I'd seen him eyeing my backside more than a handful of times when he thought I wasn't paying attention. "You don't strike me as the kind of guy that likes PDA."

"I don't. But with you?" He shrugged. "I'm okay with it. I also know you're the jealous type, so you'll probably want to stamp ownership over me in front of everyone." He sighed dramatically. "I guess this makes me your boyfriend."

"You bet your ass it does." I dotted more fervent kisses over his cheeks. "I made us hot chocolates, but they're probably cold now."

"We've been official for less than a minute and you're already the best girlfriend ever."

I crawled off his lap and walked on my bed using my knees, towards the nightstand where two mugs sat on coasters. I handed him one. "Since I'm officially your girlfriend, I think we should play a round of twenty-one

questions to get to know each other more."

He joined me by resting back against my headboard, his leg brushing mine. "You already know me more than anyone else. Shit, I talk to you more than I talk to Josh, and he's my brother."

I loved how Cade came to accept his adoptive family. It must have been such a difficult change for him and Olivia, moving from one household to an entirely new one. "There's still so much more to you."

"What do you want to know, baby girl?"

Another nickname. I liked this one, too.

"Besides playing hockey, which, if I didn't tell you before, you're very good at, do you have any other hobbies or activities you enjoy?" He was one of the best defencemen on the team.

"Thank you." He took a sip of the hot chocolate and wheezed when a hint of spice hit his taste buds. I smiled, waiting for him as he gathered his thoughts. "I love reading. I read at least thirty books a year. Literature is the best form of escapism. I've turned towards fictional worlds whenever I've had the shittiest of days. It's the best coping mechanism for me."

Cade was very eloquent and smart.

"I should read more often. The only reading I do is Teen Vogue. And, well, I've read *Twilight*, but that's about it."

"Everyone raves about those books."

"You should read them. They're the best thing to happen to humanity."

He hid a smile against the lip of the mug. "I doubt it, but I'll consider it. What do you like to do besides cheerleading?"

"I love painting the backs of my jackets with fun drawings and sayings. Sometimes I'll do bead and patchwork. I have a whole room in the basement dedicated to my art. I'm not an artist or anything, but art helps me relax. Oh, and I'm really good at knitting. *Mi abuela* taught me when I was young. I actually made this"—I touched the neckline of my baby blue bralette —"myself."

"Didn't know you had a knack for arts. You're very, ah, creative."

The tips of his ears burned. With a knowing grin, I asked him, "Are you nervous around me?"

His eyes roved over my body, starting at my white painted toes, moving over my blue sweatpants, and ending at my collarbone. "Only because you're wearing that tiny excuse of a top."

I put my hot chocolate away and he did the same.

A low, pulsing heat simmered between us.

We closed the distance at the same time. Cade's hand cradled my face as our lips collided, moving in unison. I twisted my fists into the lapels of his leather jacket. His misbehaving hands helped guide me on top of him. He kneaded my ass before delving higher, tracing the lines in my back. He played with the tie of my bralette. I could feel him wanting to take it off, but hesitating...his movements almost shy.

"Are you a virgin?" I whispered into our liplock.

He didn't kiss like one, but the way he threaded said otherwise.

Cade cleared his throat and gazed up at me. He carefully weighed his next words, as if afraid to disappoint me. "No. But I've only had sex once."

"Tell me." Jealousy reared its ugly head and I tried to imagine the girl he'd given himself to. Was she pretty?

"It was at a party this past June. I was drunk and so was the girl. It was embarrassing. I don't remember anything from it, besides a lot of fumbling, and that we used a condom. Have you had sex before?"

I felt better that it did not mean anything more than just sex. It was selfish of me, but I never made love before and I wanted to be the only girl he did that with. "Yes. Last year."

"Fifteen is kind of young to lose your virginity." He cleared his throat. "Who was it?"

"I slept with Kyan Landon, one of the basketball players from Eastwood High."

We had sex four times, but it didn't amount to anything. My pride was injured when he stopped answering my calls.

After a few crying sessions with Callie and Darla, I moved on to a sophomore from Eastwood High, Caleb Wright. While we didn't have sex, he did teach me how to suck dick and he gave me my first orgasm. Those stolen moments with him made me very sexually aware of my body. I learned what I liked having done to me and what I liked doing to myself. Caleb and I weren't in it for the long haul—a mutual decision—but I wished him well.

"I don't know who this Kyan is, but he's on my shit list. Are jocks your type?"

You're my type. "Who was the girl?"

"She doesn't matter," he replied too swiftly. Cade canted his head and gave me a smirk. "You're jealous."

"No." Yes.

"You shouldn't be. No other girl holds as much importance as you do. You make me look forward to every hockey game because I know you'll be cheering for me by the bleachers. You make me look forward to every day at school because I know you're waiting for me at the entrance so we can start our day together."

I loved a guy who could openly discuss his thoughts without worrying about his guy card being taken away.

"You're more than just my best friend. I've never felt like this." I put my head on his shoulder. "Like I can tell someone anything and not be judged. Sometimes around others, I feel the need to tone down my personality. Yet you just take me as I am."

"Because you did the same for me," he said. "You saw more than the guy who deals drugs and you never made me feel bad about it. You take me as I am. I...love that about you."

Be still, my fucking heart.

I glanced up and saw affection swirling in his blue depths.

We sealed this newfound relationship with more kisses.

Cade grew more confident with his touch as the minutes trickled by. My arms stayed squared around his neck while he clutched my waist. I whispered

to him that I was never letting him go. He whispered back that he was holding me to my promise. We talked about everything and anything under the sun. I stayed in his lap, running my fingers softly through his brown locks. The dim lighting in my room heightened the atmosphere.

This feeling floating in the air, it was bliss.

"Don't worry too much about Initiation Night," I murmured when he expressed his concern. "It's actually pretty fun. A series of dares with a partner you get paired with anonymously. Just do your best, obey the rules, and enjoy yourself."

"If you say so. I hope we get paired together."

"Me too."

We kissed like our mouths were magnets, irresistibly drawn to one another. Cade forayed to my neck and I sighed in pleasure, as he drizzled rain droplet-like kisses, before rolling me underneath his warm body. "Is this okay?"

I nodded, trying to tame my happiness. He kissed me and I squealed. It triggered Cade's husky laughter against my mouth. My hands busied themselves taking off his leather jacket and throwing it somewhere on my bed. I fisted the neckline of his crewneck and tugged him closer to me, wrapping my legs around his hips. Cade raked his fingers through my long strands and huffed when I kissed his jaw.

"I hate that there were other guys before me," he professed, voice ringing with a ragged quality. "It makes me jealous knowing other guys have touched you. Seen you like this."

"They don't matter, Cade." I threw his own words at him. "Show me that they don't."

Cade's forearms rested on either side of my head as he latched onto my lips almost angrily. Echoing to me that he accepted my challenge. He stole every breath of mine like a thief. I relinquished my entire control to him.

I feared in moments like these, I always would.

"O-Only you, Cade. No one's ever treated me like this," I reassured. I

may have more experience than him, but it meant nothing in the grand scheme of things.

I never found love. Neither had he.

Maybe we could be each other's first.

Kyan had treated me like a toy and I let him—Wham bam thank you, ma'am—because I didn't know my own worth back then. It wasn't until Caleb that I realized a lot of guys weren't worth the privilege of my presence. I was fucking awesome and if they couldn't see, then they were blind. Now if I chose to make out and fool around with nameless, faceless guys, then it wasn't because I needed a self-esteem boost; I just didn't think these boys deserved more from me.

They weren't deserving of the love I knew I was capable of giving.

But Cade was worthy. He deserved me and I liked to think I deserved him, too. He was inherently good, with just the right amount of bad. His tough exterior didn't fool me. Princepin. Gangster. Bad boy. Everything between those lines. He was a total softie underneath.

"None of them matter, baby," Cade hushed, sweeping a finger across my forehead and pushing aside my black fringe. His voice was almost sad. He kissed my neck once more. "Do." Kiss. "You." Kiss. "Remember." Kiss. "Their." Kiss. "Names?"

"I—"

"No, you don't." He nipped the tender skin at the hollow of my throat. I gasped. He sucked it, branding me with a love bite. "You don't remember anyone but me. Isn't that right?"

"No one but you," I panted as he dived lower. "C-Cade."

"That's right. Only me," he whispered naughtily, raising his head. I swore to God, that look in his eyes looked like love to me. Maybe I wasn't so awesome. Maybe I was fucking *loca*. Heady sensations had my mind spinning in a mixture of excitement and lust.

Cade's mouth was back on mine and we kissed like two teenagers who were lust-driven. He was the only thing in my line of vision, looking like a

beautiful mirage above me with blue eyes so vivid, hair mussed by my fingers, and a kiss-swollen mouth. He had the most wonderful tongue. It was magic. He was magic.

We kissed and touched and fooled around like we had all the time in the world.

"You're so beautiful, Ella."

My heart sang a song known as *Cade-Killian-Remington-now-owns-me*. I was beautiful, but hearing this boy say it out loud? It completed me.

"I adore you," I whispered to him. "Will you take your shirt off? I want to see you. *Por favor*."

Cade hesitated. Not shyly, though. Almost as though he was calculating something. Then, with a deep breath, he leaned away and tugged off his crewneck before covering my body once more. I barely glimpsed him. I had just enough time to catch a hint of Cade's washboard abs before he was kissing me again.

My room was dark, but what I couldn't see properly, my imagination made up in spades. His kisses made me feel like I was floating on cloud nine. I closed my eyes, sighing his name over and over again.

"Do you like when I kiss you like this, Princess?" Cade kissed a trail to my earlobe, which he tugged gently between his teeth.

"Y-Yes."

The amorous moment between us was highlighted by his tender touch, his bad boy kisses, and my greedy hands roaming over my newly conquered territory. AKA his abs. When I felt his tented bulge, I realized I wanted to do more than just kissing.

A lazy smile pasted on my face, I rose on my elbows, removing my sweaty hair from my face. "Can I"—I rubbed close to his thigh so he understood my message—"touch you, Cade?"

I pushed him back until he landed in a sitting position and climbed on top of his lap. I stamped my mouth over his, a soft sound escaping me. "Please, I want to play with you." "Ella, I should tell you—" He flinched when my hands skirted down his torso.

"What's wrong?" I paused, brushing his shoulder softly and...I felt rough, textured skin.

My eyes drank in his marred left arm.

I stopped breathing.

Cade glanced away, looking ashamed, gulping. Turbulent emotions swirled in his gaze, but he refused to show me the wreckage.

I was so consumed in lust before that I completely missed this.

The raised angry pink lines started at the left side of his collarbone. They crisscrossed in a disarray pattern, collecting over his shoulder like a spider's web, and then travelled all the way down to his wrist. It was like he'd been carved by a thin needle, left to bleed, and then forced to heal in the worst way.

His limb was nearly atrocious and looked like a prop out of a Halloween movie.

Cade always wore a full-sleeved shirt.

Anything that would cover his scarring.

While the rest of him was perfection, this part of him was ugly, disfigured, and he felt the need to hide it. From the world. From me.

Because he was ashamed.

Slowly, the puzzle pieces finally started coming together. I struggled to push the words through my dry throat. "What happened to you, *querido*?"

"Now's your chance to call me a freak," he murmured vulnerably, finally looking at me.

My throat constricted and I shook my head, trying to explain to him silently that he was not a freak. He was so beautiful to me, too. I knew I should move away from his lap and give him the space he needed to speak his words. But I feared if I did that, he'd take it as rejection and retreat behind that shell I tried so hard to break down in the last two months.

"How did this..." Horror laced my tone. I framed his cheeks. "I don't

understand, Cade."

"My uncle did this to me."

Anger flared until it hit a nerve. "Joshua's—"

"Not Uncle Vance. This was my dad's brother, the one I lived with after my parents died. Julius Brown. Olivia's father."

The familiar sting of tears accompanied the burning in my chest. I pressed a trembling hand to his mauled skin. The abuse almost looked fresh. My sweet Princepin, hurt by the hands of a monster. "H-How could anyone do this to you? God, Cade. I'm so fucking sorry."

He combed his fingers through his hair, tousling it further. Gathering courage. Buying time. His body shook with pent-up frustration.

"My uncle Julius was—is—a sick bastard. My parents died days after my fourteenth birthday and I went to live with him. Olivia was only a year old. Her mother died because of childbirth complications. I think losing his wife sent Julius spiralling. He was already a little unhinged when I showed up, but soon the drinking, the depression, and the cursing got worse. He didn't know how to handle his sorrow. From the minute I stepped foot into his house, I was his verbal punching bag. I didn't say anything, because where else could I go? My whole family died in a fire while I was sleeping over at a friend's house. The social worker said I was 'lucky' to be alive."

I could only stare at him, flabbergasted.

"Is it really luck when you're breathing but everything you love is dead?"

A thin tear rolled down my cheek, but I wiped it away quickly. "I'm so sorry, Cade. I-I never knew."

"Because I didn't want anyone to know. Because my past is ugly and Uncle Vance and Aunt Julia want to protect me. No one knows the truth. Not even Josh."

But he wanted to confide in me and I wanted him to see that he could trust me. "Talk to me. I'm listening." I rubbed his cheeks softly, showing him I was here, present in the moment.

Cade closed his eyes for a second, as if recollecting old memories. "It

started with cussing. Julius liked to insult me for the hell of it. He'd laugh meanly. Force me to work like a dog around the house. I did it because what other choice did I have? He would threaten to put me on the streets if I didn't comply with his house rules."

I automatically hated Julius Brown.

"A handful of times he'd make me sleep in the shed outside during the coldest nights. I would always get sick, and he'd work me down to my bones. If there was ever a male version of Cinderella, then it was me." Cade chuckled bitterly. "Julius was a sadistic piece of shit, but no one saw past his façade. I didn't think anyone would believe me if I went crying wolf. So I didn't. And, even if I did, I'd land my ass in the system. I always worried that would be worse than Julius's ministrations."

My parents liked to make me do chores around the house, even if we had a maid. Clean after yourself, Ella. Your room is a reflection of you. Dust the bookshelves. Wipe the mirrors. But never was I worked to a point of pure exhaustion.

Not like Cade.

My heart cried. I feathered my fingers along his hairline and rounded them behind his ear for comfort.

When I didn't judge him, he continued speaking. Physically, he was here. But mentally, Cade swam in old memories. "Eventually the cussing turned into pushes. Then it turned into punches. I was strong enough to fight him, but I was afraid of the consequences. So I didn't do anything. Let him hit me if it made him feel better. I was scared he'd turn his attention to Olivia, if not me." Cade gave me a tortured look. "My mom was pregnant when she died. I would have had a little sister. When I went to live with Julius, taking care of Olivia became my solace. She's the only thing that kept me going. I couldn't risk him hurting her."

Oh, God, no.

Tears streamed down the slopes of my cheeks freely now. A sob broke past my lips and I clutched his face. I leaned forward to hug him, but Cade became desperate, frantic to finish this nightmare of a tale. "Y-You have to understand I had no choice. It was me or her. It didn't mean I was weak. I was never weak—"

"Shh..." I tried to soothe him. "You're not weak. You did what you thought was right."

Cade blinked away his tears. "Julius gave me these scars in June, almost four months ago. I had just tucked Olivia in bed and Julius stumbled into the house minutes later, completely drunk. He had a bottle of Jack. He saw me and started insulting me. I just stood on the stairs, taking his verbal assault. I was used to it. I didn't care. I was more concerned that his voice would wake Livvy, so I told him to shut the fuck up. I never swore at him, but I lost it that night. Olivia had a fever, and this pathetic excuse of a man didn't care that his three-year-old daughter was sick. It was the first and last time I ever stood up against him. He walked up to me, smashed the glass bottle against the banister, knocked me until I fell on the stairs and..."

No. No. No.

He took in a shuddering breath, his whole body heaving. "He carved me," Cade whispered, tormented eyes rising to mine. "He pinned me under his weight, launched profanities in the face of my terror, and scraped the broken ends of the bottle against my skin like it was a chisel—like he was sculpting a masterpiece. He relished my agony, Ella. He laughed like a lunatic while I begged him to stop."

I wanted to murder Julius Brown.

I forced down the bile in my throat and blinked through my blurry gaze.

"Olivia woke from my screams and started wailing. Eventually the neighbours called the cops when they heard the commotion. I thought I was going to die there."

I kept staring at his arm, gently running my fingertips over the scarring as if I could take away his pain.

"I fainted from blood loss by the time the ambulance arrived. The next day in the hospital, the cops informed me that Julius was behind bars and social services were there. When they asked me about any living relative, I freaked out. I didn't want to be separated from Olivia. So I said my mother had a brother, but they were estranged. They found a way to contact Vance and Julia, who immediately stepped up. It was a miracle. For once in my miserable existence, I'd been granted a fresh start."

I could barely contain my broken cries. Cade crushed me in his arms, laying his head against mine. Treating me like his lifeline.

"The thought of you going through that breaks my heart. I'm so sorry, querido. I wish I could make it better."

I wished I could go pay this Julius motherfucker a visit in jail with a baseball bat and hurt him the same way he'd hurt my Princepin.

"You are making it better. By being here with me. By listening." Cade's body trembled and he wiped the tears from my cheeks. His own eyes were wet before he closed them and kissed me. It was a healing kiss, serving to expel all the toxins rumbling inside of him.

I was the anchor reminding him he was here and now, and not there and then.

He lay back, taking me with him. For long minutes, we pondered in silence. He rubbed my back with tender hands and I kept my lips pressed over his left shoulder, trying to kiss away his physical abuse.

Sometimes good people did bad things. Human beings were imperfect, but we had redeeming qualities. We lived a lifetime trying to find absolute happiness and in that quest, sometimes good people strayed from their right path. Those mistakes did not define you.

But then there were those people who were just rotten to their core. Imperfect and with no chance at salvation because their souls were just that damaged. Those who hurt children had a special place in hell, and I had no doubt Cade's abusive uncle would burn in fire for all eternity.

I would fucking pray to it every single night.

"I love Uncle Vance and Aunt Julia, even if I can't say it to them," Cade said solemnly. His gaze was trained on a blank spot in my ceiling. "They were

the light at the end of the tunnel. They welcomed Olivia and me with open arms. Gave us a real home, food on the table, and another sibling. I'm so grateful for them."

I put my tear-stained face between his pec. "You're safe now. You have me from here on out. I'm never leaving you. You've escaped your nightmare."

"And now I'm finally living a dream." Cade tucked a stray strand behind my ear.

"Your scars don't define you, Cade." I cupped his chin and gazed deep into his eyes. Look at me. I'm falling for you. "You're so beautiful to me."

"You think I'm beautiful, Ellie?" He grinned boyishly, wiggling his eyebrows.

Well, shit. It happened.

I fell in love with him.

"Yeah, I do." I kissed him hard, my hand trailing over his abs and undoing his jeans. I grazed the waistband of his boxer briefs. He gasped. "Let me show you how much."

I spent the rest of the night showing him how beautiful he was to me. I showed him why no other girl would ever matter to him.

Because from there on out?

It would always be him and I.

CHAPTER 6

Chost of the Past

October 18, 2014 1:03 a.m.

CADE, 18

I watched her leave, my ache keeping me rooted in one spot. I didn't even care about the people who scampered by me to complete their dares, shooting me curious glances like they didn't know how to mind their fucking business.

Ella might as well have thrown an arrow tipped in poison to my heart when she mentioned Josh's name. My heart cracked open and oozed out pain that coated my insides slowly, so slowly, until it hurt to breathe.

Until I saw red, just remembering them kissing.

I never cheated on her.

And the last time I tried to explain to her what really happened, she slammed her balcony doors in my face and effectively shut me out of her life.

"The evidence is there!" Ella screamed, tears running down her face. "Stop playing the victim—I caught you red-handed in bed with her! You had her lipstick stains all over you!"

"It's not what you think—"

She raised a hand to my face, cutting me off as she thundered on. "Spare me your bullshit. We're done, Cade! Get. The. Fuck. Out."

I tried to grab her, to hug her, to let her feel how broken I was without her. I'd never cheat on her. I was in love with her; she knew that. "I love you, Ella. I'd never do that to you. Ride or d—"

Thwack. She slapped me.

Stunned, I swayed back a few steps until my back hit the balcony railing.

"Im dealing with so much right now and I don't need your cheating ass added to the mix! You wanted to break up, Cade? You could have just said so! You didn't need to shove your tongue down another girl's throat while I stood there watching!" she yelled, her face straining. She fisted her long black strands at the roots and shook her head, like she was trying to shake off my image. When that didn't work, she shoved me with both hands, as if she hoped I'd fall off the balcony and die. "Don't think you can beg for a second chance, because you're not fucking getting it. If I ever see you here again, I'm calling the cops."

"I love you," I said quietly, almost blankly, still shocked by her actions. My hand rested on my throbbing cheek. "I've only ever loved you."

"Well, ironically, I hate you." She laughed scathingly, expression scornful. "Have fun with your new girl. You both deserve each other."

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

"Please, don't do this, Ella—" I said desperately. We weren't done. We couldn't be done. "I love—"

Ella slammed the doors shut in my face. The sound was like the final nail being hammered into my coffin.

"...You." My voice carried off in the wind.

But my pain?

It stayed with me long after that.

She never believed me.

If Ella chose to believe the ugly picture painted by St. Victoria's socialclimbing assholes, so be it. I was not going to prove my innocence to her. She could hate me as much as she used to love me.

One day, when our time here was over, Ella would find out the truth and it would be too late for us.

Before the Remingtons adopted us, the elite children of the South Side had regarded me as dirt for selling drugs to keep myself afloat. I did what I had to do to survive. It wasn't like Julius Brown provided me with anything besides the bare necessities: old hand-me-downs that had more holes than fabric and stale cereal for meals. I would not be judged by trust-fund babies

who had never felt famine or worry over outgrowing their clothes.

Even after I moved in with the Remingtons, my reputation as an exdealer followed me at school. A spot on the hockey team and a shiny new girlfriend didn't change anything.

I was still dirt to these people.

And dirt had no place in their pristine circle.

They claimed to be my friends, but they were all snakes. They all talked shit behind my back. The poor kid from South Side's projects couldn't—didn't—deserve the life he was handed to him. He certainly didn't deserve St. Victoria's reigning Princess.

They would rather see Ella and me split than thriving together.

I spent weeks trying to heal the damage Ella caused. It still hurt to look at her. I still couldn't stomach the truth of that night.

The Rangers' captain appeared in my line of vision, looking confounded.

Shaun was in his navy hockey jersey with a flashlight hanging around his neck, leather gloves, a black cane, and a Doctor Plague mask thrust over his blond hair, giving him the allure of a cone head. He looked like a fucking overgrown garden gnome. Shaun Jacobsen the III was nothing short of a jester. "Bro?" His brows knitted. "Why are you here instead of with Ella—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence. I sent my fist sailing through his face...But he dodged it. I succeeded in knocking off his ugly mask.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he yelled, bewildered. "What's wrong with you?"

"You fucking set me up, you piece of shit!" I spat, shoving at his chest. He fell back a step. "You switched our dares. Jamie was supposed to be with Ella. Not me."

My enemy set up a trap months ago and I walked right into it. Shaun had saved me. Shaun had my back. Shaun wasn't supposed to betray me like this.

His confused expression twisted into anger and he laughed without humour, throwing his head back. "That's what this is about?" He tried to spank me with his cane but hit my back instead. I growled at him. "Calm the fuck down, Cade. I did you a favour."

My eyes nearly bulged out of my sockets. "Favour?" I shouted. "You're supposed to be my friend. That's my goddamn ex, you bastard. What were you thinking?"

"I am your friend!" Shaun roared, spit flying.

Initiators walking past us froze and stared like this was a free spectacle. Shaun turned sideways and roared at them like a monster, the same battle cry he released every time he scored a goal on the ice. They ran away with squeaks and the hallway was dark and empty once more. If I weren't furious, I would've pissed my pants from laughter because what the ever-loving fuck was this motherfucker on?

"I am your friend, Cade." Shaun's chest heaved with a strong breath when he turned to face me. Sincerity plastered all over his features. "I did this for you." He grasped my shoulder and attempted to shake sense into me. Or dislocate my shoulder with the strength he was using. "I gave you a chance to win her back."

My throat closed. "Shaun—"

"You're not over her, man. I see *you*. You're fucking unhappy. You barely exist off the ice. I'm worried about you," he said vehemently. "You want her back? Talk to her. Tell her your side. If you don't want her, then talk to her still and get closure. You can't go on living in limbo. It's fucking with your head, man."

He wasn't telling me something Joshua and my other friends hadn't already told me.

Twice I tried telling Ella the truth. She just didn't want to hear me out.

"You deserve to be heard as much as she deserves to hear your side." Shaun added to my dilemma.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Fuck."

"You know I'm right."

I couldn't even muster a glare. All my friends were right.

They'd seen the destruction that night left inside me. Goddammit, Shaun was a real one. I vaguely remembered him and Nico in my washroom, helping me as I puked my guts out after the party. No one mentioned that night to me, but we all acknowledged it silently. Shaun watched me retreat and turn into a broken version of myself. Nicholas, who I bartended with at Danny's Grill, noticed how quiet I'd gone when we worked on the weekends.

I had not healed from that night and they all knew it.

How did you try to echo your truth to the girl you loved, when she stood in front of you, eyes weeping and ears blocked from anything you tried to say because her head was swimming with her own demons?

"Clock's ticking," Shaun said somberly, but we both knew he wasn't talking about the Initiation. "You may never get the chance again. I saw her make her way to the teacher's lounge. Go get her, bro."

If Ella refused to hear me out a third time, that was it. I would go back to pretending like she hadn't broken me by losing trust in us.

We all knew trust was like a mirror. Once you broke it, it could be fixed, but it would always harbour a few cracks to reflect your past history.

Shaun bent down to pick up the mask I punched off. Guilt ate at me, so I pulled out the rolled joint from my pocket and lit it for him. "Here. Something to relax while you deal with Darla."

"This is why we're friends." He laughed, a throaty sound that instantly made me feel better. I handed the joint to Shaun and he took a long hit. "I owe you one."

No, I owed him one. For always being there whenever I needed him. With a slap on his shoulder, I walked away.

Towards the girl who'd been my dream.

But left me alone in my nightmare.

1:11 a.m.

The comfort I always associated with St. Victoria during the day evaporated at night. Instead of finding solace that we were on sacred ground, my mind

churned over the various myths that haunted the walls of this establishment.

The motherhouse was built on one of the gates of hell.

In 2001, Willow Young broke her neck and died in the west wing. Not because she was running down the stairs, but because an invisible force pushed her to her death.

Sister Victoria makes an appearance every time you go down to the crypt, where she and her fellow sisters reside. She does not like to be disturbed.

It had been over a century since the convent was converted into a high school. A hundred years for a hundred different secrets. On my way to Ella, I swore, when I blinked, the angels carved high in the ceiling moldings resembled ghouls instead. Even as my thumping footsteps echoed against the marble flooring, my mind imagined the rumbly chuckle of demons and the rough crackling of hell fire.

I was either hallucinating, needed to eat, or simply going crazy.

True to Shaun's words, I caught Ella's silhouette from far away, making her way towards the teachers' lounge.

My chest tightened once more.

Good girls gave you that warm fuzzy feeling inside your chest, but bad girls brought you straight to heaven.

My Ellie was the baddest of them all.

Maybe that was why I couldn't quit her. Maybe that was why thoughts of her would haunt me when I slept. Those imperfect eyes with tears like waterfalls replaying in my mind like a broken record.

I dribbled between heaven and hell. Heaven, because I was so close to my object of affection. Hell, because dread filled me at the prospect of communicating my truth to Ella.

"Ella!" My voice was inexplicably hoarse.

I chased after her, anger and heartbreak simmering inside of me like a storm. I wanted to finish this damn competition and, when she was riding on the high of winning—because we would win—finally tell her my side of the story.

I knew Ella heard my voice by the way her back straightened. By the way she walked away faster.

I wasn't a fool. I knew there wasn't a chance of us reconciling, no matter what Shaun and my friends believed. No matter what I wished. But I hoped she could at least hear me out so we could find common ground and act civil. Joint dinners along with Olivia and Emilio's playdates had gotten so awkward. We could barely exchange polite courtesies without her wanting to stab me.

"Ella, wait!" I yelled when I neared enough.

I spun her with a hand to her shoulder and backed her into the wall right beside a row of lockers. She gasped and placed her hands flat to the surface behind her, resisting the urge to use my body as an anchor to right herself.

I brought my face down, until my mouth was at her ear, nearly touching her gold hoop. "I don't know what crawled up your well-spanked ass, Princess, but you're going to put your fucking pride to the side and listen to me." I snarled, giving her the hateful version of me she wanted. I hated this version. But it was the only one she responded to now. "I want to get the fuck out of here. We can only do that by winning first. So you can either cooperate with me or endure my presence for longer than necessary. Got it?"

I brought my light between us to see her expression.

Ella's eyes got that doe-eyed look when I mentioned her well-spanked ass. It was the same speechless, needy look she got whenever she wanted me. Her lip-glossed mouth parted. If it weren't for our shitshow of a past, I would assume she wanted to be put on her knees so I could feed her my cock.

I know she felt it too. This strong connection brimming with sexual energy from the moment she spotted me in her garden. It never left us.

I wondered if it ever would.

She hated me, but some part of her still wanted me.

"Cat got your tongue, Ellie?" I threw her own words back at her.

She snapped out of her trance, shaking her head. "Fine. We'll work together, but don't fucking piss me off."

She tried to flip her hair over her shoulder, but her hand stayed poised in the air, momentarily forgetting that she chopped off her long, luscious strands. I wanted to ask her why she cut such beautiful hair. Perhaps she wanted a fresh start after our breakup.

Ella noticed me staring and used both hands to push me back until I relented. "The next dare reads '*The bat resides where all hell creatures do*'. My guess is the teachers' lounge. If that's a fluke, we'll work our way from there."

Her tone, so sharp and angry. I knew it was Ella's defence mechanism. I couldn't even call bullshit, when I was the reason her hurt was there in the first place.

"Sounds good." I kept staring at her eyes, disappointed she was wearing contacts. Such a beautiful gaze didn't deserve to be covered.

Did people continue making fun of her? Was that why she started wearing them again?

I couldn't ask her these things. I feared it would invite more hostility because it would just prove how much we used to know about each other. How perfect we once were.

So I kept my mouth zipped.

Ella sidestepped me and walked ahead. Now I couldn't stop staring at her plump ass. I followed her like a lovesick puppy.

I missed her so much—her jokes, her laugh, her ability to always set me at ease—but fuck me if I didn't miss that tight model body. She was so easy to fuck, so light and weightless. I could throw and flip her around like a ragdoll. And she loved it, moaning wantonly when I thrust inside her in every filthy position.

No one could have ever known that South Side's resident Princess enjoyed being treated cruelly in bed. Daddy Cordova's little girl, so proper and so prim in her lily-white dresses, loved getting dicked down doggy style in her cheerleading skirt by none other than the guy he considered trash. Vance Remington's spare. Not his heir.

"Are you following?" More harshness.

"Yeah."

We passed by the small alcove hidden beside the exit leading to the school's backyard, and I remembered how many times we found ourselves there after hockey or cheerleading practice.

How did two people who knew each other like the backs of their hands, who were tighter than a nun's vow, who never succumbed to gossip and rumours, suddenly come to this point? I thought Ella was my future. My reward from the universe for everything I suffered through.

I thought I was going to marry this girl.

Walking down the hallway was like a stroll down memory lane and not a good one. The tightness in my chest got too much and I blurted out the words I tried so hard to keep within. "I know you didn't want to kiss Josh."

My olive branch to her.

Ella abruptly halted.

I didn't think she'd answer me, but she did.

"No, I really didn't," she whispered, a tad bit broken.

Relief sucker punched through my stomach at her confirmation. She never wanted him. That kiss was just a power play move.

I forgave her for it.

A masochistic part of me was tempted to ask her if she meant what she said before. Did he kiss better than me? Did he make her feel the things I did with just one simple kiss?

Lost in a trance, our feet carried us to our next destination as we floated in that small space between now and the past. We finally reached the teachers' lounge after what felt like an eternity but was mere seconds.

"Just so we're clear: I still hate you."

I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

I was done with those three words. I could take them from anyone else, but not her.

Not now. Not ever.

I crowded Ella, my chest pressing up against her back. Our reflections

shimmered in front of us through the small glass window in the door. My exgirlfriend released a small sigh. I tucked her pin-straight hair behind her right ear and brought my mouth down. She used to love when I nibbled on her earlobe when we made love. "What's wrong, baby girl—You want another round with me?" I fisted her hair lightly and yanked, tipping her head back. I relished her sharp intake of breath. "I'm game for hate sex if that's what your cheer pussy needs. We all know how much you loved it when I fucked you like I hated your guts, hm?"

Ella closed her eyes, the column of her throat flexing with a swallow. *Cheer pussy.* I had her right where I wanted her.

I bit her earlobe, just for old times' sake. Her eyes snapped open, and she glared at me through the reflection. Ella's right hand delved to the top of my head and knuckled my strands. Matching my fire.

"I'll give you one night of breakup sex if that gets you to leave me alone. Seems like you just need to fuck me out of your system, Cade. Maybe then you'll stop staring at me with that pitiful look every time I walk into a room."

Pitiful look? I cracked my palm against her ass. "Careful, Princess. I'll fuck the disrespectfulness out of you in no time."

She released a sound that was a cross between anger and arousal.

"T-This is a one-time offer, Cade." For all her bravado, there was a shaky quality to her voice. Fifty bucks she got wet from that one swat.

I feared sex with someone new would never be good again.

Because my ex-girlfriend? She was flexible, had a tight pussy, wasn't afraid to tell me what she wanted, and let me fuck her in the most jaw-dropping positions.

"I'm down," I rasped, nuzzling my nose against her collarbone. Her scent assaulted me—it felt like home. "If it stops you from giving me horny eyes every time I'm on the ice, then yeah, let's do it. You're cockblocking my game. Every girl at school thinks I'm still pining over your stubborn ass."

I hated myself as soon as the words were out of my mouth. But this was what she wanted from me. Mean Cade. Angry Cade. Cocky Cade. Not *I*-

love-you-forever Cade. Not You-broke-my-heart-but-I-still-long-for-you Cade.

"You're delusional." Ella tried to move away from me, but there was no space. "FYI, it's not like my presence stopped you before. You still fucked around with another girl while being in a relationship with me, so..."

I didn't and she would know the truth before the night was over. Then she could do whatever the hell she wanted with my words.

Taking my silence as defeat, Ella fiddled with the doorjamb, where a bobby pin hung strategically from an elastic band.

I should help with the lock, but I was too busy dirty-talking my exgirlfriend. I needed to remind her how good it used to be between us. Because no matter the outcome of tonight, breakup sex was on the agenda.

"This weekend. You and me. In my bedroom," I hushed, caressing the skin of her bare waist with the back of my hand. My thumb swept over her left rib and dipped under the knit of her orange bralette, right over the underside of her tit.

A gasp escaped her, but she didn't push me away.

I flattened her against the door with my body, thrusting my groin into her ass. "I'm thinking you put your black ski mask on while I fuck you against my windows, baby. I'm going to make you touch your toes while I fuck you from behind," I growled against her temple, my hands tightening on her waist while I ground against her. "I'll spank your ass into my favourite shade of red. You want that, don't you?" She exhaled roughly and it fogged the glass, our reflections momentarily disappearing. "Or maybe you'd like to split on my dick and bounce that pussy like the bad girl you are, Princess."

I bit her neck, enough to jostle her.

She fucking moaned.

I chuckled darkly.

Ella broke out of the spell.

She elbowed me until I fell back a step. She wasn't unaffected, that much I knew. Hell, my own dick rose to say hello to his best friend—her pussy. "You're all bark, but we'll see how big your bite is *if* I decide I want to fuck

you this weekend."

I had a big bite—We both knew that.

Or, at least, her ass did.

The teachers' lounge was eerily creepy, like the rest of St. Victoria.

Ella walked ahead of me after doing the honours of opening the door. Her flashlight jounced around the room in a quick sweep.

Not a single thing out of place.

I whistled behind her, just to show her how unaffected I was by her retort. She may hate me, but the girl still wanted to fuck me. "So we're looking for a bat?"

"That's what the dare says."

I smirked at her irritated tone.

My own torch ran across the room. A state of the art kitchenette lined the right side, a dark wood table for meetings sat in the middle of the room, and leather couches and a TV on the opposite end.

"We're looking for a Halloween prop, I'm guessing." Because I don't see any damn bats here.

Ella rolled her eyes at me over her shoulder. I always found it kind of hot. "Obviously. It's not like Shaun and Darla are going to let loose an animal here."

"I don't know. I wouldn't put anything past them." I cocked my head to the side. "I'll start here, you start on the right."

"Whatever." Annoyance laced her voice, but it was to compensate for her pride. Her reaction from moments before basically stated her attraction towards me and how it had never left. Not even waned a little.

Ella searched through the kitchenette like she had a vengeance. Knockings things out of the way recklessly. Behind the microwave, inside the cupboards, under the sink. I started rummaging through some folders sitting half-haphazardly on a faculty table, secretly hoping to find material on the upcoming tests.

"Are you even searching?"

I made a big show of staring at her and rolling my eyes exaggeratedly the same way she did. Her expression pinched like she ate something sour. "No, sweetie. I'm over here masturbating to Mrs. Blakely's notes on the upcoming Shakespeare play," I deadpanned. "Of course I'm fucking searching."

"Of course I'm fucking searching," she copied in a snotty, high-pitched timbre that sounded nothing like me.

I fumed but didn't add more fuel to the fire.

Minutes later I could sense us both losing hope but being too stubborn to speak up. I turned over every chair in the lounge, looked behind the photocopier and Ella even crawled on her hands and knees, checking under the table. I strived not to ogle her ass, but it was kind of hard not to in those high-waisted jeans that accentuated her small frame.

"I give up," she groaned, coming to her feet. She placed her flashlight on the table and dusted off her hands. "The bat resides where all hell creatures do? What a load of crap. Maybe we're looking in the wrong place."

I had a feeling she was right.

I needed a T.O., so I plopped down on the couch lined against the large windows overlooking the backyard. Hey, look. You could see the big oak tree where I screwed my ex-girlfriend during St. Victoria's junior prom.

I shifted on the couch and felt something sharp underneath the seat poking my ass. "Fuck, is that a stick?"

"Oh my God! You found it," Ella exclaimed with a clap and I shot her a confused look. "You finally found the stick shoved up your asshole. Need help pulling it out?"

"Shut the fuck up, Ellie." I dragged off the seats and lo and behold, it was a baseball...bat. With scratch marks and a piece of paper stuck to it. "Holy fuck. They didn't mean a literal bat."

Ella marched up beside me as I read the next dare. "Where the crows caw." I rubbed my forehead. "I'm seriously getting fed up. How many more dares do we have left?"

"We've already done three, so two more."

"Let's do this." I swung the baseball bat over my shoulder and walked ahead of her, my light guiding us. "I'm assuming this baseball bat means we'll be wrecking shit."

"Probably."

"Kind of like old times."

Ella's steps faltered, so I whirled around. Only to freeze when I caught the anguished look in her eyes.

"Ella?"

"Stop bringing up the past." The rawness in those words tore me. They were more painful than any blows Julius had given me. "Please, just stop."

Shaun's words echoed in my mind. I was doing this all wrong. You deserve to be heard as much as she deserves to hear your side. "Ella, I'm sorry—"

"You were the biggest mistake of my life. The biggest lesson learned. And you don't even know it."

I stuttered back, feeling obliterated. The devil on my left shoulder threw his head back and laughed, stroking my misery. Pressure in my sternum robbed me of my next inhale.

I hate you.

You were the biggest mistake of my life.

How did you look at the girl you once loved and told her she still held your heart in the palm of her hands?

How did you tell her that you were waiting for her to cool down just enough so you could try to tell her the truth one more time?

How did you tell her that you were scared she'd hear your stance and still not forgive you, because every story had more than one side?

But I couldn't say any of those things to her because the girl in front of me wasn't my best friend. This wasn't my rebellious Ximena. Or my sweet Ellie.

The girl in front of me was a vengeful, ice-cold princess perusing the world from her balcony in her ivory tower. Keeping me and the world at

arm's length. So we could see the wreckage brimming inside of her but never get close enough to build back the broken pieces.

For months I watched her defences crawl back up until she frosted over.

And as I gazed at her with yearning and heartbreak that she could never see—that she *refused* to see—I spoke one piece of my truth. "Why would I ever cheat on you, when you were all I ever wanted, Ella?"

"You tell me." The sad words ricocheted inside of me as she strolled by like I didn't exist.

Ignoring me like she did all summer.

Effectively turning me into a ghost of her past.

CHAPTER 7

Chaos

November 13, 2013 10:21 p.m.

CADE, 17

Tonight was all about setting the record straight.

In other words, getting revenge.

My girlfriend and I had a few bones to pick with the gossip-hungry mongrels who had spent the better part of the year talking shit about our relationship. Ella and I became public nearly a year ago—to everyone but our parents—and ever since then, our enemies had taken no pain in hiding their contempt.

A dirty, ex-drug dealer and a shiny, spoiled princess from the South Side? A whole goddamn headline.

A lot of these people acted like our friends but spewed nasty remarks behind our backs. Ella and I were good at ignoring the sidelong glances and hushed whispers. Hell, my girlfriend revelled in their envy and jealousy. She always took it upon herself to push me against any available surface and make out with me until her lip gloss was smeared all over my mouth and I'd laid a trail of hickeys on her neck.

Until everyone had seen the show we put on.

We were *that* couple, and nobody fucked with us.

It was time to teach these people a lesson they'd never forget. Hence the checklist in my hands.

- 1. Trevor Williams
- 2. Kyan Landon

3. Diane Hill

Trevor Williams, president of the debate team and preppy-polo shirts enthusiast, started a rumour that I gave chlamydia to Ella and that was why she missed the start of the school week. It was worth mentioning that Ella and I hadn't even fucked yet.

Essentially, Trevor Williams was a load of shit. His ego took a major dive when Ella turned him down and started dating me, so he got petty. Therefore, we taught him a lesson he'd never forget: keyed his brand-new sports car. He was going to either rage, have a panic attack, or cry when he woke up and saw the mess we made.

I was okay with all three options.

The next target was Kyan Landon, one of the basketball players from the East Side.

Back in the day, I sold him and his teammates enough baggies of Xanax to drown Eastwood High's whole populace in a drug-induced coma. Enough to have them expelled from school, let alone kicked off the roster.

The new dealer on my old turf was Jared Roy. It came to me as a surprise when I found out because he was Eastwood royalty. Some of my friends ran in the same circle as him, but his dealing remained on the DL. Only a few people could get their hands on the A-grade quality shit he sold. I'd seen him around the city and he looked like a tough asshole with his height, muscles, and cutthroat aura.

But I earned my name years before him.

I may not deal anymore, but my reputation preceded me.

So Kyan should know better than to let his mouth run like a loose cannon even if I was no longer the one filling his pockets with illicit substances.

The basketball game at Eastwood High ended some time ago. Ella and I waited until the parking lot emptied before sneaking into the school. Kyan stayed behind to talk to his coach while everyone left. Now he was in the locker room, showering, while Ella and I slithered through the dark hallway.

Unseen and unheard.

The perfect opportunity to corner him.

"You sure you don't want to put your mask on?" I whispered, as I toed open the locker room door.

My girl leaned beside me on the wall, a hellish smile twisting her glossy lips. Looking incredibly sexy in her navy and yellow cheer skirt that showcased her long legs, a cropped black leather jacket, and a white top that covered just enough to be modest but left a teasing sliver of skin near her midriff. My fingers itched to caress her. Especially when I realized she wasn't wearing a bra. Her pretty nipples begged to be sucked.

But this wasn't the time or place to be having such thoughts.

Ella laughed girlishly under her breath, winking at me. "No, querido. I want him to see my face. I want him to know it's us."

Of course the little troublemaker wanted that. Even when Kyan recognized us, he couldn't do shit. It would be our word against his. Perks of having the name Cordova and Remington associated with you.

I tugged my mask on while Ella adjusted her gold crown, the one she won from Initiation Night two weeks ago.

I liked her dry sense of humour. Kyan Landon had blabbered last week at the Reynolds' party, saying, 'Oh, Ella Cordova? She's a slut. Easy girl who spreads her legs for anyone. Not surprised she's slumming it with a drug dealer.' My blood boiled when I recalled what he'd said. However, my girlfriend was here to show him she was nothing short of a princess, of a fucking queen in the making.

Ella wasn't easy or a slut (and, even if she were, none of his motherfucking business, thank you very much). She didn't spread her legs for anyone. Only me and just so I could rub her sweet little pussy to orgasm. As for myself, I stopped dealing drugs once I moved in with the Remingtons.

Kyan was talking straight out of his unwiped asshole, and I was just the guy to tell him where to shove it.

"Ready, baby girl?"

Excitement sparked through her body like a live crackling wire. "Ready." "Stay behind me."

With a deep breath, I pushed open the door and entered the boys' locker room.

Ella followed suit. A small click resounded; she locked us in. Show time.

We shut the lights off after flickering them a few times, the room now blanketed in darkness, save for one measly light poised near the shower stalls.

Letting him know Killian and Ximena were here.

Kyan cursed over the sound of the running shower. "Hello?"

My girlfriend and I shared an evil smirk before I took the baseball bat in my hands and grazed it along the row of lockers. The metal clang disrupted the chorus of the song he played on his phone.

"Is anyone there?" he called out, the pitter-patter of the water as loud as the exhilaration running through my veins.

Ella's booted heels echoed against the flooring as she sauntered forward, her hips swaying with her confident gait. She threw me a saucy look over her shoulder and snapped her fingers in signal.

"Oh, Kyannnnn," she sing-songed loudly. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Instantly, he turned off the water and we heard shuffling. I quickly ducked into the stall next to him, leaving the door open so I could have a view of my girl. The rising steam briefly blocked my vision.

"Fuck." I saw him reach for his towel. "W-Who's there?"

The look on Ella's face could only be described as wicked, a maniac-like glint in her eyes. The bad girl was out, and she thrived on this kind of shit. She fixed her crown before popping her gum in an obnoxious manner. "It's your favourite *slut*, baby."

She managed to make her voice sound soft, baby-like, and a whole lot psycho.

I puckered my mouth and shot her a kiss. She caught it and bit her lip to tame her vicious laugh.

Kyan's stall door opened and he stepped out with a towel secured around his waist, steam following him. He ran a hand over his face like he couldn't believe the sight before him. "Ella, what are you doing here?"

Ella grinned like a she-devil and reached forward to trail a teasing finger down his wet chest. I flexed my fingers around the bat. I knew she wasn't into him and, while we already spoke about the plan, it didn't make me any less jealous seeing her hands on him. "Heard you've been talking about me, Ky. Missed me?"

I couldn't see Kyan's face—only his back—but I was certain he was smiling, falling for her trap.

"Oh, yeah? Where did you hear that?"

"Trent Reynolds' party." She openly ran her hands over his torso, getting comfortable when he didn't push her away. "A little birdie told me you wanted another round."

"And you came all the way here to scare me for some dick, instead of texting me? Seems a little crazy, Ella."

He cupped her waist and I saw red. She teasingly tugged at his towel. "Mhm. I thought that's what you liked about me, Ky. That I'm *loca*, as you put it."

"You know I'm always down for you." He leaned forward like he was trying to kiss her, but Ella dodged it, pretending to play coy. "I broke you in first, and I'm down to do it again."

The reminder that he took her virginity two years ago and left her in the dust like yesterday's trash did it for me.

Ella's eyes flickered to mine and Kyan tilted his head, as if to follow her line of vision before I came out of the stall.

Ella pushed Kyan away.

He stumbled back.

Then I was all over him.

I attacked him from behind. My baseball bat came around until I choked him, my arms barricading him and my knee pressing against his back. I brought my mouth down to his ear when he released a muffled cry. "Surprise, motherfucker."

When he realized who I was, he tried in vain to fight me. But I was taller, bigger, stronger.

Ella's giggle rang in the air and Kyan scrambled to hold the baseball bat. He stumbled into my frame when I dug the bat deeper, cutting his air supply. I'd let him breathe in a moment after I got my message across.

"Bet you didn't expect me, eh?" I taunted with a growl. "What did you say about my girl? You wanna break her in again? How about I break your face in, Kyan?"

His arms flailed as he tried to scratch me.

"Listen to me, you piece of shit." I snarled. Ella popped another gum bubble and pretended to inspect her orange nails. "I don't know who you fucking think you are, but if you call my girl a slut ever again, I'll fuck you up. You called me a dirty gangster at the party? I'll show you a dirty gangster. This isn't a threat; it's a fucking promise."

I let him breathe by giving him an inch and he tumbled out a gasp. "Y-You—"

I choked him once more and his entire body spasmed. I lowered us to the ground, dropping to my knees and keeping my hold on him. "You think he's getting what he deserves, baby?"

"I think he deserves to be punished for calling me a *puta*." Ella inserted with a saccharine smile. "What do you think, *querido*?"

She damn well knew what I thought. We chuckled together.

I knew this situation was fucked-up. But I didn't care. We loved every side of each other—flaws and all—especially the dark ones. Those needed embracing the most.

After all, you only truly loved someone if you accepted them for who they were.

And I long since accepted that Ella was a bad, bad princess.

Just like she accepted the part of me that wasn't opposed to teaching nasty people a lesson.

Kyan tried to speak.

I let him breathe again, then pressed the bat into his jugular once more.

"Ah-ah-ah. Can't hear you, Ky. But I'll make a deal with you. If I ever find out that you had the balls to talk shit about me or my girl again, you're done. It's my word against yours. Remember that, you bastard. Not only will I have your ass beat up by the kind of guys whose idea of a good time is terrorizing weak bitches like you, but I'll make sure everyone on the East Side knows your eighteen-year-old pool boy dick is fucking rich, married housewives for cash."

And that he had a penchant for dating younger girls on the side, if you caught my drift. I found it really fucking creepy how he not only fucked older women for money but had an affinity for the younger ones. This year, he took the virginity of one fourteen-year-old and another fifteen-year-old.

Ella's eyes widened. I gritted my teeth against a struggling Kyan.

I did my research on him, but I didn't want to tell Ella beforehand. I didn't want her to know that I caught Kyan flirting up a storm with her mother at the local Yacht club. To Silvia Cordova's credit, she looked fucking distraught by his junior advances.

The shock on Kyan's face was palpable.

"You called my girlfriend a slut, but the way I see it, the only slut here is you," I spat, releasing him when his face nearly lost all his colour. He fell on all fours, wheezing, trying to fucking breathe. His towel came undone. He was buck-ass naked and at his most vulnerable. "Sorry, I meant *prostitute*."

Ella crouched in front of him, running her fingers over his jaw. "Would you look at that, Ky? At least I don't need to spread my legs for money. I get fucked for free."

Kyan raised his head, shaking, panting, eyes burning, and face returning to its usual shade. He understood. One simple call and I could have him

eating the scum at the bottom of my shoe.

But I didn't need anyone.

A good leader always did his own dirty work.

One look at me and people saw what I wanted them to—quiet, reserved, broody. But this lethal side of mine? It only came out to play when you fucked with my loved ones.

I grasped a handful of his hair and jerked him back. Humiliation was etched into his expression, but he didn't try to fight. He knew I was right. "Nod if you understand me. You will not speak a word about tonight. Unless you want to be kicked off the basketball team and turned into a social pariah. I will not hesitate. Wash my girl's and my name out of your mouth, or you'll regret it."

He didn't nod.

I shook his head and barked, "Nod."

He finally did, defeated.

"Good boy, Ky." Satisfied, Ella patted his cheek condescendingly. "Calling a girl a slut shouldn't make you feel powerful. It's a derogatory term. Take it out of your vocabulary. I could fuck a new guy every day if I wanted and it still wouldn't make me a slut. I hope you learned your lesson, sweetie. If not, Killian here would be more than happy to teach it to you again."

Kyan stared at her, fear and shock having robbed him of breath.

I got up and gave Ella a hand. Kyan's dick looked sad and shrivelled, but his mind seemed too far away to care that it was exposed.

He didn't see us coming. They never did.

Ella carefully pushed his forgotten towel over his lap, giving him an ounce of kindness he didn't deserve.

We walked out together, hand in hand, and I mentally crossed out his name from our checklist.

My mask was in place.

Ella's crown poised straight.

And nothing but chaos left in our wake.

Just the way we liked it.

We ran across the student parking lot, blending in with the darkness of the night. I was parked in a secluded corner, canopied by trees. We chose to ride on my motorcycle for a fast escape and to remain as inconspicuous as possible.

Ella's breaths beside me were laced with thrill. "Oh my God. I cannot believe we did that."

We reached my Shadow and Ella switched her crown for a helmet, and I pulled my mask off, handing it to her for safekeeping. "We gotta go before we get caught, babe."

"Vamos, mi amor."

She straddled me and we took off. With Ella's squeals, my rushing heartbeat, and the breeze as our companion, tonight was unforgettable. These were the moments I felt closest to my girl. When I provided for her. When I delivered justice for her. When I brought a smile to her face and happiness to that flawed gaze.

I wished she realized there was beauty in all things we deemed imperfect. As her beholder, this girl...She was nothing short of stunning. The layers she kept hidden behind the exterior she built to please her parents, I held them on a pedestal. Funny. Rebellious. Carefree. Artistic. And so much fucking more.

I could fill a notebook with poetry to describe my love for her.

Ella knocked down every wall of mine. Before her, I longed to remain in my own solitude, but she was there, every day, with a bright grin, telling me she wanted to study with me, hang with me, watch a movie with me...Until I felt consumed by her.

I'd do anything for Ella Ximena Cordova.

"You good, baby?" I called out to her, driving us to the South Side.

I felt Ella's smile against my neck. "So good."

Diane Hill was next on our list.

During one of the big thanksgiving soirées the Cordovas liked to host every year, Diane Hill caught Ella and me sneaking kisses behind a pillar. Okay, more like her wine-drunk self caught me fingering the soul out of Ella while I whispered the nastiest shit she'd ever heard.

"Bad princesses get finger-fucked, Ellie." I nipped her earlobe, moving my fingers faster while she moaned, burrowing her face in my shoulder. "Don't they?"

I thought we were being discreet from prying eyes.

One look at us scandalized Principal Hill and sent her granny panty-wearing ass into *sobertown*. She didn't say anything, though, because Francisco Cordova was endorsing her upcoming mayoral campaign and she needed all the support.

But she did cast her nose high in the air and give me a look that was supposed to...deflate my boner? I didn't know. But it had the same effect.

Principal Hill judged me the same way a lot of the kids at St. Victoria did.

Then, two weeks ago, the hockey team played a prank on the cheerleading squad. However, Shaun took it a step further by lacing maple syrup under the hem of Darla's skirt and leaving a note attached that read 'you'll be sticky just like this after a night with me'. Diane Hill found out and for some reason thought I was the one responsible. I didn't bother correcting because you always had to have your boys' backs and, where I came from, snitches get stitches. As punishment, Diane gave me a week's worth of detention. I missed two practices and two home games. Darla, to her credit, was horrified that her mom targeted me and even tried to right the wrong, but the damage was done.

It seemed like Diane Hill held a personal grudge against me. My detention was to teach the hockey team a lesson, but she made it clear it was also a lesson for bad boys who defiled good girls.

Clearly, she lived in archaic times.

"I want a chocolate milkshake from Marnie's shack," Ella hollered behind me. Her arms tightened around my waist as I took a right turn. "After we're done. Promise!"

We finally reached our destination. St. Victoria's newly renovated indoor hockey arena, courtesy of hefty monetary contributions from South Side's richest families, including the Remingtons. It was a short walking distance from campus. Construction finished three weeks ago. Pristine with white bricks, it begged to be marred with graffiti. It was, after all, Principal Hill's new pride and joy.

Which was why I invited some of my closest friends to help with tonight's debauchery.

I pulled up in the empty lot close to a side wall so we remained hidden. A lamppost cast enough light to make our surroundings visible. I threw the kickstand down and texted my friends to ask their whereabouts.

Nate, Nico, and Sam were fifteen minutes away. "They'll be here soon, baby."

I took my helmet off and Ella shuffled behind me as she did the same.

She donned her knit ski mask and hopped off my motorcycle, coming to stand next to me. I could see the jubilation in her gaze. "Is it insane that I found you fucking hot back there?"

She liked when I was a little mean and cruel when we were intimate. And I wasn't surprised that she liked to see that side of me extended to the outside world when the time called for it.

I lifted her until she straddled my lap and gently lowered so her back rested against the handlebars. She gasped softly, excitedly. "A little, but I think you like my type of crazy, baby."

She grinned wickedly.

I jerked up her mask just above her mouth and caught her tongue swiping over her bottom lip, gathering the remnants of her gloss, leaving her lips shiny and oh-so inviting.

Teasing me, always.

I stamped my mouth to hers, drowning her needy expletive.

In a matter of seconds, I was enraptured in everything that was her,

cocooned in that addictive jasmine and orange blossom scent.

Ella's hands explored my chest, unzipping my jacket and touching my abs before yanking on my hips. She began undulating in my lap, rubbing her softness against the hard bulge in my jeans. I groaned raggedly, the sound escaping me akin to a beast's growl.

"C-Cade," she whimpered. The noise gripped my goddamn family jewels. "I n-need m-more."

I raced my lips down to her neck, kissing softly. Goosebumps awakened along her perfect tan skin, a mixture of the cold temperature and my touch. She looked so lovely, hazy with lust for me. Her mouth wet from my ministrations, her chest heaving up and down, her thighs cradling my hips and her skirt askew. Black hair cascaded messily over her shoulders like an inky cloud. If I were an artist, I'd sketch this moment so it lasted forever. "Tell me what you need, sweetheart."

Instead of answering me, Ella gulped and guided my hand underneath her skirt. I cursed, closing my eyes for a second before squeezing the soft flesh of her inner thighs.

"I want to come all over your fingers, querido."

Fuck, she'd be the death of me. "We don't have time, baby."

"Promise I'll come fast," she purred, shoving her joke of a crop top higher, baring her flesh for my ravenous gaze. "Touch me, please."

This girl, she obliterated me.

I groaned and dived down, latching onto her nipple until she mewled, spewing slender fingers in the strands of my hair. I tasted her like this was my first and last time, licking and blowing cold air on her hardened points. She shivered, her whole frame shaking over my bike. My hands moved to grasp handfuls of her small mounds as I continued sucking. I loved how they fit perfectly in my palms. Ella moaned, arching more firmly into my mouth, seamlessly suffocating me in her essence until I was trapped in everything that was her.

She'll be my end.

All the blood left my brain and rushed down south, where my dick soared like a flag to a country known otherwise as Ella Ximena Cordova. With my free hand, I snaked my fingers over the drenched flesh between her hips...Only to realize that she was bare down there, save for a tiny string that she called panties. Oh, fuck me. "You're barely wearing anything, baby." I cupped her, feeling peeved that she left the house like this, but ridiculously turned on by her boldness. By her confidence. "Why, Princess?"

She panted when I tucked the string to the side and sank my middle finger into her wet heat. "I-I was h-hoping we'd b-break my rule t-tonight." Her breath caught when I started playing with her.

I pulled my finger out and pushed her skirt higher to see how *much* she needed me. "What rule, baby?"

"My no-sex rule," she breathed, inhaling sharply. If I weren't sitting on my bike, I would've doubled over from her admission. "I...I hoped that if you caught me wearing nothing, you'd agree to give me just the tip."

I gripped her waist tightly to stop myself from swaying.

"Ella." I shoved two fingers inside her, watching her swollen folds suck me down to my knuckles. She was so wanton, moaning greedily, snapping her hips in a silent command for more. "We don't fucking have time for just the tip," I growled. "Don't make demands you know I can't fulfill. Your pussy can have fun with my dick tip another night. But right now?" I withdrew my fingers, scissoring on my way out, then plunged them back in with more force. She loved a bit of roughness. "You only get this." Two quick thrusts of my fingers and her body twisted like a stripper working for cash. "Take what you need before my friends get here and see what a bad girl my girlfriend really is."

Ella loved my dirty mouth. In fact, she requested it after watching an infinite amount of porn. So I gave her just that. Because I'd give this girl anything.

Even serve her my heart on a silver platter.

My girl had a budding sex drive and I was just the guy to fulfill her

needs.

I strummed her rosebud with my thumb, my fingers stroking her glistening petals until her honey dripped all over my fingers. The noises she made were my personal hymn, and I basked in every breathy note, in every lilt, in every broken sob. Until she cried out with her explosion, rivering all over my hand. I had to muffle her orchestra with my mouth, in case someone was nearby.

Ella's expression swam in euphoria, eyes drunk off the feeling I ignited. My heart clenched and I kissed her chin, her neck, her stomach until she pleaded with me to stop. I licked my fingers and then proceeded to clean her with the handkerchief I kept inside my leather jacket just for situations like these. Possessiveness rolled over me when the blue material, embroidered with my initials, glossed over her pussy.

"I love you," she whispered, as I cleaned her while she lay back like a pillow queen.

I melted hearing those three words. "I love you, too, Ellie."

With my hands around her waist, I helped Ella hop off the motorcycle and slipped on my own ski mask.

She stopped me before I swung off, pushing me so I leaned against the seat.

"We have less than ten minutes." Her eyes glimmered with mischief. "And I want to return the favour."

I barely had the time to let those words sink in before my girlfriend crouched down in front of me and started undoing my jeans...

CHAPTER 8

Havoc

November 13, 2013 11:18 p.m.

Ella, 17

Baby, you don't have to—" Cade's half-assed protest broke off when I took him into my mouth, his pearl of essence coating my tongue with the first taste of him.

I peered at him innocently through my lashes. What was that, Cade? Don't you dare stop, his heavy gaze implored.

So I didn't.

Couldn't.

Wouldn't.

I drove my boyfriend to the edge of a thrilling precipice, his flavour and scent permeating my senses. He was full and hard and hot. I loved everything about him. He was the thickest I ever had the pleasure of worshipping.

Cade's breathing hitched and he dropped a combination of a groan and curse before his hand came to cradle the back of my head. His other hand was plastered to his seat as he placed his weight on his parked motorcycle.

My hands and mouth worked in unison to bring him to a mind-numbing state. I peered up, watching his stormy blue eyes narrow when I stopped for a second. His expression was barely visible through his ski mask, but I knew how he felt.

Excited.

Pained.

Overwhelmed.

By me.

Always by me.

"Ellie," he moaned when I spat on his dick. "Baby."

Whenever he spoke softly to me, I turned to mush. My core—still sensitive from his earlier touch—throbbed, because pleasuring my boyfriend was just as much of a turn-on for me as it was for him.

My tongue carefully lolled out against the underside of his shaft, tracing his veins. Laughing brazenly when he cursed again. I licked his tip before taking more of him.

My jaw hurt, but I put in the work. Seeing him lose control was a prize I cherished. I sucked Cade with vigor and zeal, like my favourite orange-flavoured lollipop. My body sang in response to his low grumbles. His dirty taunts. His pleas to let him come.

Ah, fuck, Ellie. That's so good.

Suck my dick, Princess. Suck it just like that.

You love satisfying your Princepin, don't you?

Cade's hips pumped—the pace gentle and in time with my movements. He hit a spot that made me gag. I championed through as his rough exhales increased with our tempo. Giving him control. Letting him live out his fantasies.

"I'm going to fucking come, baby," Cade husked, throwing his head back in abandonment.

He squeezed the back of my neck in warning. I whimpered, but it was muffled by all of *him*.

Cade finished in my mouth; I loved the taste of him.

I swallowed like the sexual deviant he claimed I was. His body moved with a tremor as he pulled out of my mouth. I licked my lips and cleaned my chin, where a little bit of him dribbled.

He watched me suck my fingertips in awe, panting, "Goddamn, Ella."

I winked at him as I got up.

We cleaned up and he tucked himself back in the confinements of his

jeans before yanking me into his arms. He breathed harshly into my neck, still coming down from his high.

"Tomorrow after practice, your ass is mine. I don't care what excuse you give your parents, but you're sleeping over," he rasped, nicking my collarbone with his teeth. I yelped, then giggled. He soothed the rough marking with a kiss. "I'm going to play *just the tip* with your pussy. All night long. And you're going to leave your skirt on while I do it. You with me, baby?"

The blood in my veins sizzled at the tantalizing offer. "Sounds perfect, querido."

A white mustang pulled up beside us, causing us to shield our eyes from the high beams. Pounding bass and music filled the lot. Nicholas King lowered his driver's side window and hollered at us, "Yo, lovebirds!"

Samuel's and Nathaniel's laughter boomed in the background. Cade and I chuckled.

His three friends piled out, complete in black hoodies and black jeans.

Cade shook his head. "You're late."

"Yeah, so?" Sam said, a twinkle in his eyes. "Did you really think we would let you have all the fun by yourself?" He twirled a crowbar in his gloved hands before heading over to me. "Ella! What's up, baby girl?"

Samuel Rafael Adams, forever a charmer. The rumour was his parents clearly despised him since his name was so similar to a beer brand.

He walked over to me in his six-foot-four glory and hooked a muscular arm around my neck, drawing me in for a side hug. I returned it by placing a hand on his chest.

"Hey, you! What's the crowbar for?"

With his dirty-blond hair, green eyes, and mischievous smile, Sam was notorious for being Northwind High's bad boy. He just had the kind of aura that commandeered the ladies' attention and he basked in it, like a true Italian Casanova. Sam was a wide receiver for Northwind High's football team—Number 28—and, behind closed doors, a young, ambitious cage fighter, waiting to make his entry into the underground scene.

Complete trouble, if you asked me.

He grinned down at me in his cocksure manner. "Oh, you know, just in case someone tries to fuck with us."

"Hey, *chica*. Looking good." Nico high-fived me. "What are you still doing with this loser, eh?"

He referred to my boyfriend. I burst out laughing. "Play nice. You know I like him."

Out of all my boyfriend's friends, Nico and I bonded easily because of our Latin background. He was also the sweetest out of the bunch. Wild inky curls that could never be tamed, and brown sultry eyes that gave him the appearance of a suave caveman. He'd been dubbed as Papi King through social media by the female population of our high schools, a nickname that made him blush to the heavens.

He reminded me a lot of Cade. While my boyfriend managed to shed away his shy demeanour with time, Nico was one of those boys who retained his, even at seventeen. He kept away from girls and acted like he didn't notice their lingering gazes whenever we went to parties.

Or at his illegal drag races.

Nico and my boyfriend did that handshake thing boys did whenever they greeted each other. Sam continued surveying our surroundings and then... Nico pulled out a cigarette and Cade asked for one too. I pretended to overlook it, but slight anger simmered inside my gut.

I understood if he needed to relax after what took place with Kyan, but I literally just sucked him dry. Wasn't he relaxed enough? Maybe he was doing it to look cool in front of his friends.

Cade stopped smoking shortly after we met. Mostly because of hockey and secondly because of his family's strict rules. He mentioned he started chain-smoking after the abuse he suffered at Julius' hands.

I understood it. Truly.

And I wasn't opposed to the occasional weed, but cigarettes were a big, fat no. Last year, *mi tío* in Mexico died from lung cancer. He was an avid

smoker. I wasn't close to him, but *mi mamá* mourning him had hugely impacted our whole family. It helped me put my life into perspective. It was too precious to be spent destroying our lungs.

I chose not to make a big deal about it in front of his friends. This conversation wasn't being put to the grave. Only filed away for later.

After all, my boyfriend accepted all my flaws. So I had to do the same.

Sam gave me a sidelong glance and I realized I didn't hide my contempt properly. I cleared my throat. "Where's Nate?"

Sam rubbed my shoulder gently to calm me down. "Just getting spray paint cans from the trunk."

Nate hauled a backpack over his shoulder and the sound of spray paint cans crashing together echoed as he made his way to us. He tried to ruffle my hair, but I wore my mask, so it was more like an awkward head pat. "Hey, sweetheart."

"Hey, querido," I shot back and Cade gave me a playful glare because I used his special endearment on another. Call me petty, why don't you.

I used to tease my boyfriend that if I didn't end up with him, I would've tried my luck with Nathaniel Nereus Zeferino—a walking, talking, modernday Greek god. One of the handsomest guys I ever saw. Like Sam's blond mop, he wore his black hair fuller on the top and cropped shorter on the sides. Two diamond studs glinted in his earlobes and only added to his masculinity. He sported a five o'clock shadow that only appealed to his movie-star looks.

The boys had been friends for a while. Sam met Nate a year ago when they enrolled in the same fight club. Nate and Nico met at Westwood High. And Cade met Nicholas at one of his races. We all went to different high schools, yet our friendship just worked.

Once the guys pulled on their masks, we headed to the side of the indoor arena, our phones illuminating our path. Cade stepped close to me, but I kept a bit of distance...He smelled like cigarette smoke and I hated that.

He ground his jaw and kept silent.

Light from a distant lamppost lit the wall we planned on painting. This was Cade's revenge. Principal Hill held a small, immature vendetta against him, and this was his way of dishing it back.

No other schools in the district had an indoor area of this calibre and we would enjoy every minute of ruining it with street art.

Nate dropped the backpack on the ground and we rummaged through it. Sam and I started fighting over the only blue aerosol paint can. Because he was a big baby, he refused to hand it over. Who said chivalry was dead?

Cade grabbed a black-coloured can and sidestepped us. I could feel his frustration. I bit my tongue before I said something I couldn't take back.

"I'm going to start there," I informed no one in particular. Cade heard me, but he continued walking towards the farther end to create his graffiti. Whatever.

I trudged to a spot on the right side of the wall, Sam took over the middle, and Nate and Nico started on the left side.

Nate, ever the artist, concentrated as he drew a black circle. Whatever he'd make would be a masterpiece.

As for the rest of us? Debatable.

Nicholas crouched beside Nate and started outlining the letters K, I, N, G. Nate looked down at him. "That's not slick, bro."

Nico shrugged. "I don't give a fuck. I'm not from this school or this part of the city."

Nate created magic on the wall—eyes with long lashes and dark brows. When I asked who it was, he smirked and said a girl. Choosing not to elaborate on purpose. Knowing my curiosity would kill me slowly.

"Your girlfriend?" I egged on, attempting to paint a purple flower. "What's her name?"

Seemed like his mouth twitched behind his knit mask. "I don't have a girlfriend, Ella."

Beside me, Sam painted a pair of boobs like he was Picasso's descendant. And Cade outlined his drawing. "Is that for Principal Hill?" I asked Cade. I already knew the answer.

He grunted in reply, not looking away from his work. Great, the silent treatment.

The night started out so well. I got revenge against Kyan. Now Cade was getting his, without letting me be a part of it. If he wanted to act this way, then so be it. I wasn't the one who smoked when I said I would stop.

So I ventured closer to Sam, who added the finishing touch to his graffiti. Nipples over flesh-coloured triple D breasts. "Nice. To whom are you addressing this, Casanova?"

"My future wife."

"Damn. I'm sure she'll be pleased to know you drew her so vividly. By the way, one of her tits is lopsided."

He tapped his chin. "You think so?"

"Hell yeah. Look at it." I flashed my light over the left one. "So who's the lucky girl?"

"Yeah, man. Tell her." Cade decided now was the time to chime in. "I bet you Ella actually *knows* her."

Nico seemed lost and Nate snickered.

Sam grumbled, "Leave me alone. There's no one."

His face, despite trying to stay impassive, said otherwise.

Why wasn't anyone telling me anything? "What's her name?"

Sam whispered, low enough for only me to hear, in reverence, "Anna."

Anna? I gave him a strange look, not really understanding.

He didn't say more as he went on to give the faceless body a vagina and sang something like an Italian love song under his breath. By then I zoned him out.

Cade nearly finished his graffiti. It was a life-sized fist with the middle finger up. Principal Hill might not know that it was aimed directly at her, but the symbolism was there. So was Cade's gratification.

"It looks good," I said.

"Say what you really want to say."

About smoking, he meant. I would have, but angry concocted with *I-know-I-disappointed-you* vibes still swirled around him. Cade was the kind of guy who needed to be given time to cool down before you approached the matter. I fought the urge to claw his mask off and kiss him but gave him space nonetheless.

Sam drew two parallel lines, two more sideways, and then we played tictac-toe while the others busied themselves with finishing their graffiti. I was X and he was O.

When Cade completed his revenge, I edged closer to him. "Are you going to sign it?"

"I can't sign Kill; it'll be too obvious."

"You could write PH for Principal Hill. It won't get traced back to you, but the recipient of the drawing is clear."

From an artistic standpoint, Nate's piece on the wall was the nicest. The rest of ours paled in comparison, looking like fugly, cartoony mishmashes.

"Good job." Nico clapped Cade's back. My boyfriend sprayed PH in small black lettering. "Principal Hill is going to shit a brick when she hears about this Monday morning."

Cade nodded but kept staring at me.

Sensing that we needed privacy, the rest of the guys observed Nate's art and made comments about it like they were at an art gallery. Sam made the universal chef's kiss sign with his fingers and praised it, while Nico pretended to bid for it.

"I'm sorry I smoked," Cade apologized low. "I promised you I wouldn't, and I did. You know I pride myself on not breaking any promises to you."

"It's okay, Cade. If you ever feel the urge to smoke again, talk to me, please. If you're just doing it because you feel pressured..." I trailed off and he understood.

He moved closer to kiss my forehead over our masks. "I won't."

Suddenly, police sirens resonated in the faint distance. We all looked at each other in alarm and quickly packed up, running towards Nico's car and

Cade's motorcycle. We exchanged hasty goodbyes and then Cade gunned it out of the lot.

He drove well over the speed limit, until everything around us blurred. My heart pounded loudly. Did someone see us?

I didn't even realize we reached my gated community. I took a deep, soul-jarring breath when Cade pulled into my driveway. I hopped off and Cade threw the kickstand down.

"That was fun."

His eyes danced with amusement. "I had a good time with you, baby."

I leaned forward, wrapping my arms around his neck. "I like doing bad things with you."

"Don't I know it?" he hushed. I took off his helmet and finally kissed him.

His hands delved under my skirt and palmed my ass.

And that was exactly how mi papá caught us.

He strolled out of the house, bloody murder strewn all over his features. Francisco Cordova looked like he was about to lose it. But he was a businessman before anything and he slipped into his collected composure once more.

"We heard you guys talking, *mija*," *mi papá* intoned, disapproval dripping from his tongue. "I thought this was Josh."

I closed my eyes and Cade's sharp inhale wafted into the air. "Papá..."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Señor Cordova," Cade taunted with venom. Mi papá's nostrils flared at his audacity. He demanded utmost respect from people younger than him, without realizing that it worked both ways. He had never respected Cade and this was the first time my boyfriend made it known. "Your daughter prefers Vance's other son. I hope you don't mind, si?"

My father didn't even spare Cade another glance. He glared at me, silently saying 'this is your choice, Ella?' I could hear his judgemental voice running in a loop inside my brain. Could practically feel the lecture headed my way. I unwrapped myself from Cade but stood my ground, meeting his

gaze without cowering away.

Cade was my choice and my parents would have to live with it.

I played by all the rules handed to me, but I wouldn't budge on this. Cade was mine for the keeping and everyone else be damned.

"Inside, Ella."

He left no room for argument. Cade's face twisted at the way my father addressed me, but I held him down with a hand on the shoulder. I gave him a kiss goodbye, a smooth longer than necessary, so he could realize just how serious I was about my boyfriend.

Cade rode out of our driveway and *mi papá* pivoted on his heels, all but stomping back inside the house, leaving a cloud of anger in his wake. He didn't even check to see if I was following. He just knew.

Right before I crossed the threshold, I heard the guard dogs howling, their voices carrying loud and poignantly in the air. I paused, feeling my hackles rise. Some believed that a dog's howl signified that death was nearby. Ironically, the good girl image my parents had of me died tonight.

There was no going back from this.

Mi papá would demand answers.

He wouldn't like my replies.

He paced in the hallway, the sash tightening his sleeping robe coming undone. His clothes and black hair were dishevelled. "What were you thinking sneaking out like that? You nearly gave your *mamá* and me a heart attack. We called you over sixteen times, Ella. We were about to call the police when we heard you outside. Where have you been this whole time?"

Regret slithered over my bones. It was wrong of me to worry them. I thought my plan —tucking pillows underneath my blanket to make it look like me—was foolproof. Obviously not.

"Where have you been?" Mi papá roared.

I flinched.

But I couldn't tell him what I did with Cade or our friends. It was bad enough to have committed what the law would deem a crime, but another

thing to involve my parents by telling them the truth.

So I kept quiet while he fumed. I felt horrible, but I could not utter a single word about tonight.

My silence unnerved him.

He was seeing me in another light for the first time. *Papâ's* stern expression scared me. He'd never been physically or verbally violent and I wondered if this might push him over the edge. "I taught you better than to act like this, *mija*. That boy is the reason for your change. I don't like it. End it with him."

Over my dead body.

"Maybe I was always like this. Maybe there is no change," I whispered, the events of tonight finally draining me. The adrenaline rocked away and I felt depleted all of a sudden. "Maybe you and *Mamá* don't know me that well."

My parents knew I was opinionated, confident, and unafraid of having my voice heard. They were okay with that, so long as I 'behaved' in public with them. They held onto this belief that I was meant to please their every wish and act like the dutiful daughter because image was everything.

It wasn't.

Above all, I was a teenager who liked drinking OJ mixed with Vodka at parties, who believed friendships were the foundation of any strong relationship, and who loved a sweet soul named Cade.

Francisco Cordova waited for me to conjure an answer he preferred. Once again please him with an answer he would like. Deem acceptable.

Tough luck. I was over this shit. Over trying to play their perfect daughter. I succumbed long ago under their pressure, but they were only seeing my rebellion now.

Art is not a career, mija. You will go to business school and take over the company. The hemline of your dress is too short, mija. People will speculate. Do not forget to wear your contacts tonight, mija. Remember to set a good example of Emilio, mija. Always smile bright and nod politely when being asked a question,

mija.

Mija, this. Mija, that.

Fuck this shit.

"I'm not breaking up with him," I said firmly. "You were all too happy to be throwing me at Josh, so what's wrong with Cade? You wanted me with Vance Remington's son. Well, look at that. I am with him. Cade and I have been together for a year and we are not breaking up."

"I don't care how long you've been with him!" Papá lashed out.

Mamá tipped out of their bedroom, hearing our commotion. She wandered down the stairs in her satin robe with a sleepy face and red eyes. I felt guilty when I saw her. I hated disappointing my parents, but even I needed a break from the constant pressure of being their version of perfect.

"Josh is a nice boy. Cade is bad news, Ximena." My parents only used Ximena when I was being bad. How ironic. "You've been dating him behind our backs and he's brought out the worst in you! You lie to us. You sneak behind our backs. We raised you to be a respectable woman. *No como una pendeja.*"

I glared at mi papá, rage rising inside of me. I was not a pendeja.

Just because I fell in love with a boy who didn't conform to their standards didn't mean they could lash out at me.

I never stepped out of line.

I never disrespected or insulted them. Not even when I voiced out my opinions.

I believed that respect wasn't just given, it was earned. So right now, with the way *mi papá* spoke to me, I wasn't in the mood to be respectful.

I stormed past him, my shoulder colliding with his arm. *Mamá* watched the whole scene unfold in surprise, sleep evading her. She reached out for me, as if to hug me close, but I shook her off.

"Don't you dare call me names!" I yelled, not giving a fuck that I might wake Emy. This conversation was long due. "I follow every rule you've given me. Tonight was the first night I snuck out to be with my boyfriend, but that

doesn't mean I deserve to be insulted. I made a mistake, but I'm not perfect. You want to be mad at me? Be mad at me. Ground me. Punish me. But do not think you have the right to insult me. I don't do that shit to you, so don't do that to me. ¿Comprendes, sí?"

Mamá gasped. Papá's eyes widened in shock.

"Cade doesn't bring out the worst in me! He brings out the real me. And if you paid close attention, you'd know that the girl you've groomed your entire life gets no joy out of being a people-pleasing daughter. This is the *real* me. Take it or leave it!"

I said what I said, and I didn't regret it one bit. Better they learned now that I wasn't perfect than later, when it was too late.

This was the first time I stepped out of line. But now that the truth of my relationship was out? I doubted it would be the last.

I walked up the grand staircase, feeling their burning gazes weighing me down.

They finally realized that blood—our blood—wasn't thicker than water. I would always fight for Cade, the rest of the world be damned.

CHAPTER 9

Hearthreak Hotel

October 18, 2014 1:41 a.m.

Ella, 18

Where the crows caw.

The only known crow on campus was Mr. Crowley, a math teacher on every student's shit list. The walk to his classroom in the west wing was packed with nail-biting silence. We were in a time crunch, yet neither of us seemed in a hurry to win this competition, lost in thoughts.

I distracted myself by admiring the gothic archways in the corridors decorated with Halloween garlands and numerous announcements stapled to poster boards.

Why would I ever cheat on you, when you were all I ever wanted?

I asked myself that question so many times. Was I not enough? Was I too much?

If Cade loved me the way he claimed, why did I catch him in the act with a random girl planted on his lap, lavishing him with red-stained kisses?

My girls from the cheer squad shot me worried looks when we crossed paths, but no one said a word. We weren't supposed to communicate with anyone besides our teammates. Although some of the hockey players ribbed Cade openly for getting paired with me, he didn't engage with them, despite his obvious irritation.

Mr. Crowley's classroom door was wide-open. Cade and I entered, keeping distance, and shuffled past other candidates. Two freshman girls giggled as they ran out, clutching a notebook with their next dare.

The door clicked shut behind them.

Moonlight seeped through the windows, giving the room an ethereal glow. Chilly atmosphere, the frost-bite kind, hung in the air. It was just Cade and me. No words were exchanged.

"We're looking for a crow, I think. I'll start on that side." I pointed my flashlight towards the end of the room. "And you can start there."

Cade's jaw worked like he was trying to contain a flurry of words. I couldn't, for the life of me, understand why he kept throwing our past in our faces. *Move on*. Lord knew I was trying.

Then to have the audacity to suggest breakup sex...

It'd been months since the night of the party, and while the pain inside of me had grown to a dull ache, it remained present like a shadow. Maybe if I just fucked him out of my system, I'd get closure. His ghost would leave me the fuck alone once and for all.

Humans wanted to feel accepted and understood. When you found the right people who did, you clutched them tightly. It didn't mean that those who accepted and understood you didn't have the power to hurt you. In fact, they had the ability to hurt you far greater than a stranger because they understood your weaknesses and strengths, and could use them against you. Take advantage of you. Take you for granted.

You had to know when to cut those people out.

And, if you missed them, you had to remind yourself that sometimes it wasn't the person you missed. Rather the feeling they brought you.

Cade was the first guy to accept, understand, and love me. He was also the first guy to take me for granted. To make me drink my first sip of betrayal.

I've made a lot of bad decisions in my life, but cutting out Cade was the right one.

"I wonder why we need the baseball bat," he mused, rolling it back and forth between his palms.

To bash your head in once this night is over.

I detested myself instantly for harbouring such negative thoughts.

The journey from the last three months came rushing back and my shoulders deflated. I had not healed if I was thinking this way. Those months were supposed to be filled with soul-searching.

Yet I only found the darkest corners in my heart and amplified them until a layer of tarnish covered the silver lining of my vital organ.

This wasn't the best version of me.

Suddenly this competition felt futile. What was I fighting for? A crown and title I already won? Was it really worth putting myself through the pain of suffering Cade's presence?

No. Nothing was worth experiencing the walking-talking depiction of your heartbreak.

I wanted to quit this competition and go home. An odd sense of homesickness swept over me. I craved my bed, the safety of my warm blankets, a tub of Häagen-Dazs, and reruns of '90s sitcoms.

Running away from your problems solved nothing. But when the next stop ahead was a dead end, turning around was the best solution.

With a deep inhale, I pivoted around to face Cade...who was busy drawing dicks on Mr. Crowley's blackboard.

I lost it.

"Are you kidding me right now?" I yelled. "There's a fucking competition happening, and instead of helping me out you're recreating penises like you're fucking twelve again!"

Didn't I just tell myself we were quitting?

Cade didn't spare me a look, but his muscles bunched up. The chalk in his fingers stayed poised in the air. I was so annoyed by his nonchalance.

"Is everything a joke to you?" My whisper fell short in the vast space between us.

Memories better forgotten blasted me, reminding me of the physical pain I felt after catching Cade. The hopelessness echoing inside my soul while I sat on the bathroom floor, tears streaming down my face as I accepted

my loss.

Cade slammed the chalk on the tray and dusted his hands off. "For your fucking information, Princess. I already found the next clue. Here." He threw the baseball bat at me, but I made no move to pick it up, letting it clatter on the ground. "You might want to get that. You'll need it to knock down the stuffed toy crow sitting on top of the armoire behind you."

"I don't want to do this anymore." I felt numb, transfixed by the triangle pattern of the flooring.

"This isn't about the competition anymore, eh?" He laughed without humour. I didn't flinch. "It's personal."

I pressed a hand to my stomach. "It was always personal."

Cade's face morphed in indignation, and he plowed his fingers through his brown strands, tugging harshly. "I don't know what you fucking want from me. You're not giving me an inch. You don't want to talk about the past and you refuse to hear me out. Fuck, you didn't want to hear me out *then*, so why would you now?"

I smiled, but my gaze was still devoid of any emotions. I didn't want to hear him out, because mentally, I didn't want to be dragged back to that night. The days that followed the party, I waited for my body to heal before my mind could give him a chance.

By the time my mind caught up, it was too little too late.

My silence spoke volumes because Cade banged a fist against the chalkboard. He brought that same fist to his mouth, like he was trying to physically stop himself from saying words I may not like.

He said them anyway.

"You saw what you saw at the party and branded me a cheater. Understandable. But never giving me the leeway to speak my side? Not fucking cool, Ella."

"What was there to say?" A bitter laugh escaped me.

His body vibrated with barely-tamed fury as he stood beside the teacher's desk, his knuckles clenched white. This was the Cade right before he

dropped his gloves on the ice for a fight.

"What was there to say?" he barked incredulously. He spread his arms out. "We were together for nearly two fucking years. You were my best friend! You were supposed to listen to me! I've only ever been there for you." He pointed an accusing finger at me. "Through every mood and emotion, I was your pillar. Any fucking thing you needed, I gave to you." In his anger, his fist accidentally knocked down the glass paperweight on Mr. Crowley's desk. It crashed, but none of us flinched in the aftermath. It was no worse than what already lay broken between Cade and me. "You act like I wasn't there for you, Ella—"

"Because you weren't there when it mattered the most!" I finally snapped out of my trance. I didn't care if the outside world heard the argument raging inside. This was long overdue. "You withdrew from me for weeks, Cade! You might not have cheated before the party, but you still cheated that night!"

Next thing I knew, his hands flung aside the student desk separating us. It skidded against the broken glass on the floor and collided with the next desk.

"Fuck you, Ella!" Cade seethed, a vein protruding in his neck. Raw agony splattered on his face, his body heaving. This time, I did wince, backing away, the soles of my boots crunching the glass beneath me. "I don't even know why I bothered with you. You've got so much damn pride. You ran out without listening to me. Goddammit, I wasn't just your boyfriend—I was your best friend. That should have counted for something!"

My stomach clenched at hearing those words. They were dragged out of his throat. Cade talked like he genuinely wasn't guilty. It didn't settle well with me.

Because if he wasn't guilty...

"The evidence was there. What was I supposed to do?" I goaded him, seconds away from picking up the baseball bat and smashing something to let out the storm whirling inside of me. "You spent weeks ignoring me. When I confronted you about Irene Black, you bit my head off. I believed you for not

cheating on me with her, but the new blonde sucking your face off at the party says otherwise. You were unfaithful to me, Cade. Just fucking admit it!"

Two days before the party, I confronted Cade in the boys' locker room after hockey practice. There was a rumour that he kissed Irene Black last week at the Reynolds' party. From my understanding, he'd only ever kissed her once and that was at Initiation Night two years ago. And, that too, was for a dare.

Cade got defensive. He was disappointed I believed that about him. I confronted Irene too and she was mortified about the rumour. She told me she never had an interest in Cade. She'd been dating Jared Roy from the East Side for the past year.

The night of Josh's birthday party, I went over to apologize and to give Cade some news. Until I caught him getting dry-humped by another girl with lipstick marks littered all over his face.

"What were you supposed to do?" Cade spat. I glanced away from his furious face. "You were supposed to listen to me! You were supposed to believe me when I told you I loved you!"

I loved you.

"Instead, you played judge, jury, and executioner and shoved me in the confinements of an imaginary prison," he rasped, stepping closer. There was no more anger in his demeanour, just utter defeat. He grabbed my chin lightly and turned it his way. "You hurt me, Ella."

"You hurt me, too, Cade."

Our gazes locked in a stare down. This was the most honest conversation we'd had with each other. His eyes were twin pools of pain. Mine reflected the ache I felt after I left the party and ran back home, only to be dealt a bigger shock.

"I came to your balcony to explain, but you shut me out. Talking to me would have helped heal your hurt, but you refused me," Cade whispered. Our chests almost brushed. He tilted his face downwards while I angled mine upwards. "You don't want me to bring up the past, but you're quick to throw

it in my face. I'm not your verbal punching bag. I shouldn't have withdrawn from you, but I was going through my own issues."

Being this close, I could make out every delineation in his eyes. His familiar scent hugged me like an old friend. Comforting me despite belonging to the one person who had the ability to hurt me.

Who had hurt me.

I wondered if I should just come clean and tell him the truth. Make him understand why his betrayal burned this deep. We'd been best friends once and you always told your best friend the truth, right?

Time to rip off the bandage.

"I came to Josh's party that night to apologize to you for how I treated you in the locker room. I wouldn't have liked it if someone fired accusations my way with no proof. My emotions were running on a high, but that was no excuse to bite your head off." I closed my eyes, preparing myself for the next tide. "Yet saying sorry wasn't the only reason I was there...I had to tell you something important."

"Go on," Cade urged softly. Our breaths mingled. "Tell me, Ella."

I snaked a hand between our bodies and pressed it to my stomach, staring him dead in the eyes. "I was pregnant with our baby."

Cade stumbled away from me like I slapped him. "No."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and looked away, the moonlit sky beckoning me. "Yes."

My ex-boyfriend looked ashen as he digested what I said. I bent down to pick up the discarded baseball bat.

I was six weeks pregnant when I found him at the party, locked in his bedroom with a blonde grinding on his lap. Before going over, I took three pregnancy tests to confirm my suspicions, telling myself that I would break the news to him gently when I found him.

We were a team. We did everything together. Getting pregnant at eighteen hadn't been part of my plan. But life was unexpected and we both

had to deal with the fact that the condom broke when we went at it like animals in the back seat of my Porsche.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Cade breathed unevenly, his haunted eyes rising to mine. "You were pregnant and you..."

"I miscarried the night of the party."

I drove back home in a blur of heartache. My stomach cramped and I felt hot all over, like I couldn't breathe. Months of stress weighed heavily on me. Struggling to maintain my grades. My parents having marital issues and taking it out on Emilio and me. My boyfriend not having time for a meaningful conversation that didn't involve dirty talk. And so much more.

The pain in my lower abdomen increased. Somehow, I managed to drag myself up the stairs and into my washroom. Horror slammed into me like a wrecking ball when I lifted my skirt and found the verdict.

I had never felt such acute loss until that moment.

"And you were too busy with everything else to notice what I was going through," I finished.

Cade sucked in a choppy inhale that did nothing to bring the colour back to his complexion. He swayed and his hands went up to...cradle my face...but he dropped them by his side. "Why didn't you tell me, Ellie?"

My eyes stung.

I never cried easily, but something about this boy's vulnerability brought out my emotional side. Something about the baby I wasn't ready to have, but had already loved, brought out my messy side. "What would have been the point? I was angry at the world and needed to be left alone." I shook my head. "You withdrew from me for weeks and then you were intimate with another girl in your bed while your pregnant girlfriend watched by your bedroom door. In my book, you didn't deserve to know anything."

"Ella..."

I headed towards the stuffed crow sitting on top of the armoire. I knocked it down with the baseball bat. I was so over Cade, this night, and this fucking failure of a relationship.

Cade's frame was sculpted with heartbreak as he watched me walk towards the door. He looked floored by my revelation. A part of me was elated that he expressed genuine remorse over our dead child.

"Do you hate me, Ella?"

The question was uttered with such a sad bleakness, I paused. I squeezed the stuffed toy in my fist, crinkling the dare attached to it.

Did I hate Cade? No.

I hated the disappointment he caused when he was supposed to be the one person in my life to catch me whenever I fell. "I don't."

"I'm so damn sorry, Ellie." There was a thickness in his voice that made me whip around. For a second, I thought the dam would break and Cade would crack the way I had months ago. I noticed the unshed tears in his eyes, and it was enough to churn a slow burning in my own chest. "If I could turn back time and do things differently, I would. I'd be there for you. I'd hold your hand through it all. Fuck, I'd comfort you. N-Not as your boyfriend, but as the boy who was your best friend."

I closed my eyes, giving him one olive branch. "I believe you."

"What will it take for you to forgive me?" Cade stepped closer to me, but there were still oceans separating us. Our waves would never meet because our minds were no longer travelling on the same wavelength.

I smirked sadly, walking past him with my dignity intact. "A fucking miracle, querido."

I knew that was a lie.

Time. I would forgive him with time.

When he no longer possessed every waking thought of mine.

When I no longer dreamt of my unborn baby, sleeping peacefully in the cradle of my arms.

CHAPTER 10

Bad Princess

May 30, 2014 7:17 p.m.

CADE, 18

With a towel wrapped around my waist, I stepped out of the shower when I caught my phone lighting up with Ella's text message.

Sleep over tonight. —Ellie

Holy fuck. Those three words etched themselves in my mind like a brand.

Sleep over tonight. Sleep over tonight. Sleep over tonight.

Yeah, there would be no sleep involved.

Ella's 18th birthday was on May 26. We had a nice family dinner with hers and mine to celebrate the occasion.

But she *really* wanted to celebrate tonight.

Aren't you supposed to be at Aimée Island this weekend with your family? —Princepin

I said I have a big project with Callie due Monday morning, so I can't go. —Ellie

Bullshit, of course. Ella was buying us alone time.

I'd much rather be with you 99 —Ellie

The invitation was clear as day and I was more than eager to accept.

After Ella and I were caught sneaking, Franscico and Silvia Cordova snitched to my family and the rest was history. My adoptive parents loved

Ella and wholeheartedly supported us dating. Aunt Julia wasn't even mad that I kept it a secret for a year. Instead, she gushed at how happy she was that I found myself a nice girl and said I should officially bring Ella over for tea (Aunt Julia was British, go figure). On the other hand, Uncle Vance gave me the birds and bees talk (really fucking awkward). It basically consisted of him throwing a box of condoms at me and telling me there would be hell to pay if I made them grandparents before I graduated college. Uncle Vance was nice, but I heard from Josh that he was a crazy motherfucker back in his young days before Julia Havilland tamed his ass (his mancave had a wall dedicated to collectible knives). So I didn't take his threat lightly.

I'd much rather be with you, too. —Princepin

Ella sent me a couple of red hearts in a text.

I never doubted how much this girl loved me. She always showered me with affection until every corner of my heart laden with shadows was lit with her light.

I was no longer alone in my solitude.

I found the other half of my puzzle piece. The one created solely for me.

Ella Ximena Cordova, my first and forever love.

The only roadblock in our relationship was Ella's parents. In their rule-ridden, rich world, the optimal choice was Joshua Remington. They preferred the son who wasn't the black sheep, the one destined to become a corporate asshole and inherit Vance Remington's business empire.

I tried to win them over in the way they listened best: outward appearances. Yet no matter how hard I tried—picking up Ella for dates in Vance's vintage rolls versus my motorcycle, bringing Silvia Cordova flowers, dressing up in a three-piece suit—I would remain trash to them. No amount of joint dinners with the Remingtons and Cordovas could change that. They still deemed me unworthy of their daughter, who could not stop eye-fucking me whenever we were all in the same room so much that it left them choking on their wines with contempt.

Despite that, they continued to push Ella onto my brother.

Unfortunately for them, Josh was hell-bent on marrying Layla because 1) he was pussy-whipped sans having sampled the pussy and 2) he confessed to me one drunk night after we stole a bottle of Captain from Vance's stash that he was unconditionally in love with Layla Khan Anderson.

Safe to say, Francisco and Silvia would have to learn to live with me and deal with the fact that I wasn't born or raised in their snobby circle. I would never apologize for my past. My net worth may never be as high as Josh's, but I had Remington blood coursing through my veins and that would have to be enough for their pompous asses.

Especially if Ella and I had sex tonight. She'd be mine forever and I would never let that girl go.

My phone buzzed with another text.

Want to know a secret? —Ellie

The little tease excelled at torturing me. I threw my towel off and tugged on my briefs, while texting her with one hand.

Tell me, baby. —Princepin

I made a mess. —Ellie

My shameless girlfriend attached a picture of her thong-covered pussy. A wet spot stained the white fabric. I'd like nothing more than to rip it with my teeth before I buried my tongue in her tight hole.

You're going to pay for that. —Princepin.

Make me. —Ellie

Oh, I fucking would.

Aunt Julia and Uncle Vance were fully aware that I was going to see Ella. They weren't stupid. They pieced it together. We'd be fucking all weekend long.

I grabbed an overnight bag and stuffed it with all my necessities when a knock resonated on my door. I paused what I was doing to throw a look over

my shoulder. Seconds later, Olivia entered, looking adorable with a headband on her curls and a red polka-dot dress.

She bounded up to me, raising her arms in a gesture to be picked up. I dropped everything and hauled her into my arms. "Hi, Livvy."

She laid her head against my shoulder. "Hi."

Guilt assailed me. I promised to watch another Barbie movie with her this Saturday. But I'd be spending it with Ella now. Sue me on grounds for horniness. I'd make it up to my sister on Sunday.

Olivia wasn't much of a talker. She was a quiet baby when I came to live with her and Julius at fourteen. A year later after the Remingtons adopted us, she still didn't say much. Uncle Vance and Aunt Julia's concerns led them to consult a psychologist, thinking that Livvy might have trauma from losing her dad and having her normal status quo shifted. But her behaviour was deemed normal. She was just shy by nature.

I was partly the reason why Olivia was okay. As long as she had me, her surroundings didn't matter as much. Although she gained a new family through the Remingtons, she continued seeing me as her ultimate guardian. I was never just her cousin or brother. She was attached to me because she saw me as both her mother and father.

If she wanted a treat, she came to me. If she wanted to read a book, she came to me. If she wanted to play any games, me. Shit, I was still in the habit of doing her hair. While Aunt Julia did a better job, Olivia always looked at me sadly if I wasn't the one to braid her hair before school.

Perched on my hip, Olivia observed me quietly while I went about throwing more items into my duffel. Grey sweatpants and hoodies? Check. Moisturizer? Check. Socks? Check. Cologne? Check. Er, box of condoms? Check.

"Was that?" She pointed at the Trojans lying on top of my pile of fresh clothes. "It candy?"

Kill me now. I was corrupting her innocence.

"No, kiddo. You can't touch those until you're eighteen." She twisted in

my arms to get a closer look. I pulled her back against my chest, horrified. "O-Or until you have a boyfriend."

Olivia smiled toothily. "Emy is my boyfwend."

I didn't know what kind of 'boyfwend' Ella's little brother thought he was, but... "To be your boyfriend, he needs to get past me first." I put her down gently and crouched in front of her, tapping her nose. "I won't be here tomorrow, Livvy. I'm having a sleepover with Ella. I promise you I'll be back Sunday morning, okay? We'll have breakfast, get ice cream, and watch all the Barbie movies you want. Deal?"

She nodded eagerly and stuck out her pinky for me. I twined mine with hers and we shook on it.

I picked up a blue velvet box from my nightstand. Olivia's eyes lit up because she knew what it was. "You think Ella will like it?"

"Mhm," she hummed with a small smile.

I packed my bags and closed my bedroom door behind me. Olivia held on to my fingers as we descended the marble staircase. I could distantly hear Josh laughing in the game room with Layla.

One year later and I still hadn't gotten used to my new home. To say the Remingtons' residence, an enormous two-storey mansion with high ceilings and fancy moldings, was an upgrade from our previous shabby townhouse would be an understatement.

I found Uncle Vance and Aunt Julia huddled together like lovebirds in the family room with a random movie in the background. Glasses of wine littered the coffee table and I knew they were in that kind of *mood*—the one where they didn't give a fuck about PDA.

They looked over at us and smiled. I lowered myself to Olivia's height. "I'll see you in two days, okay?" She nodded. I turned my cheek for her. "Give me a kiss."

"Bye, Cadie."

After kissing me good night, she ran headlong for her parents. Squeals erupted as Aunt Julia yanked her into her lap and pressed pecks all over her

face. Uncle Vance joined in as he ruffled her curls. Olivia cackled, squeaking the words 'kissy monsters' at them as she attempted to playfully push them away.

Warmth filled my chest.

I had a lot of respect for Vance and Julia. Even though I didn't call them Mom and Dad, they were my parents, too. They saw two kids from a broken home and took us in without hesitation. They treated us like they treated Josh. We were their children in every way that mattered. They put a roof over our heads and food on the table. They cared and loved us, like we were an extension of them.

They were my home.

Uncle Vance tipped his chin at me, watching me take them in. "Have a good night, son."

Aunt Julia blew me a kiss.

I whirled around with a smile—one I rarely showed anyone except my Ellie—and headed for the door.

Blood really did not define family.

Love did.

A somber quality laced the Cordova Manor. The imposing tall trees

surrounding the property rustled in the late spring air, a dark melody ringing in the night. The only evidence of life was the light illuminating the pillars in the front porch.

I parked m

I parked my motorcycle behind Ella's orange Porsche Cayenne and threw down the kickstand. Francisco Cordova bought my girl her dream car as an 18th birthday gift and we had yet to christen it. Did I fantasize about bending her over the hood and fucking her in her cheerleading uniform? You bet I did.

My girlfriend already knew I was on my way. I could either ring the doorbell or climb through her balcony for old times' sake.

Ella loved danger, the thrill of every immoral act we committed. I

thought to scare her a little, catch her off guard before our nighttime festivities. She'd like that, if only for shits and giggles. A teasing payback for the dirty text she sent before *really* making her pay.

She was probably making *champurrados* in the kitchen (if I didn't already love the girl for her fiery personality, I'd love her for her cooking skills), so I could hide behind her curtains and jump out when it was time.

I threw on my black ski mask and jogged to the side of the house. A burst of wind chilled my bones and I gritted my teeth against the harshness as I climbed the metal ladder leading to the second floor.

I maneuvered myself onto her balcony and noticed...her French doors were ajar. Soft wind blew the curtains aside, enough for me to make out her silhouette lying in bed over a mountain of pillows. The lights were dimmed low and she was watching something on her laptop that I couldn't decipher from afar.

She couldn't see me, so I dropped my duffel bag and shuffled it inside. Change of plans. I was going to scare her like this. I stepped over the threshold, about to pull my phone out to tape her reaction when...

I heard the sound of moans, groans, and flesh slapping.

Ella watched porn.

And she was enjoying it too.

I cursed under my breath as my dick raged to life in my jeans. She might as well have signed our death warrants because I was about to fuck her until we both died of exhaustion.

Until her little gasps were all I heard circling in my mind as I pounded months' worth of sexual frustration into her tiny pussy.

I wanted to love my spoiled princess into submission.

The sound of metal rings skidding across the rod as I tossed aside the curtains and the balcony doors slamming behind me were the final nails in our coffins.

Ella screamed, shut her laptop, and flung it off the bed before turning to me with horror in her eyes.

The horror transformed to lust as fast as lightning.

I dumped the duffel bag by the side of her bed and practically loomed over her like a beast. My chest heaved beneath my black hoodie, my facial expression hidden beneath my mask.

Her own breaths were laboured as she gazed up at me, sitting on the bed on her haunches. An orange lollipop—the ones I bought her in bulk—stuck inside her tempting mouth. Now that her fear had evaporated, every line in her body buzzed with excitement.

Ella Ximena Cordova looked like an innocent lamb ready for slaughter. She looked like a sacrificial virgin with her imperfect eyes and long dark hair, dressed in my old white T-shirt and knee-high cheerleading socks.

She looked like pureness wrapped in a white bow, begging to be sullied by my dirty hands.

But I knew better than that.

This was all a disguise.

Beneath that good girl façade was a she-devil who loved to taunt me—who loved to get on her back and flip her skirt up so I could play with her juicy pussy while she whined all night long.

She was fucking wicked.

And I wouldn't have her any other way.

I threw my riding gloves on the floor, cocking my head to the side. "Someone's been *naughty*."

She slid out the lollipop and it made a wet, popping sound. The kind of sound my dick made when she freed it from the chamber of her talented mouth.

"Am I in trouble?" she whispered.

Such a fucking brat. I licked my lips and her eyes followed the movement with a small hitch of her breath. "You know you are. Can't send dirty pictures without consequences, Ximena."

"What are you going to do to me, Kill?"

Kill. I was always Killian when the mask came on. "What I do to

misbehaving rich girls," I said roughly. "Teach you a fucking lesson you won't forget."

She actually whimpered.

I grew harder. "Lose the shirt and get over here. I want to see you naked, sweetheart."

I unbuckled my belt and lowered my jeans and briefs, enough for my cock to spring free. She threw off her T-shirt and my vision was filled with her flawless tan skin and those coin-like nipples that deserved to be sucked. Or slapped, depending on the scenario.

Ella crawled over gracefully until she reached where I stood by the side of her bed.

Fascination covered every inch of her face.

God, she was beautiful like this...naked and at my beck and call. She kept on her knee-high socks, knowing I'd like to fuck her in those. But the little panties covering my prized possession would have to go soon.

"Take your hoodie off but keep the mask on, please," she pleaded, swirling her tongue around the orange lollipop like it was my dick tip.

I groaned and obliged just this once, taking off my hoodie.

She liked the mask too much since it added a touch of debauchery to our play.

Like instinct, Ella lurched forward, pulling out the lollipop from her mouth. She tried to get a lick near my hip bone, where I got tattooed two months ago by Nate. Before her tongue touched the small black X in her honour, I fisted her hair. She gasped in pain, eyes intoxicating from our little game and lips stained from the candy.

"Did you think you could send me a dirty picture and get away with it?" I growled, wrapping her strands around my hand and tugging hard. She dropped a needy sound that was far from a protest. "Answer me."

Defiance swirled in her gaze. "I didn't want to get away with it, querido."

That term of endearment bolted through my blood like a lustful arrow and sparked every nerve ending. My cock roared to full-mast, my erection inches away from Ella. She licked her bottom lip like I'd allow her a taste.

Too bad for her. This was her punishment.

"Good, because you won't." I palmed my shaft and she moaned. "Keep your hands to yourself and watch me jerk off to the thought of you, Ximena. If you behave, I'll give you a reward."

"What reward?" she challenged.

I swept my fist up and down my cock. "I'll lick your pussy clean."

That got her attention. She huffed, leaning back on her haunches again. "Fine. I can behave."

"Not likely." I chuckle-groaned, gathering the bead of pre-cum and lathering it over my cockhead. "You like it when I touch myself, baby?"

She nodded, eyes riveted on my throbbing dick. I still held her hair with my left fist as I jerked off with my right. Throwing my head back, I groaned. So fucking close.

Ella could never go unsatisfied. With an evil glint, her mouth curved around the lollipop and she began thrumming her pretty brown nipples. Massaging her small breasts with her hips swaying like I was already inside her. Goddammit. If I weren't trying to teach her a lesson—being denied the pleasure of her favourite pastime: sucking my dick—I would've wedged a pillow between her thighs to let her ride out an orgasm.

"Behave," I bared through clenched teeth. "Stop touching yourself."

She pouted, stopping nonetheless.

I grew closer to the edge, my breaths choppier.

Ella's eyes were weighed down by pleasure as she stared at my seven inches. "I want it, Kill."

"You're getting all of it tonight," I growled. "I've grown sick and tired of playing *just-the-tip* with your cheer pussy. You made me wait a whole year, so you better fuck me like you're worth it, Princess."

Mean, cruel words. She loved them. "Killian, please."

I let go of her hair and dived for her pussy instead. I cupped it, noting how she'd soaked through the lacy fabric. I fucked myself until my fist was a blur. I leaned down to whisper in her ear, "I may not have taken your cherry, but I'll fuck you like it's the first time you're getting dicked down. You'll like that, won't you?"

She whined yes, screwing her eyes shut.

"Bet you'll feel like a virgin."

She rocked in my palm, seeking release when she knew she wasn't allowed. I squeezed her pussy angrily.

"Bad princess."

"Please, querido," she sputtered, completely wanton for me.

"I'm going to fuck Daddy Cordova's beloved daughter right under his roof and there's nothing he can do about it," I taunted menacingly and Ella's breaths quickened in delight. "I'm going to fuck you deep, while you split your legs like a horny cheerleader trying to please her Princepin. You're only going to cry and beg for more, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes."

I snarled. "Open your fucking mouth."

Poised like a beggar but acting every bit the haughty princess she was, Ella opened her mouth like you would for the first drop of rain, the first snowflake, the first taste of a fine delicacy. My hand held her jaw firmly as I shot my cum all over her tongue, groaning to God. Thanking him for creating her.

My girlfriend laughed recklessly and swallowed me dry before popping her lollipop back in her mouth like she didn't just blow my mind.

I panted hard as my dick softened. I ripped my mask and threw it on the floor, running my hands over my face and mussed hair. "Fucking hell, baby."

I took off my jeans and briefs the rest of the way, nearly tripping on them in my haste.

She giggled, but the sound was muffled by her damn candy as she leaned back on her elbows, propping her heels along the edge of the bed. "I behaved, *querido*."

The position caused her small breasts with hard nipples to jut out, her

knees to point in opposite directions, and the white material of her thong to plaster across her wet pussy lips.

"Barely. I should still take my belt to your ass and give you another lesson."

Ella laughed girlishly. "La vida no es justa, Cade."

What's not fair is my damn dick having to wait a minute longer to dip into her tightness. "Tell me what you want, Ella."

"You. Just you."

I fell on her, grabbing her face and kissing her deeply.

My tongue pried her mouth open and I tasted the flavour of orange and *me* on her tongue. I sucked it and she mewled.

I pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses down her neck, feeling desperate for this girl. Ella moaned, encouraging me by wrapping her legs around my waist. My hands grabbed her small mounds, kneading as I tongued her nipples with a vengeance. I bit them and tugged until she screamed with pleasure and pain, her hands digging into my scalp as a silent plea for more. Her itty bitty model skinny body shook under my blatant affection as I hungrily spread pecks over every bit of her exposed skin. I wanted my love to sink into her pores and stay there like a living reminder of what I felt for her.

I wanted to be under her skin. Now and forever.

My fingers curled into her soaked panties and I dragged them off, tossing them behind me.

My eyes fixed on my destination as my heart drummed. Want it. Want her. So fucking bad.

I pressed my palms on either side of her inner thighs and opened her wide. Her pink pussy, sticky with her juices, welcomed me. I thrust a finger inside, fast and quick. Unexpectedly. Just the way she liked it. Ella gasped in surprise. Then I thrust another and held them deep. "Before the night is over, I'll have fucked every inch this cunt has to offer. Have I made myself clear, baby?"

She bit her lip, nodding. "Por favor."

Her wish was my command.

I assaulted her femininity like a man starving for his first meal, my tongue rolling out in one long stroke along her slit, parting her puffy lips. Ella writhed in bed, lollipop back in her mouth. "Killian!"

I wasn't listening to her anymore. I was on a mission to make my girl come. I'd done this enough times to know what she liked.

I massaged each lip with my tongue, sucking her folds deep in my mouth. I watched her stomach dip, her head thrown back in pleasure as small moans escaped her. The fingers knotted in my hair twisted tighter as I parted her flesh and flicked her with quick licks. She loved that, crying for more.

"Please, please, please."

I latched onto her clit and sucked hard. "You think you deserve the honour of coming all over my face, Rich Girl?"

"Y-Yes," she whimpered, body twisting. "I do."

I dipped my tongue into her tight opening, jigged it a couple of times, and groaned at the taste of her, my hands grabbing her ass and bringing her impossibly closer to my face as I fucked her.

Her wetness smeared over my mouth and chin, as her thighs squeezed my head like ear warmers.

"You taste so fucking good, baby girl. I could eat this sweet pussy all night long. Do you know how addicted I am to you?" My hands caressed her sock-clad calves as I ate her out. "You want to come? Ask for it."

Her reply was a moan as she arched her back, clasping her breasts like they would anchor her. "Letmecomeletmecome, please!"

"No." I bit her inner thigh.

I replaced my tongue with a finger. Then two fingers. Pumped in and out until I hit that spot. Her thighs started shaking. I rolled my tongue around the bundle of nerves as I thrust three fingers inside her steadily. Preparing her. Warning her. Making her come alive under my hot touch.

"You're a goddamn brat, Ellie. Who would have known South Side's spoiled princess could be tamed with a good tongue-fucking?" I goaded,

spitting on her pussy before I slapped it.

She cried out.

I slapped it again.

She tried to close her thighs, as if the pleasure was too much to handle. I growled and yanked them open once more. Before I pulled her deeper into me. "I'm so close," she whispered brokenly.

I could feel how close she was.

"Are you going to come for your favourite gangster, baby?" I whispered, my thumb polishing her clit. "I *need* you to come all over my tongue. I want your cum in my mouth when I fuck you—when I wreck this misbehaving, bad girl pussy. I'm going to beat it so good, you won't walk tomorrow, Ella."

"I'm going to come. I'm going to come," she chanted, moaning loud enough to wake every goddamn ghost in this manor.

My fingers continuously grazed that spot inside of her as I worked her clit between my lips. Ella went off like a firecracker, her deep groan my favourite chorus. As promised, I lapped at the wetness pouring out of her tight hole like a river. Then I kissed it to let her know I was about to fuck through all this tightness until her insides were molded to my size.

I raised myself on my hands, leaning towards her. A sheen of sweat covered her body. She raised herself on her elbows and met me halfway as our forehands touched, our panting breaths mingling with each other.

Ella rolled her lollipop along my shiny bottom lip, collecting her remnants before popping it back into her mouth for a hearty suck. "Mmm."

I nearly spent myself all over her bedroom floor. Goddammit. This girl was going to kill me.

I tugged the damn candy out of her mouth, squeezed her jaw, and melded our lips together. I pulled away just enough to register the glassy, turned on quality of her gaze. "Can I taste myself?" she murmured.

She knew she could. I made her fuck herself a year ago in the library alcove and lick those same fingers clean. This was the norm between us. My tongue darted inside the cavern of her mouth before I dribbled a little bit of

spit.

Ella was fucking nasty, moaning as I did so.

I loved it. I loved her.

Nipping her bottom lip, I kissed her cheek. "Hi, baby."

"Hi." She giggled, running her hands lovingly over my bare torso.

"You good?" I worried sometimes that my harsh treatment and bullying in bed surpassed what she could handle.

"So good," she intoned, stretching out her body like a feline.

My hands greedily ran over her naked body and I squeezed her ass cheeks. "I'm going to fuck you so good tonight. You're going to spread your legs while I do you dirty, won't you?"

She nodded when I teased her pussy lips from behind. "Y-Yes."

"Stay where you are. I have something for you." I shoved her lollipop in my mouth, finishing it as I reached for my duffel. I took out the box of condoms and...the velvet box that felt like it weighed a ton.

It was the living personification of my heart.

I turned towards Ella and, like every breath of mine, handed it over to her.

CHAPTER 11

Naughty Princepin

May 30, 2014 9:28 p.m.

Ella, 18

Every good boy was good, until his bad boy side came out to play. My boyfriend was no different. While he was rough around the edges, Cade always gave me comfort, friendship, stability, and love.

But Killian...Killian brought out the hellfire. Killian gave me escape, darkness, pleasure, and the need to act out just so I could be punished by him.

It was truly magnificent, truly liberating, to be able to share this kind of intimacy where no judgement prevailed with your significant other.

Basking in the aftermath of my strong climax, I watched as Cade bent down and searched through his bag. He finished my candy and pulled out a box of condoms and another blue velvet box.

Cade fell beside me, causing the bed to bounce. We chuckled and his eyes twinkled with happiness. That was all I ever wanted to see in him. Pure joy.

"Dude, you brought an entire box of condoms?"

"First of all, I'm not *dude*. And second of all, obviously." He raised his eyebrows. "You think you'll be satisfied with only two rounds, you orgasm monster?"

"Fair enough. So we've established I'm insatiable. You aren't any better, though."

"Nah, baby. I'm worse." Cade pressed his forehead to mine tenderly. "I

want to love you all night long."

"I want that too." He trailed his nose down the column of my throat, gently kissing the hollow at the base. "What's in the other box?"

Cade's mouth paused and he lifted his head slightly. A light blush appeared on his cheeks and he cleared his throat, giving me the blue box. My heart pounded, but I didn't want to jump to conclusions.

"It's your birthday gift."

"But you already gave me one." As an early present, we both got our left hip areas tatted with the initial of each other's middle name. I had a small black **K** and he had an **X**. It was our way of rebelling. Nate snuck us inside his cousin's tattoo parlour after hours to do it.

I was also a possessive girl, so I liked seeing my mark on him.

"Open it, please."

"If it's a ring, I'm dragging you to Vegas as soon as possible." I already had a part of him tattooed on me, might as well hyphenate my last name with his.

He didn't know, but I'd taken my favourite white leather jacket and bedazzled the back in *Mrs. Cade Killian Remington* with pearls and rhinestones. I knew we were young, but he was the only one I wanted to grow old with.

He was my beginning, my middle, and my ending.

I flicked open the lid with delicateness and went mute. A blue heart-shaped topaz sat nestled in a gold chain, winking at me in all its beauty.

"Do you like it?" he rasped, uncertainty bleeding into his voice.

I was awestruck. "W-Where did you buy this?"

"Buy?" He shook his head with a smile. "I had it made for you. It reminded me of the blue in your right eye."

I nearly sobbed, overcome by a multitude of emotions crashing inside of me like a tidal wave. I fused our mouths together in a desperate kiss, diving for him like he was my lifejacket. "Put it on me. I love it. *I love you*."

"I love you, too," he whispered, undone.

Without breaking from the kiss, he fastened it on me. It felt cold and foreign against my skin. I would warm up to it. Slowly. As it became one with me. I would never take it off.

Cade's mark was etched into my skin, his essence infused in my veins, and his love resting in the depths of my soul.

We pulled away when we needed air. But, really, all we needed was each other in this life.

Gazing at me with reverence, Cade's soul shone in his eyes as he lifted a shaking hand and squeezed my left breast. "You have my heart, Ella. It's yours."

And I was never letting it go.

Our mouths united again and we embarked on a new journey, having picked our crossroad. We sailed through like it was our first time kissing each other, gauging our reactions like we were afraid this was too much, too fast. The way we sipped from each other screamed comfort and *home* and we relaxed before a fierce sense of urgency washed over. Strong, unstoppable emotions danced like dust motes in the sliver of space between our bodies, making us feel like we were floating in the air.

We found our heaven.

His hair-roughened thighs twining with mine, his warm chest pressed against mine, and the hot hands roaming over my body with fragile yearning were all the proof needed that this wasn't a dream.

This was our reality.

Two souls from different life paths finally colliding and melding into one.

Cade's palm snaked between the valley of my breasts before coming to wrap around my throat. My breath hitched and he smirked against my jaw. "The night's not over, Ellie, and I promised I was going to fuck every inch of your cunt."

Those words accompanied by the low register of his voice had another wave of desire stirring through my body. "I—"

Cade used the hand still holding my neck hostage to roll me beneath his muscular body. "You're testing my patience, baby. Spread your legs like the good girl Mommy and Daddy raised you to be."

Oh my God.

His grin was depraved.

My knees opened on his command. Above me, Cade's expression filled with more desire. His swollen mouth parted as he stared at my treasure, blue eyes intoxicated with our game. His chest rose with a steady rhythm, his expression dripping in hunger. "Put a condom on me; you're ready for cock, Ximena."

Oh boy, was I ever.

With shaky fingers, I reached for the box of condoms. Cade spat on his thumb, using it to circle my clit. I moaned, grasping his shaft, engorged with need, and giving it a tug. All that thickness was going to be inside of me.

"Stop. Wasting. Time." Cade thrust a finger and fingered me the way I liked. Fast, shallow, while giving my bundle of nerves all the goddamn attention it deserved.

Biting my lip to muffle my moans, I slipped the condom over his length and gave him a squeeze. He groaned, causing my womb to clench. "I'm ready, querido."

Cade pulled his fingers out of me. Slick with my arousal, he stuck them into his mouth for a taste. I was finally about to get fucked by something bigger and better. Better meaning his beautiful seven-inch long dick.

After more than a year of being together.

Every line in my body reverberated like the chords of a plucked instrument.

This was happening.

Even though I had more sex than Cade in the past, this felt like my first time. I didn't care that Cade only had sex once, nor did he care that my 'body count' was higher. That wasn't a concept that mattered. Love did.

I never loved any of the boys I fooled around with in the past.

But this one? He had my whole heart, too.

Cade sat along the edge of my bed, slung an arm around my waist, and pulled me over him astride. My thighs spread over his and I gasped at the swiftness of the movement, clutching his shoulders for support. Between us, his cock bobbed.

"You want me on top?"

He nodded, Adam's apple coasting up and down. "That way we can go at your pace. It's been a while for you and I don't want to hurt you, Ella."

I closed my eyes. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Now slide that tight pussy over my dick and fuck me, you little brat."

Lord have mercy.

Intimacy was like second nature to us. Cade oozed confidence when it came to pleasuring me in every way besides being inside of me. Hell, the guy could dirty talk me into an early grave. But I saw his bravado falter for a second when I stared at him too long. His insecurity—his inexperience—caused him nervousness.

But just like he always did with me, I Molotov cocktailed his insecurity away.

I trailed little kisses to his earlobe. "No one gets me this turned on, baby."

His eyes met mine and the vulnerability slowly evaporated. My self-assured, arrogant guy was back. "Show me how turned on you are."

Using his shoulders for support, I rose to my knees. My shaky exhale became his inhale as we watched the space between our bodies. His tip nudged my entrance before I guided him to my clit and rubbed softly. Fuck, yes.

Suddenly, Cade clapped my ass cheek. Hard. I squeaked. "Fuck *me* or I'll put you on your back and fuck *you*."

I pressed him to my opening and sank down inch by inch.

Oh. My. God.

We released desperate sounds at the same time as we ventured to an island of fervour where only the two of us lived. Where the wind smelled of sex and love, and the water was so blue that we couldn't help but be drawn deeper into the abyss.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, feeling oh-so-fucking-full. Our gazes collided and what we couldn't speak with our words, we said with our eyes.

This was our slice of heaven.

My pebbled nipples slid over his muscular pecs as I hugged him tight. Tiny bolts of pure want racketeering through my system from this hot, skin-on-skin contact. We moaned together.

"You're so big and thick, *querido*." My clit brushed against his base when I shifted. "O-Oh, God. You feel so fucking good."

The discomfort slowly ebbed away and gave leeway to the telltale signs of pleasure. I squirmed again and the sensations running through me had my inner walls milking Cade.

My toes curled in my knee-high socks and I dug my fingers into his shoulders like I wanted to sink into him and never leave.

Cade cursed and licked his top lip, eyes fixed where my pussy swallowed his dick whole. "Fucking hell, you're gripping me so tight." Cade held my waist when I tried to move. "Baby, hold on. I just...Fuck. Fuck, I didn't expect it to feel this good."

"I'm sorry I made us wait this long." But I wasn't really sorry. Waiting only made us cherish this more. "C-Can I move now, please?"

Closing his eyes, he nodded, groaning, "Yeah. Fuck me, baby." So I did.

My boyfriend kept an arm looped around my waist and another gripping my right thigh as I raised myself gently, feeling every inch of his ridge rubbing inside of me. I dropped down. He groaned again. I kissed his jaw to muffle my noises—a force of habit—as I worked him up and down inside of me.

"You're my world. You're my favourite shade of brown and blue. I love you," he murmured almost nonsensically, sweeping those big, callused hands over my back, causing me to shiver. "I love you, Ella."

"Te quiero, Cade." I panted. "Mucho."

Our foreheads erased the last remaining inch separating our minds and hearts.

A slow minute passed with me rocking us into an easy tempo. My bed creaked each time I lowered down on his hard dick. Cade's face was a picture of complete bliss, the slash between his brows highlighting the extreme gratification he felt from being inside of me. He screwed his eyes shut when it got too much, fingers digging into my skin like he wanted to mark me...

"Do you see how much you turn me on?" I whispered in his ear, combing my fingers through his hair before clasping the nape of his neck. My breaths fanned against his collarbone. "I'm so wet for you."

The sounds my pussy was making should embarrass me. Yet I didn't give a damn.

Low groans rumbled from his chest as he held me, our bodies beaded with a layer of sweat. He spanked me, and I whimpered. "Fuck me harder, Rich Girl. Bounce that pussy all over my dick."

"Kill," I gasped. We were back to our dirty secret.

"You're doing such a good job pleasing me, sweetheart."

But he was holding back. I could feel it. It wasn't like him to let me do all the work. Maybe he feared I couldn't handle him when he really let loose.

Nevertheless, I quickened our pace, moaning high to the Lord above. Cade's hands raced over my body like he hadn't already committed every curve to memory. He helped me ride him, playing with my breasts. Pinching and twisting my nipples. I welcomed the pain, my eyes rolling inside my head. "K-Kill."

"I got you, baby." His hands coasted over my ribs, down my stomach, until he could pet my clit.

"Fuck," I mouthed against his cheek. "Oh my God."

Cade lavished my chest with love bites. I threw my head back and moaned, overcome with a million feelings at once.

I fucked him with deeper, longer strokes. There was no finesse in the way our bodies made love. We were still learning but doing so with much vigour. I was incredibly wet, slapping sounds of flesh—like in my porno—suffusing the air between us as my ass met his lap and my pussy ground against his cock.

Cade began panting, a rivulet of sweat trickling down the side of his temple. He was handing me over the reins and it was costing him. But I needed more. I needed his dirty talk.

I needed Killian with the taunts.

I needed him to dominate me, strip me of all common sense. "Please, Killian. More."

His eyes flashed with understanding and he gripped my waist. "Bet you're fucking regretting making me wait a year to get inside this cunt, hm?" He bit my earlobe. We both watched his slick length disappearing into me. "Feels good, baby?"

"It would feel even better if you were the one fucking me," I purred. I was growing tired and I was pretty sure my bed was going to break if I fucked him any faster. "You talked a long game. Back it up. Unless...You can't."

An angry growl left him. His entire body trembled with restraint. "Stop. I don't want to hurt you."

I wanted to hurt. I wanted to feel.

Everything he had to offer me, I wanted to take.

I was too damned greedy when it came to this guy. I owned him the same way he owned me. I had to provoke him because I craved his brand of bad. It spoke to the dark side of me that could not be tamed.

"Thought you wanted to punish me for the bad picture I sent you." I reached back to squeeze his balls lightly. "Thought you wanted to fuck Daddy's little girl."

Those words were the trigger.

My smirk was wiped away in a flash.

Three consecutive slaps were rained on my ass and I screamed, while clenching his girthy dick inside of me.

"Remember this the next time you have the audacity to send me a picture of your thong sticking to your pussy lips." Cade slapped my tits. My sensitive skin burned, but I relished it, demanding more. "You want to act smug? I'll fuck the confidence out of you, Ximena. Split your legs so I can give you the pounding I promised."

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Moaning, I spread my legs flat until I was splitting over his dick.

In the next second, Cade robbed away every inhibition as he dragged me for a ride I would never, *ever* forget.

Leaning back, he bucked his hips hard and fast. I swooped up and down his length with a sudden brutalness that made me gasp for air. The kind of feeling you got on a roller coaster right before a big drop. "This what you wanted from me, baby? I was trying to hold back. To not hurt you. But you asked for this."

Cade jerked me up and down his thick shaft, drilling my insides with franticness, his hips delivering breathtaking upward pumps. Like he was trying to split me in half. I think he groaned. I think I moaned. But everything was lost in translation, in this sensation of being united.

A lock of dark hair fell over his forehead as he huffed, eyes glazing over with a possessive gleam. With fast, deep thrusts, he bounced me on his lap like I weighed nothing—like I was made of fluff and solely for his pleasure. The angle of his penetration caused his tip to hit that spot inside of me that made me pant like a bitch in heat. My *querido* treated me like I was nothing more than his sex doll and I loved his eagerness. I loved how wild he was in his passion, how gone he was for me, that he just couldn't help but use me to make himself feel better.

He rode me with a vengeance, teaching me a lesson I would not forget. I would only act out more if this was my punishment.

"Such." Thrust. "A." Thrust. "Bad." Thrust. "Princess."

I whined for more, my hands holding his over my hips. Finger-shaped bruises awaited me tomorrow.

I felt my orgasm building inside of me, like a small wave threatening to grow big and consume me whole.

My heart beat furiously.

My toes curled in my knee-high socks.

And my pussy clenched him at every retreat like it never wanted him to leave.

In a sense, it really didn't.

"You wanted me to fuck you like you're nothing but a brat?" He slapped my ass and I pulsed around him. My mouth opened on a mute scream—the force of his fucking taking away my voice momentarily. "I should punish you more often. Tame that attitude of yours. Not so stuck-up now, are you? All it takes is my dick to shut you quiet, baby."

"Y-Yes." Panting hard, I threw my head back as his erection slipped out and slid over my clit, pushing me closer to the edge. "Punish me."

I sounded like I was having an exorcism. Like he was literally summoning the orgasm out of me.

"Are you going to fucking behave now?" He shoved deep and halted.

We were both breathing like we ran a marathon.

I tried moving my hips for more, a quick stir, but he held me down and slapped my left breast, plucking my nipple. "I-I'll behave—"

I didn't finish before he thrust again, more viciously than before. I squealed as he fucked me, my hips snapping in time with his, my thighs shaking with the promise of my climax. "No," he hissed angrily. "You don't know how to fucking behave. Not unless I've got you crammed seven inches deep."

"Kill!"

"You're going to want a ride every day, aren't you? Going to pout and beg for it until I've bent you over the nearest surface and given you what you need," he growled. Every line in his body shook with his impending release. He looked like a beautiful wolf, fighting that place between man and a ravenous animal succumbing to his mate's need. "I should plaster this model body against the library wall and cover your mouth as I fuck you from behind between breaks."

"Please. Please." I didn't even know what I was begging for at this point. My orgasm, or for him to fulfill every fantasy he issued.

Every jarring thrust was bringing me higher and higher to my peak.

Cade gritted his teeth, sweat moving down his beautifully sculpted abs. I touched his mangled left arm, reminding him that I loved every inch of him.

"I'm so fucking close, Ximena."

"No." I tugged his head back, crushing my lips to his. "I want to come first."

Cade pulled back to breathe, a little ragged and a lot overwhelmed. A small thread of saliva held our mouths together as he brought a hand to my clit and played with me. "I love you spoiled and selfish in bed. Come for your Princepin, baby."

It was the sexy words, our mingled sweat, the teasing of my clit, the cocky look, and the way he continuously tortured my sensitive spot.

I came like a storm, my body writhing as I cried out in ecstasy. Crashing. Freefalling. Until I collapsed against his chest, kissing him feverishly.

Cade flipped our position and I landed on my back, still quaking in the aftermath of our lovemaking. My arms slack beside my head, I was swept away in an intense current.

With heavy breaths, Cade parted my legs roughly, splitting me once more before dropping his cock inside in one smooth go. My back arched from the intrusion. Cade locked my wrists over my head and went for pure, frenzied fucking. Our lower bodies smacked together and created noises that were so beautiful to my ears.

"Goddammit, sweetheart," Cade grated, fucking me into the mattress. My body shifted upwards with each pump. "I'm so deep inside of you. I never want to leave. Fuck."

He pulled out and flipped me around. I landed on my stomach with a mouthful of my Egyptian cotton sheets. Then he yanked off my right kneehigh sock and used it to tie my wrists behind my back. My vision danced with stars. "Kill?"

One savage thrust and he went deeper than before.

I screamed in pleasure.

Cade reached around to clamp my mouth shut with his hand, the same one he used to finger me. "Shh. Shh," he murmured, almost mockingly. I thrashed, fucking loving this. "Your punishment isn't over, Rich Girl."

I grew even wetter, if possible.

Darkness, wrapped with a little bit of fear, was my kryptonite.

Cade's arm reached under my hips to lift me, fitting us in a provocative position. I always wanted to do it this way. Ass up, face down. With my *querido* behind me, he resumed a dirty pace that had my headboard banging against the wall.

Holy shit. I would never be the same after this.

"You're so fucked-up, so gone for me, Ella." He chuckled darkly, surprising me when I felt the whip of his leather belt crack against my ass. He never stopped thrusting, amplifying every shade of pain and pleasure. The unexpectedness of his action tore another scream out of me, which was quickly drowned by his hand. "You like that, baby?"

I nodded, tears leaking out of my eyes. It was all too much. My hands bound behind my back, my racing heart, my stiff nipples rubbing against the sheets and Cade alternating between thrusts and spanks.

"I should fuck this tight cunt over Daddy Cordova's office desk."

My eyes widened. Another crack of his belt. My squeal was muffled.

"So he knows that the guy he hates so much broke into his house to fuck his precious little girl." *Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.* "How much she enjoyed it."

I moaned at the way he switched up the angle so he hit jackpot over and over again.

"Think about it, X. It'll be our dirty secret. Nobody has to know South Side's princess loves slumming it with a gangster—loves getting dicked down so fucking good by her Killian," he husked in my ear, driving deeper into me from behind. "Only for me. Fuck yeah. That's it. I feel you tightening. Squeeze my dick." He released my mouth and clenched my throat at the last second, whispering against my cheek, "Make it nice and wet with your cum, baby."

My release flooded all over his cock. With a broken moan, I cried into the mattress, tears of joy leaving mascara streaks all over my face. "Killian!"

One more thrust and he stilled, groaning. "Fuckkkk."

I wished I could see him in the throes of passion as he climaxed. But I pictured it all the same. His face twisting, eyes drooping with satisfaction, and strong, muscular body trembling above me.

Cade pulled out and the sense of loss was prominent. I grunted softly into the mattress, energy depleted, as he made quick work of disposing of the condom. He untied my wrists and flipped me around, pushing my locks out of my face. His eyes scanned my expression as he tenderly cupped my cheek. "Was I too rough?"

I smiled lazily, pushing my fingers through his matted hair. "I'm okay, Princepin."

His expression melted and he fell over me, flattening me to the bed. "I'm broken," he hushed into my sweaty neck, kissing my hot skin. "You've broken me. I don't think I'll ever recover from this. I love you more each and every day."

Oh, Cade.

I nearly wept from the onslaught of emotions he invoked with those few words. I felt the weight of them physically bearing down on me. This boy, who shared his dreams and ambitions with me, was my ride or die.

I love you didn't suffice to explain his worth to me. So I said the next best thing.

"You have my heart, too, Cade."

His head snapped up and his eyes shimmered with something akin to longing.

Then our mouths hugged like two old lovers reacquainted after a long drought.

After another round of slow missionary sex where Cade tied my wrist with his leather belt, I lay on my stomach, utterly spent. I had the life fucked out of me, but I never felt more alive than right now.

Sex with the person you loved was so much different and better.

I was glad Cade and I had waited. The foundation of our relationship was friendship and laughter and tender moments. Even though our sexual chemistry was off the charts.

I couldn't wait to have more sex with him. Sex in the back seat of my car. Sex on his motorcycle. Sex against his floor-to-ceiling windows. Hell, even sex while he wore his black knit mask. Maybe we could role-play another scenario. The last one thrilled me, got me so hot and bothered that I was down to explore this side of us in more detail.

My boyfriend was propped on one arm beside me, using my ass like a mock-table as he rolled a joint. I glanced over my shoulder and he extended it towards me. I grabbed the lighter from my nightstand and lit it.

Cade took a deep puff, and smoke curled out of his mouth.

He moved towards me until his back was half-up against my headboard. "You know I was kidding about the picture, right? You can send me all the naughty shots you want, Ella."

"Will you send me dick pics, too?" He pressed the joint to my mouth and I inhaled.

"If you want." He wiggled his eyebrows jokingly.

"Duh." Cade took another hit and we shared a smile.

"Did you mean what you said about Vegas?" He rubbed my back, a hint of shyness seeping into him. "Do you want to marry me someday?"

Didn't he know that already? He was stuck with me. "I want to marry

you. I want to have your babies. I want to do it all."

Overcome by emotions greater than him, Cade exhaled roughly and pressed his forehead to mine. "I want that, too."

"So where's my ring?"

A cheeky smile broke over his face. "Behave, sweetheart. All in good time. You'll get a ring and a shotgun wedding in Vegas."

"Deal." I leaned forward to kiss him. "I want to do it soon, Cade."

"How soon?" His thumb stroked my cheek.

"After we graduate from high school."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Fine. After we graduate from college."

"Deal," he replied. "Gives you more time to plan a proper wedding."

"What if I want to elope?" My parents would probably kill us if we did.

"That's good with me too, baby. Whatever makes you happy."

I grinned wide. This boy, he gave me anything and everything I wanted. No questions asked.

"Nobody else matters besides you and I," he whispered, brushing his mouth with mine. "Always."

Him and I.

Always.

And that would never change.

CHAPTER 12

Hearthurn

October 18, 2014 2:07 a.m.

CADE, 18

You have my heart, Ella."

The first time I whispered those words, they felt sacred. They held weight and meaning. Now when I replayed them, they felt hollow despite the sweet memory. Because while Ella held my heart, I completely forgot, when I spent those weeks withdrawing from her, that I held hers too.

I broke hers before she broke mine.

God, we created a life together. My ex-girlfriend had been pregnant with my baby.

Those words felt like a sucker punch through my solar plexus. Ella glided past me, carefully overstepping the broken glass on the floor. The baseball bat and the next dare clenched in her fists as she left me.

I didn't know how to begin explaining the clusterfuck my life became leading up to the night of Josh's birthday party, let alone the mess from the actual night itself. It took such a huge toll on me that I spent the remainder of my summer staying away from St. Victoria's stuck-up, elite assholes because I knew none of them wished me well.

I used to think heartbreak was the most potent, the most hurtful thing I'd experienced. Not even Julius' assault could compare to the pain of loving and losing. But as I pressed a hand against my left pec, feeling my battered, beating heart, I knew it was the realization that Ella miscarried our baby and I wasn't there to help her get through the devastating loss.

That was the most hurtful thing.

My body finally caught up with my mind and I raced out the door, my flashlight held in a crushing grip. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up when I realized the hallway was empty.

It was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. Mr. Crowley's classroom was in the haunted west wing, where students claimed to see Sister Victoria's ghost. While I wasn't afraid of horror movies, no part of me wanted to meet a two-hundred-year-old nun in her habit, aimlessly floating above her resting place: the crypt right below my feet.

There was an hour left to Initiation Night, but Ella and I clearly didn't care about winning this anymore. Tonight was about speaking the truth. Not being crowned winners of a useless tradition that predated our births.

I practically flew down the corridor, searching for her.

Oddly enough, there was no sight of Darla or Shaun when I crossed the grand foyer. No cheerleaders or hockey players roaming the hallways either.

Where was everyone else?

Was the competition over?

Did everyone leave...campus?

A sense of foreboding crept over my body and I shivered almost violently.

I had to find Ella in case something went downhill. With a clenched jaw and a pounding heart, I entered the east wing, running like a madman. "Ella!"

Pitch blackness welcomed me at every corner, my flashlight giving me limited visibility.

The atmosphere got colder as I forayed in the part of the east wing that students usually avoided. This was where they claimed one of the gates of hell resided. There was a long, dwindling stone staircase that led down to the crypt. In fact, there were many ways to get there, but this particular one was branded *stairs of the stolen souls*. Since the 1960s, there were rumours circulating that six students who once ventured down to the crypt using this passage never made it back up. Vanished like they never existed. A myth, I

believed, but it led Principal Hill to block this area to avoid any further chaos.

I ran past the creepy staircase. "Ella!"

My voice rebounded in the emptiness.

The walls of the old motherhouse seemed like they trapped decades of secrets. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a chilling thought consumed me: Maybe, if I paid close attention, I could hear the whispers of every soul who'd died in this building, calling out to me. Mocking me.

Ella, Ella, Ella,

The faint silhouette of my ex-girlfriend appeared by the janitor's closet.

She noticed me. The lost look in her eyes was prominent and it tightened my chest.

Fuck the consequences. Push past the pain. Talk to her. Tell her the truth.

I came to a stop in front of her, my chest bowing with pants. "Ella—" I wheezed.

"I don't want to hear it." She dismissed me, unlocking the closet with the key stuck to the dare paper.

I shouldered past her, dragged her inside, and slammed the door shut. I could feel her glare as I raised my hand to flick the string hanging over our heads. The lightbulb switched on, and I realized how close we stood to one another.

Ella realized it too.

The fact that she didn't move back was a victory for me.

From this proximity, I could make out every shade in her gaze from memory. It didn't matter that she wore contacts. I imagined the blue tinge in her right eye, like a drop of heaven, and the brown pooled at the bottom, grounding me like earth. I used to love gazing into her eyes when I made love to her.

A black strand glazed her cheek. Ever so gently, my finger brushed it aside, but I didn't let go. I gathered more of the silkiness between my fingers and rubbed softly.

I loved her long hair, but I loved this short straight cut too. She looked

every bit the badass she was. A true femme fatale.

"Why did you cut your hair?" I whispered, when I should have asked her a million other things.

How did you find out you lost the baby? Who did you tell? How did you fucking cope? Why didn't you call me so we could have shared the pain?

Ella's teeth grazed over her plump bottom lip and I fought back a groan. "I needed a change," she murmured. "After..."

After we broke up. After the miscarriage.

I dropped her hair, but she didn't retreat from me. A new spell wove around us like invisible vines, binding us to this moment. I trailed the back of my pointer finger over the skin where her jaw met her neck. I loved biting her here. Her sharp intake an indication that she remembered.

"I like it." I closed my eyes, working the words past my throat. "I'm sorry, Ella. I'm so sorry I wasn't there when you were going through..."

"I know you're sorry. I never doubted that you would be." Her heat faded. She stepped back, colliding with the metal shelf behind her.

The janitor's closet was matchbox-sized and it felt even smaller with our pasts overtaking the spare room like spirits crowding an old haunt.

I mimicked her, leaning away until my own back hit the shelves on the opposite wall. We observed one another, seeing ourselves in a new light. The stubborn tilt of her jaw told me she'd grown harsher over the months. The sad droop of her shoulders told me she was exhausted from keeping appearances. The pin straight curtain of her hair told me she'd gotten used to hiding behind a shield. With just one flick of her head, her mass of black strands hid her expression from everyone. Her vulnerability, her fiery nature, that fucking spark of hers...Gone.

The air between us charged with something electrifying, leaving our muscles coiled and our lungs breathless.

Through the dim lighting of this small enclosure, I saw a flash of suffering cross over Ella's features, before she hid behind her respective wall.

Yet I stood in front of her, my defenses lowered, and half my cards on

display.

I had to drag her out of the corner she built inside her head. A cardboard box where she retreated whenever facing me got too rough.

"A few days after your eighteenth birthday, my...aunt Julia had a breast cancer scare."

Ella flinched. "What?"

I glanced at my feet and repeated with more resolve. "She had a breast cancer scare."

"I can't believe this. Is...is she okay?" My ex-girlfriend's voice quavered.

Aunt Julia loved Ella like a second daughter and Ella was extremely fond of my adoptive mother too. I knew they terribly missed each other when we broke up. "She is now. The doctors said it's called fibrocystic breast. Something about it being a common condition amongst women. But the anticipation of finding out the verdict sent our whole house into an uproar."

"I didn't know..." Ella's hands inched towards me, and my own moved the slightest bit towards her. But she dropped them by her side, turning her slender fingers into fists. "Nobody told me."

"Because no one knew. We didn't want to risk anyone else finding out. You know how people are in our circle. They gossip. They pity you. They act like they're your friends when they're not."

Aunt Julia and Uncle Vance had never been the kind of people to tolerate that behaviour. The last thing they wanted was this to turn into news and run loose within their friends and business associates. This was a family matter and it would be treated quietly and efficiently.

I couldn't tell anyone what was happening in our home. Not even Ella. Uncle Vance made me swear I'd keep my lips sealed. And I owed it to him to play by his rules.

There were so many times where I picked up the phone to tell Ella what was going on. She was my best friend, before anything else. But Uncle Vance's words played in my mind like a broken record and I would hang up before the second ring.

I thought it was best this way. I didn't want to worry Ella. Things would blow over eventually.

Except they hadn't. Things just got worse and I kept digging my grave.

Now I was lying six feet beneath, while desperately trying to claw my way out.

"That's not the only thing." I ran a palm over my stubbled jaw. "Shortly after Aunt Julia's first mammogram, Olivia got diagnosed with epilepsy. She started having seizures."

Ella's eyes bulged out of her sockets. Nothing tumbled out of her mouth as she processed the new bomb I dropped.

"The first time Livvy had a seizure was during dinner. I remember the scene vividly. Uncle Vance shared a work anecdote. Aunt Julia threw her head back in a laugh. Joshua tried to pile more pasta on his plate but missed half of it, spoiling the white tablecloth. Aunt Julia scolded him. I snickered at Josh. One second we're all talking. The next second Olivia's fallen out of her chair with a huge *thump*."

We thought she dropped dead.

My heart stopped.

Her little body spasmed on the floor and she foamed at the mouth.

None of us understood what was happening.

"Her seizures come at random times. We don't understand the pattern. They just happen, you know? She's had three alone in the month of June. It's one of the scariest things I've ever seen. I feel so...helpless. I can't do anything but let her go through it."

"God, Cade. I'm so sorry. I...I don't know what to say. I would have never imagined this." Ella's sentences were coated with sadness. "Poor Olivia. Please tell me she's okay now."

"Yes and no. She's healthy in the ways that matter, but the doctors are saying it can be a lifelong disorder, or it can disappear with time. We don't know and there's nothing we can do to prevent it. It doesn't help that the kids at her school are rude to her. They tease her about her seizures, about her

curly hair, about her small height. Fuck, one kid even told her she's pathetic because her real dad is rotting in a jail cell while she lives with a replacement family."

When I picked Olivia from school the day she got bullied, she cried fat tears in my arms, asking why Aunt Julia and Uncle Vance weren't her real parents. Why Josh wasn't her real brother. I never thought I'd have to explain to my five-year-old adopted sister that your family is the people you love. So Mommy, Daddy, and Joshy were her real family because she loved them. Because they loved her.

Ella grimaced.

"Between finals, hockey training, Aunt Julia's and Olivia's health issues, I could barely breathe. Nor could I tell you any of these things. Uncle Vance made me swear to keep our private matters to ourselves until it was all dealt with. We couldn't allow these issues to leave the four walls of our home. I didn't know how to handle myself, and I withdrew from you when I shouldn't have. I'm sorry I made you feel like nothing but a warm body. You've always been more than that." I love you. "But I couldn't express any of it in words, so..."

It sounded bad when I said it aloud. I withdrew from Ella, but we continued having sex without proper communication. Stolen moments in the courtyard, in the back seat of her car, in a classroom.

And I was so wrapped in my own thoughts, in my own pleasure, that I completely forgot the condom broke when we had fucked in the back seat of her Porsche during Junior Prom. How selfish of me, needing to forget about my woes and get lost in the one girl who could provide me solace—my Ellie —without taking into account how my carelessness hurt her.

The condom broke and I vaguely remembered Ella reassuring me. She said she'd let me know when she got her periods. She was due anyway. I didn't think it was a big deal.

Only she never got them, and I didn't even bother to ask because I'd been so caught up in my own shit.

Goddammit.

"It makes sense now, why your behaviour was so tense. Why you never seemed to be present in the moment. No matter what I said or did, I couldn't get through to you."

Her voice was blank. Not accusing.

It killed me.

"Please, understand that I'm not making excuses for myself. It doesn't justify me not giving you the time of the day when you were my girlfriend. Especially when you needed me the most. But I hope it explains where I was coming from."

"I get it." Ella looked away from my imploring gaze. "It doesn't make it okay, but I get it."

Relationships were a two-way street and I didn't give her anything in the month that followed her birthday. Just took. It was wrong of me, I acknowledged. I needed her to understand that I understood. "I'm not perfect, Ella. I made a mistake, but thank you for understanding. Thank you for...your concern over Aunt Julia and Olivia."

Not thank you for your forgiveness. I didn't have that yet.

I might not ever have it.

That gutted me.

The light above our heads flickered a couple of times. Taunting us that the clock was ticking.

"Of course, I'm glad they're okay now."

My gaze was drawn to Ella's taut stomach. I stared hard at the sliver of skin exposed where her bra ended, right before her high-waisted jeans started. If Ella hadn't miscarried, she'd be four or five months along now.

I pictured her belly swollen with my child and a deep primal instinct shouted in satisfaction. We talked about getting married and starting a family one day.

But we'd gone about it all wrong.

God, we would be on our way to becoming parents. I never thought I'd

be ready to be a father, but something inside of me fiercely loved this child who never got the chance to come into our world.

"When you lost the baby, how did you cope?"

She winced and I took a step forward. I needed her to see me and only me. I curled my fists into the shelf behind her, caging her in. "Please. Tell me."

Ella's eyes rose to mine, filled with heartbreak. I itched to run my fingers through her hair to comfort her, but I held back.

Her throat bobbed with a rough swallow. "I knitted a onesie for our baby."

Raw ache slashed through my heart.

"God, *Ella*." The words were torn out of me, a small whisper echoed in the space separating our mouths. Ella drank it with a tiny whimper. I pressed our foreheads together, nearly mashing her frontal lobe to mine. "I'm so fucking sorry, baby. I should have been there for you. You should have told me. You *needed* me."

She shook her head against mine as she sucked in a deep breath. "No. No one could understand my pain. I didn't want anyone around me. Least of all you."

I ignored those words. She'd take them back when she found out what really happened that night.

I gave up the fight with myself and cupped her cheeks, feeling the familiar softness under my palm.

Months. I'd been starving for months to touch her like this.

Relief trickled inside my veins, but it was short-lived as small beads of tears gathered in her waterline, spiking her lashes. She refused to let them drop. My strong Ellie. "Who did you tell about your miscarriage, sweetheart?"

"Only Callie. I couldn't tell mi mamá."

I clenched my teeth at the fact that Callie knew before me. "Why not?"

"It takes two to tango and I didn't want my parents to hate you or hold

this against you. This would have destroyed our families when it could have just ended with us."

It did end with us.

She made sense, though. Her parents never accepted me. Knowing I'd gotten their only daughter pregnant and left her to deal with a miscarriage alone would have been the last straw.

Even heartbroken, she still thought of everyone else but her. Emilio and Olivia's play dates. Uncle Vance and Francisco's weekly pool nights. Aunt Julia and Silvia's afternoon tea parties. It would have ruined everything.

"If I could go back in time, I would do so many things differently," I whispered. "I would have told you what was happening, instead of pushing you away. Do you at least believe me on that?"

"Yes. I believe you." Ella rubbed her upper arms and shifted, peering at me through her lashes. "Did you really not kiss Irene Black during those weeks?"

Someone spread a rumour—with a black sharpie, on a bathroom stall—that I kissed Irene Black, one of the cheerleaders, at a party the weekend before Joshua's birthday. It was completely absurd because I wasn't even at a party. I was bartending at Danny's Grill, and afterwards I hung out with all the guys.

"The only time I ever kissed Irene was two years ago on Initiation Night because of that stupid dare. You saw it happen. That was the only time. Plus, Irene's dating Jared Roy and I'm not the kind of guy who hits on another guy's girl."

"I believe you."

She believed I didn't kiss Irene. But she didn't believe that I didn't cheat on her the night of Joshua's birthday party.

"Thank you."

The energy shifted with one truth cleared. She forgave me for withdrawing and another one of her walls broke down. Something titillating pulsed in the air between us.

Ella's breathing deepened and her tongue peeked out, wiping over her bottom lip. Leaving it moist and inviting. I bit back a groan. My hands slowly left her cheeks and moved down to her neck. Ella's eyelashes fluttered when I tightened my hold, my thumbs cradling her jaw. Forcing her to meet my tumultuous gaze and acknowledge that our feelings were still here, simmering low.

Her fingers wrapped into the shelf behind her.

My voice was a harsh rasp. "I want to kiss—"

Ella cried out suddenly and I jerked back, scared that I did something wrong. She raised her hand between us, cursing. "Fucking shit."

She hurt herself on a sharp, jagged corner of the metal shelf. A cut along her wrist, near her vein. Slow droplets of blood gaped from the wound, trickling down her hand.

"Fuck," I hissed. "You need to get that cleaned and bandaged right away."

"I-I'm fine. I got a tetanus shot this summer."

"We still need to take care of it." I stepped away from her, now that the spell was broken. I still longed to kiss those delectable lips, but it would have to wait. "The nurse's office isn't too far from here." I picked up the baseball bat by her feet, not letting go of her wrist. "I'm sure we can get in."

"You don't have to take care of me," she mumbled, resigned. "I've got some tissues in my pocket and—"

I pressed my thumb to her lips. "Ellie, I want to take care of you. I want to be here for you. We're a team, remember?"

That disheartened look returned to her face. I tucked her hair behind her ear.

"Tell me why you were with the other...girl. Please, Cade."

Profound torment laced her tone and it carved my insides.

I reached into her crossbody bag, pulling out a small wad of tissues. I carefully bundled one and held it against her bleeding wrist. "I'll tell you more just, please—" Crimson soaked the white. I didn't think it needed stitches,

but it was still a lot of blood. "Please let's take care of this first."

I twisted open the closet door and tucked the baseball bat underneath my armpit. With one hand I grasped my flashlight and the other I extended towards Ella.

Giving her the choice to accept me.

Her left hand twitched in response.

And her fingers hesitantly reached out for mine. We wove them together seamlessly. The feeling of home seeped through my pores and calmed me down.

I squeezed her hand, the way I did every time I got off my motorcycle and tugged her along. The way I did every time we entered a room and let the world know we were *here*.

Then I veered her out of the closet.

Ella whispered something. I was past hearing anything but the sound of my voraciously beating heart.

I was holding the hand of the girl I loved and she gave it to me willingly.

While I was elated right now, I knew this feeling was short-lived.

Because our next stop?

It was Hell.

CHAPTER 13

Broken Souls

October 18, 2014 2:35 a.m.

Ella, 18

The fingers threaded with mine felt as foreign as they did familiar. Against the softer skin of my palm, Cade's calluses rubbed almost in a ticklish manner.

The fondest memory I recalled of those calluses was when they mapped the lines of my body like they were travelling on an endless road, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. Caressing me in the kind of place where the sun didn't shine. Until I was love drunk and floating on a cloud of ecstasy with my boyfriend's name on my tongue.

I let Cade tug me along the stairs leading to the upper floor, the eerie atmosphere broken up by the wedge of light emanating from his torch. Mine hung uselessly by my side. I was too caught up in the pain radiating from my wrist, and on Cade's softly uttered words.

"You were enough."

Three words. Thirteen letters. They bounced inside my skull with conviction. There were always two sides to a story. I didn't want to hear Cade's side before. But my walls were down and my beliefs of that night momentarily suspended with the sheer certainty conveyed in his voice that...

That suddenly it felt like I was missing a big piece of a puzzle I thought I previously solved.

"You saw what you saw at the party and branded me a cheater."

Did I see wrong?

"You were my best friend. You were supposed to listen to me."

I was too caught up in my heartbreak, my pregnancy hormones, and my anger at seeing him with another girl. So I ran as far away as possible.

Into Josh's arms, no less.

"You played judge, jury, and executioner, and shoved me in the confinements of an imaginary prison."

Yes, I did. Because every fibre of my being vibrated with betrayal, telling me that he belonged in the rustiest corner of my heart.

Now, with the turn of tonight's events and the way Cade spoke, I doubted my decision. Reconsidered his penance in my mind.

Some people deserved a second chance. But did you really need a second chance if you never truly lost the first one?

Did Cade ever lose his first chance?

We were in front of the nurse's office. He flashed his light over the doorknob. "It's already unlocked. Someone must have done it for a dare."

"There's no one here. In the school, I mean." The strange fact registered when we left the janitor's closet. Before that my mind was rolling in a gyre of wretched memories. "I didn't see anyone besides us."

"I noticed that too when I left Mr. Crowley's classroom. I didn't even see Shaun or Darla in the foyer."

Fear dribbled into my system. "What if someone found out students were here after hours—"

"We'll figure that out soon." Cade tugged me inside the room. "But first let's get you bandaged."

I sat on the edge of the soft white bed while Cade rummaged through various drawers, cursing under his breath. I'd been here a handful of times since freshman year whenever I felt faint or just didn't want to be in class. Nurse Ligaya was the best and always let me get away with it.

Staring at the bow windows adjacent to me, the outside world was a murky blur with torrential downpour decorating the stygian sky, the medley

of thunderbolts and lightning breaking the inky canvas every few pulses. The sight and sound were a mirror reflection of my heart—dark with a tempestuous beat. The vagary of the weather was a depiction of my exboyfriend's and my relationship.

Cade dropped a square pack of antiseptic wipes and gauze on the bed. I held the tissue paper against my bleeding wrist as Cade wheeled a small backless stool closer to me. Parking his ass on it, he snapped on a pair of blue exam gloves. "Fuck, does it hurt?"

Before I could shake my head in reply, Cade gently snagged my wrist and thrust his flashlight into my spare left hand. "Hold that for me while I clean this."

With nimble fingers, he tore the square package and I was reminded of how his fingers worked a condom whenever he was frenzied to get inside of me. Cade tended to me calmly, unaware of the place my lustful thoughts had descended.

The calm to my storm.

That was Cade.

While my fiery temper got us into trouble, Cade's quick thinking often got us out of it. Whenever I hurt myself, Cade was there to save the day.

Even after our breakup, some things never changed.

I hissed, my eyes stinging when he wiped my wound. "I know, I know, babe. I'm sorry."

The double meaning of his apology didn't go unnoticed by me.

My eyes pricked, but for an entirely different reason. A crease slashed the skin between his brows and his tongue poked out in concentration. So adorable. The tenderness he displayed as he dressed my gash was too much. Cade, despite the harshness he'd been dealt in life, was so gentle. He could have turned into a monster after all the abuse, yet he turned into gold.

That was the thing that drew me to him like bees to honey. How he'd always been so honourable, so soft-spoken, despite his rough edges, with a hint of a bad boy streak to go hand in hand with his good boy side. Even

though he used to be part of a gang, Cade had only ever been my courteous, trustworthy Princepin.

And that was why his betrayal burned so deep. My Princepin wasn't supposed to hurt me.

A voice ticced in my brain: What if you were never betrayed?

I knew what I saw. But the way Cade talked, reacted, and acted made me believe he was swallowing the regurgitation of his own version of that night.

A version where I might not have seen right.

When he finished bandaging my wound, he disposed of his gloves and turned back to me, weary-faced. Our gazes clashed like the rain crashing against the windowpane—profoundly, jarringly, and inevitably.

"There were so many times I wanted to tell you about the miscarriage. But every time I picked up my phone, I decided against it."

His blue gaze mirrored misery. "You should have. I keep thinking about you going through that alone and it breaks my fucking heart. I would have been there for you."

I know you would have. "I wanted to be left alone. My parents thought I was just heartbroken over you and not my dead, unborn baby. It was better that way...better that they didn't know the truth."

I drank myself into a coma most nights as a coping mechanism until I decided wasting away my life wasn't the answer. I would heal, find love again, and one day give birth to a healthy baby when the time was right.

Cade released a shaky exhale because we both knew I was right.

I extended another olive branch. "Despite our ongoing circumstances, I knew you'd make an amazing dad. The way you are with Liv, I never had a doubt."

"Thank you." He smiled sadly.

The moment between us reeked of mild mercy and acceptance.

Cade's fingers inched closer to mine and, with the barest amount of resistance, my fingers twined with his.

One beat. Two beats. Three beats.

Cade hunched forward, his right knee brushing along my inner thighs. His scent—clean, male, earthy—perfused my being. He raised our joined hands together, palms up, unweaving our fingers and trickling his down the length of mine like slow water rivulets over the slope of a leaf after a rainstorm. Running over the lines etched in my hand. Reminding me he was branded there, too.

Affection and nostalgia bridged between the space of our mouths and we closed the gap, little by little, as we orbited closer to one another.

We were no longer oceans away.

Finally, we were riding the same wave.

A dark brown strand fell over his forehead, right over the arch of his brow.

I gently pushed it aside. It fell back. Fixed in this moment like us. The flashlight next to my hand tumbled to the ground with a clatter, but our attention from one another did not sway.

Two heartbeats later and the ambiance was illuminated with the coruscation outside before a clap of thunder resonated loudly. Then the room was bathed in pitch blackness once more.

But we did not need eyes to see what we had already seen.

Our minds conjured the vision in acute sharpness—the one we'd seen a hundred times before as we ferried closer with the promise of intimacy.

Our souls reignited the feelings simmering in the chasms of our vital organs until our flames, hot and roaring, grazed one another once more.

Soon enough, we were so close that our breaths twined. I could smell and already *taste* the cherry flavour of the lollipop he'd suckled.

It happened suddenly.

The emotional drought came to an end.

Cade's soft lips brushed mine, feathering over my mouth like a plume over bare flesh. It was the sweetest thing I ever felt. A shot of pure rapture zinged through my body, every nerve-ending crackling with awareness.

One of my hands curled in the lapel of his leather jacket. Not tugging

him close. Not pulling him away. Simply keeping him suspended in this little fantasy of ours.

We weren't exes right now. We were two beings who grew tired of fighting their attraction and finally succumbed to our fate.

This, Us.

"Ella," he whispered vehemently.

"Cade," I returned with equal fervour.

He skated his lips across mine again and an involuntary sigh left me, parting my lips. Cade took it as an invitation. He captured my bottom one, kissing it softly with his usual ardour. Making me realize that we never lost the ability to drive each other wild.

Cade's hand stole to the back of my neck and he held me tight as he kissed me more firmly. Like a lover demanding his beloved's undivided attention, moans and secrets.

I gave them all to him.

I responded back, my lips moving against his with more freedom, finesse, and...a bit of forgiveness. I bled his absolution through my kiss but strongly held onto the core of it. The need for more of *his* secrets stopped me from giving him full purgation. Titillating kiss, be damned.

Even if nothing had felt this right since our last kiss.

Like we were two beings designed with the sole purpose of being each other's pillar. To satisfy each other's desire and bear each other's sorrow.

The kiss tasted of cherry, regret, and something wicked.

Cade's groan punctured through the cloud of haze in my mind. I drifted back to reality but continued to clutch the strings of my escape. Him and that dark, delicious place where common sense no longer mattered. Only raw, elemental lust.

"Baby." His devious tongue entered the play, coaxing my mouth open and plundering inside in a misbehaving manner. "I missed you so fucking much."

Red, hot heat simmered low in my belly and I moaned, my thighs

clenching around his knee. Filthy want coursed through my bloodstream, pumping my heart faster and destroying any last shred of apprehension.

I broke away to breathe and gather my thoughts.

But to no avail.

Basic need took over and Cade attacked my neck with rough, senseless kisses. His arm curved around my waist and jerked me impossibly closer to him. I gasped as his knee pressed against my core. The wanton part of me wanted to grind against it and get off.

Cade bit the hollow at the base of my throat, where I used to wear the necklace he'd gifted me on my eighteenth birthday. The playful nip was a warning...He was reminding me of who reduced me to a pile of messy, horny emotions. He teasingly toyed with my gold hoop earrings, tugging them with his teeth. Just enough to let me know I wasn't getting away from him this time. Not that I wanted to.

Having adjusted to the darkness, I clenched my fists into his shoulders and yanked at his jacket. "Cade."

He didn't break the lip-lock as he ripped off his leather jacket and threw it somewhere on the floor. His restless fingers skimmed over my collarbone before he practically tore my cropped leather cut down my body. "Off, Ella. I want to feel some skin, baby."

I obliged with no fight.

I wanted him to feel my skin because I wanted to feel his too. My hands cupped his cheeks as our kiss turned sloppy, the kind of nasty kiss that was accompanied by long, slow, dirty sex. I pulled him into me and Cade's muscular body followed. We fell back into the soft bed, and it depressed with our added weights.

Righteousness blanketed me as Cade's familiar planes molded to my slim curves. He pressed deep and rubbed his tented bulge against me. My hands fell to his hips and I jerked his hoodie up. "*P-Please*."

I was begging for everything I promised myself I would never have with him again.

Cade leaned back on his knees, keeping my legs trapped between his, and jerked off his hoodie. It fell on the pillow beside me.

A roll of lightning flashed.

Is that...

Darkness slinked the room once more.

Blindly, my fingers reached out, connecting with his abs. They dipped under my hand as I roved higher, over his ribs, until I reached his chest. I sank my nails into his skin. His shaky exhale married with the loud thunder beyond us.

"You tattooed a wolf."

As if the universe could hear me, another spark of lightning illuminated our small bubble. It looked so real—the face of a menacing wolf inked on the entirety of his right pec, amber eyes with black fur. A new tiny, pencil-drawn black heart was dotted near his left ribs. Livvy's art. It was just like Cade to honour his little angel like that.

Another spark of lightning and my gaze seized the one tattoo I wished I hadn't.

The **X** in my honour.

He didn't get rid of it. Just like I couldn't get rid of his K.

His torso, roped with muscles from years of hockey and marred with the remnants of his past abuse, would forever be branded in my mind.

Cade's warm body covered mine as he kissed me fiercely, swallowing my sound of need. He pinched my top lip with his teeth like the animal I accused him of being. "You called me a lone wolf once."

I did, what seemed like a lifetime ago.

And even apart, his actions told me I still affected him. If he remembered a playful jab I threw years ago and tattooed it just to remind him of my words, then I still mattered.

None of it made sense. If I mattered this much, then why...

My chaotic thoughts blurred under the power of his skilful mouth.

Cade was my pain, the living embodiment of my heartbreak, but his kiss

was also my remedy.

We made out almost angrily now. Fuck-you-for-leaving-me, he said with his lips. Fuck-you-for-breaking me, I replied. Our tongues battled in a fight that was futile. We both lost long before tonight.

Shivers crawled through my spine as he sucked on my tongue and played with the string of my knit bralette, his knuckles grazing down the small of my back. *I-still-want-you-so-much*, he said now. *I'll-never-stop-wanting you*, I concluded.

Not being able to see each other only made this hotter. Only heightened our senses.

"I want you," I said finally, scoring my fingernails down his chest, leaving my marks. I grabbed at the ever-growing bulge in his jeans.

We shouldn't be doing this.

But this was all I wanted to do right now.

His hands ran over the sides of my body. "What do you want from me, Ella?" He licked my jaw. "My tongue?" He pushed his thumb inside my mouth. The cold silver of his ring sent another shiver through me. "My fingers?" He notched his hips where I needed and thrust. "Or for me to fuck you right here?"

Oh my God.

"You don't get to fuck me." He already had so much control over me. If we fucked, I'd lose it all. His stubble abraded me as I trailed my mouth to his ear, wrapping my legs tightly around his waist. "But I do want to come all over your face, *querido*."

Cade could never resist whenever I said *querido*. The word instantly morphed him from a gentleman into a sexual fiend.

He groaned and then my throat was clenched under his tight grip, as he slammed me back against the pillow. My gasp stuttered out of me. I was breathless, just the way he liked it.

"Bad princess," he whispered in my ear, low and smoky.

There he was. My Princepin. My gangster. My bad boy.

Cade shoved my knit bralette up to my neck, the string at my back loosening. He kneaded my small breasts with impatient hands, like he was fucking furious there wasn't more of me, like he was fucking ecstatic that I fit perfectly in the palms of his hands. "You had the fucking balls to show up here wearing nothing but this tiny excuse of a top?"

Loud thunder crashed behind us.

Cade twisted my nipples and I whimpered before he slapped my tits with quick flicks of his wrist. "I ought to put you over my knee, Ximena."

Mean. Cruel. Twisted words.

He still knew me so well.

"I can wear whatever I want. You're not the boss of m-me," I stammered as Cade laid perfervid kisses down my valley, making sure to pay extra attention to my nipples. I moaned mindlessly when he licked and sucked my puckered tips before blowing cold air on them.

He popped open the button of my high-waisted jeans and drew down the zipper.

"When it comes to bringing your sweet little cunt pleasure, you and I both know I am." The authoritative tone of his voice only made me hotter, wetter. His fingers clenched my tits to a point of pain. "Who's in charge right now?"

"Y-You." My jeans were pushed down to my knees. Cade shucked off my booted heels and worked the rest of my jeans off. I lay helplessly like a sacrifice, my fists clenching the sheets beneath me, eyes squeezed shut.

My mind chanted once more that this was a bad idea, but with every passing second, the voice melted under the loud choir of my loud heart rate.

I'd always been a thrill junkie and this moment right here—knowing Cade was going to touch me, but not knowing where his hands and mouth would roam next—was everything I craved. Coupled with the fact that this immoral act was happening right above the crypt of St. Victoria's nuns? We just signed our names under a one-way ticket to hell.

Suddenly, my knees were spread wide and every bit of me was bared.

The bed creaked and I held my breath as I *felt* Cade's body settle between my open thighs. Where his hungry gaze failed to see, his mind stepped in to imagine. Cade's nose buried against my wet thong and he inhaled, the kinky bastard.

He chuckled darkly. "You've been throwing insults and giving me attitude all night long, but it makes you fucking wet when I play back." Cade's jaw opened over my feminine flesh and he bit down lightly—enough to spark an erotic jolt through me. "Doesn't it, baby?"

I whimpered when he ran the flat of his tongue against my soaked thong, plastering it to my pussy lips. More wetness poured out of me.

His fingers teased the underside of my thong before he let it snap back against my swollen folds. "Answer me."

Before I could, Cade sucked my clit through the damp fabric. I cried under my breath, my thighs shaking, my stomach dipping.

"Y-Yes, it makes me fucking wet," I panted, fingers diving for his hair and tugging, tugging, tugging with need. "Your mouth. Your fingers. Give it to me, Cade."

"You want my mouth?" His tongue jigged against my clit, already fucking me through the lace barrier. "My fingers?" There was mock innocence in his voice as the pad of his thumb traced the outline of my folds.

"Yes, yes, yes!" I all but stomped my feet on the bed, going crazy with all his teasing. "I just said so!"

"Who kisses you better?" His sinister grin was stamped right over my clit, his voice sending a barrage of vibrations through me. There was no humour. Just self-loathing in his tone. "Me or Josh?"

The lustful fog in my mind evaporated just enough for me to realize I'd truly hurt him with my insensitive comment earlier tonight. I meant to inflict the barb, but now? Now when things might not be the way I thought they were, I didn't want it to linger in his mind. My fingers withdrew from his mussed locks and travelled to touch his temples before moving down to lift his chin and stroke his bottom lip. "No one kisses me or fucks me like you."

He made a confused, humming sound and pinched my bundle of nerves between his fingertips. He was enjoying tormenting me. "I don't think I heard you, Ella."

"No one will ever kiss or fuck me like you, Cade."

My words were salve for his wounds.

I could *feel* his relief and how he tried to hide it.

"Good girl." He pressed a kiss to my mound and curled his fingers in my thong, tugging it off. "You've ruined all this lace, but we're going to put it to better use, aren't we, baby?" I choked even before he brought the balled-up material to my mouth. "Can't risk getting caught, sweetheart."

The makeshift gag was shoved into my mouth and I tasted the musk of my own arousal. My ex-boyfriend had mastered the art of eating me out and I always got loud when his tongue worked magic over me, so this wasn't the first time we resorted to such measures.

My legs were thrown over his strong shoulders, just as lightning struck once more, giving me the most spectacular view ever: Cade's big, tattooed body between my spread thighs and his turned on, angry face breathing me in. "Don't come until I tell you, Ella."

Then Cade's tongue thrust me into a whole new realm as it struck out against my puffy lips, plowing deep, lapping at my swollen need like it was his sustenance.

I cried out, but my noises were nothing in comparison to the storm brewing outside. Nothing in comparison to the storm brewing inside me—a myriad of memories flickering behind my closed eyelids like a film, reminding me of every moment that made us *us*.

Every moment filled with laughter and happiness where I swore I found my missing soul mate.

Tears gathered in my waterline, from pleasure and the bitter sweetness of our past. I didn't allow them to spill.

Cade murmured dirty taunts and praises into me.

I've missed the taste of this pretty pink cunt, baby.

Jesus fucking Christ, I've never felt you this fucking wet for me, Ella. I could sink inside you right now and you'd ride my cock into the best breakup sex, wouldn't you, Princess?

You've always been a brat. But you're my brat. Act up all you want. Give me attitude. I'll only tongue-fuck you harder for it, baby.

My ex-boyfriend licked my essence with enthusiasm, lewd sounds filling the air. He ate me like a man who just couldn't fucking wait, couldn't get enough. My moans grew incessant as Cade dipped one, then two fingers inside me and massaged my clit with his lips. When he replaced his fingers with his mouth and jounced his tongue inside my tightness in the best tongue-fucking of my life, my orgasm crested undeniable heights.

"Come for me, sweetheart." The stubble on his chin scratched me and his nose bumped against my clit as he groaned. "Come all over my tongue, you fucking brat."

Him sucking my clit and his fingers hitting my G-spot did it for me.

My back arched masterfully and my climax geysered out of me, hot and thick. Cade drank from it like a thirsty motherfucker.

I was still trembling, still coming down from my high, when Cade moved up my body. The rustling of his buckle belt had me sitting up in the dark, panting, reaching out for him.

He found me first and grabbed hold of my neck.

"I'm so fucking close. Tell me where you want it." Cade jerked his thickness. Raised on his knees, his length was perfectly aligned with my mouth. "Otherwise I'm coming down your throat, baby."

I could barely form a coherent sentence after that mind-blowing orgasm. I opened my mouth to speak, just as another rumble of lightning and thunder snapped in the room. In one second, I saw the desire and longing on his face and, in the next, his fat dick plowed past my lips and thrust so far deep I felt him in my throat.

I gagged, hands coming out to touch his abs, as if to stop the assault.

When really I wanted more. I would always want more.

The realization altered me.

We would always be unfinished business.

"Not so mouthy now, hm?" Cade chuckled cruelly, cupping my head to brace me. The sound caused my body to sing. "All it takes is my dick in your mouth to pacify you, baby girl."

Mercilessly, Cade pumped his cock inside of me half a dozen times. He groaned and spent down my throat, forcing me to drink every drop. I suckled him with zeal, feeling his grin.

I was his brat, after all.

That's all tonight fucking proved.

I was and would always be a goner for Cade Killian Remington.

I whimpered when he pulled out of me, softening. He growled above me, "Fuck, you're killing me."

You're killing me too.

How was I ever going to move on from him?

Breathing harsh, I rested my forehead against his tattoo of my name, centering myself as I gathered my wits. This night started off totally harmless, but now we'd ventured into unchartered territories. I wasn't armed for this battle.

Fate screwed me over when she paired me with him. But I fucked up when I allowed myself to fall back into my old patterns. Allowed him to remind me how good it used to be between us before it was all ripped apart.

Cade breathed deeply, almost peacefully, as he rummaged his fingers through my short strands and traced the lines of my back lovingly. The way he always did after I finished sucking him off. The metal of his silver rings trickling over my body with a touch of familiarity was such a sweet gesture. It brought a new set of tears to my eyes.

"You're it for me," Cade murmured above me. "You've always been it."

A traitorous tear fell down my cheek, instantly ruining what was found in the dark.

Lightning.

"Then why wasn't I enough for you?"

Thunder.

Cade saw the broken expression on my face. Every wall was down and, for once in these last three months, he could really see the scars from that night, which had been festering inside of me like poison to my very soul.

I could no longer stop the dam from breaking. Tears flooded my cheeks as I relived every painful day since that night. Every glass of whiskey to numb the pain. Every hour spent watching a movie to distract myself from thoughts of losing Cade and my baby.

Cade clasped my face, breaking with me. A wheezing noise whistled past him. "D-Don't cry, Ellie. You're it for me. You're enough. Please, believe me."

My hands found his wrists in the dark and I squeezed as he wiped my face with his thumbs. "Tell me, dammit!" I roared. "Why did you cheat on me when I've always been it?"

I didn't think he'd answer me.

I thought he'd evade.

But he proved me wrong.

"I didn't fucking cheat on you!" he yelled back, pure agony splitting his voice.

My stomach dropped.

Hot blood iced over in my veins.

"I didn't fucking cheat on you," he said with more conviction and uneven breaths. "I loved you. You were everything to me."

Time paused. Nothing tumbled out of me as I focused on the three most important words. *I loved you. I loved you. I loved you.*

Cade brought his face down, his stubbled jaw skittering against the side of my cheek. I held on to his waist, torn between wanting to embrace him and never let go, or hit him until he felt an ounce of my ache.

I chose neither.

Cade's lip tickled my earlobe, his voice husky with halts. His entire body

shook with anticipation and fear, and when he said his truth, I felt him heave deeply. Like an old ghost was exorcised, only to wander back in the room and suffocate us with its presence.

Never in a million years would I have expected him to say what he said. "Beau Mackenzie drugged me the night of Joshua's eighteenth birthday."

CHAPTER 14

The Beginning of the End

July 19, 2014 9:23 p.m.

CADE, 18

hated fighting with Ella.

Two days and zero communication.

My girlfriend knew how to hold a grudge.

Joshua's eighteenth birthday party was in full swing and she was nowhere to be found. We'd fought over something trivial and now she was giving me the cold shoulder.

Well, it wasn't entirely trivial.

Someone wrote a rumour in the girls' bathroom stall at St. Victoria that I kissed Irene Black last weekend at a party, and Ella actually believed it. I was bartending all weekend at Danny's Grill with Nico, ergo I did no such fucking thing. I didn't know if I was mad at the rumour, or the fact that the so-called love of my life had such little faith in me.

I was a goner from the minute I spotted Ella on her balcony. I never laid eyes on another girl. I never wanted to look at any other girl besides her.

She was it for me.

So how could she think otherwise?

Granted, I've been distant lately. Between finals, hockey camp, Aunt Julia's breast cancer scare, and Livvy's new diagnosis, I barely had the time to be with her—unless it was purely physical and involved her tight pussy deeply seated over my dick in the back seat of her car.

I haven't been the best boyfriend lately, but I was going to make up for it

tonight.

The Remington residence was blasted in colourful neon lights with the first floor converted into a makeshift nightclub that shook with the music's loud bass, while the backyard was flanked with partygoers who hovered over beer pong tables or got drunk in the pool. Nothing less for the future Remington heir.

This whole affair was so over-the-top but very on brand for Josh. While I was low-key, he loved to flaunt his assets. Namely his money, football stats, and expensive sports car.

Not to mention Livvy and me. Josh liked to shove it in people's faces that he had the best brother and little sister on the planet. We often joked around that we were fraternal twins, separated at birth. It stopped strangers from questioning how I suddenly came into their lives. I never said it to Josh, but he was the best brother I could have ever gotten.

I hovered close to the railing on the second floor, resting against a white pillar, where I had an eagle eye's view of the front entrance. If Ella walked through, I would see her.

The second floor was partially empty, save for a couple of people loitering around. Three seconds later, I spied Layla tiptoeing out of Josh's bedroom, which was off-limits to everyone. But her, of course.

She spotted me, features lighting up with recognition. "Cade!"

"Hey, Lay. What are you doing in Josh's bedroom?" I took a swig of my beer.

She made her way over to me, a light blush creeping over her face. "Oh. Just dropped his gift."

"Which is?"

"None of your business."

I chuckled around the bottle neck. "Fair enough." Maybe she bought him a box of condoms and they'd both finally lose their virginities tonight.

Josh was saving himself for her.

Not that she knew.

My brother gave the impression of a young playboy who flirted with any girl on two legs so Layla wouldn't realize how pathetic he was, pining over her like a lovesick fool. They danced around the friendship label for way too long if you asked me.

Anyone with a pair of eyes could see they were disgustingly obsessed with each other.

"Come on. Let's go find Josh." I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and ushered her down the stairs.

Layla held on to me with a death grip as she descended in her stiletto heels. She traded her casual attire for a short yellow dress (AKA Josh's favourite colour) and packed on so much makeup I almost didn't recognize her.

"Who are you dressed up for tonight?" I teased as we reached the bottom step. The dance floor was adjacent to us, booming with Nicki Minaj's "Super Bass" and scantily-clad gyrating bodies. A couple of guys from Josh's football team at Northwind High were raging battle cries as they chugged beer keg, and I was pretty sure I spotted Nate's gigantic six-foot-five frame dry fucking a girl against the wall. Nice.

"For myself!" Layla said over the song. "Women don't dress up to impress men. We do it for ourselves. Get with the memo, Cade!"

"I know that, jeez. Don't bite my head off. Was just trying to get you to admit you have the hots for my brother."

Layla paled. I used her moment of shock to guide us outside. The floor-to-ceiling window panels were open to allow fluid circulation into the backyard.

Balloons of every colour under the rainbow decorated the veranda, the trees, and even the fencing. No expenses were spared for tonight; Aunt Julia had seen to it. The massive kidney-shaped pool was filled with animal floaties, alcoholic beverages, and party people taking selfies or making out. The rancid smell of weed and teenage recklessness drifted high in the atmosphere.

It seemed like half of Montardor was here—students from Eastwood High, Westwood High, Northwind High, and St. Victoria crammed into our mansion.

Josh wasn't hard to find. He was the life of the party, surrounded by a group of male and female admirers as he played a game of beer pong against Hunter, another one of his football teammates.

Josh was dressed in his white football jersey, which harboured a flurry of black sharpie signatures on the back. A collection of *happy-birthdays* and *xoxos*. His hand was perched in the air, aiming for a cup, when his narrowed gaze landed on us. Upon seeing Layla, he turned into said lovesick fool. "Yo! It's my lucky charm. Come here, Lay!"

Josh was tipsy.

That or he finally grew a pair of balls.

Wide-eyed and still with that blush lingering, Layla glided over to him. He instantly engulfed her in a big bear hug from behind and whispered something in her ear, most likely coaxing her into taking this shot for him. Hunter smirked at the entire thing. Josh's female fans were not happy, shooting the couple sour looks.

Layla took the shot and it landed perfectly in Hunter's formation. The latter scowled and gulped down the contents of the red party cup, while Josh whopped loudly. "Another point for Team Joshla! Suck it, bitchhhh!"

I hated to cockblock, but since Ella was still my main concern, I wandered over to them. My brother roped me into a hug. Josh was a little bit like a golden retriever. He gave his affection easily to anyone who was willing to have a piece.

"Guys, it's my twin! Wish him a happy birthday too!"

Yup. Tipsy as fuck. I chuckled at the chorus of enthusiastic *happy birthdays*. "Have you seen my girlfriend?" I hushed into his ear.

Joshua frowned and steered us away from Layla. "I haven't seen Ella, but her best friend is already here."

His words were a bit slurred, but I understood what he meant.

Callie.

Fucking great.

"I saw her earlier," he said. "She was hanging out with some of the cheerleaders in the kitchen."

I squared my shoulders and drained my entire bottle of beer.

"Just be careful with her, all right? I don't like the way she stares at you," Josh mumbled, pursing his lips.

I blinked.

He wasn't stupid. He may act like it, but he wasn't.

And while I'd never told him this particular secret, he wasn't blind.

I didn't like the way Callie stared at me either.

"Thanks, bro." I patted his back. "But don't worry."

I stormed into the kitchen. True to Josh's words, Callie was on her way out with a group of cheerleaders from St. Victoria. She slid me a Cheshire cat grin.

It irked me.

Callie ran her fingers through her blond hair and openly winked at me. In front of all the girls. Because Ella wasn't around. "Happy birthday to my favourite hockey player."

I wanted to vomit at her suggestive tone.

It wasn't even my birthday and she fucking knew it. The rest of the girls laughed and wished me, except for Irene, who shot Callie an annoyed look, then glanced over at me knowingly.

"Thanks. Have you seen my girlfriend?"

Callie didn't like my clipped tone. Or the blatant reminder that Ella was my girlfriend.

And not her.

I didn't like her flirting with me two years ago and I certainly didn't fucking like it now. For over two years I'd tried to relentlessly place boundaries between us. I was always polite to her when Ella was around and otherwise ignored her existence on a daily basis.

But Callie was persistent, always trying to remind me of something I'd like to *forget* altogether.

I didn't have it in me to break Ella's heart by telling her that Callie was a fucking rat. Your best friend shouldn't be hitting on your man when you aren't around.

How long could I curb her advances until the cat was out of the bag?

"No. I haven't seen Ella." A calculating glint entered Callie's eyes. "But I'm here."

Now she was being creepy.

"I'll see you around, Callie." I chin-tipped at the girls, turning around to leave when Callie stepped forward to give me a hug. I flinched, but she clung to me like an octopus.

"Okay, let me go." I tried to wiggle away.

Callie had the audacity to kiss my cheek.

Fuck, no. She didn't respect my boundaries, so I pushed her back with force. She gasped, red splattering her face. "Don't touch me."

Maybe if she hadn't hugged me like she was trying to cop a feel, I wouldn't have had to embarrass her. But truthfully, I didn't give a fuck. The group of cheerleaders snickered around her like a pack of hyenas.

That was the other thing about St. Victoria: nobody had any loyalties to you. They might 'pledge their allegiance' once a year, but once Initiation Night was done, the mirage was over. The only thing that mattered was status, money, and drugs to these people.

I walked deeper into the kitchen, which brimmed with more partygoers and neon lights.

Nico, Nate, and Shaun were huddled around the island counter.

Nate had his tongue shoved down a girl's throat—a different one from the dance floor—and Shaun, on the other hand, looked like he was trying to ward off attention from an overeager female.

I clapped Nico on the back, who was in the middle of loading a shot glass. He beamed at me, eyes a little red. This one was tipsy too. Maybe even

a little high. "What's up, cabrón? You up for a birthday shot?"

I laughed, but it sounded hollow to my ears. "Nah, I'm good."

The party around me buzzed with excitement. My friends were having the time of their lives and instead of joining them, I was being Debbie Downer because I hadn't heard from my girlfriend in forty-eight hours.

I was so fucking in love with Ella that a part of me felt incomplete without her.

I knew if I wanted to end this rift (that she fucking started two days ago when she cornered me in the boys' locker room after hockey practice to bite my head off about the Irene rumour), I had to take the first step and be the bigger person.

Where are you, Ellie? Everyone is at the party except for you.

—Princepin

Ella was usually glued to her phone and answered me within seconds.

I don't like this distance between us. Come over. Spend the night. We'll talk. I miss you. —Princepin.

Still fucking nothing.

"You fuckers really started the party without me?"

Samuel's voice pierced through my reverie. I looked up from my phone and found him grinning at the scene, arms folded over his chest as he peered down at us.

"You were too busy chasing pussy," Nate quipped, untangling himself from his hookup. His mouth was marked pink from her gloss.

Sam chuckled as he made himself a drink. The island counter was littered with bottles of liquor, used and unused party cups. He plucked one and inspected it for cleanliness before pouring himself some Captain. "You're one to talk. Where's Katharina?"

At the mention of Nate's neighbour, he grew somber. "Fuck off." "Gladly."

"Did you find her?" I asked Sam. I knew exactly who he was looking for.

His crush. A tall blond bombshell who looked like she could compete for Miss Canada and whose name rhymed with *Anna*.

"Does it look like I did?" he grumbled, swishing the contents of his cup before downing them.

Sam flirted with girls and a lot of them wanted to date him, but he never did. He was always respectful when it came to the opposite sex, but his attention was just fixed on one girl...who still hadn't noticed him.

Fifteen minutes since my last text to Ella. I tried again.

I'm getting really worried. It's not like you to not answer me. Are you okay? —Princepin.

"Dude, you've been staring at your phone for the last five minutes. You good?" Shaun asked. The rest of the guys stared at me curiously. It was unusual for us to be at a party without Ella hanging on my arm, sipping her favourite Vodka and OJ concoction.

I rolled my shoulders back. "Yeah. Everything is good."

Everything fucking sucked, actually.

"You want a drink?" Nico offered.

Nate waved the joint he lit. "Or a hit?"

No, I didn't. All I wanted was my fucking girlfriend. I wanted to stay sober tonight in case she slept over. We were going to fuck tonight—make love, really—and it was going to be fan-fucking-tastic. We'd never had makeup sex before, but I was certain it would end with Ella losing her voice and my back full of scratch marks.

"I'm good," I said while texting Ella.

You're it for me, Princess. Only you. —Princepin.

I saw three little dots pop up. She was typing.

Then it stopped altogether.

I stared at my phone for over twenty minutes, glued to it while the rest of the party raged on. Josh and Hunter joined us in the kitchen too. Everyone was having a wild time and I was glooming. And Ella was punishing me for something I hadn't even done. Kissing Irene.

At the thirty-minute mark, everything started getting to me. I grew annoyed the more my friends enjoyed themselves, laughed and drank and toasted to Josh's new year.

If Ella wanted to play this game, I'd be petty and play along too. No more running after her. I would give her the coldest goddamn shoulder until she apologized.

So when Nico thrust a drink at me, I drank it wordlessly, my blood turning to alcohol. Then I had another one. Halfway through my sip, someone bumped into me. I choked.

A feminine voice quickly apologized and I glanced over my shoulder...only to swivel my head back around to Sam. I started giving him the signal, widening my eyes and tsking under my breath to alert him that the object of his affection was standing mere feet away.

Sam looked like Cupid shot him. His blond stubbled jaw slackened and he stared at her like she created the universe.

She barely noticed him, riveted on a can of Pepsi sitting close to him. She leaned across the island counter and wrapped her fingers around it. He wrapped his over hers on reflex. So not smooth.

Her amused gaze rose to his. "Do you mind?"

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but she'd already snatched the can and sashayed away, disappearing into a sea of bodies and flashing lights.

"You fucking blew it, man." I chuckled.

Sam ran a hand over his face, mesmerized. "That ass, that face—that body. Lord have mercy on me."

Beside him, Nate narrowed his eyes. "Wait a minute... She's the girl you've been obsessing over?"

Sam was still staring where she had once stood. "Mhm."

Nate shook his head, bringing the joint to his mouth for another drag. "Sam, I'm only going to say it once. Stay away from her. She's—"

"Shut up, Nate. She's the nicest girl at Northwind and she's beautiful and I'm going to marry her."

"You're drunk," he informed him. "And you're going to regret going down this road. I warned you."

I zoned out the rest of the conversation.

We inched closer to midnight and the crowd thickened. I was on my third drink when my eyes connected with one of my teammates.

Beau Mackenzie.

He was staring at me intensely, with a hint of hatred.

Why? Simple.

I had what he wanted: Ella.

Beau played the nice guy, but I saw through him. From the second I transferred to St. Victoria, I figured out he'd been secretly pining after my girl for years. Salivating after her like one of Pavlov's dogs. Trying to be subtle but being so fucking obvious. He never had the guts to make a move on Ella—not that she'd ever wanted him—and I never said anything about him to her because I didn't want to come off as an overbearing, jealous, possessive boyfriend.

Ella was mine.

Beau left his spot and materialized next to me. "Happy birthday, mate."

"Thanks." We weren't mates, but we still shook on it. I squeezed his hand a tad bit harder than necessary.

"What are you drinking?"

"Jack." I tipped my glass towards him. "You?"

"Fruit punch."

I laughed at him, at his expense really.

Beau's nostrils flared.

I felt like being mean. He was trying to be friendly when clearly he wasn't a fan of me. I earned the position of lead defenceman on the Rangers' first line. Something that he wanted as badly as my girl. It bothered him like a bitch.

In his book, he lost twice.

In mine, I won. Twice.

Shaun watched us with a worried look. As the Rangers captain, he was always trying to make sure we got along. Hence why he inserted, "Let's have shots, guys."

All my friends gathered around the island counter as Shaun poured a couple lines of Goldschläger. I was going to regret mixing, but it would be worth it. Especially if it made me forget about my girlfriend, who was ignoring me.

Liquid poured over the rim of Nate's shot glass as he raised it to his mouth. "Bottoms up, motherfuckers."

Joshua, Hunter, and Shaun started hooting like idiots. Nate and Sam ribbed Nico about something.

And I downed a series of three consecutive shots to numb the fact that Ella still hadn't replied to my texts.

While Beau stayed plastered beside me. I could feel his gaze like a laser beam burning into my side.

"Did you ever regret taking my position?" Beau's voice was surprisingly low. There was a dead seriousness to it that may have unsettled me if I weren't veering straight into tipsy town.

I should have been wary. I should have been cautious.

I shouldn't have been arrogant.

Maybe that would have altered the chain of tonight's events.

If I had shown just a bit of remorse.

But I hadn't.

None of my friends noticed our exchange because they were too busy laughing and jostling each other, making *yo-mama* jokes and acting like pubescent kids. Nate and Sam sang the Canadian anthem and Nico videoed the entire thing.

"It wasn't meant to be your position, Beau." Another shot. The spicy liquor burned as it trickled down my passage. "And no. It just means I'm

better than you."

"You're not better than me," he spat, shaking. Friendly, all-Canadian Beau with his blond hair and blue eyes finally stopped pussyfooting around and stood up for himself. Finally said what'd been on his mind for two years. "And you act like it."

I turned towards him and raised my eyebrows. "I am better than you," I goaded. "Check my stats, Mackenzie. You are nowhere near my realm. If you worked just as hard as me—on and off the ice—maybe Coach would be willing to put you on the first line."

Under the low lighting of the kitchen, highlighted by spurts of colourful neon lights, he seethed. Rage splattered over his baby-looking features. "You really think you're above everyone else, you arrogant piece of shit. You love acting like a badass, but you don't belong at St. Victoria. You never did and you never will."

I closed in on him and stabbed a finger into his chest. "I may be an arrogant badass, but at least I'm not pathetic like you." I smirked, moving my tongue over my teeth. I held onto my inhibition as the alcohol threaded through my body. "I see right through you, Beau. You flirt with Callie, but it's Ella you want and it kills you that I got to her first. So I'll let you in on another secret." I brought my mouth close to his ear. "The next time I catch you talking to my girl, undressing her with your filthy eyes, I'll fuck you up. Teammate or not. This isn't a threat...It's a *promise*."

Beau's nostrils flared and his fists clenched by his side. I pegged him and I pegged him fucking hard.

"You have no idea what I'm capable of, Mackenzie, and you don't want me as an enemy. I'll wreck you." Just like I wrecked Kyan Landon. Just like everyone else who had the balls to cross or insult me.

I thought Beau would swing at me. I wanted him to. I was itching for a fight.

His chest puffed and his mask slipped back into place with a slight rupture. Beau grinned, looking unhinged, almost like an addict who just sniffed a white line. "Fine. I'm sorry. I don't want problems with you. Enjoy your drink and the rest of your night."

He waved at the red solo cup I put down before taking shots. It sat a little closer to him.

Or maybe I set it there. I couldn't remember.

"I bumped into Ella upstairs some time ago. She mentioned looking for you. I think she went into your room." He raised his own glass. "Enjoy your night, mate."

Beau blended into the mass of people behind me.

Something didn't feel right. It crept over me like a crawling spider—slowly and dreadfully. I tipped my forgotten drink to my mouth and drained it as I walked out of the kitchen, leaving the noise and chatter behind.

I reached the staircase and climbed up, my legs feeling like logs.

I blinked, stopping, not understanding why I felt so drained all of a sudden. It was as if I was running in quicksand and sinking. I managed to fish out my phone and, through a bleary gaze, noticed Ella still hadn't answered.

Fuck it. Just fuck it.

I wanted to go to my room and plop head-first into a nap of the coma variety and hopefully sleep off this forming headache. My skin prickled and my neck heated up.

Reaching the top floor with the help of the golden banister, a new wave of dizziness hit me. I pushed past a group of gawking partiers and grabbed the wall with one hand and grasped my forehead with the other. I shouldn't have drunk that much.

I stumbled towards my bedroom, my hand-eye coordination slowing down and my heart extremely loud in my ears.

Maybe...maybe Ella would be in my room. Lounging on the bed and flipping through one of my mystery novels. I had...no energy to fuck, but maybe we could talk after a nap.

Sweat formed near my temple and I wiped it with my hand, swaying

inside my room. Darkness, my old friend, welcomed me. The ground beneath my feet felt malleable and my strength seemed to vanish as I leaned against my closed door.

Why was I struggling to breathe?

I reached for the lights, but I was stopped.

Two small hands pressed against my chest and suddenly, the noose around my neck loosened and I *could* breathe.

Ella.

"Baby," I drew out, gripping her face. Everything around me spun. "Y-You came."

She mumbled something I couldn't decipher. My hands delved into her hair...finding curled strands. Ella's hair was naturally straight, but she liked to style it this way occasionally.

"I-I hate fighting with you," I murmured, rubbing her back. "You know I l-love you."

Ella guided me farther into the room. Asking me not to talk and just feel. I was so fucking game. I landed on my bed and my girlfriend climbed onto my lap. Soon she was laying hot kisses all over my neck and grinding on me.

This didn't feel as good as usual.

My throat was parched and I couldn't see or move right. Claustrophobia leapt high inside me and I sweat some more, feeling like I was trying to jump out of my skin while simultaneously trying so hard to stay within.

I mustered enough strength to reach for the water bottle I usually kept by my bedside table. "N-not feeling v-very good. I-I think I'm..." I uncapped the bottle and poured some into my mouth, but most of it overflowed and landed on my shirt.

I was drenched, and my breaths were choppy.

Ella shushed me, mumbling something unintelligible against my fevered skin.

I tried to tell her I couldn't breathe unless I focused hard on every inhale

and exhale.

When she really kissed me, I finally figured out why this didn't feel right. Her neck was too small—not like her usual elegant column—and the shape of her lips and curve of her jaw were all wrong. I placed my hands on her ass to stop her from working my lap. But she took it as an initiative to take this a step further. "S-Stop."

My belt buckle was undone and my jeans lowered until my boxers and erection were visible and she ground against me. Hard. "Please...S-stop...E-Ellie."

Akin to a snake's venomous poison entering my bloodstream, my willpower and vitality crashed low, teetering on the edge of utterly depleted.

Ella stopped working herself above me. "W-Who's Ellie?"

What...?

She reached over to turn the lights on.

And I saw it then with a fuzzy vision.

Short and curvy, with bouncy blond curls. She looked just as fucked-up as me. I had no idea who this stranger was. Anger and horror caromed through my trance. "G-Get off me."

"Y-You're not Beau," she whispered back, drunk as hell. "T-They t-told me..."

The door burst open, her sentence falling short. Noise from the party filtered inside my room, breaking the false safe haven I thought we were in.

Because my real girlfriend stood at the threshold.

Heartbreak evident all over her face and one word on her lips.

Her favourite word. "Cade?"

CHAPTER 15

The End of Us

July 19, 2014 11:21 p.m.

Ella, 18

I overreacted.

I could admit when I was wrong and this was one of those times. Two days ago, I backed Cade into a corner right after his hockey practice and demanded he tell me why he'd kissed Irene Black, my fellow cheer mate, at the Reynolds' party. I should have known better. This was Cade. He would never do that. He loved me and only me.

I jumped the gun because I was feeling overwhelmed, lonely in this relationship...

And six weeks pregnant.

Cade and I screwed in the back seat of my Porsche after Junior Prom and the condom broke. I didn't think too much of it. My periods were due soon. The timing was all off. Moreover, my concern was Cade and how distant and withdrawn he'd been lately. He refused to confide in me. We were so out of touch, unless he was inside of me, fucking me like an animal.

This wasn't us. Cade and I talked all the time. We were a team.

And yet here we were. Withdrawn. Distant. And six weeks pregnant.

Was the honeymoon phase over?

I hated to break it to him, but we were entering the babymoon phase and my boyfriend needed to pull his head out of his ass before I took our infamous baseball bat and did some serious damage.

The Remington residence was blazing with Joshua's birthday party. I

parked between Callie's Beamer and a big black truck. My palm automatically went to my stomach to brace myself for what came next.

No one knew about my pregnancy, but Cade would be the first. I was equal parts terrified and excited for his reaction.

Would he be happy or would he freak the fuck out in the worst way possible?

No matter the outcome, I would not abort my baby. My parents might strangle us, but I was having this baby. They loved me to death. They wouldn't disown me. But they might tell me I brought shame upon the Cordova name by becoming pregnant in my teen years with a guy who wasn't even my husband.

How did I explain to the world I didn't need to bestow a title upon Cade Killian Remington when he was the other half of me? Soul mates were divine. Eternal. A useless label would not prove anything.

Cade and I created a gift together, and I would cherish it over the next months as my body morphed to carry the weight of this miracle.

My boyfriend was like a father figure to Livvy. He would love his own child with every bit of his heart. We were young, but we could start a family together and flourish. I believed in this.

With those reassuring thoughts, I stepped out of the comfort of my car and into the hot, sticky summer air. The Remingtons' courtyard was trashed with party people, deafening music, and too many familiar faces.

Yet the face I was looking for was nowhere to be seen.

My phone brimmed with Cade's earnest unanswered text messages. I didn't text him back because what we needed to talk about required more than 160 characters. A thick layer of makeup, white tennis shoes, and a matching denim skirt and jacket ensemble completed my look. I was ready to face Cade and put the last forty-eight hours behind us. And even, hopefully, have make-up sex because lately I was horny all the time.

I'm here, querido. I will sleep over tonight...We need to talk. — Ellie.

Upon entering the house, the smell of BO, alcohol, and weed danced in a horrible mishmash, assaulting my nostrils. It triggered my nausea. I already had a couple of dizzy spells this week and I feared my first trimester would be hell.

Where are you, Cade? —Ellie.

Flashing lights and loud music reduced my vision and meshed my thoughts into a singular *I-need-to-find-Cade-and-break-the-news-to-him-and-then-puke-my-guts-out*. Despite the bumping scene, I knew from past experiences that the real party at the Remingtons was always in the kitchen, where liquor and conversation overflowed in abundance.

I pushed through a flock of people on my way to the kitchen, being mindful of keeping my stomach protected. It was insane how the beginning joys of motherhood could make you so cautious, so possessive, of a fetus that was barely the size of a pomegranate seed.

I bumped into Layla, who was just on her way out of the kitchen.

She fell back a step and used my biceps to steady herself. "Whoa! Hey, girl! Where have you been? The party started hours ago."

She enveloped me in a hug and I wrapped my arms around her, pressing my cheek to her shoulder. Layla was the best—one of the nicest girls I'd ever met. "You look beautiful tonight, Lay. And I just got here. Have you seen Cade?"

A flush covered her neck and face. "Thanks, Ella. Haven't seen Cade, but Josh is in the kitchen if you want to say happy birthday."

I pretended to ignore the obvious hickey on her neck and walked around her. "I'll catch you in the morning. You're sleeping over, right?"

A timid nod.

Finally, Josh grew a pair of balls and decided to make a move on his girl best friend. Cade and I set bets on how much longer it would take for them to get together. Cade said ten years. I said ten months. Neither of us hit the mark, but I was closer, therefore my boyfriend owed me fifty bucks.

There was too much happening in the kitchen. Too many scents. Too

many close bodies. I swallowed the bile rising in my throat. The guys spotted me from the island counter as I approached them.

"Look who finally made it to the party!" Josh drawled, swinging an arm around my neck. "BTW, this is my future sister-in-law, in case you didn't know."

I cringed at the volume he used to echo that sentiment. People around us laughed. I snagged a fresh wedge of lemon from a white porcelain tray and sucked on it to help with my nausea. "Joshy, have you seen Cade?"

"Noooope." The birthday boy shook his head.

Untangling from him, I sighed a *thanks* and asked the others about Cade's whereabouts. "Has anyone seen him?"

No one did.

Beau came towards me with a small smirk, donned in his Rangers jersey. "Hey, Ella."

"Hey, Beau." He stared shamelessly at the blue topaz necklace sitting in the hollow of my throat before his gaze dipped to my cleavage.

I arched my brow.

He snapped back to reality. "I heard you asking for Cade. I saw him head upstairs earlier."

"Thanks, Beau." I squeezed his shoulder in gratitude. "I appreciate it."

I whirled around before he snagged my wrist and stopped me. An unreadable look inched over his face. "You...you look stunning tonight."

Um...

I smoothed my frown and gave my practiced doormat smile. The one I used at every charity function my parents hosted. "That's sweet of you, Beau. You look pretty good yourself."

He blushed. I didn't wait for his response as I jogged out of the kitchen.

A dull throb began in my abdomen. I chalked it up to stress and a bit of anxiety. Cade was probably upstairs in his bedroom, chilling with a book. While he loved hanging out with his friends, big parties weren't really my quiet *querido*'s scene.

With every second trickling through an invisible funnel, my intuition screamed that something wasn't right. Where was Cade? Was he okay?

On my way to finding him, I ran into one of the catalysts of our problems. Irene Black.

Her posture wilted, her signature red ponytail a mess and her expression pinched. She stood under the alcove separating the sunroom from the hallway with her boyfriend...Jared motherfucking Roy.

From the looks of it, they were deep in a disagreement.

Last night I went over to Irene's to ask her about the rumour. She blanched when I confronted her on her front porch steps.

"I have a boyfriend, Ella. I'm not a cheater. Yes, Jared and I have been having issues, but I swear, I did not kiss Cade. Not since Initiation Night two years ago, and that too was because of a dare."

I believed Irene, the confirmation a balm to my bruised ego.

"Who started the rumour?" I'd asked her. "Do you know?"

Irene winced and glanced away, wisps of her fiery red hair dancing in the night air. "I...I don't know. Sorry."

She lied to me. It was all over her body language. When she didn't elaborate, I grew annoyed and left.

At St. Victoria, rumours were murmured from deceitful lips and, once in the air, intangible and gone. Or they were written with ink on bathroom stalls and locker surfaces, tangible and forever visible until someone decided to wipe them away.

But who would erase hurtful rumours, when most humans' amusement came from the misery of others? We were flawed creatures and relished the fact that someone out there had it so much fucking worse than us.

And my misery, after years of listening to ruthless gossip behind my back, was the breadth of every ghost living in the walls of St. Victoria's fucked-up vicinity.

When I entered the girls' bathroom a few days ago during summer school and saw the pink bathroom stall vandalized, I lost it, smashing the

mirrors above the faucets.

#378: Rumour has it the Rangers' star defenceman was caught kissing Irene Black at the Reynolds' party. Looks like Princess Ella no longer wears the crown.

I never succumbed to these rumours. But when my boyfriend's and my communication ranged from *hello* to *I need to fuck you*, it was hard. I was only human.

Now Irene's eyes snapped to mine. "Ella, what are you doing here?"

Jared Roy, branded as King of Eastwood for his notorious reputation, craned his neck and gazed at me, arms crossed over his barrel chest. Black Henley and dark jeans poured over a tall, robust build with sinewy muscles. Brown crew cut and piercing, steel-grey eyes. He flirted with the kind of crooked smirk that screamed *you-don't-want-to-fuck-with-me*.

I'd be lying if I said he wasn't hot as hell.

The aura of danger and mystery he carried around with him only amplified his sexual appeal. Girls loved bad boys—the ones they could only hope to tame—and Jared Roy embodied that definition.

His tongue peeked out to wipe over his full bottom lip and I belatedly caught a glint of a tongue piercing. "Yeah, *Ella*, what are you doing here?" Jared mischievously mimicked Irene.

Oh, this one's playful.

We'd seen each other a handful of times at parties, but never exchanged words until now.

I threw my long hair over my shoulder. "Just passing through. Looking for my boyfriend."

Jared winked. "You should keep him on a tighter leash."

The words weren't said in a condescending tone, so I bantered back. "Does Irene keep *you* on a tight leash?"

He threw his head back and barked a short laugh. "Obviously, since I'm right here."

Irene flushed, but she still looked pissed at him. Then she glanced at me

curiously. "I thought you were already in Cade's room."

"Why would you think that? I just arrived at the party."

"Then who...I saw..." Irene straightened with an alertness that made me nervous. Her sharp gaze implored me to understand something. "You should go to his room, Ella."

Confused at the strange exchange, I waved them goodbye and leapt up the grand staircase. In the distance, I heard them arguing with each other.

The more I neared his room, the more my skin prickled. A crowd gathered outside his doorway, which was unusual, and mumbled conspiratorially. I didn't spot Callie or any of the girls.

I shoved my way through the swarm. "Move it," I growled, until I knocked on his door. "Cade, are you in there?"

The noise behind me dimmed, like everyone was waiting for me to uncover some big mystery. Upon testing the doorknob, I found it unlocked.

I pushed the door open.

And froze as my mind captured the scene before me like a polaroid. Burning it in my brain forever under the word *betrayal*.

Cade.

On his back.

Sucking faces with a blond girl, who was happily grinding on his lap.

My world tilted on its axis and I fell back a step.

Then another.

Disoriented.

Shocked.

Not believing what I saw.

Rooted in one place as my heart shattered.

The sharp pain in my chest had me dragging out a simple, "Cade?"

The funny thing about soul mates was your connection could never be severed even through utter destruction of your vital organ. That same fateful connection beckoned Cade's mindless gaze to stray my way and, when it did, he witnessed the carnage he birthed inside me.

I cradled my stomach, the incessant pain spiking down to my core.

The way Cade looked at me, I knew he finally registered the wrongness of this situation. He was with another girl. Cheating on me. While I stood before him like a fool, decorated by more than a handful of St. Victorians. They gasped and snapped pictures of the scene.

South Side's Princess' dethroning.

Caused by her very own Princepin.

"Ella." Cade's voice slurred like he was intoxicated...but his eyes went big with the realization of his fuck-up. The girl on top of him looked at me too, high and so fucking drunk.

Cade reached out a trembling hand, as if he were trying to grasp me and shorten the distance between us.

My blood boiled and I blinked back tears. "You fucking asshole...All this time...You've been..."

Cheating.

I couldn't force out the word. Because then it would be too real. My humiliation aside, I thought I was having an out-of-body experience.

I fisted my hands to stop myself from ripping Cade and his new girl to shreds. Or clawing my own heart out and throwing it at his head, blood splatters and all.

I was pregnant with Cade's baby and he was cheating on me.

How long had this been going on for?

My torment continued spreading through me like venom until I knew with conviction that I would get even.

Cade taught me how to get revenge. It was both of our middle names as past history proved. So if I was going down, so was he.

I ran past the horde who took pictures and hollered obscene remarks at me. This was a farce to them. I was this week's entertainment like the latest episode of reality TV.

This was what they wanted to see. The coveted couple of St. Victoria falling from their high pedestal.

To take my anger out, I snatched the phone from a guy who filmed my demise with a shit-eating grin. I whipped it hard against the wall, breaking the screen. He yelled in disbelief and I flipped him the middle finger—a long red claw that I wouldn't hesitate to sink into his jugular—as I kept walking.

Head held high and shoulders squared.

Fuck princess.

I was a *queen* amongst these vultures and I fucking knew it. It was time I taught them all a fucking lesson they would never forget. You could not dethrone me. I was here to fucking stay and anyone who dared to mess with me would end up with their expensive convertibles keyed and their tinted windows smashed with my baseball bat.

I kept my dirty side locked up for the after hours. But when push came to shove? I would show them how nasty Ella Ximena Cordova could be. Revenge was a dish best served cold and I would make sure each motherfucker here choked on every bite as I spoon-fed it down their throats.

I inhaled their cruelty, exhaled a dose of my retaliation and adjusted my crown.

They had no idea what was coming for them.

But first I would deal with Cade, who quickly closed in on me. "Ella... Ella...W-Wait. *Baby*."

Tears gathered in my waterline, but I refused to cry in Dior. I ignored the world surrounding me and walked faster. Cade attempted to grab me and I turned around, biting his head off. "Get away from me!"

"I-I...It's not..." He was so fucking gone, he couldn't even form his thoughts into sentences. I also ignored how he wasn't walking right. This wasn't like the usual times he got drunk. This was bad.

I sneered at him. "Don't touch me, you piece of goddamned shit!"

My words sucker punched through his haze, and he stumbled away like it was a physical blow.

Now I ran down the stairs. The crowd parted for me like the Red Sea. Ironically, I had no one to save but myself. The old me was dead, buried and

in her place was this cold-hearted bitch who refused to crack under the hefty judgements of these people.

At the bottom of the grand staircase, my revenge manifested in front of me in the form of a very distressed-looking Joshua Remington.

In exactly five minutes, I would hate myself.

Josh came forward, much more sober than when I last left him. "Ella—"

In my opinion, people with nothing left to lose were the most dangerous of all. They lost all sense of right or wrong. Threw fire to their morals, if it meant salvaging the tattered pieces of their honour.

I clasped Joshua's face in my hands and kissed him, smack in the middle of the party. My tongue went into his mouth and our lips moved together for two point five seconds before we mutually broke off. Him, in complete bewilderment. Me, because he wasn't the guy I wanted.

The kiss didn't fix anything that Cade broke. My heart, my mind, and even my soul were defeated.

But I showed St. Victorians that I would not be bested by their rumours. I did not need South Side's ex-gangster when I could have North Side's Golden Prince. I was still the cause of their envy. The next rumour would be how I moved on to a shinier conquest. Or that Cade and I were in an open relationship. Either was better than being Cade's poor featherhead of a girlfriend.

I finally witnessed the faces of my friends as they watched our PDA in horror. Shame burned through me, but I held my ground.

"What did you just do?" Josh mumbled under his breath, shoulders sagging.

"Salvaged my pride," I whispered. "I'm sorry."

I fed Montardor's teenage population the highlight of their fucking year. And they devoured it with eager gasps and loud hollers, capturing the entire thing on film.

Cade watched the entire shitshow unfold.

Josh clutched me, eyes closed in vanquish, because he knew Layla saw,

too. Torn from my act, she receded into the shadows.

Guilt rolled in my stomach and triggered another wave of nausea. In that moment, I hated myself for what I did to Layla and Josh because they were undeserving. They had no skin in the game and I dragged them down to the fiery depths of my personal hell for no reason.

I unwove from Josh and ran out, my lungs sucking in deep gulps of fresh air. I jogged to the side of the mansion and doubled over a grassy patch, black tears streaming down the slopes of my cheeks.

That was where I found Darla.

She sat on a garden bench next to the brick wall, secluded from the rest of the world. Her head tipped towards the moon, a beer bottle pressed to her lips.

I huffed, suddenly wanting to lash out at her. Callie was nowhere to be found and I needed someone on my side who'd known me since the beginning of time. Darla used to be that for me. Until she wasn't.

How did you throw away over a decade of friendship without reason and move on like you didn't have memories etched in stone?

Look at me. Give me emotions. Stop blocking me out. Tell me what I've done to you in the last months that caused you to hate me.

Darla's stare clashed with mine and I was taken aback by the resentment in it.

She was crying quietly this whole time...where no one could see her.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" A rough chuckle shuffled out of her. "I should feel bad for you, Ella, but I don't. You're a bad person and people are finally realizing it."

"I was never bad to you," I returned, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "I don't get it, Darla. I really...I really don't."

I zeroed in on her left wrist and realized that she no longer wore the friendship bracelet I made her when we were eight.

"You're right. You weren't bad to me," she amended, her voice slicing me. "You were *horrible*, and you still haven't owned up to it. You're just like

them, Ella. Now you finally got a taste of your own medicine."

"I don't get it!" I yelled, so fucking tired of everything. What in the world was she talking about? "I don't *fucking* get it!"

My words were drowned by the rustling of the trees.

Darla retreated behind her invisible barrier. "You never did, Ella. That's the problem."

A jolt shot through my entire system and I gasped, palming my stomach. For a second, my ex-best friend seemed like she actually cared.

It was a façade, though. She no longer did.

Everyone that entered your life had a purpose. Sometimes it was to stay forever and help you navigate through your journey in the form of a friend. Sometimes it was for a temporary stitch to help you get through a specific period of time. Sometimes...it was to teach you a lesson. While people came and went, the only constant in life was the relationship you had with yourself. The *only* relationship that was worth nourishing.

Darla's time in my life came to an end long before tonight. I just needed to accept it and move on for good.

So I went far away from the nightmare my life became, knowing that all good things must come to an end.

Nothing good lasted forever.

Not friendships.

And certainly not the love of brown-haired, blue-eyed boys who claimed to love every one of your imperfections.

CHAPTER 16

What Goes Around Comes Back Around

July 19, 2014 11:59 p.m.

CADE, 18

Numb.

I wished to be numb.

The pain radiating in my stomach travelled through every artery, causing my blood to rush faster and my heart to pump harder. I clutched my chest, feeling a tide rising in my core. Suffocating me with its magnitude.

Ella left the party after kissing Josh.

Josh, my fucking brother.

And I watched, stunned on the sidelines as my *real* girlfriend—and not the pretend stand-in who was writhing over my lap—delivered her kill blow.

I captured Josh's disbelief as he stood in the middle of the foyer, enveloped by people videotaping the entire thing. In minutes, this would be all over social media and give the evil spirits of St. Victoria something new to jest about.

The end of Ella and me.

She made her point crystal clear.

I humiliated her, so she humiliated me back, her embarrassment forcing her to get revenge on something I had no control over.

No longer could I withhold my bile. Seeing Ella kiss Josh undid me. I pushed against the vultures surrounding me, my vision causing me to see twos of everything.

I fell to my knees right before entering my en-suite, no ounce of energy

left in my limbs. I would have puked right there on the carpet if it weren't for Shaun, who hauled me by the collar and thrust me face-first into the toilet bowl.

I gagged and my fingers clutched the frame weakly.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," Shaun cursed. From my peripheral vision, I saw him touching my forehead. "You're burning up. Holy fuck."

I sweat and gagged, but nothing came out. "S-Shaun, m-my drink..."

"What?" he barked, fiddling with the hem of my shirt.

Somewhere behind us, I heard Nico's worried voice. "What's happening?"

"He doesn't look right. He was mixing tonight and he drank a lot and I don't—"

My guttural heave cut him off. Acid bubbled at the base of my throat and tricked up my mouth. Spit dribbled down my chin. My eyes burned at my body's refusal to release its toxins.

"Fuck." Nico dropped beside me, holding the back of my neck.

My hazy gaze met his and I mouthed words that no one understood. *I think I was roofied*. My eyelids fluttered shut. I felt lightheaded. I felt like I could float in the air.

My shirt was ripped off. Hands caressed my warm back. Someone cursed at seeing my mangled left arm for the first time. Another voice murmured comfortingly to me.

Then I heaved profoundly and vomited. On and on and on.

I emptied my guts until there was nothing left inside to empty.

Until the only sound in my ears was my broken heart beating.

Until the only thought in my head was Ella.

Ella. Ella. Ella.

July 20, 2014 12:36 a.m.

Ella, 18

My hands trembled on the steering wheel as I parked my car in my driveway. Another wave of pain buzzed through me, low in my belly and back.

My mind and heart were all sorts of battered and knotted up. A bubble bath, a good crying session, and a hot mug of *champurrado* would solve everything.

The image of Cade with the other girl tore my fragile emotional health to nothing. The windshield in front of me blurred like our relationship as I cried with loud, wracking sobs.

I wasn't the kind of girl who would take back a guy just because I loved him.

Cheat on me once and you were dead to me.

My heart refused to sever its tie with Cade. Soul mate, it cried in grief. True, you couldn't break that kind of connection, but you could certainly ruin it.

Just like my ex-boyfriend ruined ours.

Blinded with heartbreak, I stepped out of my car and slammed the door harder than necessary. The sound incited the guard dogs to howl just as I crossed the threshold of my home.

My phone blasted with notifications from my social medias.

Because I was a masochist, I played the videos where I kissed Josh. You could make out Cade's agonized face as I gave his brother the mother of all revenge kisses. I scrolled past the video of Cade cheating on me, unable to bear it.

I regretted my actions. Not because they hurt Cade, but because I hurt Layla and Josh. I wouldn't forgive myself if I destroyed their chance at becoming a couple.

I opened my message to find a few from Callie.

Where are you? The girls and I are waiting on you! —Callie

Are you not coming to the party anymore?

Callie

Ok. Now I'm getting worried. Is everything all right? —Callie

The last one made it clear she was present for the lowest point in my life.

Holy shit, Ella. What have you done? —Callie

Great fucking question. I would cry to her later, when I didn't feel like shit. Right now, my focus was on mending my broken pieces.

My feet were dead weight as I threaded towards my sanctuary. My family was asleep, so I had to be quiet. Unfortunately, as I walked by Emilio's room, another sharp pain fluttered through me and I cried out loud, mashing my knuckles over my mouth to control the ache.

Wetness pooled in my thong and I paced to my en-suite as fast as I could, throwing open the door and rushing inside. My heart jackhammered inside my rib cage.

With frantic fingers, I reached under my denim skirt to tug down my verdict.

Blood.

Thick, red blood soaked the lining of my white thong.

"No. No. No. No." I glanced at myself in the mirror, clutching the roots of my hair. "Not me. Please, not me."

I fell back against the wall and slid down.

Not believing it.

This wasn't a period. Nor was this mild spotting during pregnancy. This was something bigger...

...I miscarried my baby.

Deep loss sank into my bones, paralyzing my body. I snapped out of it and quivered, sobbing into my hands at the cruelness of my reality.

Cade hurt me.

So I hurt him back, along with Josh and Layla.

And now I was being punished.

This was karma.

I cried a river for a solid seven minutes.

Tiny soft footsteps padded into my washroom. Emilio entered in his superman pyjamas, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He squeaked when he noticed the sight I created. Slugged, black streaks of mascara trekking my cheeks, my body shaking as I coped with loss, and my panties tangled by my ankles, stained with so much blood.

My four-and-a-half-year-old brother fell beside me, sleep evading him. "Ella?"

"I-I'm okay, manito. G-Go back to bed."

His eyes wide with fear, he rested a chubby paw against my thigh. "You bleeding."

I brushed my fingers tenderly through his hair. "W-Why are you awake, hm? Go back to bed. It's okay. It's okay." I smiled as more tears parachuted down my face.

My pain seeped into him and he started crying with me, not understanding the gravity of the situation. He wrapped his small arms around me and hugged me tight, squeezing with all the might in his little body. As if he was gluing my insides back together.

In a sense, he was.

"What wrong, Ella?" he sniffled, his face in my chest. "You cry."

"My baby." I pressed my cheek to his soft locks and placed his hand on my stomach. "I lost my baby."

"No." He shook his head determinedly, blinking big wet eyes at me. "I still here."

I cried even harder. Emilio didn't understand. He thought I meant him because he was the baby of the family. I crushed him to my chest and he said nothing more, comforting me with his hug and love.

I was scared to go to the hospital, but I knew I had to.

Telling my parents wasn't an option, so I would have to call Callie. She'd hold my hand through it and make me feel better.

A small part of me wanted to call Darla. Weep and confess to her how shitty my life had been lately. I wanted to demand to know what I did to have her suddenly hate me. I wanted her to be the best friend who I met when I was three years old, bonding over Barbies and the colour pink.

But that ship had sailed and sunk too long ago.

"I'm okay, Emy. D-Don't cry anymore," I whispered and kissed his head.

"You no cry first," he wailed into my chest.

I released a broken wheeze at how cute and sad that sounded. Then I rocked us to the beat of my crippled lullaby.

The universe punished those who deserved it. The rational part of me knew I deserved this. But the irrational part of me refused to believe I had been handed these cards.

Reaching rock bottom forced me to acknowledge my shortcomings, my many past mistakes. It forced me to acknowledge that if I wanted to feel true peace after tonight, I would have to seek forgiveness from those I hurt *and* forgive those who hurt me in return.

However, forgiveness came with a heavy price.

My pride.

And I wasn't about to lower mine to forgive Cade.

CHAPTER 17

Two Touths and No Lics

October 18, 2014 3:05 a.m.

Ella, 18

"Beau Mackenzie drugged me the night of Joshua's eighteenth birthday party."

The veil of blissful ignorance shearing my gaze lifted away and Cade's words penetrated, destroying the reality I had constructed for myself where only my truths from that night mattered.

Cade was a lot of things under the sun, but he was not a liar.

In the trepidation of the dark, my hands found his jaw and I caressed, apprehension and consternation gliding against one another, turning like cogwheels within my frame. "Elaborate, *please*."

Because I could not comprehend that statement. It was too weighty, too raw, and too scary to be the truth. Was this what I refused to listen to three months ago on my balcony?

The shell of my ear was bathed with a puff of his breath, which still smelled and tasted like me. "Before you arrived, I was drinking with the guys in the kitchen. Beau was there too and my drink was right next to him as we exchanged heated words. I said some shit that pissed him off and he got angry. He must have slipped the benzo when I was worked up. I didn't realize it. The kitchen was dimly lit and crowded. Shortly after, I left in search of you when he mentioned seeing you upstairs, while finishing my drink. The drug in my system kicked in full force within minutes. Everything in my body slowed until I barely had a grasp of my inhibitions."

My mind ran a marathon trying to catch up with all the questions

whizzing along my train of thoughts. What were he and Beau talking about? Why would Beau do that? Oh, God. Why, why, why...

"You have to explain more." I swallowed past the lump and tried again. "I don't understand why he would—"

"Beau hates me, Ella. He's hated me since the moment I arrived at St. Victoria."

Dread settled like cement around us with that statement.

Cade groaned like he couldn't believe what he admitted and I, too, felt hoodwinked by the admission. But I believed him. I believed Cade. So I gave him space and time to collect himself.

A flash of lightning.

Cade's head hung with his hands twisted in his hair, eyes closed, tattooed torso heaving with a deep breath.

I crawled towards him on my knees as best as I could in the darkness and my arms looped around his waist. The skin on skin contact momentarily dispensed my stress and I buried my face in his left shoulder, feeling the rough texture of his mutilated skin against the softness of my wet cheek. Home. This was what home resembled. "I hurt for you, Cade. I never thought...I never would have known...I'm so sorry, *querido*. Talk to me. Help me understand your pain. I'm listening to you. God, I'm late, but I'm listening."

His shaky exhale stirred my baby hairs. Without seeing, I felt the sad twist of his beautiful lips. "I never stopped loving you, Ella. Not for a single second. You've been in my blood from the moment you called me your Princepin and said you loved me even after I showed you my monstrous scars. You will never stop being everything I cherish, desire, and love."

Love.

It shone like a beacon of light through all the ugliness of our past. All the deceits, omissions, and secrets were unravelling and helping us create a new path to redemption. I inched closer to the brightness, yet still so far away, for we had miles to walk in the tunnel before we found our solace at the end.

Those three words refused to slip through the seam of my parted mouth. It was futile. I wasn't ready to say them again even though I knew Cade itched to be bestowed the honour of my loving once more.

"I don't have hard evidence that Beau roofied me, but everything points towards him. Nico poured my drink straight out of the bottle, right in front of my face, so I knew it was okay before Beau came along. It was my mistake for lowering my guard when I was tearing him a new asshole," he said. "I was all sorts of dizzy when I entered my room. The girl you saw with me was already waiting there. I had never met her before, and she had never met me."

"Then...how do you explain what I saw?"

His voice came out rushed, desperate. "Y-You have to believe me when I say I didn't cheat on you. Not that night and certainly not before. I made mistakes by pushing you away, but I was always loyal to you."

I believed him, even as the reminder of another girl brought back a bitter taste in my mouth. "If you didn't cheat, who was she?"

"A pawn. The whole time she kissed me, she thought I was Beau. When I called her by your name, she didn't understand. Until she really saw my face and realized I wasn't him. The bastard told her he'd meet her upstairs in my room to fool around."

Oh my God.

"In her defence, she was drunk and high, Ella. She was just Beau's 'fall guy'. He was setting me up. It was a trap."

Initiation Night took a complete turn. Hours ago when I was getting ready to come here, I never would have expected to end up in this lane. With Cade and me rehashing our own versions of that night. A version that was nothing like the image painted in my head.

Regret tipped out of the corner of my eyes.

Cade soaked it in with his salacious kisses, the damage to his soul lessening with each stroke.

What was it about the dark that made it so much easier to confess our secrets? Was it the reassurance that if you could not be seen, you could not be

judged?

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm so goddamned fucking sorry." The words flew out of me like shrapnel. "Sorry I didn't listen to you then. Sorry I believed what I saw. Sorry Beau is so vile and he..."

"I know, Ellie. I know you're sorry," he said gruffly. "You're forgiven. I pushed you away and you were going through so much. You can't be faulted for assuming I was cheating. It looked bad, I'll be the first one to admit. I hope...we can leave this in the past." What he really wanted to say: I hope you give me another chance. "You shut me out, but I'm still sorry for not trying harder to tell you the truth."

Sick to my stomach, I muttered, "You're forgiven, too. I'm sorry for slapping you. I...I was in a dark place after losing the baby and seeing you 'cheat'."

The sheets rustled as he pressed our bodies together, barricading me in the fortress of his muscles. "You'll never know the depth of my apology. I should have held you when you were going through your miscarriage. I should have mourned with you. You would have made an amazing mother, sweetheart."

My lips tickled along his collarbone, his words meaning more than I could ever convey. "Thank you."

"Did you ever think to get an...abortion?"

"I was shocked to find out my predicament, but never did I once consider getting our baby aborted. I knew we'd take heat from our families, but I was willing to take parenthood in stride, with you by my side."

He gulped and his abs tensed against my stomach. "It's okay, baby. You'll have more children one day."

More children.

I was no seer. I did not know what the future held for us. But when I envisioned a family and children *one day*, it was Cade who decorated those dreams.

Our wounds were mending. Our spoken words the balm draining out the

festering poison in our cuts. We had walked separate paths for so long, yet I could finally see the crossroad where he and I would meet. However, it was unclear where we would head next.

Broken promises could not be restored overnight. They were similar to a mirror. Once shattered, crushed glass may be put together, but it would always harbour cracks to highlight its previous history.

To distract myself, I felt around the bed for my knit bralette and fastened it on. My cheeks heated at the thought of everything we just did. God, I fucking missed Cade's nasty mouth and how it always made me come like a hurricane.

"Do you regret what we did?" he murmured, making no move to dress. His hand caressed my upper arm in gentleness, coaxing my reply.

I sighed. "No."

But it shouldn't have happened like that, when there was already so much baggage. And now, past the horniness and emotional talk, anger surged towards Beau. How could he do this? What were his motives? Cade was his fucking teammate, for crying out loud. The guys on the hockey team were like family.

That old, sickening urge to get revenge when we wanted to teach someone a lesson churned inside me. If it weren't dark, I knew I'd see that same need in my ex-boyfriend.

"Cade, why does Beau hate you so much? I believe you, I do. I'm just having a hard time wrapping my head around this. He's such a nice guy... Why?"

"I'm his competition, Ella. I've stepped foot in this building and taken everything he wanted. I'm the lead defenceman on the team because I'm better. I'll most likely get scouted before him, should I choose to pursue hockey professionally. And..."

"And what?" I came in contact with my thong and winced. Cade had ripped it clean. Guess I was putting my jeans on commando.

"Beau Mackenzie has been in love with you since elementary school."

There was a moment you experienced when you heard unexpected news. Words failed to manifest. And no matter how many times it ricocheted inside of you, the bullet refused to settle and pierce a wall.

I blinked.

And I blinked and blinked and blinked.

"What are you talking about?" The bullet finally tore a wall. "What in the fucking world are you talking about?"

"It's the truth. Beau's in love with you—whatever his fucking definition of love is—and it kills him that he lost his chance to make a move on you because he was such a goddamn coward. It kills him that I got the most beautiful, popular, stunning girl at this fucked-up school."

If I weren't reeling from the fact that apparently Beau Mackenzie loved me, I would kiss Cade for saying that I was the most beautiful and stunning girl.

"You can't be serious, Cade." I laughed without humour. Trying to amuse myself, really. "Beau likes Callie. He's liked her since we were kids."

Silence on Cade's part.

My expression fell. "Cade, I'm not joking. Cut it out."

He was dead serious.

"I'm not joking either. Think about it. Really think about it. Have you ever noticed him blushing when he talks to you, acting all awkward when you give him the barest amount of attention?"

I scattered through my brain and...unfortunately, did not come up short. Beau had the tendency to blush when I talked to him. I attributed it to him being shy with the opposite sex. It was how I justified why it'd taken him this long to ask Callie out.

But what if it wasn't just shyness?

No. No. No.

I didn't want to spare this another thought. Furiously, I stabbed my legs through my jeans and hopped off the bed, trying to find my booted heels in the dark. "This theory of yours is wild, Cade."

"Are you calling me a liar or do you really not see him staring at you with boners in his eyes?"

I cringed at the mental image that visual conjured. "He likes Callie. He's just...shy."

I was beginning to sound less and less convincing to myself.

I slipped into my boots and almost tripped over my discarded flashlight. Cade cursed under his breath and followed suit, donning his black hoodie and leather jacket. "Ella," Cade grated. "You're not really listening to me, sweetheart."

You...You look gorgeous tonight.

"Look, I never realized it, okay?" I all but barked, pointing my flashlight at him. Getting flustered because there might be truth to what he was saying. "I get the hockey thing, but I'm not convinced he has boners in his eyes—ew, by the way—for me. Everyone knows Beau's liked Callie since elementary."

"No. Everyone knows that Beau has had feelings for *you* but settled on Callie because she's the second best option. Actually third. She's not the cocaptain like you or Darla. Beau may flirt with her, but he's in lust with you."

Third best option? He did not just say that.

And if this were true...My blood boiled at the thought of Beau toying with Callie this entire time because she wasn't Darla or me.

"Don't talk about my best friend that way. You haven't been in my life for three months while she has. You. Have. No. Right."

Callie held my hand in the hospital at 3:00 a.m. when I wept after the doctor told me it was just 'one of those unfortunate things'. Callie had been there for me every step of the way like a good, devoted, supportive sister.

Cade threw his head back and chuckled cruelly, advancing towards me. "Oh, that's rich. I haven't been in your life because *you* shut me out. I haven't been in your life because my own was a fucking wreck. My family was falling apart, I was fucking *drugged* in my own house by a bitch ass of a teammate, and *my* girlfriend refused to hear me out. How could I have been in your life if *you* made the decision to cut me out, huh? Tell me, goddammit!"

I retreated because he had a point. But that still didn't mean he could insult Callie. Chicks before dicks, as the saying went. "I just don't like you putting her down like that. It's rude and she's never done shit to you. Moreover, she's not the third option. She's the first. Because Beau likes her! Not me!" I yelled back.

Cade tipped his head back like he was asking the skies above for patience. Didn't he get it? There was nothing heavenly above us. Not when the so-called gates of hell rested just below our feet.

"Callie's not who you think she is," he rasped, tunnelling thick digits into his hair—hair that I mussed while he ate me out like late night munchies after a fantastic smoke. "I never wanted to have to tell you this. She's not really your friend...She's a fucking conniving cunt."

I gasped as my back hit the wall behind me.

Did the mutual orgasm alter his brain cells or something? Why was he being this way?

"What's your problem? You're targeting one of the nicest girls I know. That's my fucking best friend, for crying out loud. What has she ever done to you? Accusing Beau was one thing but this?" I shook my head, disgusted. "This is where I draw the line."

"So eager to paint me as the bad guy, eh? Fine. I'll play along," he spat. "In the last two years, every time you've turned your back, Callie has taken it as an opportunity to flirt with me. Be fucking inappropriate. Give me comehither smiles. Talk to me in a suggestive tone. I loathe it. I loathe her."

My blood turned to ice.

That was a huge accusation.

"You don't believe me yet. I know this breaks your heart, and that's the last thing I ever wanted." Cade ran a hand over his face, silver rings glimmering. "I'm laying all my cards out for you, baby. Take it or leave it. But I'm done sparing your heart for the sake of my own. This is my truth. I loathe Callie Mackowski."

"Spill," I hissed, my chest shuddering and heart rate increasing. My

nerves were doing me in. "I know there's more. You're hiding something else."

"Two years ago, remember when we were talking about our first times and you asked me who the girl was..."

A cold stare was what I gave him, as the warmth we rediscovered moments before turned to winter. I foresaw his next sentence.

It ripped me apart all the same.

"I had sex with Callie when I was sixteen years old."

CHAPTER 18

Confessing Thy Sins

October 18, 2014 3:23 a.m.

Ella, 18

You hadn't felt true anger, true heart tearing, until you found out the closest people to you—whom you loved with everything you were—had been keeping a monumental secret from you. A secret that concerned *you*, in an altering way.

"No," I spoke resolutely, looking above his head. Seeing nothing. But feeling everything. "No."

"It was before you, but it's true, Ella."

It couldn't be true. Not this.

My nerves roiled and my palm itched. It wanted to meet Cade's cheek and leave three long streaks—my own hellhound mark—so he never forgot this moment. The moment I cracked under the density of *this*.

I cramped my fingers into a fist instead, causing my wounded wrist to throb. "Explain yourself. Explain yourself before I do something I fucking regret."

"It was before I met you." An edge lingered in his tenor, shame lurking in the shadows. "I was at a South Side party, making out with a random girl. Both of us were drunk and we lost our virginities to each other. The next morning, I barely remembered what happened. Just had a vague idea of what she looked like. Months later, when I transferred to St. Victoria, I saw her. Imagine my surprise when you introduced me to her as your best friend—as Callie."

Lost their virginities to each other?

He might as well have thrown an axe at my sternum.

Could time erase the affliction caused by this divulgence?

I remembered vividly how proud I felt on Cade's first day, clutching his hand as I showed him around school and introduced him to all my friends. I'd marked my territory with the physical touch so everyone knew, without the need for words, that this one was mine.

It never stopped the cheerleaders from giving Cade suggestive eyes, but could I really blame them? He was so fucking handsome, not to mention polite, and carefully wrapped with just the right amount of bad.

Had Callie ever stared at him that way?

...Had I ever noticed?

"Why should I believe you?" I refused to look at him. He wasn't a liar, but...this was too much. "Why should I believe anything you say now, years later?"

"I've omitted some truths, but I've always been truthful to you."

Omissions were just as bad as lies. The other side of a coin. Another way to say the same thing.

My best friend would have told me if she lost her virginity to my fucking boyfriend. We told each other everything. From our first periods to our first heartbreaks, she'd been riding with me for years.

"Callie would never lie to me."

The laugh that tore out of Cade's mouth was reverberant, orchestrated with disbelief. He laughed in the face of my denial, like I was the biggest jester on the planet. My soul leapt from my body, until I clawed it back inside its cage with frantic hands.

Cade sobered up and beat a fist over his heart. "I would never lie to you. I love you too much to lie."

"But not enough to not omit the truth."

He ground his jaw just in time for another flash of lightning.

A deep ache settled into my bones, until the jealous monster inside of me

clung to the bars of its prison and hissed out in a vicious tongue. The thought of Cade with anyone besides me was apocalyptic to my very being.

The thought of it being my best friend? I wanted to lie next to Sister Victoria's grave and rot.

The past played like a reel in my mind and I distinctly remembered the way Callie gazed at him when I first introduced them. Her big smile. Cade's stony demeanour, which I measured up to him being uncomfortable with new people. The confused quirk of her brow when she saw our joined hands and that quiet, throat-gulping look she gave me. I thought she had just wanted to hear details about him and me.

If they really had sex with each other and never told me the truth...

God have mercy on me.

No. God have mercy on them.

I would rain hellfire after this night was over.

"I don't want to believe this." I vibrated with the need to go at a punching bag. "Don't make me believe this."

"I know this hurts you and I'm so fucking sorry."

I backed away when he came closer.

"The first time I saw Callie at St. Victoria, know that I regretted her. I knew she could be an obstacle for us and, by then, there was nothing more I wanted in life than you."

He was killing me softly.

"I rarely allowed myself to want something. I knew, with my luck, I may never get it. But seeing you on that balcony for the first time? I wanted you with every fibre of my being, Ella."

My heart trotted to the cadence of his revered whispers.

"I wanted you more than my next breath. Even if it meant omitting the fact that I made a mistake by having my first time with a girl who meant nothing to me...but who meant everything to you."

I now knew how it felt to have your heart physically clenched in a phantom fist. Wretched. Excruciating. And so lurid that it made me want to

drop to my knees and deliver a Hail Mary. Would this feeling be ephemeral?

Cade's sweet words could not heal the track marks inside my chest. He caused them by hiding a prominent part of his past.

It was one thing to forgive him for what Beau did, but another for touching the girl I considered my sister and never telling me about it.

A girl whose intentions in my life I suddenly doubted.

Because Cade was not a liar.

And Callie? She would bear my wrath if she didn't fess up her truth.

How was it that the nicest girl in my life had blindsided me?

The thought of Callie and Cade fucking each other made me want to swallow bleach.

Funny how humans were a lot like snakes. They'd slither up to you unassumingly, inflict you with their poison, and then shed their skin when they'd outgrown the need to hurt you, before moving on. Leaving you to find your own abditory to recover from the venom.

"I'm sorry you had to find out like this. But it's better you know now. Callie's not who you think she is, sweetheart—"

"You slept with Callie. Callie slept with you," I reiterated blankly, confirming it by saying it aloud. "And none of you fucking told me."

I didn't deserve to be deluded by the two people in my life I'd loved like my own blood.

My hand flew between us to meet his cheek because the need to lash out prevailed all common sense.

Cade stopped it in time, catching my wrist in mid-air and squeezing as he slammed it against the wall next to my head.

I groaned as my bones collided with the hard surface. Cade drank the sound as he thrust his hips against mine, nailing me to the wall.

I was trapped against him.

He captured my other hand and gave it the same treatment, his fingers wrapping around my wrists, brandishing me with his fire. "You want to be angry at me? Be fucking angry at me," he growled. "But don't ever hit me. I

don't hit you, so don't do that shit to me."

Even with the anger, lust bloomed. Nothing went unnoticed by me. How his breaths fanned against my open mouth. How my thighs cradled his lap so perfectly. We fit. Even with a storm brewing between us, we still fucking fit.

"It's not just that you slept with Callie before us. You lied to me. In two years, you never told me—"

"I know I made a mistake! I wish I could take it back!"

"Fuck you, Cade!" His hands around my wrist were like shackles, and I raged to be free. "Just fuck you. I really, really fucking hate you right now. You want to know what I regret? I regret you! Goddammit, you were my biggest mistake."

A lesson I refused to learn because I still yearned for him.

"It was before you!" he gritted harshly, shaking our locked hands as if trying to jostle sense into me. "She means nothing to me. *Nothing*. How could she mean anything to me when I've been consumed by you from the moment you set foot into my life?" He switched to holding both my wrists with one hand and squeezed my jaw with the other. His wrath burned my skin. I loved it. Shame on me for being so twisted. For always wanting it. "How could I ever give any other girl the time of my day when every fucking minute was filled with thoughts of you? How I could make you smile. How I could make you laugh. How I could fucking make you *mine*. And once I made you mine, how I could keep you forever."

I whimpered when he tightened his hold on my wrists and jaw.

"Does it hurt?" he asked, biting my bottom lip until he drew blood.

I nodded, closing my eyes.

"Good," he growled, hand leaving my jaw to trail down to my throat. He grasped with half his might—enough to excite me and enough to leave me breathless. "You left a hole in my chest with your last blow, and you refuse to fill it once more. I *ache*. Tonight's the first time you're feeling an inch of my pain. So take it, baby. Suffocate. Choke on it."

He took those same bloody teeth and bit my neck, marking me with his longing.

I gasped.

Wolf. He was such a wolf.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" My spirit sounded broken even to me.

"Because I was afraid it would ruin us."

"This ruins things."

"You think I don't fucking know that?" Cade licked the hollow of my throat. I shivered. "Why did you take your necklace off?"

"Because I hate you!" I was trying to convince myself, my body twisting in his hold. I begged silently to be free. To never be free. To have it all. To have absolutely nothing to do with him. "I hate you, Cade."

"A part of me hates *you* for making me live without you for three months, Ella," he grated into my neck, having the audacity to suck a love bite. "You tormented me, made me live without my heart, and now I want to fucking punish you for it."

He too ripped a chunk of my heart when we parted ways.

"I want to put you on your back and edge you all fucking night long so every goddamned soul in here knows how wet and fucked-up you get for me. I want you to feel my pain as you cream all over my cock when I play you like you're nothing but my toy." Cade rubbed his dented crotch against my stomach, already hard and ready to deliver every threat. I melted under his ministrations, too turned on to think straight. "But I won't let you come. Not until your voice has gone hoarse from begging me for mercy. I want to taste your tears as I fuck you, baby. I want to know you're sorry for tearing me apart. Only then will I let you come."

I swayed from the imagery he spun like gold; it gave me false promises. Made me want it all.

I loved his rudeness in bed.

I loved how he glued me back together after throwing me against the closest surface.

Cade was the smoke to my high.

The other half of me.

But he could also be the end of me if I wasn't careful.

And given my previous track record, I never was.

"You want to be treated badly, Rich Girl? I'll remind you how bad I am when I devour you in the back seat of your expensive car." He licked the shell of my ear, bit my earlobe, and thrust his bulge against my core, jolting my body up against the wall. My toes barely skimmed the floor. I moaned under my breath when he ground against me. "And I'm going to do it with my necklace wrapped around your throat so you never forget who you belong to. I'm branded in your skin, baby. You can't unlove me, just like I can't unlove you."

The reminder of his tattoo on me snapped me out of my reverie, the cloud of lust barely evaporated. It hugged my mind like cobwebs after a long slumber.

"Get off me," I bared through clenched teeth, ignoring how arousal pooled low in my womb. "The only thing you're doing is proving you have a one-track mind. You just admitted to fucking my best friend and here you are, trying to dirty talk me. I get it, my pussy's made out of gold. I'm the best you've ever had. But get this through your thick skull: the sight of you right now repulses me. You screwed up by lying to me from the beginning."

He let me go like I scalded him.

"Yes, I fucked up! I fucked up because I loved you too much and I was scared to lose you. But I don't deserve your hate, no matter how you put it. Tell me. Do you hate Callie too, or am I the only one who has that honour?"

I rubbed my sore wrists, nostrils flaring.

"Fucking answer me!" he roared just as lightning flashed once more.

What I felt towards Callie couldn't be put into words yet. Hate? Anger? Disappointment? But until I heard her side, until I dealt with her, I wasn't going to add more fuel to the fire. My main concern was getting out of this haunted school in one piece.

Cade's desperation was the elephant in the room. I didn't acknowledge it as I picked up my flashlight and the baseball bat.

"Even when you and I were together, Callie continued hitting on me."

You'd think I would've lost the element of surprise by now.

"She's not your friend, Ella. My second day at school, she cornered me and asked me out. I turned her down, so she guilt tripped me. Said I took her virginity and owed her a date. A chance at a relationship. I considered it for a second, until I thought of you." He shook his head. "It's *you* I wanted. It's only you I've ever wanted."

No, Callie didn't...

The baseball bat slipped from my fingers and clattered to the ground. My nails dug into my palm in half crescent moons.

Cade took that as an initiative to continue talking. Three months without his truths and now he couldn't shut up.

"When we started dating, Callie didn't stop pursuing me. She confronted me once in the student parking lot, totally shit-faced, demanding to know why I chose you over her. She cried, saying it wasn't fair that you got me. I told her to leave me the fuck alone or she wouldn't like the consequences," he admitted. "I thought Callie got the message. I should have known she was too drunk to remember. A few days passed and Callie tried new tactics. Giving me seductive smiles behind your back. Flirting with me if she ever caught me alone. I figured ignoring her advances was the best way to go. She wasn't worth my time."

I digested this silently. Because what the fuck.

Not only did he never reveal he had sex with her, but I was just finding out Callie macked my boyfriend the entire time we dated.

"And I hate to break it to you, but all your cheerleading girlfriends are fake. Irene and Darla are probably the only girls on your team who see Callie for what she really is: a rat."

Irene and Darla?

Thunder rumbled as I turned on my heels to face him, shock pouring out

of me the same way blood seeped through the gauze on my wrist.

"I remained cordial with Callie for your sake," he murmured. "I'm so fucking sorry for not telling you from the very beginning, sweetheart. I made a mistake, and I know you're furious, but please know that I genuinely thought I was protecting you."

More silence from me.

"Now I'm asking if...Do you have it in your heart to forgive me for my one mistake? Do you have it in your heart to...love me again?"

The only purpose this night served was making my feelings abundantly clear. I loved this rough broken man with every bit of my heart even as I hated him for what he did.

I walked backwards.

His face split. "Please don't make me live without you."

Agony. This was pure agony. The gape inside of me grew.

"I can't give you what you want," I whispered, reaching once more for the baseball bat, grateful for the pain in my wrist. It diverted my attention from my heartbreak. "You're sorry, I get it. But I...It's too fucking much, Cade. It's too much."

I whirled around, used my flashlight to help me open the doorknob, and stepped out.

Initiation Night, by my standards, was over.

I won nothing and lost so much more than I anticipated.

I didn't check to see if Cade was following me.

Please don't make me live without you.

Why did that broken plea have my insides twisting with anguish? The path ahead was hazy. Could I forgive him? Could I ever move past the mental image of my *querido* with my best friend?

Forgiveness was no longer an issue of my pride. It was sanity. Not forgiving Cade meant holding onto his absolution and that was toxic. My system couldn't take any more poison.

I almost relented and pivoted around to tell Cade that yes, I can forgive

you. His only real mistake was never telling me about his past with Callie. Beau was not his fault.

And while I could forgive him for Beau, it didn't mean I could be with him.

My mind was muddled with horrible thoughts and self-doubts. It wasn't just about Cade. I kept running over every past memory with Callie, Darla, Irene, and so much fucking more. Nothing made sense.

It wouldn't until I had all the answers to questions I wasn't even ready to ask.

Agnosthesia plagued me.

Suddenly, all thoughts halted. Breaking through the darkness of the corridor was a large figure barrelling towards me.

I screamed.

CHAPTER 19

Stranger Danger

October 18, 2014 3:33 a.m.

CADE, 18

My own pain was forgotten the second Ella's bloodcurdling scream rang through the entire wing. It boomed with a window rattling quality that had me springing into motion.

I crossed out of the nurse's office with fast strides, rushing to Ella, who stood flanked by terror, staring at...

A fucking apparition, running headlong in our direction, a beam of light flickering by his hand. In this darkness, our vision was limited. Despite that, what my eyes captured was still fucking terrifying.

So I did the first logical thing. Grabbed Ella by the hand and dragged her as I ran in the opposite direction.

"What the fuck. What the fuck," she chanted hysterically. "Cade, what the fuck is that?"

Blood pumped through my veins as I wheezed, "Keep running. Keep fucking running and don't stop!"

Never one to believe in ghosts or evil spirits, tonight might just be the first time where my beliefs were suspended. Sweat broke out as fear goosebumped my flesh. Ella's legs weren't moving quickly enough in those booted heels, so I grabbed her by the waist in a half fireman hold and gunned down the hallway.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The long stretch ahead of us was like a never ending black tunnel,

encased with our heavy footsteps, thudding heartbeats, and the rough downpour outside, hitting the mosaic windowpanes with fury.

Fear slickened my palms. I almost dropped Ella and the flashlight in my hands.

Ella shrieked. So did the thing behind us.

My ex-girlfriend buried her face in my neck and wrapped her arms around my shoulders and legs around my hips. "Oh my God. Oh my God. This can't be real."

I skidded to a halt when I noticed a familiar pair of stairs that were forbidden—the *staircase of stolen souls*. We arrived at a dead end, so I plunged head first into the dark abyss that would lead us down to our salvation or demise.

Everyone knew you were only supposed to go down the crypt using the other staircases. Those weren't cursed like this one.

I didn't have a choice.

"Cade, no!" Ella sobbed when she saw where I was headed. Her wild eyes reflecting the rollercoaster of emotions from tonight.

She wasn't a believer in this kind of shit. Neither was I.

But right now, we both believed.

Dust motes and a musty smell danced in the air as I descended the cobblestone stairway that led us to the crypt. I shuddered when my gaze roamed over the brick walls, the words registering with a shaky quality.

Do you pledge your allegiance was streaked along the surface in faded... blood.

Ella gagged into my neck.

Veni, Vidi, Mortus was the last saying we saw as my foot came in contact with the final step. I almost tripped reading the words.

I came, I saw, I died.

A morbid spin on Julius Caesar's famous proverb.

Breathing jagged, I closed my eyes for a few seconds to center my thoughts. Ella's body slowly slid against mine as she came to her own feet,

knees wobbling. "We shouldn't have taken this route. I'm scared." She panicked, clutching her throat. "What was that?"

"I don't know..." I pressed a palm to my mouth. "All I know is we're not safe here."

"Shaun and Darla. Everyone. Gone!" she whisper-shouted. "And now we're being fucking chased by a spirit like it's ghost fucking busters!"

"Ghosts aren't real."

"Oh, yeah? How do you explain what we saw up there?" she protested. "It looked like a fucking demon. I literally heard it growl. I refuse to believe it's one of the Initiators pranking us. It's already past 3:00 a.m. Initiation Night should be over. There is no one in the school left besides us."

We thrived in dangerous, thrilling situations, but this was unchartered territory.

"Don't cuss, Ella. We're amongst saints."

There was one sole torch hanging from the low ceiling, over Sister Victoria's grave in the ground. It was forever lit, the only beacon of light in this concibule-like setting. It cast an eerie glow over the coffins on the ground, housing all the other nuns' graves.

This crypt was reminiscent of a time machine, the only relic left in an establishment that had seen many decades of revolution and change. Ironically, it never lost its horrifying charm.

The atmosphere was very unsettling down here. An orison almost tumbled out of my mouth. If we made it out alive, I would drop down to my knees and deliver as many prayers as it took to satisfy the heavens above.

I'd been down here once with Ella. Back then, we were caught in the throes of passion, too focused on our baser needs to really take in our surroundings.

We were amongst the graves of at least a dozen nuns, yet it didn't feel like a sanctuary.

No.

This felt like the devil's lair.

"The crowns." Ella's chest rose up and down so rapidly, I thought her bralette would pop free. She pointed a trembling finger towards her left. "They're here."

Angling my head, I spotted two golden crowns with fake encrusted blue stones poised over Sister Victoria's coffin. It was blasphemous. And it was so Darla and Shaun.

"There's no one left in this school and the crowns are still here...That means nobody won."

Something went extremely wrong during this Initiation Night, and we had no means of communicating with the outside world. Everyone had vanished, and Ella and I were locked in here, hallucinating over an apparition.

A creak resonated and Ella squeaked before I clamped a hand over her mouth. Echoing above us was a curse and a growl. When heavy footsteps began descending the staircase, I dragged a stupefied Ella to the confessional that lay tucked in the corner of the crypt.

Ella's arms flailed, but she didn't try to fight me as I hid us into the old, dusty booth. No one used this. It was merely an accessory, an ode to a time before St. Victoria's modernization.

I brought a finger to her lips to warn her to stay quiet and turned off our flashlights to not draw attention to us.

As every new second flitted through an invisible hourglass, I realized that maybe what was coming down here wasn't an apparition.

The possibilities of it being something living, coupled with the fact that everyone in this school had suddenly disappeared into thin air, was even scarier than the former.

We struggled not to step onto each other's feet, our bodies plastered together. The baseball bat dug into our fronts.

I was afraid. So was Ella.

We held each other the way we had a hundred times before. Only this didn't feel like a hundred times before. This felt more monumental.

"Why does this feel like the end?" she hushed, hugging me tighter.

"It's not." I was trying to reassure us both as I crushed her to my chest, needing her warmth and light. Needing her, point blank.

The footsteps got closer.

My throat bobbed with a swallow and Ella's lips chased the contours of my Adam's apple. The tender intimacy almost undid me, had it not been for the fact that the thing on the other side might be a serial killer of the Texas chainsaw massacre variety.

My imagination ran wild with petrifying scenarios.

The need to protect Ella—my Ellie, my fucking world—prevailed all common sense. I'd gladly take the hit if it meant she left this place unscathed. I trembled as I embraced her, covering every inch of her exposed frame. She never had to worry about any threat. Not when I was around.

Ella wouldn't get hurt.

Over my dead body.

I tried to think of happy thoughts. Having Ella stuck this close only served in reminding me of that one time we snuck down here by accident and ended up fucking in this very confessional booth. Easily one of the hottest fucks of my life. I'd gotten down on my knees to show her how I worshipped and she'd creamed my face in blessing. Then I completed the service by pounding into her body nine ways to Sunday. Sacrilegious of us, for sure. Now we were being punished tenfold for it.

God forgive us because Ella and I had definitely sinned in our short time on his Earth.

Unfortunately for God, I didn't think Ella and I could ever stop.

We were a force to be reckoned with.

We were sinners disguised as the good fellows our family demanded we be.

But our tainted souls thrived in the darkest crevices of any room, for that was where we could truly be ourselves and raise hell.

"You're hard," she remarked, grinding against my erection.

I gritted my teeth and stared at the ceiling. "I know."

Maybe whoever was on the other side of the confessional would leave after not finding us. Maybe we would get to live and then we could do something about the epic cockstand growing in my jeans.

"This is so not the time, Cade," she informed an octave too loud.

"You think I don't know th—"

The curtain of the confessional was ripped open.

I screamed.

The apparition screamed.

Ella released a battle cry.

Then she took the baseball bat between us and swung it out like a probaseballer.

It bashed against the intruder, who released a groan that was too human, too masculine, too...recognizable.

My ex-girlfriend heaved like a warrior as she stepped out of the booth. I switched my flashlight on, directing it towards the big body on the floor to confirm my rising suspicions.

Ella cupped a hand over her mouth, the baseball bat clattering to the concrete ground.

I doubled over and yanked at the roots of my hair, my eyes widening in disbelief.

It couldn't be.

I blinked.

She didn't.

"You just fucking *murdered* Shaun!" I yelled at her, with a ferocious quality that could—no pun intended—raise the dead. "Holy shit, Ella! What the fuck!"

"Oh my God," she said blankly. When she snapped out of her daze, she began hyperventilating. "I-I just k-killed Shaun."

I fell to my knees beside my best friend, whose temple was now slick with a stream of fresh blood. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I-I wasn't thinking!" She cried bitch tears and I shook my head furiously, fear skyrocketing my rhythm higher than ever. Shaun could not die. I wouldn't allow it. "I-I thought it was a g-ghost, or a s-serial killer. I thought we were going to die! Oh my God. I'm going to fucking jail. I just killed Shaun Jacobson the III."

While she had her episode, I felt for his pulse with shaky fingers and lo and behold, he was breathing. Hallelujah. I shoved the butt of my flashlight into my mouth and ripped her side purse off her body as I dug for clean tissues. I bundled a wad and held it to Shaun's temple, whose breathing was —thank God—steady.

Ella fell to her knees beside me, doing the cross before clasping her hands together in prayer. "Padre nuestro que estás en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre..."

I drowned her out. Blistering heat and terror crawled over my limbs like an eight-legged creature. I concentrated on wiping Shaun's blood and running my fingers over his head. His Plague Doctor's mask was knocked clean by Ella's mighty swing.

"Shaun?" I slapped his cheek lightly. "Please. C'mon, Shauny Boy. I need you alive."

This felt like the first time Livvy had her seizure. I already lost my parents. I couldn't risk another person dying on me.

Done with her prayer, Ella tenderly cradled his face in her hands. "Shaun, I'm so sorry. Please, don't die on me. I'll never be able to live with myself knowing that I killed you. I need your annoying ass in my life because it'll be really boring without you," she cried. "I'm so sorry I stole your math textbook in ninth grade and drew sperms all over it. I'm sorry I told Hera you had chlamydia when you actually liked her. Still do. I'm sorry for a lot of things, but I need you to wake up so I can properly apologize. I swear I'll never pull another prank on you if you just open your eyes. Please, I'm begging you."

A knife was lodged into my windpipe and twisted every time I glanced

down at my best friend's unconscious body. I prayed silently, begging the universe to spare Shaun.

His fingers twitched.

Ella and I both gasped. "I think he's waking up. I didn't kill him."

"Ella?" Shaun groaned, eyes fluttering open.

"Yes, it's me! Oh, God. It's me." Ella smacked a noisy kiss on his forehead. "I didn't kill you. Thank God."

I pulled the water bottle out of Ella's purse and handed it to her. "Make him drink this."

I wiped the sweat beading his face with more tissues. "You're going to be okay, bro."

Ella unscrewed the bottle and tried to tilt it to his gaping mouth. "Open wide, Shauny."

Shaun groaned, blinking at Ella with a glassy quality. His hand reached out to cup her cheek. "I'm not strong enough. You'll have to give me mouth-to-mouth."

Ella and I shared a deadpan.

"If he's talking about kissing me, he's clearly fine," she spat, then sighed with relief. "I'll let it slide this time, considering I almost killed you."

He chuckled weakly, then grabbed his head. "My skull's made out of metal. I'm good, baby."

"Yeah, but you might have a concussion." He needed to stay awake. "Ella, we need to get him out of here and to an actual hospital."

A eureka moment hit me and I remembered Shaun had my phone. I dove for his pockets, almost brushing his crotch. My fingers shaped around the contours of my phone and I pulled it out, laughing a bit manically. The night's events made me feel like I was running a marathon and finally winding down.

I powered on my phone and...nothing.

A frustrated sound bubbled inside of me. What the hell was this luck of ours?

"My phone's dead," I growled.

"You...gave it to Shaun at the beginning of Initiation?"

As if I'd fucking give it to Callie *I-hit-on-my-friend's-man* Mackowski and Beau *I-roofie-my-teammates* Mackenzie. Ella flushed when she realized how redundant it was to ask me that.

"Do you have your keys on you or did you give those to Callie as well?" It came out sour, but I didn't care. I would hotwire her Porsche if it meant getting us to the hospital in record time.

"No, I have those on me." She got up, dusted her knees, and squared her shoulders. "Let's get him out of here."

Shaun sat up with my help. I felt so fucking horrible for him. "Is this a bad time to ask what happened?"

His gaze wandered around the scene and he shuddered. Shaun, like most of us, stayed away from the crypt. "We've got a traitor. Someone told the cops. We heard the sirens and ran away on time. They couldn't enter because it's private property. I believe they left after checking the outskirts."

My mouth fell open. "No fucking shit."

The cops probably thought it was a false alarm. None of us were dumb enough to park our cars in the student lot. Ella's usual spot was on the street behind the hill of St. Victoria and I rode in Shaun's Audi tonight.

He nodded but then groaned again like the small gesture ached him. It probably did. I gripped the side of his neck and tried to rub his back.

"We were all escaping to Marnie's Shack and I noticed you and Ella weren't there. I took the keys from Darla and came back for you both."

Aw, fuck. Ella's expression softened, too. "Thank you, Shaun. You're the best, you know that, right?"

Goddammit. I said it before, but I'd say it again. Shaun was a real one. I hugged him to emphasize my affection. "I love you, bro."

Also explained why Shaun was dripping wet. He came back for us in this downpour. "C'mon. Let's get you to a hospital."

I wrapped an arm around his waist and hauled him up as he swayed.

"Do you think..." Ella's timid voice was so low that it jerked us. "Do you think Beau...or Callie told the cops?"

Shaun gazed at her, not understanding.

But I did.

My words finally sank and she second-guessed everything she once believed true. Her perfectly constructed world was crumbling beneath her orange acrylic fingertips and she struggled to grasp anything that would anchor her.

"I don't know," Shaun said. "We don't know."

"Where are our phones?" Ella asked.

"Darla took the tote from Callie when they reached Marnie's."

Ella didn't say more. She whirled around and marched towards Sister Victoria's grave. I knew what she was going to do before she did it. We already lost so much tonight, but if there was one thing Ella would hang on to—if not for her pride—then it was her ego.

In her book, we won Initiation Night and our names would be scrawled in St. Victoria history.

Illuminated by the single light hanging over the coffin, Ella picked up her crown and gently set it down on her head, relishing the moment with a quiet intake of breath. When she turned towards us, she looked like a fallen angel with clipped wings. Even the mascara streaks down her cheeks and smeared lip gloss didn't take away from her beauty.

A quiet fire burned in the depths of her flawed orbs.

She'd never looked more beautiful to me.

"Let's go, Princess," I said through the tightness in my throat. "It's done."

This night is done. We're done. Everything is done.

"Oh, Cade." She smirked wryly, tipping her chin in that haughty manner of hers. "Everyone seems to forget. I'm not South Side's princess. I'm the *fucking* queen."

She swiped the other spare crown and brushed past us before halting.

Turning back, she gently placed it on my head. "We did it, querido. King and queen of Initiation Night."

The universe worked in mysterious ways. Finally granted the thing we wanted two years ago when it no longer mattered now.

With Ella's torch guiding us, we slipped out of the crypt.

Ella's presence always lit my world up like fireflies in a late evening sky. For the first time since she walked out of my life, I felt alive tonight.

I would do anything to feel like this every day.

My omission ruined any chances of us getting back together and Ella made it clear it was a little too late.

Freedom slipped into our hands as we journeyed out of the school, stripping away the chains of Initiation Night. The rain had simmered to a light drizzle. Wet grass sagged beneath our shoes as we ventured into the courtyard.

Instantly, we were blinded by a flurry of red and blue lights.

Four words were yelled through a loud speakerphone. "Put your hands up!"

CHAPTER 20

October 18, 2014 4:47 a.m.

Bonnie and Clyde

Ella, 18

I flipped my middle finger on the last picture of my mugshot. Even with Dior staining my under eyes and my glittery lip gloss feathered around the edges of my smirking lips, I still hung onto my Cordova pride. My Initiation Night crown was tilted but still poised as regally as ever on top of my head.

We don't show people our weakness in this house, mija.

The inside of a jail cell was nothing to write home about.

Half a dozen individuals housed the temporary confinement. It swarmed with despair and BO. The biker with the faded tattoos, yellow teeth, and wiry beard gave me a rotten smile.

I grimaced and flicked my head away, dismissing him.

Cade glared at him like this was a pissing contest. "Keep your eyes to yourself."

I promptly ignored him too, my fingers wrapping around the bars of the cell. I leaned my forehead against the steel rods. Ironically, I became the jealous monster living inside my head, rattling the cage, hissing to be set free from this purgatory.

"Joder mi vida," I murmured.

The cops hadn't left the premises of St. Victoria like Shaun thought. After a humiliating juncture involving us getting on our knees with our hands behind our heads, we were dragged to the police station for questioning. Not Shaun, though; his injury resulted in him being rushed to the hospital.

Through the silent ride in the back of the cruiser, every rule set in place by Initiation Night was reinforced into Cade and me. We had pledged our allegiance. Therefore, we were bound by it the same way the mafiosos were bound by their omertà.

The metal cuffs biting into my skin had felt foreign and like an insult to my very being. On my way to the station, I also concluded, with a hearty amount of shame, that the only cuffs I enjoyed were the ones Cade tied me with when we fucked.

How in the world did we get here?

"It's going to be okay," Cade hushed, materializing next to me, with a comforting hand on my back. It slipped beneath my cropped leather jacket and rubbed my bare skin. "Don't worry, Ellie."

Translation: Francisco Cordova and Vance Remington had enough money to set fire to this entire vicinity if their children were harmed in any way.

I winced and moved a few steps away from Cade. His touch confused me, made me forget about right or wrong. It brought too many intimate memories I couldn't afford to think about. Not when I was so messed up in the head and high off the secrets he kept.

The masquerade was over. I could no longer pretend to be strong and collected as I waited for the verdict.

Cade's, Shaun's, and my lie was iron-clad. It was just us and us alone. We were vagabonding around the neighbourhood until we found the school 'unlocked'. Shaun tripped in the dark and hit a brick wall. Ergo the blood and blow to his head. We left behind all the important details in between.

Because what the fuck was I supposed to say?

"Hi, my name is Ella Ximena Cordova. Tonight, I found out that my exboyfriend never cheated on me because his teammate roofied his drink and staged it to look like he hooked up with someone else. Oh, and I finally told him that I miscarried our baby. Before that big revelation, I allowed him to go downtown and eat me out like a Mcdeez caramel sundae on a hot summer day. And after that, he informed me he lost his virginity to my best friend—before he met me, but semantics—and that he still loves me. Probably always will. Now my mind can't make sense of anything. Besides the fact that I probably, most likely, still love my ex-boyfriend too. Oh, and my so-called best friend? I'm afraid Cade might be right about her being a two-faced bitch. That's my statement."

Instead, I mentioned that if a single hair on my head was harmed, Francisco Cordova's lawyers would fuck the entire police station in the ass with no lube.

"Ella, talk to me." Cade's sweet whisper hit the side of my neck.

I whirled around on my size seven Pradas and gave Cade the murderous look of a lifetime. "Talk to you?" I laughed incredulously. "Are you fucking serious right now?"

He looked completely serious.

"I am still processing tonight's shitstorm if that hasn't occurred to you. I am not over hearing what you told me. I am dumbfounded, drained, and utterly at a disadvantage because I feel like a fool who's been played. So tell me, what do you want to talk about right now, while we stand in a jail cell with an audience of six and the smell of piss up our noses?"

Cade stared at me.

"I want to know if you can forgive me. I want to know if," he hesitated. "If...I still have a chance to be with you."

The thump in my chest magnified. "You're forgiven." I swallowed. "For the stuff with your family. For Beau. None of it was your fault and I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

I couldn't imagine the amount of strain it must have caused his mental health. I wished I could have held his hand through it all. I wished I retaliated for Cade's sake.

But I no longer had that right.

Our flame burned to small embers and soon, there would be nothing left except for ashes.

"But not for Callie," he said with finality. His shoulders sagged. "Why

can't you forgive me for that?"

I refused to spare him a glance. "Because you could have told me about Callie. You had two years to come clean. About losing your virginity to her. About her...trying to seduce you. You let me stay friends with someone like that. You kept secrets from me. I was your best friend. You don't do that to your best friend. Even if you were led by some false sense of protecting my feelings."

When he didn't say anything, I added somberly, "What sickens me is that you kept this piece of information to yourself and you would have kept it if it weren't for the fact that I defended her tonight. You only told me the truth because it grated your nerves that she had my love while you lost it."

Guilt oozed out of him and I knew I hit bull's-eyes.

The people in the jail cell gravitated towards us like this was a juicy segment of a telenovela as we aired our dirty laundry.

Cade grabbed my waist, forcing me to release my hold on the bars. Blood rushed back to my whitened knuckles. His hands rose to cup my cheeks and I was helpless to push him away. I allowed him to be heard.

"I've made mistakes, Ella. I'm not perfect," he rasped. There was a fine sheen of moisture coating his blues. "But you were the first person who made me feel as though my jagged, broken parts were worth loving. You made me feel whole after I spent years getting ripped apart by my demons. From the minute I saw you, I've only wanted to be worthy of you."

I'll always love your broken parts the way I've loved your healed ones.

"So I lied. I lied and I hurt you and I'm so fucking sorry. I see your side. Your anger is justified. I wish I could go back in time and tell you everything from the start," he whispered. "Can you find it in your heart to forgive the flawed part of me that lied, because I never wanted to lose you?"

He knew that if he told me from the get-go that he'd been with Callie, he and I would have never happened.

"If you walk away from me now, know that I'll survive." He brushed my lone tear with his calloused thumb. "But I only feel alive when I'm with you,

Ella. Don't make me live without you anymore. There's no good version of my life where you aren't in it. You and I. Always. Remember?"

I did remember.

I just couldn't give Cade what he wanted right now. I would be sacrificing my mental sanity if I jumped into the deep end with him again.

That was the thing about Cade Killian Remington and me. We were two souls cut from the same cloth. Everything about us was crazy, fast-driven, impulsive, and wrapped in a red ribbon of thrill, excitement, and so much love. Together, our energy, our flame, was as bright as the sun.

The thing about the sun?

When you got too close, you always got burned.

Cade and I were notorious for playing with fire, and it was time to calm down and move away from the flames and into the smoke.

I needed some time to myself to figure out my next move. I couldn't do that with Cade's overwhelming affection shrouding every singular thought.

"I'm sorry, Cade." My voice was barely an audible whisper. "But I can't give you what you want."

I moved his hands away from my face. It physically pained me parting with his touch.

Perhaps tonight was the night where I truly handed over my heart to him with no chance of it ever coming back to me. He said I left a hole in his chest when I walked away. I hoped he knew I was carving my own to match his as I left. A space that would forever stay void, only to be filled by him.

This was for the best.

"Is there any part of you that still loves me?" The question, charged with so much electrifying tension, crackled between us.

A gasp from the biker. Shuffling from the other inmates.

Cade waited like he was on death row and my answer would determine the course of his fate.

I didn't reply, just stared at him with a sad smirk.

Yes.

Cade understood the opposite. He closed his eyes and staggered back from the weight of my expression.

"Ella Ximena Cordova." One of the cops came to collect me.

I didn't take my gaze away from Cade. "Goodbye, querido."

Then I walked out on the love of my life.

Francisco Cordova rarely played the overly doting father role. He didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, nor was he the overly affectionate type. But he loved his children dearly and was always present throughout every one of my milestones: elementary graduation, first cheer performance, teaching me how to drive and more. If it weren't for those moments, I would think my father was nothing more than a cold businessman with an aversion to familial duties.

He came to bail me out at 5:00 a.m. with panic blanketing his features.

It was a turning point.

I saw *mi papá*'s armour crack. His eyes were red and weary, and anxiousness tumbled through his body. He waited for me in a haphazardly buttoned dress shirt, slacks that hadn't been pressed, and shoes without socks. A telltale sign that he rushed over to the station when I called.

I was expecting him to yell at me.

Instead, the crinkles by the corners of his eyes grew more pronounced as his expression fell. His throat bobbed with a swallow. "Mija."

I cracked, dashing into his embrace as the events of the night trickled like fallen dominos. One after the other, the impact more profound than the last. Overwhelmed and exhausted, a sob tore out of me and I hugged his middle with all my strength. "Papá."

He didn't ask me what happened. He didn't scream at me. He simply held me close as I cried big, fat, ugly tears into his shirt.

Oftentimes I saw life divided by a rope with two equal sides: bad and good. Most individuals went above and beyond to stray to the side where evil did

not prevail. Myself? I balanced on the edge of both.

There was exhilaration to be found in dancing with the devil. We knew by now that nothing got my blood pumping more than a thrilling act with the one who treated me like I was his reason for living.

Being a rule follower was ingrained inside of me by my parents at a young age, even though I occasionally slipped up. The flip side was disappointing them when I acted wild—no morals, no shame, just me and my bae—and that wasn't something I liked to acknowledge.

Saturday afternoon, my parents and I gathered in *mi papá*'s office as I told them about Initiation Night. If I wanted to get back into their good graces, I needed to be honest.

My parents were shocked to hear about St. Victoria's tradition. A screaming lecture ensued where *mi papá* told me how reckless I'd been. Then *mi mamá* calmed him down before ripping me a new one. I took all their heat because it was well-deserved and, well, I lived under their roof and ate their food. So *shut-the-fuck-up* became my middle name as I sat like a toddler getting scorned for eating the last cookie in the jar.

After giving me the verbal thrashing of a lifetime, we ended on a good note. AKA me promising to never partake in this tradition. Technically, I never would, since I was graduating this upcoming year.

It baffled my parents that Initiation Night was so coveted, but they understood the pull it held for the young, rebellious youth. Didn't mean they agreed with it.

My parents also said my record was clear. The thing about Montardor? Most of the cops were dirty and in the pockets of the rich, powerful elites of the city. People whose last names were Cordova, Jacobsen, Manning, Remington, Roy, Simmons and so on.

"Diane won't punish you for 'breaking' into the school," *mi papá* said. The cops didn't know about Initiation and it would stay that way. However, they were curious as to how the school was 'unlocked', so the investigation would probably continue. "Not unless she wants me to continue supporting

her upcoming mayoral campaign."

Diane Hill wouldn't say shit because she'd be a hypocrite, considering her own ancestors debuted this goddamn tradition. But my parents didn't need to know that.

With one problem down the drain, we hugged it out like a family before *mi papá* left his office with a resigned sigh. "I don't even want to know what kind of trouble Emilio will cause me."

Emilio was an angel of a child, but the Cordova bloodline was filled with rebels and my little brother would probably fall into line when the time came.

Mi mamá and I were the only ones left in the room. She gazed at me like I took ten years out of her life. And in a way, I guess did. "Don't ever scare us like that again, mija. You have no idea what went through my mind when we got a call from the station. Por favor, no more secrets. We confide in each other. We're a family. Never forget that."

It was now or never.

We sat side by side on a brown leather couch. I grabbed her slender fingers in mine. "Mamá, I have to tell you one more thing. Please, don't be mad at me, though."

She gulped.

I concentrated on her silvering roots contrasting with her tan skin, the sharp angles of her dark brows, the soft curve of her chin, but I avoided her eyes that shimmered. I would start crying before the words even emerged.

"I was six weeks pregnant last July."

She froze.

I recounted the entire sordid tale, minus the party situation where I ruined things for Josh and Layla. I told her how many pregnancy tests I took to confirm. How excited I was at the prospect of motherhood, no matter how young. I told her how I lost the baby. How I sat crying on my bathroom floor because the universe had dished me a dose of karma. I told her how I broke up with Cade—not because my feelings had waned like I originally lied to them—but because I thought he cheated on me. How he didn't actually cheat

on me because he was a victim in this situation, too.

Through my monologue, she stared at me like she didn't recognize me.

While I mourned my dead baby, $mi \ mam\acute{a}$ crushed me to her chest and wept because she mourned all that I'd gone through. She hugged me the way she used to when I was a little girl who needed shielding from this world of ours.

A mother's love was eternal and this was the comfort I had needed months ago. I wished I'd confided in her before. No matter how much I tested my parents' patience, they would always love me. Through every right or wrong decision. While you could be mad at your children, you could never stop loving them.

After our crying session, she wiped my tears while I wiped hers. Blotchy-faced, she looked at me pointedly. Trying for stern but failing. "So...You and Cade have slept together?"

I laughed. It was not like we were hand-knitting bralettes in my room. "Yes, mamá. Please note that before you attempt to give me another birds and bees talk where you slip in that girls are supposed to hold onto their virginity until marriage, you and papá conceived me straight out of high school. You weren't married either."

She sucked in her cheeks and blushed. "Fair enough. I just meant making love is sacred, Ximena. It should only be with the person you love—"

"Let's not have this conversation, *mamá*." I glanced down at the rug beneath our feet. Cade and I had christened it too. "For what it's worth, I really did love Cade."

"Do you not love him anymore, mija?"

The writing was on the wall, but I wasn't ready to read it yet.

"I know your *papá* and I weren't the nicest when you both started dating." She scratched her head, then looked down at her watch, unable to meet my gaze. "I also know that we can't help who we fall in love with. Vance and Julia have spoken highly of Cade and rightfully so. That boy is polite, sweet, and smart. We knew Josh and trusted him, that's why we...favoured

him. But I see now that it was wrong of us to never give Cade a proper chance. I know I didn't say it two years ago, but I'll say it now: he had my blessings from the moment he showed up on our doorstep for your first date. Dressed in a suit and with roses for me because he was so desperate to impress and show us that he deserved you. Your father may have been tough on you both, but with time, I know he got used to the idea of you two. He realized Cade was worthy. However, I am sorry we didn't make an effort to get to know him better. That was wrong. Forgive us."

God, I had yearned for my parents' acceptance and approval for so long. I wanted them to like my choice because my ex-boyfriend was worthy.

I would always want and love Cade Killian Remington.

"Doesn't matter now, *mamá*." I kissed her knuckles in a silent thank you, fighting back another onslaught of fresh tears. "It's over."

It was.

Wasn't it?

The rest of Saturday passed in a blur. Getting released from jail (saying that would never get old) was emotionally tiring, so I slept for most of the day. Once I woke up, I binged on churros and *mi mamâ*'s home-cooked meals.

Sunday meant business.

In the morning, I took it upon myself to fix a wrong that was overdue.

I apologized to Josh and Layla. I called them both separately, certain they wouldn't pick up.

Josh, being a typical guy, barely dwelled over it. He said I kissed like shit (his adoptive brother would disagree) and that it was all 'good in the hood' since he and Layla were kind of dating now. Sort of. Or at least they admitted to wanting to suck each other's genitals. Josh's words, not mine.

Layla was a good sport, nicer than I deserved. When I told her everything that happened, she sympathized. She was a little bit disappointed, but not mad. After all, Josh hadn't been her boyfriend then. When I asked her the status of their relationship, she chuckled and said pending.

It's incredible how forgiving kind people could be. Forgiveness didn't damage their pride. It simply meant they didn't have the time to hold grudges and harbour negative energy.

I didn't deserve their forgiveness so easily when I was such a horrible bitch, but the universe cut me some slack. I decided to send them both a basket with sex toys and gift cards to the movie theater. It made sense to help advance their courtship when I was the one to put a pause to it.

After dinner and a movie with Emy, I wanted to sit on the front porch with a glass of chardonnay to wind down after the crazy forty-eight hours I'd experienced. Then I planned on going to Darla's to pick up my phone.

And to confront her.

I had enough of the distance. I wanted real answers.

I stepped out into the autumn air to sit on the porch swing when I saw it.

A familiar bouquet of orange lollipops awaited me.

Overcome by a new wave of heartbreak, I sank to my knees. I could still smell his cologne. Or I was imagining it because I missed him.

I picked the makeshift bouquet he sent me, without fail, every month. He had stopped when we broke up, but seeing him honour our memory one more time this way plucked at my heartstrings.

I tried to force back the tears. Really, I did.

There was a note attached. I gingerly plucked it open.

Dear Ella,

I hope you're doing well. I wanted to check in on you personally after Initiation Night, but I wasn't sure if you'd see me. From our last encounter, I've gotten the impression that the door is closed. I don't blame you.

I know I've said it before, but I'm sorry again for hurting you. I'm sorry I selfishly omitted the truth because I was so afraid to lose you. I should have spoken sooner because in the end I did hurt you. I did lose you.

Nothing was worth that.

I want you to know that this is my last batch of lollipops for you. Please accept it as a token of my apology. I'll never bother you again. You won't ever have to see my face either. Moving forward, if Emilio and Olivia want to have playdates, Josh will take my place. If our families insist on joint dinners...Know that I'll make myself scarce so you don't have to feel uncomfortable with me in the same room.

I promise it'll be like I never existed.

If I could go back in time and change the past, I would. Yet I can't. I'm drowning in remorse, but I have to learn to live with the consequences of my actions. Maybe one day I won't feel like this anymore.

Thank you for having once loved my broken parts. After all the adversity, you were the first person who made me feel like I was worth something—like I deserved to be loved. I'll never doubt my worth ever again.

I wish you well, Ella. I have no doubt that you are meant to do big things in this big world. I may not be by your side anymore, but I'll always cheer you on from afar. I can't help it. Some part of me will always love you.

I also hope that you can one day forgive me for Callie. Until then, take care and be kind to yourself, sweetheart.

Your Princepin.

By the time I finished reading it, his letter was soaked in my teardrops.

CHAPTER 21

Revenge à la Remington

October 19, 2014 7:19 p.m.

CADE, 18

 $^{\prime\prime}$ I'm thinking of transferring to Northwind High," I said.

All the guys did a double take.

Nico leaned forward, his elbows digging into the green felt of the poker table. "What?"

"Why?" Sam asked the better question, taking a sip of his beer as he reclined back in his chair.

Nate looked over at me pensively, a cigar tucked in the corner of his mouth as he dealt our cards.

Every month, we had poker night in Uncle Vance's cigar lounge. The stakes were never high and occasionally Hunter and Josh joined us if they weren't busy. Which they were tonight. Hunter had a family thing, and Josh was upstairs in his bedroom with Layla, learning how to eat pussy for the first time.

I mean, that was what I gathered an hour ago when I knocked on his door to ask him to join us.

I lit a cigarette with the zippo Ella gifted me, ignoring the twist in my chest as I smoked. "Just need a change."

"Bullshit," Nate rumbled. "You're avoiding your ex-girlfriend."

"You transfer to Northwind and you'll lose everything," Sam chimed in, rubbing his upper left arm absentmindedly. Nate helped design him a new tat —a falcon climbing his left upper arm, morphing into a phoenix, ending by

the side of his neck. It was only halfway done, but it looked fucking good. It made me want to get inked again, for the sole purpose of feeling pain anywhere but in my heart. "Hockey and..."

The chance to win back Ella.

Everyone remembered the dreaded party. It was the elephant in the room. No one talked about it, yet it was there like a constant reminder of my biggest failure.

"Tell her you love her, man. Tell her you were piss drunk and made a mistake you'll always regret," Nate said. "And that you'll use the rest of your life to make up for it."

I took another drag of my cigarette and glanced away. I stopped smoking unless it was the occasional weed, but every single good habit I'd implemented in the last few months unravelled this weekend.

Nico's brown gaze collided with mine; he implored me to say the truth.

I wasn't a cheater. Nico and Shaun knew. They took me to the hospital, where they found out I was drugged. I made them swear not to tell anyone.

But even they didn't know that Beau Mackenzie was responsible for the mess. I never told anyone besides Ella. What proof did I have other than my words? Moreover, it was humiliating and I was ashamed to have fallen victim to Beau's ministrations. I wanted to block it out altogether.

Sam said gruffly, "If you transfer to Northwind, you'll have Josh, Hunt, and me, but you'll only be running away from your shit. You mentioned Ella doesn't want to hear you out, but she's had months to cool down. Talk to her again and tell her you still love her."

Nico looked at me mildly, waiting, just waiting, because he knew I was going to spill.

"I never cheated on Ella," I finally whispered.

Sam and Nate jerked in their respective chairs and stared at me in shock. Of course, everyone had seen the videos. Some stupid fucks had captured the moment Ella opened the door and caught me with the blonde, circulating it through social media. It looked bad. But Sam and Nate had refused to believe

what they'd seen. I never bothered confirming the truth.

Confirming it meant acknowledging what happened to me and that damaged my pride. Getting drugged was such a low point in my life, and I refused to fall down that rabbit hole. It made me feel like that sixteen-year-old kid Julius used to beat.

Nate puffed out a plume of smoke. "Start talking, Cade."

I butted out my cigarette in the golden ashtray and levelled my friends with a look that hopefully spoke volumes; I struggled to choke the words past my lips. "Beau Mackenzie drugged me the night of Joshua's party. That girl everyone saw me with? I didn't know her and she didn't know me. She was waiting in my room, thinking I was Beau. I thought she was Ella. It was all a trap."

To say they were surprised was the understatement of the century.

I explained. From zero to one hundred.

They listened intently.

When I was done, all three looked like they were ready to commit murder.

"He's a dead man walking," Nico husked, shaking his head in disgust. "What a fucking coward."

Nate placed a hand on my shoulder. "I'm so fucking sorry, man. I...can't believe you went through all of that."

Sam sat stoically across from me, green eyes storming with anger.

Shame and humiliation faded away like the smoke in the room. Their reactions made it clear that those wrecking feelings had no place within me, for my choice that night was ripped out of my hands by a piece of shit. It felt so goddamn liberating to be able to speak my side, and not be judged by those I valued greatly.

"I wish you'd told us sooner." Sam ran a hand over his face, jilted. "Fucking hell, Cade. We could have done something."

"We're going to set this right," Nico said. "That motherfucker doesn't deserve to be on the hockey team, let alone roaming free for what he did."

I chuckled without humour. "I know Beau did it, but I don't have proof. I can't go to the authorities and point out accusations without the proper receipts backing it up."

"That night is a bit of a blur to me," Nate admitted. "I was drunk and high out of my mind. I can barely remember who was in the kitchen."

"Same," Sam added.

"Me three." Nico plundered his fingers through his inky curls, his head tipping back to observe the ceiling.

"It's all right, guys. It's over. I really don't want to see Beau's face any more than I need to." Playing hockey this entire season with him would be hell. Instead of throwing my gloves against the opponent, I'd end up doing it against him.

"You can't give up hockey because of him," Nate chided. "You'd be admitting defeat."

I shrugged. "Hockey is more of a hobby for me. I never had plans of going pro, so in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't really matter."

"Wouldn't you still want to play hockey at a collegial level?" Sam asked.

"Would *you* want to play football at a collegial level or keep fighting in the ring?"

Sam took another sip of his beer. "I know for a fact that I wouldn't quit either due to some sick fuck who had the audacity to roofie me because he was jealous."

Nico didn't say much. He fiddled on his phone with a scowl. Music and laughter erupted through the device as he filtered through old media.

"Don't transfer, Cade." Nate put down his cigar. Our game was forgotten. "You'll be miserable without hockey as a distraction and...without Ella."

I was already miserable without her. What was an entire lifetime, right? "Ella and I are over for good."

The pain in my chest doubled. God, would it ever lessen? I left a bloody trail all the way from the North Side to the South Side as I drove over to give

her my final act of love. Her favourite lollipop bouquet. I poured my heart into a letter, hoping it would be enough for her to understand how sorry I was.

For her to understand how much I loved her and always would.

It'd been hours. She hadn't reached out. Which meant this was goodbye.

In typical Ella fashion, she slayed me in front of an audience of six inmates, the little heartbreaker.

The memory of her sweet laughter, devious nature, and tender love would stay with me until the day I died, her name forever inked into my skin.

"By the way, I completely forgot to tell you guys that I was in jail this weekend."

Sam sprayed his sip of beer and it landed on Nico's shoulder, who choked on his own saliva, while Nate gaped at me like I grew another head.

I gave them a rundown of what happened at Initiation Night (yes, I was totally breaking the rules by speaking to outsiders). The tradition, the dares, the prize, Ella's and my adventure and how we won by default. I forwent the details where I ate her out and she sucked me off in the nurse's office like I was the best dick she ever had. A gentleman never kisses and tells, as the saying goes.

Needless to say, my friends were very fascinated and a little pissed that their own schools had no fun traditions like St. Victoria.

"You have to win her back now. There's unfinished business and too much history between you two," Sam said.

Nate hummed. "She knows you didn't actually cheat and she even forgives you."

"Not entirely," I mumbled. She didn't forgive me for the Callie situation. Years down the road she might, when she was married and living her best life.

Fuck that. The thought of Ella married to someone else, wearing his ring, his necklace—his fucking heart—burned me.

She was meant to be *my* fucking soul mate.

The other half of my darkness.

The lightness in my world.

But if you really loved someone, you'd let them be happy, even if that meant without you. I loved Ella enough for both of us. So much that I would suffer in silence while she championed through life and accomplished every one of her dreams.

Nico spent an awful lot of time going through his phone while we talked. I tried to focus on the game but gave up halfway through, lighting another cigarette and brewing alone in my musings.

Nate and Sam played go fish like losers, our poker game forgotten. They forced me to join after Nate broke my cigarette in half and said I would die from lung cancer if I didn't stop.

I kept stealing glances at Nico, his expression pinched. Eventually, his thumb stopped scrolling over his screen and his features grew more alarmed.

"Cade," Nico whispered. "I think I found your proof."

I quirked a brow as I fished for a card in the pile, needing a Queen, but finding a King. "Meaning?"

"I went through pictures and videos from Joshua's birthday party on social media using the hashtag #Remi18. There's this clip where you see you and Beau in the kitchen..."

He placed his cell phone in the middle of the table. A video played with loud thumping music, red neon lights, and a shaky quality. A girl squealed in the background as she and her friend took shots.

Everyone held their breaths.

Leaning closer, I zoomed in and caught the exact moment in the corner of the frame where Beau slipped the drug into my drink, just as I got into his face. It was dark. It was grainy. It was there.

My proof.

I may not be able to win Ella back.

But with this, I could fucking restore the part of me Beau Mackenzie fucking ruined.

Entering Vance Remington's office always felt like entering the lion's den. The mood was hostile and always a little predatory, like he remained on the edge of squandering any enemy who threatened his quest for utter domination à la Remington style.

His mancave was adorned with a mahogany bureau bordering pictures of his family, brown accented paint, a ceiling that was more skylight and, behind his vintage throne, where he lounged lazily like a king waiting to make his next move, an entire wall encasing his coveted knives collection. Daggers, machetes, samurai swords with golden handles and engravings.

My uncle was notorious for having quite the reputation twenty years ago and still today nothing had changed. It was rumoured his business partners walked on eggshells in his presence. Josh wasn't kidding when he said his dad was low-key a crazy motherfucker.

I usually came into his office with three knocks as per his request, but I had too much on my mind and simply barged into his kingdom. A kingdom he wished to pass onto Joshua and me one day.

Uncle Vance was playing a switchblade between his scarred fingers when I disturbed him.

Tonight, the only light in his lair emanated from the fireplace and the shining stars above. Vance and Julia were fond of the stars. It was why a lot of the mansion had skylight fixtures. It was why, every summer, we glamped in our backyard and counted the stars while eating overcooked smores.

I closed the door and padded closer to him. "Hey..."

Uncle Vance's sharp eyes clashed with mine and he straightened his posture, dropping his Italian loafer-clad feet from the edge of his desk. His black Armani suit was wrinkled after a long, restless day, his tie discarded on his desk and the top three buttons of his dress shirt open, showing the golden locket he wore around his neck with all of our initials engraved. "Son?"

"I have to talk to you," I confessed and fell into the leather armchairs in front of his desk. "Is this a bad time?"

Uncle Vance's eyes snapped to his Rolex to confirm it was well past midnight. He lit the art deco hurricane lamp beside him and closed the lid of his laptop. "No. I wasn't getting any work done."

"What were you doing?"

The blade did an impressive flip between his fingers. "Just thinking."

"About?"

"About my wife. My children. How I'd like to take you all somewhere nice for winter vacation so we can put this clusterfuck of a year behind us."

I smirked just as his words lit a candle in my chest, making my insides feel warm. *My children*. "Never one to mince words, eh?"

Uncle Vance usually controlled his tongue. He could be crass and foul-mouthed behind closed doors, yet he remained the perfect gentleman in front of the world. Most of the time, anyway.

"It's part of my charm." A roguish grin crossed his mouth before disappearing as fast as it came. "What brought you here, Cade?"

I sighed, just as my gaze connected with a small picture frame. It was a photo of my mother and Uncle Vance as teenagers. Vera Remington looked healthy, vibrant, and so happy, without a care in the world. Her fashion sense was a reflection of her upper-class upbringing and her smile a depiction of a real-life Canadian Princess.

My mom didn't deserve her ending.

Pregnant and being burnt alive like a roasted turkey—a freak accident in their shabby apartment building—with my hard-working, middle-class father, who was never accepted by the Remingtons. A far cry from the palace and customs she was raised in, while I slept over at a friend's house, unassuming of how my life was going to be flipped around in mere hours.

"Something happened to me a few months ago." I cut straight to the chase. "And I never told you, Aunt Julia, or even Joshua because I was embarrassed."

Uncle Vance's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, clasping his hands together and using them as a makeshift seat for his chin. "Go on."

His command was low, urgent, but still softly spoken. I licked my dry lips and eyed his whiskey tumbler. Wordlessly, he edged it my way and I took a sip, letting the Crown Royal dance over my taste buds.

"The night of Joshua's eighteenth birthday party, one of my teammates drugged me."

His elbow moved and the blade sitting beside him clattered on the marble flooring.

It was now or never, so I talked and talked and talked. Instead of staring at him, my gaze fixed on the picture of my mother. Her smile, her blue eyes, and her tenderness could be felt even through a photo from over twenty years ago. Her face encouraged me to stay resilient and tell my uncle the truth, for it was the only way I would really be set free of this demon.

I heard Mom's voice in my mind, encouraging me like always. The same sweet lilt when she pushed me to do something she knew I could. My first time riding a bicycle. My first time putting on skates and then whimpering because I was terrified of the solid ice beneath my feet.

"You can do it," she'd whispered with a beam. "You can do anything you want, if you just put your heart and mind to it, honey."

By the time I finished telling my story, including everything with Ella, Uncle Vance looked like a heaving beast unable to control his anger. His dark eyes bulged out of his sockets and he breathed roughly through his nose. It was in moments like these where he looked far beyond his forty-two years.

"I'm going to nail the Mackenzies' asses," he bit out.

I leaned back in my chair and laughed. "Is it bad that I want to do it myself?"

"I'm so fucking sorry, son." He walked around his desk and sat in the chair next to me. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I was ashamed."

"There was no reason to be ashamed." He placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "He drugged you. Not the other way around."

"My arrogance caused my demise." I goaded Beau. Had I not, things

would have potentially gone differently.

"Our arrogance comes into play when our humility cannot defend ourselves against those who make our ego feel threatened. You did what any full-blooded male would. Taunt him after feeling like he disrespected and trampled all over your territory. At the end of the day, he was not the bigger man if his pride caused him to hurt you in such a way. And I'm so sorry you were at the mercy of a pathetic excuse of a human being who thought that winning the upper hand meant slipping drugs into your drink, just so they could feel more *powerful* for a flicker in time."

My eyes prickled. "Thank you for listening to me and not judging."

"Thank you for feeling brave enough to tell me." He closed his eyes and cupped the side of my face. It was a proud father gesture and he didn't do it often, if ever. "I wish you came to me sooner. From the moment you've stepped into my house, I said no lies, Cade. I will always come to your rescue, but I need my children to be truthful with me."

"I'm sorry." My head hung. The fire crackling in the fireplace seemed to rise with the emotions in this room.

He grabbed the back of my head and tugged me into his embrace. My arms circled his middle and I buried my forehead against his collarbone, inhaling his cologne. I was strong and tall, but in his embrace, I felt small and like that wounded teenager who first arrived on his doorstep. I blamed the tightness in my throat on the whiskey I drank.

"Do you know what I see when I look at you?"

I smiled into his blazer. "A failure?"

He laid a kiss against my crown. He never did that before. The way his arms shook around me, I understood why he needed to. "I see my younger self. A misunderstood boy—a little cocky, a little arrogant—yet filled with nothing but love. You act out, not because you want attention, but because it's the only way you know how to cope. The world has a hard time understanding people like us.

"You walk around like you've got the world's burden on your shoulders.

You're soft with the right people, you're tough with the rest, and you don't take anyone's shit. I've always tried to protect Josh from the harsher realities of our world, but I never had to do that with you. Did I?"

I shook my head solemnly.

Looks wise, I was a carbon copy of Uncle Vance. Aunt Julia gasped so loud the first time she laid eyes on me. But my attitude... "Am I just like you when you were my age?"

I felt his grin instead of seeing it. "I was worse. I didn't get my scars and collection of knives by playing the good, dutiful son. I drove your grandfather crazy."

His chuckle rumbled through his chest and settled into me like a calming rhythm. I pulled away and blinked back more...sweat. Yeah, that was what it was.

Uncle Vance's own Adam's apple coasted up and down. "Promise me nothing but honesty moving forward. I've kept tabs on you from the minute we adopted you and Olivia. I know you dealt drugs, Cade. I've paid a lot of money to the people you used to work for so they kept quiet and away from us. The same way I paid the cops to keep your little night at St. Victoria a secret."

I shouldn't be surprised. I tried to keep my past a secret, but he would have figured it out eventually. "Can I at least keep my mugshot?"

"No. It's mine. I've framed it and it's sitting on my mantel."

I stared at the mantel above the fireplace. True enough, my mugshot sat framed like a proud trophy. An unexpected laugh burst out of me. "You fucking didn't."

"I *fucking* did," he agreed with a fatherly smile, palming the back of my head again. "I know you've had a rough start, son, but I'm here now. *We* are here now. Give us the chance to keep you safe. That's all Julia and I want. It's what Vera would have wanted, too."

"I swear if I'm ever in trouble, I'm going to come to you."

"Good." He stood up and smoothed down the front of his shirt. "First

thing tomorrow morning, my PI is going to dig up dirt on the Mackenzies and we'll take it from there."

I still thought dealing with Beau on my own would be the best course. "You don't have to go through all the trouble. I can take care of Beau on my own."

Uncle Vance shot me a dirty look and scoffed. "The Mackenzies have a nasty track record they love to keep hidden. I'm about to take the motherfuckers down. Remington style."

"I appreciate it, but I still want to handle Beau on my own."

"You want to rough him up?"

I didn't flinch. "Yes. I couldn't do it before, but now that I have my proof, I want to scare him a little." You shouldn't play with your food, but I would. "I want him to realize that I know. I want to scare him into what's coming next."

Revenge was, after all, a dish best served cold.

Uncle Vance looked like he was debating something, then he cricked his neck from side to side and picked up the discarded golden blade. He closed it, then threw it my way. I snatched it without a flinch.

"It's yours now," he stated. "Scare him, but don't hurt him. Leave the heavy lifting for me."

The blade felt weighty in my palm. The golden handle was engraved with *V.R.* It felt like an honorary rite of passage to be given something that belonged to one of the most powerful men on the North Side.

"Thank you," I whispered once more. "For everything...Dad."

The smile that broke over his face was worth everything. Guilt assailed me for not giving him the title he'd longed to hear for two years. "Love you, kiddo. Now go get some rest. Tomorrow is a new beginning."

I stepped out of his office but not before murmuring it back, "Love you, too."

Based on the sharp inhale, he heard it.

I did love my parents. I hadn't been able to say it for two years, but now I

could.

Love was like a thorn. It grew on a stem and pricked you when you got too close, forcing you to acknowledge the sweet, bearable pain it inflicted. You could lick at your wound, but the forming scar would always commemorate the moment you were ensuared in one of the strongest, most basic human emotions.

I'd never forget the moment I fell in love with Ella.

It crept up on me slowly but surely. Before I realized it, the she-devil had me wrapped around her fingers. My days were spent making her smile and laugh, and my nights were consumed with dreams of more ways I could make her smile and laugh. That was love. Cruel and sweet as ever.

It made you put others before yourself.

Until you put a stop to it and wrenched it out of your system.

And maybe that was what I would have to do if I ever wanted to get over the love of my life. Loving someone enough for the both of you could become poisonous. Wanting someone who no longer wanted you was a death sentence.

I said my goodbye when I drenched my feelings like a love poem in my final letter to her.

Now it was time to part ways.

Forever.

CHAPTER 22

Liar, Liar, Bitch on Fire

October 20, 2014 12:34 a.m.

Ella, 18

Two things led me to drive over to Darla Hill's house in the middle of the night.

- 1) Getting my cell phone back and
- 2) Finding out where things went wrong between us.

I couldn't recall the exact moment where we fell apart. Just that it... happened.

Initiation taught me not only was my communication with Cade flawed, but it had sucked with Darla too. It was time I righted a lot of wrongs.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. My parents revoked my driving rights by locking my car keys in a safe, so I snatched the duplicate I made for emergency situations and snuck out of my balcony like a spy in a B-Grade movie.

Darla's house was a ten-minute drive from mine; we lived in the same gated community. Past midnight, the drive shortened to seven minutes with no cars out.

I arrived in record breaking time—six minutes—like this was Grand Theft Auto, and parked behind her custom lime green Corvette.

Colourful leaves crunched under my feet as I jogged to the side of the Hills' house. The residence lights were turned off and, in the distance, crows cawed. A sign of bad luck. Though not sure how much worse things could get, I wouldn't bet on fate.

I wasn't surprised by the faint glow shining through Darla's window. She usually stayed up late reading erotica. Bending down to grab a small rock from the ground, I shot it with all my might towards the glass surface, a petty part of me hoping I shattered it.

I did it three more times.

Darla cracked open her window, face strained and a little stunned. Gaze narrowing when she noticed it was me. "Ella?"

"No. It's fucking Santa Claus!" I whisper-shouted, cupping my hands around my mouth. "Yes, it's me!"

She rolled her eyes.

"Let me in?" I asked. Okay, more like begged. It was chilly tonight and my nipples were way past frozen in my pink cami and jeans jacket.

Darla assessed me the way you would a victim on trial.

And for once, I saw the misery lurking in her expression. The one she hid behind snide remarks and rude jabs.

Something on my face caused her to raise a white flag. I, too, raised mine, needing to put an end to this discord.

"Please, Darling," I teased her.

When I was seven, I learned Diane named her Darla because it meant Darling. I found that so adorable. So much so that I spent the better part of second grade refusing to call her anything but Darling. People used to make fun of her appearance—chubbiness, pigtails, and obnoxious fashion attire—but I wanted her to feel special because she was the nicest person I'd ever met in my life. No one could bully her around me; I would beat up kids with a stick and push them off slides if they insulted her.

We had too many childhood memories that could not be erased.

Before Callie, there was Darla.

Change was inevitable. Humans grew and evolved. Sometimes certain people stopped fitting us and we outgrew them too. Was that what happened to Darla and me? Did we...outgrow one another? It made sense, but it also didn't. There were times where, when I looked at my childhood best friend,

I'd see the old her and *feel* the old me.

It was in the way she laughed from the sidelines when I said something funny, but when I glanced at her, she covered it up with a fake cough. It was the way she still had a clumsy streak she tried to hide from the rest of the world, especially when she strutted down St. Victoria's halls, but I noticed it anyway. It was the way she talked to me in front of others, a little bit indifferent and harsh, but I could feel her wanting to soften her tone.

We played this tug-of-war game for so long, we didn't know how to be at peace with each other after more than a year of this shit.

I pleaded once more. "Please. Let me in, Darling."

She closed her eyes like she lost a battle with herself. "Fine. Meet me in the sunroom."

I ventured deeper into the backyard where an entrance led into the sunroom. Darla arrived and toed open the glass door for me, ushering me inside. I was engulfed in a wave of nostalgia as I glanced at the familiar spacing.

The Hills' house was like a second home to me growing up.

It was where Darla and I learned how to bake cupcakes. It was where we cut the hairs and eventually the heads of our Barbie dolls. It was where we played tic-tac-toe with pink sharpies on the hallway walls before Diane caught us and forced us into time-out punishments. This house was filled with so many memories.

I knew why God never gifted me a sister. I was meant to find Darla.

We had the kind of bond growing up that made people sigh in awe. Yet here we were at an impasse with no clear directions on how to steer away from this crossroad.

I pushed aside my bout of sadness and drank in Darla in her sleepy ponytail and satin pyjamas. "When did you get glasses?"

Darla looked bewildered. Fair enough. I was questioning her choice in optical wear when there were so many other questions I should be asking her.

"I got them a year ago."

"You never told me."

"I haven't told you anything in a while." She winced, saying more than she wanted to. Ouch, but this was better than indifference. Darla thrust my dead cell phone into my hands. She didn't even bother charging it. Nice. "I figured that's why you're here."

Darla shuffled on her feet and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. Ugliness had settled into our daily exchanges for so long that we didn't know how to converse unless it was a barb infused with bitchiness.

"I was in jail this weekend," I informed, breaking the ice.

I observed in amusement as she mulled it inside her brain a few times. "Wait, what? Why?"

"I don't know if Shaun told you, or even your mom—*mi papá* contacted her—but we got caught by the cops."

"I thought you and Cade escaped when Shaun went back for you," she said hoarsely, tugging at the loose threads of her silky shorts.

"I've had a really rough forty-eight hours if I'm being honest." My laugh came out rusty. "I can't even wrap my head around everything that happened on Initiation Night, let alone the fact that I now have a mugshot."

Darla cracked a rare smile. "That's so you."

I smiled too. "Yeah. Yeah, it is." There was gravel in my throat. "How come you had my phone, Darla?"

"Because I don't trust Callie."

I should be surprised.

Why wasn't I surprised?

Darla didn't trust Callie.

Darla stopped talking to me more than a year ago, but she would still talk to Callie occasionally. They remained friends while Darla and I drifted away.

Now Darla was saying she didn't trust her.

Cade's warnings about Callie were beginning to stack up.

"Why don't you trust Callie?" Darla retreated when I hedged closer to

her. I paused, leaning my shoulder against a glass window. "I'm not trying to attack you. I...I have my own reasons for not trusting Callie right now, but I need to hear your side."

Darla looked at me in disbelief. "You don't trust Callie?"

No, I fucking don't. "I have something to tell you about Initiation Night, something Cade told me, but I need to hear your side first. Why don't you trust Callie?"

Darla tipped her face ceilingward, throat flexing. "It's come to my attention that Callie's been talking shit about a lot of people for *years*."

The blood in my veins turned to smoldering anger. "Like who?"

Darla bit her lip. "Namely the girls on the squad...and you."

I almost dropped my phone, dread furling in my chest like a boa's embrace. "What?"

"I don't want to get into this—"

"We have to—"

"Because I don't trust you either!" she snapped, her forlorn expression holding me hostage. "I don't know if you're one of them and—"

"Callie lost her virginity to Cade and lied to me for two years."

The words hung between us like a bad omen. Like the last note of her favourite Vivaldi's four seasons.

Darla released the mother of all gasps. She tried to determine what angle I worked. There was none. "Get the fuck out. You aren't kidding."

Grimly, I shook my head. "I'm afraid not. The reason Cade never told me about it was because it was before we dated, and he didn't want to upset me. I found out yesterday that Callie made passes at him even when we were dating. Going as far as getting mad at Cade because he chose me over her. As if it's some fucking competition. Cade would never lie to me about something like this, so I do believe him."

"Ella, that's messed-up."

"You can say that again." I swayed towards the settee lined against the wall. I plopped down and stretched my legs out. "Can we please talk, Darla?

I'm trying to make sense of so many things. For starters, I need to know what I did to cause you to hate me so much."

"It's not what you did. It's what you said."

"What did I say?"

"Now you're just pulling my leg." She glared at me, sliding farther away into the room, half silhouetted under the shadow the moonlight could simply not touch. "You know what you said. You know what you've been *saying* about my family behind my back. Callie told me everything."

"Told you what?" Goosebumps broke out over my arms.

Darla rubbed the side of her temple. "I really don't want to get into this tonight. Please, I gave you your cell phone and now you can go home."

"Darla. What. Did. She. Tell. You?"

Callie was already skating on thin ice with me. Fucking my Cade and never telling me when I relayed to her multiple times that he was the love of my life? Not fucking cool.

Now lying to Darla that I was talking shit about her family? I was seconds away from driving over to Callie's and keying her angel white beamer.

"Darling, please."

One beat.

Two beats.

Three beats and Darla boiled over with a pitiful howl. "You said my sister is a todger dodger because she likes women!"

When I dated Cade, I made an effort to read more books to expand my vocabulary. I came across many new words, but never in my life had I heard that term.

"What the fuck is a...todger dodger?" I tested it out on my tongue the way you would the first sip of Pinot Grigio.

Darla lost it.

"Google it!" she screamed, stepping forth, no longer shadowed, and letting me see the entirety of the detritus my supposed words had caused. "Or better yet, search your goddamn brain because you said it. You're a lot of things, Ella, but I never expected you to be homophobic."

Wait a fucking minute. "I'm sorry. Did you just call me homophobic?"

"You called Dacia a todger dodger, a switch hitter, a fucking Lipstick Lesbian and so much more! Callie told me everything. I came to you with a secret—my sister's sexuality—and what do you do?" She laughed bitterly. "You blow my trust away by telling Callie and then making fun of Dacia behind her back. You're despicable."

I was speechless, dumbfounded.

Because I had never said or thought those things about Dacia.

Hearing Darla spew bullshit and pin it on me felt like I was having an out-of-body experience. It reminded me of that time I almost drowned when I was six. The feeling of falling with nothing to catch you, nothing to anchor you, as you fell into a scary blue abyss, with no way to defend yourself.

"First of all, I never told Callie anything," I seethed. "We were heading into the girls' locker room two years ago after cheer practice and spotted Dacia and Naomi quietly making out in the shower stalls. Callie's the one who flinched and made a big deal about it, asking me what your mother would think when she found out her eldest daughter was a *dyke*. I told her to shut the fuck up, not use that term, and to mind her own business. Dacia's free to love whoever she wants to. I already knew she was bi. Your sister confided in me years ago, for your fucking information. So last year when you said Dacia was into girls as well, I pretended to hear it for the first time for her sake. I'm not homophobic, Darla. Get that through your thick skull. I've loved Dacia like an older sister. I would never stoop so low and insult her like that. Those words you just mentioned? They aren't a part of my vocabulary and they'll never be."

My breaths were laboured after my monologue and I probably resembled a huffing dragon with smoke coming out of its nose, but goddammit, I was so motherfucking angry.

Why did Callie tell Darla such a harmful lie? It didn't make sense.

What hurt the most in all of this was Darla actually believed I said those things about Dacia. I unclenched my fists and forced myself into a state of calm.

Darla gazed at me with a strange glint in her eyes, seeing me for the first time. We eyed each other like two enemies standing on opposing sides of a battlefield. "But those are words in...Callie's vocabulary?" she enunciated each word carefully, like saying them out loud helped her assess them.

"You should have known better, Darla. You know *me* better," I said angrily. "When did she tell you I 'said' this?"

"Last November."

Another spike to my gut. "And you believed her?"

Darla sighed and fell into the settee next to me. "You and I drifted apart two years ago when you started dating Cade. You had more time for him and less time for me and Callie. You barely talked to us because you were so wrapped up in your new boyfriend. You barely gave me the time of day. You started changing and I could no longer hold onto the old you."

You. You. You. It was all me.

"It made me resentful that you forgot about us...that you forgot about me. So Callie and I grew closer together. She agreed that you were a bitch for never making time for anyone but Cade. Therefore I gave you attitude because I was hurt. Callie mentioned how she was always snapping at you for ditching your friends. Yet...you still hung out with her separately." A muscle in Darla's cheek twitched. "So it was just me you hated, it seemed. Eventually, when Callie told me all the things you were saying about my family, I believed her because I thought her to be my only 'real' friend."

It was true. I did neglect Callie and Darla when I got in a relationship with Cade. Callie brushed off my not giving her enough time to 'it's totally okay, and I know you're busy' versus Darla, who I could see now took it as me cutting her out of my life and moving on.

"Darla, I hate to break it to you, but Callie never brought up the fact that I ditched you both. She was lying. If anything, I got the impression that you

didn't want to hang out with me because of all the attitude you were suddenly dishing. Callie was constantly telling me what a bitch *you* suddenly became now that you were co-captain. She said we were better off without you in the mix."

"She called me a bitch?" Darla's mouth fell open.

One thing was clear, Callie made a fool of both of us.

"I'm so fucking sorry, Darla," I whispered. "I've never said anything bad about you, until I felt like you were shutting me out. Since last year, you became cold, indifferent, and verbally jabbed at me any chance you got. You became difficult during cheer practice and you ignored me constantly throughout the school year. It's like I was a ghost to you. We talked about becoming co-captains for years. It was on our bucket list. It hurt me that my best friend suddenly didn't give a shit about me anymore. I'll admit I've vented to Callie how you changed. But I never took into consideration that I changed first and left you like yesterday's trash when that's not what I wanted. Over the last year, when I tried to talk to you..."

"The damage was already done." Bleakness coated her vocal chords. She wasn't even looking at me. "I was only treating you the way you treated me. You pushed me away first, even if it was unknowingly. What did you think I would do when you finally mustered the time for me? Cade's a good guy, don't get me wrong. I was happy for you. It just sucked that you gave him all your attention and forgot about everyone else."

Darla and I used to talk about those girls, the ones who dropped their friends because they were so engrossed in their relationships. We vowed never to become those girls.

But I had.

I did exactly what I said I wouldn't do.

"I'm so sorry, Darling. I wish I could go back in time and fix all my wrongs."

"I get it." She stared aimlessly at the Afghan thrown over a purple velour couch. "Doesn't make it okay, but I get it." Then she swung those brown eyes

my way and slayed me a little more. "How do you explain never coming to the hospital after my surgery?"

My jaw loosened. "Surgery? What are you talking about?"

"I had a benign tumour last December. I had to have surgery as soon as possible. I...I wanted to have you there so badly when I recovered. I texted you, but you never answered."

"My number changed." Horrified, my hands trembled as I reached for hers. "You have to believe me—"

"Callie came to visit me," Darla rushed out, moving a few inches away from me on the settee like she really couldn't bear my closeness. "She said she told you, but you were too busy with other things. She even gave me your new number. I texted you. I texted you every day that I was on bed rest."

I was going to start fucking crying because the chaos unravelling inside of me was too much. "I don't have any messages from your number, Darla. Moreover, Callie never even told me you had a tumour and needed surgery."

Her haunted eyes rose to mine.

It was so quiet, I could hear my heart thudding in the stillness of the room. "What number of mine do you have?"

Darla gulped, not quite trusting me yet, as she unlocked her phone. When she showed me the conversation, I choked on a concoction of fury and sorrow.

Darla sent such heartbreaking text messages to a number that wasn't even mine. Telling me how worried she was that her tumour was cancerous. How she wanted me beside her. How she was scared she was going to die because the verdict wasn't out yet.

And I hadn't received a single one.

"That's not my number, Darla. The last two digits are wrong. Callie gave you the wrong number."

On fucking purpose.

Words could not convey the maelstrom I was going through right now. Shocked by the situation. Elation that Darla was okay. Rage that Callie

orchestrated all of this, and so fucking betrayed that I was too stupid to see what lay before me.

A goddamn traitor posing as a well-wishing best friend.

What was Callie's motive for doing all of this?

"I don't understand," she replied. "This doesn't make sense."

I grabbed her hands before she could retreat and wove our fingers together. "Darla, I've made mistakes in the past, but you should know I've never gone out of my way to intentionally hurt you. I would never speak ill of Dacia. If I had known you had a tumour and needed surgery, I would have been at your bedside. Before anything, *you* were my best friend. No matter what happens between us, I'll always come back to you."

Her lower lip trembled before she burst into silent tears. "Then why haven't you once called me in the last six months?"

I wrapped her in my broken home and she sobbed quietly. It wrenched the final layer of my foundation. I too began crying as her hurt bled into me. I cried for the fuckedupness of our situation and how lies and deceits and no communication got us here.

Her familiar floral scent hit me. The one thing that hadn't changed about Darla was her scent. She smelled like my childhood. My soul sister.

"Please, tell me about your t-tumour." The thought of my best friend having gone through that destroyed me. "How did this happen?"

She began blubbering in my shoulder, through her hiccups.

Apparently she felt pains for a while, so she went to a doctor, who sent her for X-rays. They found a tumour but didn't know if it was cancerous or not. The anticipation period of not knowing what it could be was the toughest, she said. She cried herself to sleep every day before she went into surgery.

I remembered Darla disappearing from St. Victoria for a bit. I was ashamed that I didn't reach out to her sooner.

It hurt to hear this out loud.

It hurt even more that Callie knew and didn't tell me anything.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, Darla."

Her tears dripped over the shoulder of my jeans jacket and I hugged her tighter. "It's okay. I'm okay. It's over."

"I'm going to fucking kill Callie."

Darla wiped her tears with the back of her hand. "I don't get it, Ella. Why would she lie? Why would she do this?"

Because she's not who we thought she was. "Look, I hate to say this, but she talked shit about you more than a couple of times too."

"What else has she said?" Darla drawled, looking sick.

"You were distancing yourself from me and I was pretty upset and vocal to Callie about it. She spoke very ill about you in the last few months, but I thought it was to take my side in this situation. But I think it's deeper than that. She's gone above and beyond to lie about so many things. It's like she likes destruction."

"I'm going to regret knowing this, but you have to tell me what she said."

I hesitated, then ripped the bandage off. "She said you're an attention whore who's only good for teasing guys and never giving it up." I never defended Darla because by then, I was over her attitude. "She also said you lost your virginity to Shaun in the boys' locker room."

That rumour spread like wildfire through St. Victoria.

Shaun or Darla never denied it.

"Ella, Shaun and I have only fooled around a couple of times. I'm *still* a virgin. He's a great guy, but I'm not ready to have sex with him. Also, I'm pretty sure the rumour is that two girls from the squad lost their virginities to Shaun in the boys' locker room during a threesome."

My head thumped the wall behind me. None of this was adding up. "Wow."

"What else has she said about me?"

Honestly, I could barely remember half of it. "It's not worth reiterating, Darla. I'm still processing the fact that she's been lying and talking shit about us both to each of us. How fucked-up."

Callie also knew Darla and I wouldn't confront each other. It wouldn't have been worth it and it would have ruined the small peace we had left, which was our childhood memories. Darla was the kind of person who took the mature route and me? Well, we knew how I was. But I'd never go around town terrorizing Darla.

"We've known her since we were kids. None of this makes sense."

No, it didn't.

We knew Callie since we were eight, when she moved into our gated community. She was always sweet. Too sweet. A disguise for her devil she carried beneath.

You had to be rotten to the core to pit the two closest friends to you against each other for absolutely no reason.

Darla and I had never hurt Callie, yet she'd hurt us.

Could jealousy and insecurity be the root of this?

"Callie also said you got an abortion in July," Darla murmured. "I didn't know you were pregnant."

Ice-cold water doused over me. Oh, hell no. "Abortion? She told you I got an abortion?" The screech that left me was loud enough to wake the neighbouring properties.

Darla nodded, eyes glimmering.

"I had a fucking miscarriage at six weeks, the night of Joshua's birthday party, when I bumped into you," I all but growled. "Not an abortion. Callie went to the hospital with me."

"Ella, no." She dragged me into her embrace when she noticed I was seams away from breaking apart.

It was my turn to become a mess.

I sobbed as I narrated my story. Darla's body shook with anger. She couldn't believe it.

"I'm so sorry, Ella. I know you love children. You've always wanted to be a mom."

I always wanted to be a young mom with a career, a crazy family, and a

man who treated me like I was his other half.

After everything was said and done, Darla leaned her head against the side of mine, our shoulders pressed together. From the sunroom, we watched the dark sky above in all its glory. Thousands of stars. Only one bright moon. All our worries cast away as we lowered our weapons, rejoicing in this newfound peace that stemmed from bleeding dry all our past thoughts and secrets.

Darla and I may have found light at the end of the tunnel, but we weren't fully at peace yet.

Callie still needed to be dealt with.

"I stopped trusting you a long time ago," Darla whispered. "But I stopped trusting Callie the minute I walked into the girls' bathroom during summer school and found her writing the rumour about you, Cade, and Irene on the bathroom stall. She didn't see me and I didn't tell anyone, because I was certain no one would believe me. She's too *sweet*, too *nice*. It would have been my word against hers."

I jerked upright. "You actually saw her write the rumour with your own eyes?"

Darla wiped her blotchy cheeks. "You were so crappy to me that, in my book, you deserved to get hurt. Now I regret not telling you. We lost so much time."

"It's okay, Darling." I wiped the remnants of my tears. "Forgive and forget. We made mistakes, but Callie played a huge part in our demise."

"I never confronted Callie because I also know her parents are endorsing my mom's campaign. I didn't want to risk a scandal, so I stayed quiet. I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't."

"I get your situation, Darla." No point dwelling over what was done. "I'm so exhausted right now, yet I have so much adrenaline that I can just drive over to her place and smash every tire on her car."

Darla bit her lip as a mischievous gleam entered her eyes. "You game?" Was I ever. "We're getting revenge, Darla. We're settling the score.

We're about to make a bitch fucking pay."

She laughed with exactly my type of mania. "Oh, she's going down, that's for sure. Callie fucking Mackowski is about to get railed in the ass."

"With no lube," I added with a short chuckle. "And I know just the place to start."

"Where?"

"Irene Black."

CHAPTER 23

Pussy's out of the Bag

October 20, 2014 2:10 a.m.

Ella, 18

"She's probably sleeping," Darla mumbled from the passenger side of my car.

She called Irene three times already.

I floored my gas, zooming out of our gated community. "Then she'll fucking wake up. I'm not waiting another minute."

Irene Black wasn't like most St. Victorians. She didn't come from a background of privilege and lived closer to the projects in the South Side. She was smart and got a full scholarship to ride her through high school. Nothing about her screamed fake, bitchy, or materialistic, like so many other girls in our circle. I reckon those were the qualities that played against her.

A lot of people didn't like her because she was, in their words, poorer.

Unfortunately, based on her reaction at Joshua's birthday, she had skin in this game.

I took a sharp right off an exit and Darla lurched forward, dramatically grabbing the dashboard. "Whoa, speedy. Are you trying to kill someone?"

My knuckles whitened around the steering wheel. "I'm practicing running over Callie."

She laughed. "I can't believe we snuck out like this. Feels like old times, eh?"

We shared a mutual grin.

It totally fucking did.

Irene lived in a quaint two-storey townhouse with a broken picket fence and worn-out potted plants lined along a cobblestone pathway leading to a tilted porch. The screen door had a rip in the mesh and I shoved it open, peering into the peephole uselessly while Darla pressed her cell phone to her ear.

"C'mon. C'mon. Pick up," she hissed, tapping her foot, her gaze darting around our surroundings with caginess.

Her uncomfortableness was a manifestation of her rich upbringing. People like us were raised in luxury, safely tucked away behind the golden gates of South Side's most prestigious community. The first time Cade drove me around the projects, I had the same reaction as Darla. Skittish. Afraid. Purely wary.

A light flickered in a window above our heads and we glanced up, seeing a flash of Irene's face. The sound of carpet muted footsteps resounded and then the front door creaked open.

Irene looked dishevelled, with her red mane haywire and a half sleepy look on her face.

"Before you say anything, we are fully aware that this is a bad time." I raised my hands in surrender.

Irene arched her brow, as if saying 'you think?'

"We need to talk to you." Darla fidgeted next to me. "This is important. Can we come in?"

"Important enough to call me sixteen times and blow up my phone with twenty-three text messages at this hour?"

We were totally being disruptive. It was Sunday night—well, Monday morning now—and school was in a few hours.

"Important enough that if you give us the answers we want, Callie's getting yeeted off the cheerleading team tomorrow," I chimed in.

Irene croaked. Nonetheless, she moved to the side and let us in. "Please don't make any sound. My grandfather is sleeping." She hooked a thumb behind her. "The kitchen is the first entrance on the right."

It took twenty-five minutes to catch Irene up to speed. We recited everything from Callie pursuing Cade like a lovesick stalker to her pinning lies between two best friends.

I left out the part where Beau drugged my ex-boyfriend. That wasn't my truth to tell. While I may have said I hated Cade in the heat of the moment, which I didn't, I wouldn't break his trust like that.

Cade didn't know this, but I was going to get justice for him. I was going to rhetorically fuck up Beau so hard he'd never be able to walk straight after I was done with him.

"I don't know what to say," Irene mumbled when she finally digested our little tale. We sat huddled around her wobbly kitchen table. "Holy shit."

Darla's gaze wandered around the room, taking in the chipped paint, the unvarnished cabinets, the cracked countertops. I knew she couldn't hide her pity. She'd seen some of the girls bully Irene on the team and regretted never defending her. The vultures at St. Victoria preyed on any piece of juicy meat. Irene Black, with her low socioeconomic status and non-designer clothes, was their favourite steak.

I slickly kicked Darla under the table before Irene saw the look on her face.

Darla snapped out of it, clearing her throat. She tucked a strand behind her ear and straightened her posture like true South Side royal-fucking-ty. "With all that being said, is there something you want to tell us about Callie?"

Irene's gaze, previously filled with suspicion, darted between us. She probably thought it was a ploy when we sat down to talk. Something on our faces must have convinced her that we were genuine and desperate to nail Callie's pasty ass.

"I know Callie's been writing the rumours in the bathroom stall since freshman year," Irene confessed.

Darla, respectfully, choked on her sip of tap water.

I clenched my jaw. "You saw her do it?"

Irene nodded, glancing away. "Multiple times. I didn't say anything because she'd make my life a living hell. Everyone sees her as a harmless little thing, but I see her for what she is: vile, jealous, and the devil personified."

"I only caught her once." Darla shifted in her seat. "Has Callie done anything to you personally, before the rumour with Ella and Cade?"

A belly-deep laugh rumbled from Irene and I swear it was enough to stop Jesus from performing miracles upstairs. Darla and I shot in our seats. Irene collected herself quickly, hatred swarming her gaze. "Callie tried to make out with my boyfriend a couple of months ago at junior prom."

I palmed my face. What was it about this bitch and going after guys who didn't want her or belong to her? "I can't even say I'm surprised."

"I am." Darla's face twisted with disgust. "I can't believe she tried to hit on Jared."

Irene smiled a bit nostalgically. "He told her she had Big Mac breath and not to get near him within a ten-foot pole unless she wanted a restraining order."

I laughed hard. I remembered Callie scarfing down two loaded Big Macs right before we went to the dance. "I'm sorry. That's actually pretty comedic. She must have freaked."

When I really thought about it, Callie never took well to being denied what she wanted. Not when we were kids and certainly not now. Even when we were in elementary school, if she found a doll she liked, nobody could ever play with that doll. Even if she outgrew that doll, it was still 'hers'. She laid claims on things that never belonged to her, and I hated myself for never telling her otherwise.

Irene sighed and toyed with the condensation on the side of her water glass. "Oh, Callie threw a fit. She was tipsy from the spiked fruit punch and started saying shit like my trailer trash, broke ass didn't belong with Jared. That he deserves better. When she started puking her guts out, we just left before she could cause a bigger scene."

"I must have been dancing with Shaun when all that was happening.

She's so embarrassing." Darla blanched, turning to me. "Where exactly were you the night of junior prom? I barely saw you."

I rolled my lips inside my mouth, drawing an invisible pattern with my forefinger on the tabletop.

I didn't see Callie's tantrum because I was getting railed on all fours, near the sacred oak tree in St. Victoria's courtyard, with only the earth and grass to cushion me against Cade's savage thrusts. After my dress and his tux were stained with dirt, we moved to fucking in the back seat of my car. Pretty much the night Cade knocked me up.

"I was probably taking shots with the girls." I shrugged. "I can't recall much from junior prom. Did Jared say if she ever tried anything again?"

Irene looked uncomfortable. "Jared and I actually broke up a few days after Joshua's birthday party. So I wouldn't know."

Well, shit. "I'm sorry to hear it, Irene. You were good together."

She pretended to play it cool. "It was mutual. I'm over it now. I'm pretty sure he has feelings for his best friend's little sister or something."

A moment of reflection ensued, packed with awkwardness and apprehension. Now that the cards were all on the table, what would be the next move?

It was clear Callie needed to be taught a lesson. I knew forgiving and moving on was the mature thing to do, but the petty bitch inside of me wanted to drag her through St. Victoria's grand foyer by the ends of her blond pixie cut.

How could a best friend have done this?

It was interesting how your view of someone could change overnight. Callie, who I deemed to be my most trusted confidante, had stabbed me in the back. Betrayal was so painful because it came from those closest to you. But everything was coming back full circle. Funny how the universe slowly weeded out the bad seeds from your life.

"What now?" I asked Darla. "How do you want to confront Callie?"

She took a deep inhale and ran her fingers through her black ponytail,

hooking her hand over the nape of her neck. "I don't know, Ella."

"There's another reason why Callie doesn't like me." Irene cleared her throat. "She suspects I have something of hers."

"And what would that be?"

"Remember that sleepover we had with the whole team at her house in August? Well, after she finished making fun of the fact that I drove a 1999 Toyota, I snuck into her bedroom with the intention of...I don't know... maybe breaking something?" Irene refused to meet our gazes, embarrassed. "I was so angry and hurt. Instead I found her diary."

Callie had a diary?

Darla narrowed her eyes at Irene. "What did you find in this diary?"

"I stole it," Irene admitted with a blush. "You can read for yourself if you want."

I clutched the necklace around my throat, the same one my *querido* gave me. The same one I took off all those months ago when I thought I was done loving him. "We're not going to like this, are we?"

Irene rose from her chair, shaking her head. "If you have any doubts about kicking her off the team, they'll be gone by the time you read this."

~

We read the entirety of Callie Mackowski's diary, a fuzzy pink affair with a lock that Irene already smashed open.

And I was right.

We didn't like what we found.

CHAPTER 24

Him and I, Always.

October 20, 2014 8:53 a.m.

Ella, 18

The autumn morning flirted with a thick air of defiance, a hint of the upcoming retribution gyrating at its fringes, as I stepped out of my Porsche. Layers of concealer hid my lack of sleep and the ice coffee in my hand fuelled me as I crossed the student parking lot of St. Victoria like a woman on a suicide mission.

Class wasn't in session for another forty minutes and never one to arrive before the first period bell, the usual early birds already loitering in the grand foyer eyed me skeptically in my ensemble—red-thriller leather jacket, high-waisted jeans, and a pair of LV boots with the kind of heels that only the ladies who worked from dusk till dawn, Friday to Sunday, wore.

For the first time in weeks, my gait was strong and collected as I marched towards Callie's locker, which was right beside mine. I struggled with my confidence at school—dare I say, even felt lost after my very public breakup—when I no longer had Cade to rule the hallways of St. Victoria alongside me.

But a queen didn't need anyone's aid to rule. St. Victoria, with all its ghosts and misery, had always been my dominion. My playground.

I momentarily lapsed and forgot who I was and it was time I reminded those who'd had the audacity to forget.

Namely Callie Mackowski.

I was about to show that bitch that I was never to be fucked with ever

At precisely 9:13 a.m., my cell pinged with Darla's text message.

Everything is printed. Is she here yet? —Darling

I grinned and raised my gaze from my screen, perusing the populated hallway before me. Students milled around and teachers strolled to their classrooms. I plucked out the familiar faces of a few Initiators. Nobody stared longer than necessary. Just a fleeting look recognizing the mutual infraction. Pledging our allegiance having killed the notion of ever saying aloud the debauchery of that night.

Not yet. I'm waiting for her. I'll text you when she's here. —Ellie Kay. I'll join you soon. —Darling

I ignored the need to look for Cade, hacking away at it like the dead branches shielding my heart in frail tendrils. Distance heightened your craving and while I too could survive without my Princepin, I wondered if I could live the life I always dreamed, now that he no longer occupied the throne beside me.

Was it really living if you felt like half a heart?

I was saved from these spiralling thoughts when public enemy *numero uno* came into view with a smirking Beau by her side. Her blond pixie cut was styled into waves and she wore her cheerleader uniform while Beau wore his home-game hockey jersey. They tried to walk like they owned the school.

The same way Cade and I once did.

I almost scoffed.

Now that I read Callie's diary, I knew the truth.

Not only was she obsessed with Cade, but she wanted the image we wove. She tried so desperately to cultivate this with Beau but ended up looking like that meme: expectations vs. reality.

Nobody could replicate us.

She's here. —Ellie

Callie spotted me real swift and bounded over. I never realized how fake her smile was until now. Until I read her ugly truths and saw past her façade.

"Ella!" Her arms went around me, face practically smothered in my chest due to our height difference. "How have you been?"

"Considering the fact that you didn't even bother checking on me after Initiation Night? Peachy." I lowered my voice when I spoke but kept it high enough for Beau to hear too.

Callie pulled away uncomfortably. "You're mad." She shared a look with Beau before glancing at me with fake apology. "I'm sorry. Things got out of hand. I had that family thing, you know, and Beau and I were busy."

"No, I don't know what family thing you're talking about," I deadpanned. Callie flinched. I aimed my snark at Beau. "Later, boy. Your presence isn't needed."

A hard, embarrassed blush slammed onto his cheeks. He liked slash loved me, according to Cade and it was confirmed by Callie's diary. Never once had I ever been blatantly rude to him. But considering Beau was one notch away from being labelled a goddamn rapist for roofying people, I'd take my chances and hopefully kill his infatuation towards me.

Like I said, I'd deal with him soon.

Beau kissed Callie goodbye, gave me a wounded look, and walked away like a little chicken-shit.

Callie scowled. It was really the audacity for me. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Ella? You usually aren't a bitch so early in the morning."

"Actually, I'm a bitch day and night." I tapped my chin mock-thoughtfully. "You know, maybe I'm good at faking it...Like you."

Callie hoisted her bag higher up her shoulder, glaring at me. "Okay, what is going on? I get you're mad that I didn't contact you, but I was busy. Plus, Darla took your phone from me, so I knew I wouldn't be able to reach you."

"That's a cheap excuse, Cal." Languidly leaning against my locker, I

kicked off and crowded her, my heels making a clicking sound. "If you were really my *best friend*, you would have found a way to reach me."

She blinked.

"We are..." She walked backwards as I advanced, sensing my dark aura. Click. Click. "Best friends, right?"

The grand foyer and main entrance were just five big steps away from our lockers, so students were about to have the biggest show of their sad high school lives as they entered the building.

"Of course." She paled, trying to play it cool. "I-I'm sorry, okay? Chill. I'll make it up to you. Let's catch up during lunch, all right?" She laughed pathetically, holding her hands up. If only she knew how much of that I did this weekend. "On the bright side, Beau and I finally figured things out. We're officially together."

"Wow," I mocked, raising my eyebrows. *Click. Click.* "Congratulations to the most fucked-up couple this school will probably ever see."

Callie froze, not uttering a single squeak.

She knew damn well that the crazy Gemini in me wasn't worth poking.

I rolled my eyes and gave her shoulder a light shove until we strategically stood smack in the middle of the foyer. Above us was a high mosaic ceiling that scattered a flurry of colours all over the cream flooring.

Also a spectacular angle for when Darla would throw printed copies of Callie Mackowski's diary entries from the second floor.

My soon-to-be ex-best-friend grabbed her shoulder and gasped dramatically. "What the fuck, Ella? I don't care how mad you are at me, but don't shove me like that."

I threw my head back and laughed. "Oh, you think I'm mad, baby?" She vibrated with restless anger.

"I'm livid," I spat. "Guess what I found out this weekend, Cal?"

"What?" she returned, clutching her Fendi purse like it was her lifeline.

I wanted to choke her with that same purse.

"A little birdie told me Callie Mackowski fucked Cade Remington, and

then proceeded to stalk him like an obsessed groupie for years"—I paused for suspense, then said louder—"after he initially rejected her because she was a drunk mistake…and because he actually wanted *me*."

My statement blurred into the everyday hustle and bustle of high school chatter, but my words did not fall flat on her ears.

Callie's nostrils flared first. Her entire demeanour shifted second. The Fendi purse slipped from her shoulder and landed in the crook of her elbow.

The atmosphere rose like a cloud of hostility and suddenly, we were the center of attention. Not, rest in peace, Sister Victoria's statue sitting on a dais one foot away from us.

"Aw." I chucked her chin, adoringly to the outside world, but it was a demeaning gesture. "Someone's been hiding behind a fuck ton of jealousy. It's okay. Happens to the best of us, Callie."

She straightened her posture, unaware that I was about to snap her spine like a twig. Masking her features, she huffed with a *would-you-like-fries-with-that* kind of smile. "W-What are you talking about? Since when do you trust anything your stupid, ex-boyfriend says—"

I wished I could give Darla Hill an Oscar Award for perfect timing.

Thick wads of paper rained down from the second floor like cash at a strip joint, floating slowly like a boundless white ribbon. The gift that kept on giving because holy hell, Darla had printed hundreds of copies of various entries.

The chatter came to an abrupt cease, as did every individual standing in the foyer. Their faces tipped up, observing in fascination this unwelcome disturbance on an otherwise mundane Monday morning.

Several entries pooled facedown and faceup on the ground, marred with beautiful hues from the mosaic ceiling, creating a kaleidoscope of fibs and ghastly confessions.

Murmurs and gasps resumed once more as the inner workings of Callie's hideous mind showered like confetti from the sky.

Callie frowned and picked one up. Other students did the same. I simply

stood with a devious expression. Waiting, just waiting for the frenzy.

"Ouh, which one is that?" I peered closer to her as she read the printed sheet, going rigid with each passing second when she figured out what it was. Her death from South Side's society, generously provided by yours truly. "Entry #53? Not my favourite, but definitely one that's hilarious."

Entry #53

Dear Diary,

Beau and I fucked. Anal, to be precise. He said it would be soooo much fun.

It wasn't.

He didn't use enough lube and he creamed in my ass. The worst part? He called me by Ella's name when he came.

Even during sex, I can't escape the bitch.

Hate ber. Hate Beau more.

—Callie

Callie's skin turned tomato red with mortification. "Where is this coming from?" she barked, waving the sheet in front of my face. She dropped her purse and scooped up as many secrets as she could with her arms, which, given how small they were, wasn't a lot. "No. No. No. No."

"Can't have your cake and eat it too, Callie," I sing-songed, staring at my orange acrylics while calamity whirred around us like a hurricane. "Pretty disturbing how he called my name while fucking you. Is that some messed-up foreplay thing you guys do? PS, the next time a guy offers to fuck you in the ass, might want him to wear a condom. You know, so he doesn't creampie in your anus. Gross, eh?"

Booming laughter rang like a chorus, the noise of diary entries continuously falling from above like rushing birds in flight.

The student body got a firsthand taste at how fucked-up Callie Mackowski's musings were, how she talked shit about others, and how she played false narratives. Revenge was sweet.

"You!" Callie yelled, shoving an accusing finger into my chest. Spit flew out of her mouth, her face so red you could barely discern her features. "You fucking did this! How did you get your hands on my diary?"

I grinned sinisterly and bent down to pick up my favourite Entry #69, reading it aloud. "Dear Diary, I'm sick and tired of all the girls on the team. Mostly Ella and Darla. Who the fuck do they think they are? Co-captains? More like Co-cunts. I don't want to take orders from the likes of them." Callie tried to snatch the entry out of my hand with a screech. I held her back with a hand to her head and continued mimicking her nasally voice. "I worked hard to be on the team. I deserved to be captain. Naomi and Dyke Dacia can literally go fuck each other for choosing them. Nepotism at its finest. Ugh.

"Don't even get me started on Ella. I'm sick and tired of her wanting all the things I want. Such a spoiled brat.

"I saw Cade first. I wanted Cade first. I fucked Cade first. If it weren't for her, I would be dating Cade first. Ella acts nice, but she's fake and two-faced. Pathetic. Always wanting what others want. He should have been mine.

"I wanted him first. He wanted me too.

"Ella fucking ruins everything.

"So I'll ruin everything for her.

"Darla too.

"Just you fucking wait and see.

"—Callie," I finished theatrically, the horde around us laughing and clapping. Some students pulled out their phones to videotape. "Damn, I'm surprised you even know what nepotism means," I tsked, crumpling the diary entry and shooting it above my shoulder. "Sounds like you're projecting. Entitled? Spoiled brat? Sure you're not talking about yourself?"

Callie fisted her hands by her side, heaving panicky breaths while gazing at her surroundings with horror. She was a laughing stock. Good. I hoped

she had a fucking panic attack, the little compulsive liar.

Her lies and deceits caught up to her, and this was the first time in her life that she had to acknowledge her reality: she was a horrible human being.

From my peripheral vision, Darla jogged down the grand staircase to join the commotion, pushing past people to get to us.

"You're delusional. Cade was never yours. But he was mine." My grin fell away. "Last chance. Are you still going to deny that you fucked Cade and then chased after him like a creepy stalker when we were together? Are you going to deny the fact that you've been faking being friends with us—that you've been talking shit behind Darla's and my backs? The proof's all here, Cal."

"Fuck you, Ella!" She panted. "I can't fucking believe you!"

I smirked.

More cheers from the cluster circling us. The vultures were here and they wanted their due. I was about to throw them five-foot-three inches of white meat, bones, and all.

I grabbed another diary entry from the floor, crumpled it, and shot it at her head.

"Listen up, you dumb, homophobic cunt. I'm done with your fake girlnext-door act. Not only did you insult Darla and me when all we've done was
be true friends to you, but you shat on pretty much everyone that goes to this
school." There were hundreds of diary entries of her talking smack about the
faculty members, judging people based on their colour, background, and
sexual orientation, as well as a particular graphic entry about how she had
webcam sex with a porn star twice her age. I was disgusted with myself that
I'd been friends with someone like her. "The sad part is you actually believe
yourself to be entitled to these judgements. You think you're better than
everyone else, and that we're all beneath you. Take a look in the mirror,
Callie. Not only do you look like a cheap version of a blond Betty Boop with
that hairstyle, but you're rotten on the inside. There's no salvation for your
soul. You've got a one-way ticket to hell, sweetie."

It took me saying all that for Callie's fight or flight response to kick into gear.

"You fucking bitch!" She shoved at me with all her strength and I budged, falling back and colliding against Sister Victoria's statue. "How dare you touch my belongings?"

Chants from the crowd rang so loud my ears throbbed.

My back protested in pain as I righted myself. Callie actually had the balls to physically push me. I couldn't believe it.

She came at me again, a crazed look in her eyes. This wasn't the Callie I grew up with. This was the monster she kept hidden. "Yes, I fucked him! I wanted him and you took him. I wanted Beau, and you also took him. The co-captain position? You also fucking took! Anything I want, you always take. I hate you!"

"Don't touch me." I shoved her back and she fell flat on her bony ass. I hoped I'd injured her tailbone. "Beau can suck a cock for all I care. Get off your high horse, you lazy bitch! I earned my position. I worked hard. The only reason you're on the team is because of Darla and me, you ungrateful, psychotic wench."

Callie got up and charged with a battle cry, tackling me to the ground. I howled as my back slammed against the floor, just as the first warning bell signalled the upcoming period. Nobody moved. Students cheered loudly like this was a wrestling match.

I pushed Callie off me and bitch slapped her. "That's for hitting on my boyfriend behind my back." I slapped her again, catching her cheek with my sharp nail. "That's for—"

She head butted me.

My world spun around and I almost toppled over.

In the background, I heard Darla entering the pit.

Callie crawled towards me and I crawled backwards as she shrieked, "If I'm going down, so are you—"

Out of nowhere, Darla took Callie's Fendi purse and swung it so hard,

Callie flew sideways and landed beside me on her stomach, the wind knocked out of her.

"That's for calling my sister a todger dodger!" Darla lowered herself to her knees so she rested on top of Callie. She swung the loop of her purse around Callie's neck to...choke her?

"Darla, no!" We couldn't murder the bitch no matter how much we wanted to. "Stop!"

"That's for calling me an attention whore!" Darla yelled, tightening the loop around Callie's neck while the latter struggled to shove her fingers into Darla's eye sockets. "That's for lying about Ella's miscarriage—"

I pushed Darla off—who was too consumed in her zeal—before she killed Callie. Death by Fendi, no matter how tempting, wasn't the right answer. "Let Principal Hill deal with—"

Callie punched Darla in the jaw with all her force, her knees slipping over the diary entries on the floor. "That's funny! You want to defend Ella now, considering you couldn't stand her a year ago?" I tried to wedge myself between them both. Yes, we wanted a scene, but it wasn't supposed to resort to violence. "Well, guess what? Thank God her baby fucking died. She would have made a terrible mother, birthing a devil spawn from that bloodline."

Oh. Hell. No.

Before Darla could launch at Callie again, I clocked a solid one over Callie's left eye.

She wailed in pain, doubling over and cradling her face.

I stood up on shaky legs, almost tripping, as I grabbed fistfuls of her pixie cut and yanked her head back. "Talk about my baby again. Talk about my family again. I dare you, bitch!" I screamed, dragging her backwards while she squirmed like a fish out of water. Praying to God she got paper cuts all over her back. "I'll fuck you up so hard, an anal creampie will be the least of your worries—"

The crowd split and a frantic-looking Shaun shouldered his way into our fight club.

I paused, staring at him in confusion, no longer in tune with my surroundings. It was just me, Callie, and the need for bloodthirsty revenge blurring my vision.

Callie took my distracted, loosening hold as an opportunity to swing back and push me until I fell back. She landed on top of me, delivering blows to my face and chest with feeble fists. I fought back as we brawled on the floor like two vicious cats playing a losing game.

"I hate you. I hate you!" she bellowed, splitting my lip on a particularly hard punch. "You're going to fucking pay for ruining my life!"

"You ruined your own life, you fucking bitch!" I seethed, slapping her while Darla attempted to weed her hair out of its roots.

In our haste, we knocked over Sister Victoria's statue. It broke into three solid pieces.

Shaun jumped to grab Darla under the armpits and pulled her out of the crossfire while she kicked and screamed to be free so she could beat Callie.

I rolled over Callie using the strength in my legs and delivered my own series of punches. I landed a few on her tits and one to her other eye to make sure she had two matching shiners.

I was a woman on a quest to annihilate the best friend I'd given so much to: loyalty, trust, time, and effort. Only for her to stab me in the back.

Talking about my bloodline and unborn child was the match in the powder barrel.

She yelped with every punch I shot. "How dare you hit on my boyfriend! How dare you insult my family! How dare you pin Darla and me against each other!"

Before I could land another one, a strong hold yanked me back. I growled, propelling my body in Callie's direction, wanting to hurt her until *I* no longer hurt.

"Stop. Stop. It's over," Shaun hushed in my ear, banding his arms around my waist. "You'll get in more trouble than you already are. She's not worth it. Let her go while we can still pass this as self-defence."

Everything slow sped up once more as I regained my hearing, the totality of my bearings. St. Victoria. Grand foyer. A shocked student body filming the fight like paparazzi.

What did I just do?

I never wanted to use my fists. I was supposed to be better than this.

Shaun helped me stand up. Shame rocked through my solar plexus, but pride kept me rooted, as I glared down at Callie.

Her cheerleading uniform askew, her hair more spikes than waves, her face swelling with bruising. She lay in a pile of her own dirty secrets. What a hot mess.

Maybe Darla and I had never needed to do anything. The entire floor of St. Victoria was covered with Callie's karma. We could have taken the mature route and let time do its magic.

We even broke Sister Victoria. Bless her, I hoped she forgave me. The ghouls and demons confined in these four walls must be cackling at the shitshow.

"You weren't worth it," I threw to Callie, pressing a hand to my busted lip. "This shouldn't have happened, but I don't regret it. Let this be a lesson to you. My loved ones and I are not to be fucked with. Your time here is over. You might as well be one of the ghosts roaming these halls, Callie."

Callie raised herself on shaky legs. Placing her torn Fendi bag up her arm. Grasping for her lifeline when her timeline ran its course.

I gave her a shake of my head, disappointed in this entire ordeal. Disappointed in her and myself.

Did I feel better? Yes, because I got my revenge. No, because it came down to violence. There's no such thing as taking people for face value, I learned. The deeper you glanced into someone's soul, the more perversion you found.

I whirled around to walk away.

I made it three clicks when Callie's broken chuckle resonated behind me.

"It all came down to your insecurity, eh?" She smirked, smoothing a

hand over her hair to tame it. "It was never about the stuff in my diary. You were jealous that I fucked your boyfriend before you got the chance. Well, you know what? I damn well enjoyed every second of it."

Shaun cussed in revulsion. My own features twisted in disgust. Callie didn't realize it. It boiled down to *everything* she did.

I raised my hands in the air and clapped loudly, mocking her with the gesture. "Good job, Callie. Not only did you prove to everyone at St. Victoria that you were a horny bitch who lost her virginity in a drunken one-night stand to a guy who couldn't give a single shit about you, but today, you proved to me it was never about my jealousy or insecurity. It was all yours. Unlike you, I want to uplift the women in my circle because I want to see them succeed. I am better than you, Callie. I will always be better and that's a pill you're going to have to swallow. So to answer your question: No, I'm not jealous. While you may have fucked Cade once, I fucked him for so many more countless nights."

There.

Slayed her one final time.

Booming laughter and boos escalated. I imagined if these were medieval times, tomatoes would be pelted at Callie. Some students even professed their displeasure now that they read the words she penned about them.

I threw her to the vultures and walked away with a slight limp.

Past the throng of students, faculty members burst through the grand foyer with concerned expressions. Security guards with crackling walkie-talkies tried to stop the ruckus, tried to figure out what happened...only to find the floor TP'd with horrendous confessions, the matriarch's monument shattered, and three girls who killed more than a decade-long friendship.

I blended into the flock. I had every intention of finding Darla and sneaking to the girls' bathroom on the east wing. But Shaun hooked my elbow and veered me near a water fountain by the alcove.

"I got to be honest, you look like crap. Are you good?"

"Thanks," I said dryly, wetting my palm to wipe the blood from my lip.

"How's your head?"

"Seeing as you didn't successfully kill me, absolutely great." He smiled cheekily before frowning at me and scratching his blond head. "Your boy's here, by the way. He's dropping out of St. Victoria. Now's your last chance to make up with him." He ruffled my hair affectionately. "Don't make me have paired you both together for nothing."

Oh my God. He was responsible for pairing me with Cade? "Shaun?"

"Talk soon. I'm taking Darla to the nurse's office." He saluted me, jogging away. "You know what you gotta do."

Did I ever.

As the crowd thinned out, I saw light at the end of the tunnel.

Cade Killian Remington, standing by the entrance door, with the autumn sun as a backdrop. Delectable as always in his combat boots, dark washed jeans, signature black leather jacket, and silver rings, those baby blue eyes burning with emotions. The kind of sight that graced my dreams every so often.

A sight so cruel, as it may be the last time I ever saw it if I wasn't careful with my next words.

I approached him cautiously, wearing my own emotions on my sleeve. He must have seen the entire shitshow. He gave me space and respected my boundaries, courtesy of his bittersweet letter, and I loved him even more for letting me fight my own battles.

I loved him. Plain and simple.

Cade Killian Remington was in my blood, in my laughter, in my veins, and he would forever reign in the darkest and lightest crevices of my vital organ.

"Whatcha got there in your hands?" I asked softly, cringing when too much weight was put on my right ankle.

Cade flinched, closing his eyes like seeing me bleeding and sprained was too much for him. "O-Official documents." He swallowed, not meeting my gaze, staring at the archway ceiling above our heads. "I'm transferring to

Northwind High."

"Why?"

His fist clenched around the manila envelope. "Because I can't be here."

"Why can't you be here?" Cade's personal space and I were well acquainted. I was all in it now, causing his muscular frame to plaster against the gothic-styled archway. Audience be damned. If people wanted to enter the school, they'd have to use the other entrances.

"Because you hate me. We're over." His Adam's apple rifled up and down. "And this place reminds me too much of you."

Oh, Cade.

"You can't leave," I stated, pressing my hands on either side of his shoulders, caging him in.

He sucked in a deep breath. "Why?" he demanded. "Why can't I leave, Princess?"

I grabbed his fists in my hands and unclenched them, weaving his fingers with mine. The manila envelope fell by our feet and I vowed to stomp on it later. Polishing my thumb over the wolf ring I gifted him forever ago, I whispered, "I love you, Cade, and refuse to live without you."

A rough noise erupted with his exhale and I had just a few short moments to convince him of my love.

"I don't hate you, *querido*. I never did. I jumped the gun in the heat of the moment and overreacted, but I could never hate you. Hate is too much of a heavy word and I should have never used it in regard to you." I cupped his face, thumbing his chiseled, stubbled jaw. "I'm flawed and a little wild—secretly, and only ever with you—but you've always accepted me as I am. Thank you for loving *my* imperfect parts. Thank you for finding something of worth inside of me. You were trying to protect me by never telling me about Callie, and I get it now. You made a mistake. You're human. I'm sorry for hurting you too. If I could take my actions and words back, I would. But I can't. The best I can do is take accountability for what I did and said, and hope like hell you'll forgive me, Cade."

"Forgiven," he said rather too quickly, trying to untangle himself away from me like this was too much. Like he hadn't prepared to deal with me so early in the morning. "I'm sorry too. Now *please* go get that cut bandaged. I can't stand looking at you like this. You're bleeding."

If it was possible, I melted even more. Even in his distress, I mattered.

"Cade," I murmured, pressing him back against the wall as he tried to escape my embrace. "Listen to me. Please."

A soft morning breeze sauntered past us, blowing away the last bit of his resolve. His attempt at an indifferent expression fell away and his hands found their rightful place by the curve of my waist. He gripped me hard, like he was afraid I was as intangible as the wind.

"I thought of what you said to me in jail." I wrapped my arms around his neck and peered up at him with no contacts, with all the mismatched colours in my eyes. No more hiding. "I can survive without you too. But if I want to be alive, it has to be with you. You strengthen me. You challenge me. You love me and you complete me. I love you, Cade. You'll always be the other half of me."

Cade's chest bowed with every prominent inhale and exhale. His gaze spoke a thousand miles a minute. Lost for words, he stared at me wistfully, almost afraid I would break him if he took another chance on us.

The fact that he hadn't let go of my waist gave me the courage to continue.

"I want lazy mornings and rebellious nights with you. I want all your dreams and the chance to fight your nightmares. I want every rainbow and every storm. I want the life we spent two years building together and more. I want my *querido*, my lone wolf, my shy Princepin, and my dirty gangster. I want you, period. Will you have me?" I touched his chest to feel his voraciously beating heart. "Will you love me, forever and always?"

Cade shook his head, cupping my cheek in comfort. No consolation. He grappled with something I could not decipher. "Ella, I...You..."

I waited and waited and waited.

He just closed his eyes again.

When it became clear that Cade couldn't internalize his thoughts aloud after I bore my soul, I moved away, freeing him. I only had myself to blame for taking too long to pull my head out of my ass. He was allowed to be wary of me when I shut him out after he apologized. Even after he asked me if I could give him another chance. Now he didn't know how to gently let *me* down.

Funny how the tables had turned.

I pivoted and descended the steps of St. Victoria, my destination, the cab of my car. I would cry and lick my wounds in private. Afterwards, I would drive home to ask my parents to help me...transfer to Northwind High?

No. Cade and I were done. He needed space now. This was for the best.

His voice penetrated my veil of melancholy. "You have something that belongs to me, Ella."

I paused on the last step and glanced at him over my shoulder. Sounding like a petulant, sulking child, I said, "What?"

If he thought I was going to fill a box with all the shit he left at my place, he was so fucking wrong. I hadn't done it in July, and I wouldn't do it now. His belongings were mine to keep. So I could cry over them when I was old and grey, reminiscing over having found the love of my life in my teenage years and being so stupid for letting him go.

Cade's blue eyes twinkled mischievously and he blessed me with a heart-throbbing smile that left me breathless and swooning. "My heart."

My fingers clutched the necklace around my throat and I half-chuckled, half-stuttered. His heart...

And I was never giving it back.

The look of defeat vanished from his demeanour, confidence and reassurance pouring back into him as he crooked a finger my way. Beckoning me. Like a moth drawn to a flame, I flew up the stairs with fast strides, the pain in my heel forgotten as I crashed against Cade. My arms wound around his shoulders and my legs around his hips.

"I'm sorry," he grated into my cheek, kissing it, roving his hands all over my back. "I spent the entire weekend convincing myself that we were done; you just surprised me. I was trying to make sense of it all."

And jumped to conclusions, not bothering to wait in all my haste. Some things never changed, I guess.

"I love you. I love you." I dotted kisses all over his face, knuckling his windswept brown strands and tilting his head back for more kisses. "Say you love me, too."

"I love you so fucking much," he growled, showering my neck with cotton soft kisses right here in the open for anyone to see. I moaned at the tenderness of it all, and Cade squeezed my ass with his usual enthusiasm. "Don't ever leave me like that. I won't be able to survive it a second time."

"Your letter broke me."

"Writing it killed me," he groaned, catching my lips in a kiss that was too much teeth, too much tongue, too much passion. "I thought we were done."

"We'll never be done." Not now, not ever.

"I want sunshine and moonlight with you. I want graduations, a shotgun wedding in Vegas, big family dinners and so much more with you. Promise me you'll never leave me again, sweetheart."

"I swear. There's no more leaving each other. We communicate about everything. No more secrets, lies, or omissions. Just trust and us."

I tried to suck a hickey on his neck. My lips tickled him. He laughed boyishly, jokingly batting me away.

I laid my forehead against his, smiling. "You and I. Always."

He kissed my defective eye. "Always."

My *querido* carried me to my car while swatting my ass and whispering how he was going to take care of me. Love me today and every day forward until we died.

While I held his transfer papers and lit them on fire with his Zippo.

CHAPTER 25

Looks like it's just you and I in this hellhole, sweetheart.

October 31, 2014 11:38 p.m.

CADE, 18

My girlfriend—yes, we were official for the last eleven days—climaxed violently with an arched back, the orange lollipop in her mouth muffling her cry.

"That's it, baby girl. Ride my hand." I kept thrusting my fingers in and out while giving her clit the attention it deserved.

She panted around the sucker and I licked my digits clean. Ella's eyes drooped with heavy desire, legs spread open in a shameless V, breasts spilling out of her corset top, the skirt of her dress bunched around her waist, and her head pressed against the car door.

Beau's car door, to be specific.

Ella giggled deliriously when I tore her panties down her legs and wiped her clean. I pocketed them in my suit jacket for later use. We couldn't leave evidence on a crime scene now, could we?

Well...Not too much anyways.

"We should probably fuck." Ella crawled over to me in the cramped back seat of Beau's sedan, taking the lollipop out of her mouth to kiss me. No doubt to taste herself along the way too.

I lifted her onto my lap and she giggled. God, I missed that sound. I missed her so fucking much.

I licked a nipple that popped free from the confinements of her top before settling it back into place. I helped tighten the laces of her corset once more. "Soon. Beau will be here any minute."

"We can be quick." We hadn't fucked since becoming official; Aunt Flow decided to visit her at the worst possible time.

"Yeah, right." I put my black ski mask and leather gloves back on. "I already told you you're getting fucked within an inch of your life tonight."

Ella and I were dressed for the devil's night. She was my bloody bride in a white dress and white veil stained with red paint, and I was her modern-day, grim reaper groom— her words not mine—in a Tom Ford suit. Silly, but I went along with the idea to make her happy.

As long as the end goal was to fuck up Beau Mackenzie, I'd wear a goddamn toga.

"I'm game," she whispered, wiggling her eyebrows.

I kissed her back with the promise of more to come.

Life was going great. I decided to stay at St. Victoria. Or rather, Ella decided for me when she burned my transfer papers and laughed Mr. Burns style.

I wasn't ready to quit hockey, nor the chance at seeing my girlfriend every day at school. We fell back into our old patterns, but not without the lingering note of growth. We knew how to avoid our past mistakes and were already going stronger than ever. Communication was key, after all.

We had four date nights and even attended a dinner at her place. Francisco and Silvia Cordova made an effort with me and I wasn't complaining. They finally understood; I was here to stay. Their daughter would wear a ring one day and it would be mine.

"I wonder how much longer he'll take." Ella absentmindedly rubbed my jaw, fixed on the window next to me.

South Side was renowned for its Halloween festival. Every year, the devil's holiday was highlighted by the biggest fair in the city and it was the hottest place to be.

It didn't take a genius to figure out where Beau would be tonight.

The bastard avoided me all week, even skipping hockey practice. He knew he was next. He knew we were coming for him.

Ella and I didn't do anything half-assed. So naturally, we broke into his car and sat comfortably in the back seat, hidden by the privacy of the night. The carnival would end soon and Beau would be in for the surprise of his life after I dropped the mother of all bombs on him.

Shout-out to Uncle Vance and his PI for digging up dirt on the Mackenzies because it was Michael Jackson bad.

Not to mention Beau had a bag of cocaine the size of my head in his glove compartment like it was a trap house. I was going to make him quit the team but hell, Coach's next drug test would just about do the job too.

I glanced at my watch, noting it was six minutes after midnight. Like clockwork, the lights at the carnival shut one by one while the hustle-bustle noise from the crowd muted to a drone. People slowly filed into their cars and rode out of the lot.

"He's coming." His figure swaggered out of the entrance, hand in hand with a short girl. "Get ready to go in the front seat."

Beau and his date were the last ones to leave the carnival. They made out against the side of her car for about ten minutes. Then Beau fingered her the way one stuffed a turkey on Thanksgiving. I narrowed my eyes when their silhouettes became harder to see. "Are they...?"

"Oh my God. He's fucking her," Ella said in disbelief. "In the middle of the parking lot."

Thankfully, we couldn't see any genitals. Just him humping her against the hood of her car like the energizer bunny.

"He really didn't waste time after Callie." Callie, who got kicked out of school for obvious reasons, was probably being cheated on by this fucker. Not that I felt bad for the bitch. Ella told me how she wrote about me in explicit details in her diary to a point where I felt violated. And that Darla made sure not to print those diary entries. "Damn, he's already done."

"He's a two-pump chump." Beau attempted to kiss his date, but she batted him away. "His date looks mad. I don't think she came."

"How rude of him, eh?"

"Agreed."

The car beeped as Beau unlocked it. Ella and I exchanged a mutual look and stayed immobile as Beau parked his ass into the leather seat.

He reached for his belt, unassuming of what lay in the back seat: his downfall.

I leaned into the space between the seats and came right next to his ear. "Boo."

I cut Beau mid-scream by clamping a hand on his mouth and holding a knife to his throat. The same knife gifted to me by Uncle Vance. It was a rite of passage for Remington boys to terrorize their first enemy.

As said before, I only wanted to scare Beau. Not actually play the grim reaper. I was only the messenger for the bigger plan Vance Remington had for the Mackenzies.

"Surprise, motherfucker," I rasped in his ear, while his hands clambered to cover mine in a desperate attempt to pull away. "Missed me?"

Beau's cries were muffled by my leather glove.

Ella crawled to the front seat, her naked ass sashaying in my face. I'd lick it, suck it, and bite it later.

Beau's body jerked when he noticed her in her costume. Ella pushed her veil aside, biting her bottom lip. "Hi, Beau," she drawled with a saccharine inflection, a wild gleam in her eyes. "How're you doing, baby?"

His gasp was drowned by the sound of her yanking open a duct tape roll.

I chuckled. She was fucking crazy. My crazy.

Ella ripped a piece of duct tape and I removed my hand so she could tape his mouth. Beau whimpered, the bliss of post-coital gone. I pressed my blade flat against his jugular. Not enough to cut. Just enough to taunt him.

Ella leaned forward on all fours, getting in his face. Beau was paralyzed with fear and shock. I watched the entire thing through his rear-view mirror.

The way sweat dotted his forehead, the way his body heaved with choppy breaths.

"What's wrong, Beau?" She batted her eyelashes, running the backs of her white-gloved knuckles over his cheek. "I thought you liked me. I thought you wanted to fuck me...in the ass."

Ella and I both let out evil laughs at the same time. Beau screamed behind the tape, body digging into the seat of the car when my blade almost slipped. By accident, of course.

Callie's diary, while all sorts of deranged, was a helluva entertainment piece. She wrote so many confessions about Beau and his infatuation with Ella. Creepy, yet also funny.

Funny because Ella was out of his league and he'd never have her in any shape or form, ass included. Not even over my dead body.

My girlfriend tutted, caressing his face mockingly. "Do you only like me when I'm good, Beau?" She grinned and lowered her tone to a conspiring whisper. "I'll tell you a secret. I like to be bad sometimes. Really, really bad. Killian loves it when I'm bad. Do you think you can handle me at my worst?"

I was afraid Beau couldn't handle shit, based on the way he trembled. Hopefully, he pissed his pants.

"You've been a naughty boy, Beau." I used the butt of my knife to gently skim his hair behind his ear, my hand grasping his throat. "Not only do you have a hard-on for my girl, but you even tried to take me out of the picture. Mixing benzos in my drink? Fucking dick move on your part, buddy."

"And we even have proof!" Ella exclaimed, shy of a squeal. She loved this shit; putting on an alter ego for our acts. "Look, it's you and Cade and...there you go. You just roofied his drink. Right there." Ella tapped the video on her phone with a long orange nail. "Boum!"

Beau froze, witnessing the screen with growing horror.

I reclined his seat back with one swift movement and brought my knife to his throat again. He yelled, hands flailing out to support himself. Ella crawled over his lap and quickly duct-taped his hands together. She duct-taped his body to the chair too, seat belt and all.

"Now listen to me and listen well, you ass-eating moron. I won't repeat myself twice." I snarled, all but ripping his blond strands out. Tears gathered in his eyes, but I didn't care. "You fucked up by thinking you'd get away after doing what you did to me. Not only am I about to nail your ass into the next province, but in exactly twenty-four hours, you're leaving Montardor. It can be prison or a reform school for fucked-up rich boys like yourself. And, if that's the case, I can promise you, not dropping the soap will be the least of your concerns." I skimmed the back of the knife near his temple, like a feather. Adrenaline surged deep inside me. "I promised you, the next time I caught you near my girl, I'd fuck you up. Nod if you understand me."

Beau stared at me blankly.

"Answer me." The sharpness of my tone had him nodding frantically. "Now say you're sorry for drugging me. We're not leaving until you do."

Ella all but ripped the tape off his mouth. Beau started whimpering and crying. "I-I'm sorry, okay. Don't—"

She plastered it back on.

"Good boy." I slapped his cheek. "See, that wasn't so hard." I glanced at Ella and she opened another video on her phone. "In other news, did you know that your mommy has acquired a taste for young, pool boy dick?"

The CCTV video was grainy. You could make out two people, a young guy and an older woman, fucking in the storage room of the yacht club.

"Mrs. Mackenzie has been fucking Kyan Landon since last year. He's a basketball player from Eastwood. I'm sure you've seen him around." Sounds of their loud groans and slapping flesh resonated. Beau tried wriggling away, mumbling something that sounded like *pleasestoppleasestop*. "He was seventeen. Do the math, Beau. Sounds like jail time to me."

Uncle Vance was going to make sure Mrs. Mackenzie rotted in a cell too.

Beau was far too gone to process anything. He was huffing, crying crocodile tears. I'd cry too if I saw my mother getting screwed like that.

Oh, well. Beau brought it on himself.

Lucky for him, Ella and I had the bad habit of playing judge, jury, and executioner.

"Here's what's going to happen now." I retracted my blade. "Someone is going to come to collect you in an hour. Until then, you stay put like this and contemplate how your life's about to go to shit. Don't even think of freeing yourself and calling the cops. It won't end well for you. Not with all this cocaine." He really was an idiot. Who the hell carried pounds of illicit drugs in their cars? "Tomorrow, you're going to get taken away to God knows where. Before that, though, I want you to write a letter of apology to the girl you tricked the night of Joshua's birthday party. Her name's Mabel, by the way. My people will pick up the letter and personally deliver it to her door. Have I made myself clear?"

Beau blinked. Blank. Nothing there.

I looked at Ella. We were done.

I leaned down to whisper in his ear, "See you in hell, Beau."

He didn't flinch. He didn't cry. We stripped him of his dignity and, mouth taped and body tied to his chair, he looked a step away from roadkill.

Ella gave him her own goodbye. "For your information, I never do anal, Beau."

I chuckled, exiting his car and inhaling the popcorn and cotton-candy edge lingering in the air. I offered a gloved hand to my girl. Ella scooped up the tape and our infamous baseball bat before hopping out. "Let's go, Princess."

With a devious grin, she accepted the offer.

Hand in hand, we sauntered away like thieves in the night.

Leaving chaos in our wake.

We were rebels.

We were sinners.

We were corrupted.

And that was the way we liked it.

November 1, 2014 12:46 a.m.

On Initiation Night, I promised Ella we'd have hate sex against my window. I was a man of my word.

We raced back to the Remington residence, breaking a few speeding rules, but what was one more sin added to our plate, right?

The minute my bedroom door shut behind us, I pounced on her like a man starved after a long drought. There was no finesse in the way I grabbed her face, captured her lips, and impelled my tongue inside her orange-flavoured mouth. I fucked it the way I was going to fuck her pussy tonight. Impatiently, passionately, and with no mercy.

Ella moaned, wanton in my arms. Her head fell back as I drizzled incessant kisses all over the column of her neck, so fucking hungry for her. Taking small bites would not be enough. I wanted to devour her whole and leave nothing behind.

"Kill, please," she begged, fingers tugging off my suit jacket.

I didn't stop kissing her as I undid the buttons of my black dress shirt. From my chest holster, I pulled out my knife. "Turn around." I bit her bottom lip. "And say goodbye to this fucking dress. You're never wearing it again."

She pouted, ready to protest, but I spun her around and worked my dagger through the laces. The corset dress, with the tiniest miniskirt I'd ever seen, fell down her toned body. I dragged her white veil off, adoring how the short length of her mane caressed her shoulders.

I threw my knife on my bed and fisted the back of Ella's hair, walking her with fast strides until her naked skin was pressed against my floor-toceiling window.

The view from here was spectacular. The moon, the pool lights casting a glow in my dark room, and the most beautiful girl in the world winking at me.

"Kept yourself wet for me, Ximena?" I unbuckled my belt and the sound caused a huge shiver to wrack her body.

"Yes." She skimmed her hands over her torso. One hand cupped a breast, and the other one delved into her softness. "I'm soaked, Kill."

She sure fucking was. On the drive to my place, she played with her pussy while I struggled not to crash the car.

"Good. I don't have the patience for foreplay and you've kept me waiting long enough for what's mine." I slapped her ass and stepped out of my slacks. "Part your legs, sweetheart. You're getting it rough and you're getting it all night."

"N-No condom," she whispered, reaching back to spread her ass cheeks. Her waxed pussy, clinging with creamy arousal, came into view. "I'm on the pill. I want you bare."

I groaned, jerking off at the thought of going in raw. "You sure, baby?"

I caught her licking her bottom lip through the window's reflection. "Mhm."

In three steps, my front covered her back. I spanked her ass before slamming into her pussy in one smooth go.

Oh, fuck. Pure, tight, wet heaven.

The hot squeeze of her drenched pussy was everything and more.

Not giving her time to adjust, I thrust half a dozen times, plastering her body to the window with the force of mine, my hands shackling her wrists to the surface as I buried my face in her neck.

Ella's cry of pleasure fogged the glass before us. "Killian!"

I couldn't hold back. I was a slave to my body's needs, screwing her like she was my filthy toy and not the love of my life. Her tightness milked me and I growled, biting her neck. "You're far from your zip code, Rich Girl." I knuckled her swollen clit, loving the way her moan stuttered. "Did you come all the way to my side for a quick fuck?" Her body banged against the surface every time I delivered an upward thrust. *Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.* "Did you need your dirty gangster to break this tight pussy in all over again?"

"Yes," she mewled. "I needed you so bad, Killian."

"You have me." I grabbed her hips, pulling her back so she held herself with just her palms on the glass, and pistoned my cock inside her with vengeance. Ella's entire body shook with my deep plunges. "Play with yourself. I want you coming soon."

She moaned breathily and I groaned, her fingers brushing my cock at every withdrawal.

"That's it, baby. That's *it*." I bit her shoulder blade, my cockhead hitting her G-spot. Pressure built in my spine as I readied to empty inside of her. "You stop being daddy's little girl and turn into Killian's fuckdoll the minute you get this pussy stuffed full of cock, huh?" I slapped her ass. Twice. She half sobbed, half screamed. Her pussy juices were smeared all over my dick. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. Nobody has to know beneath that cheerleading skirt, beneath this princess façade, is a little porn star."

"Oh my God. Killian," she cried, bouncing her ass in my lap, fucking me back faster. "So, so close."

Our pace increased until every thrust was a blur and my mission was burying myself so deep inside this girl, I'd never leave. She moaned like a spoiled brat and I indulged her before wrapping my fingers in her hair, over her throat, and really fucking her within an inch of her life.

"I'm going to steal you away, marry you, and spoil you fucking rotten, Princess," I growled into her ear. *Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.* "And there's nothing anyone can do about it. You're going to spend your days laughing and your nights crying when I put you on your back and do nasty things to this pussy. You with me, Ella?"

Ella came first and wrung the orgasm out of me. I jetted thick spurts of cum inside her pussy over and over and over again until I was spent, having experienced one of my most powerful releases.

"I love you. I love you." Still thrusting my softening cock inside, I drizzled kisses all over the back of her sweaty neck.

Ella barely had strength to keep herself up. "Te amo, querido."

I turned to mush when she spoke her language to me. Pulling out, I watched in fascination as my cum dripped down the inside of her thighs. Fuck, I liked that a little too much.

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I brought her back against my chest. Her head flopped against my shoulder and a sated smile curled her mouth. I pecked the side of her face and inhaled her scent. Orange blossoms, jasmine, and sex.

For months, I was plagued with homesickness. Going through everyday motions with no zeal. Ella returned and suddenly, she breathed new life into me.

The way she did the first time we met.

I loved this girl on a cosmic level.

I wanted to give her all the good life had to offer and thread through all the bad, with her at my side.

Our moment of peace was short-lived.

Ella's head snapped up and she squawked.

I jumped out of my skin, turning her around to face me. "What's wrong?"

Was I too rough? Did she change her mind about allowing me to come inside her?

She wasn't looking at me. Instead, she pointed towards the window, where the large kidney pool lay beneath us. "It's Josh and Layla."

I peered out the window and true enough, Josh and Layla sat by the edge of the pool, their feet dipped in the water, their faces staring at us with fright. They had a perfect view of our fuckfest. Josh's mouth hung open and I was certain Layla blushed to the heavens.

"Oh my God. I think we just traumatized them." Ella exploded into a giggle.

I gave Josh the middle finger for not looking away when they should have before joining Ella's contagious laugh. I grinned into her hair, as I walked her backwards and threw her into my bed for round two. I pressed the

button on my nightstand to draw my curtains closed.

"We're going to hell." Ella smiled bright, flawed gaze playful.

I wiped us clean with a washcloth and fell on top of her, holding her face and kissing her passionately. I slowly inserted my rock-hard cock inside her sweetness once more.

She broke into a moan.

I brought my lips to her ear, vowing to never stop loving her. "Looks like it's just you and I in this hellhole, sweetheart."

EPILOGUE

Las Vegas, Nevada

Ella, a few years later...

I finally got my shotgun wedding.

The venue was small and cozy and exactly as we wanted. We promised our families we'd throw a big bash once we returned to Montardor but wanted the chance to celebrate with ourselves and some close friends.

Cade looked devilishly handsome in a designer navy suit poured over his tall, muscular body, with his dark brown hair slicked back and pure reverence shining in his baby blue eyes.

I wore my long black hair straight, adorned with a crown showcasing a cluster of diamonds and pearls. My wedding dress was created by Maison Sereno, a close friend's designer brand and a Canadian powerhouse. She captured my vision and designed me a short affair ending above my knees with a gorgeous sweetheart neckline that made my tits look fantastic. It was simple, elegant, and timeless. My ensemble was complete with diamond jewelry and the white leather jacket I'd bedazzled years ago with my future title—Mrs. Cade Killian Remington.

All our friends were present. Darla, Josh, Layla, Nate, Nico, Sam, Shaun, and their significant others. Shaun was Cade's best man and doing the most, clapping and whooping the loudest. If he hadn't paired us together on Initiation Night all those years ago, Cade and I might not be here today.

Darla was my maid of honour and I was so thankful that the universe brought us back to each other. The last few years were filled with joy, laughter, and many girls' trips around the globe. She looked beautiful in her orange bridesmaid dress and hair swooped in a tight chignon. Her smile was

tinged with happiness for me and a bit of wistfulness. She'd never have this. Her happily-ever-after was arranged to one of the most corrupted men Montardor had ever produced. If I could have done something to prevent it, I would have. Didn't matter how old we got. I'd always be protective of her.

Elvis Presley—a funky copy of him, mind you—officiated our wedding.

We said our vows and slipped our rings into place. A white gold band for Cade with the engravings of a wolf and a simple band for me—carved with Cade's name—to go alongside my engagement ring. A stunning four-carat orange diamond.

Only the best for me, as per my querido's words.

"You may now kiss the bride!" Shaun hollered before Elvis got a chance.

Everyone laughed except for Cade and me. We were too busy basking in the magnitude of this moment. We were finally married. It didn't feel like it. Not when we'd already lived so much of our lives together. A piece of paper stating us as husband and wife didn't change anything.

Soul mates weren't written on paper. They were written in the stars.

Cade clasped my face and pressed his mouth to mine for a hot kiss.

Cheers and wedding bells rang in the background.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him harder. His arms grasped my waist and lifted me off the ground.

"We forgot to sign a prenup," I murmured, resting my forehead against his.

Cade Killian Remington, my husband, smirked in that bad boy manner that was so reminiscent of our teenage years—in that manner I *loved*. "There's no end for us, Ella. You're trapped with me. Forever."

The End

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you so much for reading Trapped With You. I poured a piece of my heart into this book and I hope it was worth your time. Completing this story has taught me that no dream is too big. If I can do it, so can you. Anything is possible if you put your mind to it. You are powerful and the world is yours for the taking. Always remember...Women are the future leaders of tomorrow.

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Now that you've finished reading Trapped With You, it would mean the world to me if you took some time to leave a review on Amazon and Goodreads. I'm so excited to read your thoughts <3.

Love always,

Marzy

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Enjoyed Trapped With You? Make sure you stay connected for upcoming projects. I have a lot in store! My social media handles are @marzyopal and you can find me on:

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