

DYLAN PAGE



THE BLEEDING HEARTS SERIES

TORMENT: PART TWO

OceanofPDF.com

THE BLEEDING HEARTS SERIES BOOK 2

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DEDICATION

To anyone who has ever felt trapped in the darkness, who have felt lost, consumed by the cruel thoughts in the back of their minds. To anyone who has ever felt like giving up by giving in to those words that rip your heart apart, and make you feel like you don't deserve happiness or love. Tell those voices to shut up. Pick yourself up, and please reach out for help.

You are WORTHY!
You are a FIGHTER!
You are STRONG!
You are BEAUTIFUL!
You deserve HAPPINESS!

Don't let the nightmares of the past ruin your hopes of the future. Don't let your worries of the future overrule your present. Be silly. Be kind. Be present in today and just do the best you can do. This is your life. Whenever anything tries to knock you down, pick yourself back up, and tell them they hit like a bitch.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

**Warning: This book is meant for mature readers, 18+. Torment: Part Two is a dark romance and contains scenes and situations that may be upsetting for some readers. Includes triggers and sensitive materials such as – BUT NOT LIMITED TO – domestic abuse, profanity, dub-con, gang violence, PTSD, depression, and anxiety disorders. Please do not read if you are uncomfortable with any of the above.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblances to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead, are coincidental.

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Lastly, to my family, but especially to my two boys, Elliot and Colby. I know it's not easy to not have your mummy available all the time, and trust me, I miss you guys, too. But I hope when you are old enough, you will understand I am just someone chasing a dream. Please know that you two are the most important people in my life. I want you both to be proud of me, as I am of the two of you, even when you are both climbing all over me or burping in my face. I appreciate the love, kiddos! Xx

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Prologue

Mina: Sixteen Years Old

June

THE DAY of my mother's funeral, Shay walked nervously at my side while I fumbled on my crutches in the cemetery. I've never used them before and wasn't accustomed to them yet, and ended up slipping on several occasions. But each time I did, he was there, quick to help me. Though I was determined to learn how to do this myself, it was reassuring to know that he was there, ready to catch me. My protector.

I've been home from the hospital for only a few days, and never felt so vulnerable and weak in my life. Today, I needed to feel strong. I needed to *be* strong. Or else I was going to lose all control of my emotions and descend into a pit of despair that I was sure I couldn't climb out of.

My mother was to be buried in the same plot as my dad, a kindness I hadn't expected from James, and I was grateful to him for it. Now, because

I had no one else and mum had signed the deed, he was my legal guardian. So I remained under his care.

It is a bright, sunny June day when we bury her. The only people in attendance are James, Shay, me, and the Celtic Beasts. I sit between my stepfather and stepbrother, all of us dressed in black, staring at the mahogany casket covered with white flowers: hydrangeas, calla lilies, some baby's breath, hellebore, and daisies...

I bite my trembling lip as I fight back the grief that is suffocating me. Her death had been so violent, tragic, and pointless. *Why?* Why had they done that to her? Why disfigure her? Why put her through that torment and horror? If the plan was to grab me and take me somewhere, which I gathered from what I heard that night, why did they need to hurt her the way they did? Who was it that sent those men to grab me and hurt her? Kill her? The answer was right in front of me.

I glare at the MC men from behind my dark sunglasses. It was because of them my mother suffered, and we were attacked. I know it. Either they had fucked with the wrong guys, or they had become involved with people who were now calling the shots, and they hadn't obeyed. I couldn't think of any other reason.

As if to remind me of what else I lost, my knee gives a painful twinge beneath my cast. I hiss in pain and tightly grip the soft, cotton material of my black dress, desperately attempting to hide it from everyone. But Shay, he always saw. His hands, which were gripping his own knees, twitched before he reached over and intertwined our fingers together, allowing me to squeeze his hand as hard as I needed.

James told me that Shay had been beside himself when he had arrived at the hospital. He'd barged into the emergency room, demanding to see me, and wanting to know what had happened. Shay had been on his way to Ashland that night to carry out a task, when he received a call from Gavin telling him that something was going down at our house. As he sped back into town, Gavin sent him updates explaining what had happened and where we all were. He almost started fighting with the doctors and security because they wouldn't allow him to go in the back to see me while I was in surgery. Thankfully, other club members were already there, and they hauled him out. For four days, Shay remained by my side in the hospital, leaving only once to go to the clubhouse where they were holding the attackers. He'd been insistent on being the one who dealt with them.

I clung to him now, squeezing his hand tightly, knowing it was nearly impossible for me to hurt him. Thank God, he was here. Though he seemed on edge today, he was still here to support me.

On my other side, James' bowed head showed tears sliding down his face. He didn't make a sound as the minister droned on about how death is a part of life, and only leads to the next step... blah, blah, blah. I hated how people kept telling me that it was God's plan to take my mother away. That it was meant to be, or some other bullshit like that. I know they were trying to comfort me, but those words felt so hollow. I had a hard time believing that my father withering away from the cancerous cells spreading throughout his body like poison was all a part of some plan. Did this plan also have my mother being tortured and mutilated? Was it fate or meant as a lesson to me on dealing with pain and learning how to be a stronger person? What a bunch of bull!

James had come by each day that I'd been in the hospital, his face gaunt as he was finally able to bring himself to tell me about what had happened to my mother. Her body had been found partially thrown into the trees after what looked like being dragged halfway across the driveway. She was gone. With the damage she'd sustained from the stab wounds in her chest, there was no way she could have been saved. Her eyes and nose were gone. The corners of her mouth were cut so that when she had screamed, the skin would have ripped open. Shay held me all night long as I cried my heart out.

I reach over and squeeze James' hand. He releases a shuddering gasp and squeezes back, a tear slowly slides down the end of his nose, and falls into his lap. He hasn't said much over the past few days, except to argue with the doctors over the phone about scheduling surgery for my knee. I have my leg in a cast, a wrap around my wrist, and bandages over my hand from where I'd bitten into my fist to keep quiet. I also have several bruised ribs. I had been sent home with pain killers, so today I was fairly dosed up, though I didn't take as much as I should have. I didn't want to be high as fuck at my mother's funeral. Now here I am, staring numbly as she was slowly lowered into the earth beside my father.

Dad...

Mum...

I was all that was left of my family. What would my life have been like if my father had never gotten sick? Would I have siblings? Would mum

have been happier? Would she have still fallen to her addiction? Or would we have lived the life that so many of us wish for? A happy family, living in a lovely house in the suburbs with a white picket fence. My parents would have had well-paying careers, and my siblings and I would have excelled at school and all our extracurriculars. We'd have had family dinner nights, vacations, and trips to look forward to, along with a safe and stable foundation we could depend on.

Shay's thumb starts to softly stroke the back of my hand, snapping me out of my reverie. For a moment, I almost forget that I'm sitting in the middle of a graveyard, watching my Mum disappear beneath the earth.

When I glance over at him, his beautiful, silver gaze is on me, studying my expression and no doubt interpreting exactly where my thoughts had just gone. Over the years, he has become so perceptive when it comes to reading me. He always seems to know what I'm thinking. And now, he's pulling me away from what *could* have been back to my reality.

I *wasn't* alone.

I had him. I had James. I had the club.

I was still good at school, and I had been a great dancer, with a promising future... until now. As much as I craved that fantasy in my mind about my parents, possible sisters or brothers, a safe, happy household, *this* was my reality. It was dark. It was violent and terrifying, but I was still loved. Shay loved me. He loved me more than anything. And I so desperately needed his love right now.

As if reading every thought in my mind, he releases my hand and slides his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side. I wrap my arms around his middle and squeeze hard, trying my best to keep it together. My mind is a mess of emotions: pain, grief, and fear. I am terrified. But here, in Shay's arms, I am safe. He would keep me safe.

"I'm here, Sweetness," he whispers into my ear, "I'll always be here. You're not alone. I'll never let you be alone again."

I shiver and desperately cling to him. "Do you promise?"

I feel his lips curve up in one of his rare smiles before he murmurs, "I promise."

Chapter one



August

“MINA!” Shay’s tortured scream echoes through the darkness behind me as I run. It’s close to midnight, pouring rain, with lightning flashing overhead, followed by the booming thunder that’s so loud it feels like it’s reverberating through my body. “MINA!” He bellows again. I ignore him and keep running, limping heavily on my bad knee. The ground was uneven to begin with, but now, it’s turned to thick mud with the pouring rain, which my flip-flops got sucked into about fifty yards back, leaving me barefoot. I can barely see as the rain is coming down hard through the canopy overhead, and each step my foot takes in the mud sends a chill racing up my legs and spine. In the daytime, the leaves would be shining brilliant shades of reds, oranges, and golds, but right now, everything was black, cold, and desolate in the middle of the night.

I trip and go sprawling while the shoebox I'd been cradling tight to my chest, goes flying through the air and lands with a heavy thud several feet away. My hands sink into the thick, wet muck before I manage to push myself up and off the ground. I run over to the box, grateful that the most precious items it contains hadn't fallen out, and protectively embrace it to my body before I take off through the trees again. My heart is pounding and I've got a stitch in my side, but my adrenaline keeps me going. I don't even notice how cold I am, wearing only a pair of cotton sleep shorts and a tank top for clothing. I'm soaking wet, covered in mud, and am still shaking from what just happened.

FUCK! I'm so goddamn stupid...

"Mina!" Shay's shout is fainter now as he loses me in the blackness of the woods. *Good.* I push myself a little harder, wincing as my knee sends sharp shooting pains up and down my leg. Gritting my teeth, I force myself to keep going, weaving in and out of the trees as I go, occasionally slipping on the sodden ground. I manage to go for another ten minutes before I finally collapse beneath a huge maple tree, surrounded by thick underbrush and shrubs. Here, I'm partially hidden and better protected from the storm.

Wheezing and trying to catch my breath, I sit on the ground and rest my head against the rough bark, and my mind whirls with what I'd just run from...

This month has been absolute hell. The cast on my leg was removed, however my knee is still majorly fucked up. I was brought in for a partial patellectomy to help preserve the tendon and other soft tissues in the area. I still have another week before I start physiotherapy, and I am supposed to be avoiding strenuous physical activities and sports, but someone's life is on the line right now, someone I care deeply about.

We'd been lying in my bed, as we've done every single night since I returned home after my surgery. Shay kept his kisses and touching to a minimum over the past several weeks as I was recovering, but lately, he's been more persistent about continuing his explorations. Especially after the ultimatum he gave me. He's become a little more brazen with every passing day. I've been playing along, hoping my compliance would keep everything calm and balanced: follow Shay's rules, do as he says, and he won't kill anyone.

I just don't see you like I see...

Those words had set him off, his mind officially snapped. There I was, lying with him after he'd given me yet another orgasm from eating me out, which is something he insisted on doing almost every night if he wasn't finger-fucking me. My mind is tortured endlessly with guilt and shame each time Shay touches me now, especially when my body responds to his fingers, lips, and tongue. Though my mind is constantly at war screaming through it because all I can think of is *him*. The person who I wish I were lying with instead.

Shay still doesn't know who I was referring to when I inadvertently sealed my fate. And true to his word, he has never tried to figure it out, though I know he could if he wanted to.

I can't let him find out about Keenan...



It was nearly one in the morning, and we were both in the process of dozing off when a loud *beep beep* broke the silence in the room. Shay and I instantaneously tense at the sound, and I feel my blood run cold.

Beep beep!

Oh. Holy. Shit. NO!

“What is that, Mina?”

“Uhh...” I think quickly, trying not to panic as I attempt to come up with a convincing lie. “Just my phone. Probably Becca texting me about her new boyfriend or something-”

Beep beep!

“That's not the tone your phone makes when you get texts, Mina. It's been the same alert for years. You've never changed it.” Shay's voice is steady, but there's an underlying tone to it that makes me think of an angry bear being woken up during hibernation. *Danger... danger... danger...*

“Miiii-naaaa,” he says in a sing-song voice, “tell me the truth, please.” His words go from playful to dark and silky, all in one sentence.

I know exactly what it is. Beneath the floorboards under my bed, I had hidden a shoebox filled with years worth of notes from Keenan Mathers. There was also a small velvet box containing a pearl necklace and a burner cell. I have been texting back and forth with Keenan for ages now, but it wasn't until today that I finally told him about Shay's ultimatum. I'd been

alone for most of the day, laying in bed, feeling like a heavyweight was holding me down. I felt numb, almost like I couldn't breathe. I wanted to get up and fix my life, but I didn't fucking know how to. I was only seventeen, for crying out loud! That was when I got the "brilliant" idea to message Keenan.

A time might come when you will be looking for someone to turn to, someone to trust, and I want you to know that you can always come to me. If you need to run, to hide, to escape... you come find me. Those were the words he'd said to me on the beach. And though I've been trying to protect him by distancing myself this past month, with only taking the chances to respond to his messages on the rare instances I was left alone, it hurt. It hurt a lot. He was the one person I wanted, that I needed now, more than anyone.

Only...

He hadn't replied.

I'd held onto that burner cell all day, checking and rechecking it to see if he had replied. I had been hoping against hope that he would have some ingenious solution for me, one I hadn't considered before, and I impatiently waited for him to message me back. I usually kept it on mute, so this very situation wouldn't ever occur. But when James and Shay came home for dinner, I had slipped the phone back in the box beneath the floorboards, forgetting to silence it again. I had only turned on the volume to the phone once before today, as I got tired of looking at it every two seconds while waiting for a response, but he'd been caught up with work at the Spades Mechanical Shop. Today, however, I *desperately* needed to hear from him. Now, it seems Keenan was messaging me back, and it was a string of texts, one after the other.

Beep beep!

Beep beep!

Beep beep!

"Mina?" Shay sat up in bed and reached for my cell on the side table, and held it aloft for me to see. "No messages on here... so it's not *your* phone. And it certainly isn't mine. So, the big question is, what is it?"

I pressed my lips together, too terrified to say anything. Shay was incredibly observant and could figure out so much from so little. I already screwed up enough lately, so I wasn't going to try to hit a home run now with my luck. I gripped the sheets in my hands and shook my head, unwilling to meet his eyes.

“Don’t want to tell me? That’s fine, Mina. I don’t need you to,” Shay lurched to his feet and stalked over to my computer and shook the mouse, waking up the screen, “No emails or messages on Facebook. That doesn’t leave much else, Sweetness.” Despite how gentle his tone is, I catch the underlying fury to every word he utters. “And seeing as you are so reluctant to tell me, I can only assume it is another phone? Perhaps one that you use to contact your mystery man. How close am I?”

Frighteningly close... in fact, 100% accurate, I think as my eyes fill with tears.

“So, where is it? Hm? Where is it, Mina?”

I shake my head and squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block him out.

“Where, Mina? Where is it?”

Again, I shake my head, my whole body now trembling as the reality of how dangerous this situation truly is, hits me. *Oh my God, he isn’t going to let this go. There’s no way... what the fuck am I going to do?*

“Mina!” Shay shouts as he stomps over to the bed. I instantly recoil and cover my face, but his hands whip out and seize my wrists hard, making me cry as he wrenches my skin, “Where the fuck is it? Where?!” He screams in my face.

When I refuse to say a word, Shay shoves me down onto the bed, spins on his heel, and proceeds to tear my bedroom apart. He moves with such ferocious speed, it terrifies me. He seizes one of the drawers to my desk and rips it out before he flips it upside down, emptying the contents on the floor. He kicks through the mess of papers, pencils, and highlighters. When he doesn’t find what he’s looking for, he moves on to the next drawer and upends it, sending makeup, body spray, and several pairs of cheap sunglasses flying.

“Where is it, Mina?!” He shouts and rushes to my small dresser, ripping out one of the drawers. He scatters my delicates and socks at his feet before he throws the drawer aside, where it strikes the wall with a loud *crash!* I scream and shrink back into my bed as he seizes the next drawer and does the same thing.

“Shay, stop!” I cry, finally finding my voice.

“Where the *fuck* is the phone?!” He practically roars as he finishes with my dresser. But he’s not done. Instead, he grabs the back of it and hauls it away from the wall flipping it over, where it smashes to the floor, sending bits of splintered wood everywhere.

“What the fuck is going on?” James shouts from upstairs.

“James! James, come quick!” I scream.

Shay, meanwhile, has moved on to my closet, and starts throwing stuff over his shoulder as he tears through it, searching, like he’s gone completely insane.

Beep beep!

At the sound of yet another message, Shay screams and loses his shit entirely. The clothes that had been hanging in my closet are scattered around the room, some ripped to pieces. He spins and charges at me just as the sound of James’ steps on the stairs thunders as he hurries down. Shay grabs my upper arms, none too gently, and lifts me off the bed. I fight back, struggling against his grip as he drags me to the middle of the room. I twist in his grasp and manage to free an arm, swinging as hard as I can, managing to slap him across his face.

But he’s so far gone, he acts as though he doesn’t even feel it.

Instead, he releases me, and storms over to the bed just as James appears in the doorway.

“What the fuck is happening?” His dark eyes nearly bug out of his head as he takes in the destruction before him.

“Stop him, James!” I cry as Shay wrenches the blankets and sheets from the mattress, “He’s lost it!”

“Shay? Shay, stop!” James charges in and grabs his son around his waist and tries to haul him back, but Shay’s focus is on my bed and he growls through his clenched teeth as he fights to free himself. I can’t let him find the floorboard. I can’t.

I’m about to move in to help when Shay elbows his father in the stomach, shoving him back a bit, before he slams two punches into his gut, causing James to let go and double over. Storming over to the mattress, he lifts it off the bed and throws it to the floor. Seizing his huge, bowie knife that he left on the bedside table, he proceeds to rip into my bed, the springs coming free as he slashes at the material inside before ripping it out.

“WHERE IS IT? WHERE? WHERE! WHERE!” He shouts at the top of his lungs, his voice tearing, as he trashes my mattress. Though I’m practically paralyzed with fear, my eyes flicker to the floor, now visible, beneath my bare bed frame. I see the knotted panel, and I feel like I’m struggling to breathe at the thought of Shay finding what lies beneath it.

“Sh-Shay...” James gasps as he rights himself, “Calm the fuck down, son...”

“She has it hidden somewhere!” Shay screams, wildly, “It’s somewhere in here! It’s somewhere close-”

Shay turns and moves toward the frame, coming dangerously close to the floorboard. I have no idea what he was about to do, because James suddenly throws himself at him, wrapping his arms around his waist, and tackles him. Shay shouts as his knife goes flying out of his hand, hitting the far wall across the room, and fights back, and both men start rolling across the floor as they swing their fists at each other.

I look from the floorboard to them, and back, making a snap decision at that moment. I climb over the remains of my mattress, not caring about the harsh springs that press into my bare legs, and I slide the board out of place. Reaching inside, I scoop up the shoebox, turn, and run as Shay’s furious screams escalate at the realization that I’ve outmaneuvered him. I tear down the hall to the front door, slip into my flip flops, and run out into the stormy night just as Shay comes barreling out of the bedroom, yelling at me to come back.



And now here I was, soaked through, shaking from cold and dread, clutching my last saving grace to my chest as I understand what I now have to do. Hands trembling, I lower the box to a dry spot beneath the brush and open it, finding the cell phone at once, and opening the texts.

Captain Stud Muffin: Mina, listen to me... you need to get the fuck out of there. Shay is fucking insane! The shit he's done... they say he's as bad as Jeremy, and that guy is a fucking psychopath. I know you don't know who that is, but fucking trust me, Shay is on his way to being just like him. You can't allow yourself to become his plaything on my behalf. I won't allow it.

Captain Stud Muffin: I've always said you don't belong here, Mina. He's trapping you. You will NEVER get out if you don't take a chance and trust me, okay? If someone is with you, go somewhere where you can be alone, and fucking call me!

Captain Stud Muffin: Don't you dare agree to this. There are other options for you. I just need you to call me so I can help, alright?

Captain Stud Muffin: Mina, text me back if you can't call. But I need to talk to you.

Captain Stud Muffin: Are you okay? Answer me, damn it!

Captain Stud Muffin: If you don't message me in fifteen fucking minutes, I'm driving out there, and I'm going to take you with me! I don't give a shit if that fucker is home!

Quickly, I press the call button and crouch even lower into the bushes to ensure I'm still hidden. I don't hear Shay over the sound of the rain, nor do I see any sign of him. I think I'm safe... for now.

"Mina!" Keenan's voice is frantic as he picks up, "Wait a sec!" There's a scuffling on the other end and the roar of an engine, and I realize he's on his Harley. *Oh God, can this get any worse?*

Moments later, I hear him cut the engine, followed by the crunching of gravel, most likely from him running to get out of the rain. I have no idea where he could be, but a few seconds later he comes on, breathless as he speaks, "My God, love, I'm nearly fucking there! What's happening?"

"Sh-Shay..." I choke, my entire body shaking so hard my teeth are chattering. "He-he almost found the phone. Threw a fit. I managed to grab it and run out of th-the h-house. I'm-I'm in the w-woods n-now..."

“Fuck!” Keenan sounds like he’s about to lose it, himself. “Okay, hold tight. I’m so close-”

“N-no!” I practically shout, then pause, quickly peeking up from my hiding spot to make sure no one heard me. But the forest is pitch black and silent, save for the rain and thunder. I lower my voice to an anxious whisper, “No! No, Keenan. He will kill you. Don’t you d-dare!”

“I’m not leaving you there with him! I can help you, Mina-”

“No, Key!” I cry as I sag against the maple tree, tears streaming down my cheeks, my hair wet and tangled around my face. “P-please! I-I don’t want anything t-to happen to you! I couldn’t b-bear it!”

“I won’t abandon you, Sunshine.” His voice is fierce, and I can hear his footsteps crunching again as he moves, like he’s heading back to his bike.

I really start panicking now. “Key, stop! Please!”

“Mina, I can help you. I will get you out!”

“I-I won’t take that chance! Not with your l-life!” I sob as I press the phone to my ear, straining to hear everything on his end. Seeing Shay’s reaction when he realized I had a secret means of communication with another man has scared me shitless. I had wanted Keenan’s help before, but now, after seeing Shay tear my room apart, attack his father, and chase me out into a storm, I changed my mind. I absolutely refuse to take a chance with his life. “I wouldn’t b-be able to live with m-myself!”

“Mina!” He practically shouts, “Don’t fucking ask me to forget about you and just leave you there. I can’t do it!”

“You have t-to!” my voice cracks as I plead with him. “You have to, and you know it! If Sh-Shay f-found out it was you... if he found out y-you were the one I-” I pause, catching myself before I say too much.

On the other end, Keenan has gone unbearably quiet, the only sound coming through is the rain and the occasional passing of a car. I can picture him standing on the side of the road, his blond hair soaked, his grey leather cut shining from the lights of passing vehicles, and standing by his Harley holding the phone to his ear.

“Key,” my voice breaks again, “if he finds out it’s you, he will kill you. And he won’t stop there. You know that it would be risking your entire *club*. I can’t have that hanging over my head.” My voice has become eerily calm and steady the more I speak. I’m right. I know I am. And I think that is what helps me cement my decision, “He will come after all of you...”

He remains quiet on the other end. For a moment, I think I hear a pained sort of moan, but it's so faint that I can't be sure.

"I'm just calling to tell you that-that I didn't want it to end like this. You have no idea..." my voice keeps breaking as I speak, but I can't help it. I feel like my heart is actually being ripped apart in my chest. I feel sick. But this is what's right, "I fucking hate this. I hate it! But..." my voice trails off.

"Mina," Keenan's voice trembles, as though he is struggling to speak, "please, don't..."

But I hear the defeat in his tone, "It's okay. I'll be okay. Just-just know that whatever this-this thing was between us, know that it meant something to me. *You mean something to me-*"

"Mina!" I can tell he's crying now. I can hear it in the stilted way that he says my name.

"Don't try to contact me. Don't look for me. Just... let me go," I feel an actual lump in my throat as I choke out the words, "Goodbye, Key." I press the End Call button and throw the phone back into the box. I stare at the contents as tears stream down my face. The notes, the necklace, the phone... they all meant the world to me. They were a lifeline. They reminded me that I wasn't alone in this world, trapped. I had a connection outside of Shay that was my own. But not anymore. I care too much about Keenan to risk him or his brothers in the Black Spades. No one deserves Shay's wrath.

I turn to the side, finding a soft patch of earth deep beneath a dense bush close to the maple tree, and start to dig in the muck with my hands. The entire time, I'm crying my heart out, ignoring how cold I am and how hard my hands are shaking. I was sure they were blue beneath the dirt and mud that now coated them. But I ignore my pains and continue digging. I've lost so much in my life, and I'll be damned if I was going to lose him, too.

I've managed a pretty deep hole by the time I'm too breathless to continue. Satisfied, I cradle the shoebox one last time before laying it at the bottom of the small pit. For about a minute, I stare at it, doubt filling my mind. What if I didn't say goodbye? What if I took Keenan's offer for help?

No! No, absolutely not! Shay would find you, and kill anyone helping you get away from him... is that what you want, Mina? That nasty bitch in the back of my head snarls at me. *There is no way you can leave with Keenan unless Shay is done with you, or... I shook the other thought away before it could properly manifest.* I was surprised by how much it hurt to

think about, despite everything that's happened. And as for that quiet voice in my head, she was right. I couldn't risk it.

I bury the box, making sure it's covered by the bushes and the maples, placing several stones to lay on top of the earth. Once it was done, you couldn't see it unless you crouched low to the ground and craned your head to look beneath this particular shrub. I breathe a sigh of relief and slump back against the tree again, trying to slow my heart rate and calm myself. Shay was going to be livid when I returned home. There was no way he was going to let this go. But the question was... what would he do to me?

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Chapter two



I COULDN'T WAIT ANY LONGER. After burying the shoebox, I lingered in the woods, languidly making my way around the property before I dared go any closer to the house. If Shay was watching for my return, then I wanted him to see me come from an entirely different direction from where I had buried my lifeline.

By now, it must be close to about two or two-thirty in the morning. I'm covered in mud, soaked through my pajamas, my hair sticking to my forehead and neck, and I can't stop shivering. I just knew if I continued to delay, that not only would it increase my chances of getting sick but also worsen my already throbbing knee pain. I wasn't supposed to be running on it. I'll probably need to use the cane that James bought for me after the surgery. Won't that be great for when I start school next week? I can just imagine the whispers and gossip that will circulate like wildfire when I go back. I'll limp along the halls and receive pitying, terrified stares...

There she goes... Mina Westberg... the girl who survived a kidnapping, witnessed her mother's murder, stepdaughter to a notorious biker of the

Celtic Beasts, and stepsister to a crazy psychopath who attacks any boys that go near her. Add a cane to that mess, and it will only be a reminder to others of what I'd endured and survived. This school year was going to fucking suck.

I broke through a cluster of trees and shrubs to finally catch sight of the log cabin-style house. The main floor lights are on and the front door is open with only the screen shut. I knew then that Shay was waiting for me.

My teeth are chattering as I stumble forward, slipping a little in the mud. The lightning and rolling thunder were starting to ebb away as the storm headed north towards the city of Ashland. There was more of a drizzle at this point, which made it easier to see where I was going now that I wasn't being pelted in the face with freezing, cold water.

When I'm about twenty feet from the house, a large shadow steps into view from the other side of the screen door, partially blocking out the light. I stop walking, my body shaking uncontrollably as I wrap my arms around myself, trying to keep warm. Not that it really mattered, since my whole body was completely numb at this point. But seeing Shay's large, ominous figure waiting for me inside the house did all sorts of strange things to me. I was terrified, my anxiety levels flying through the roof. His face was shadowed by the light from the kitchen shining behind him, I could only imagine how furious he was with me.

Slowly, he raises a hand, and with two of his fingers, beckons me towards him.

I hesitate, taking one huge breath in, holding it for a few seconds before slowly releasing it. I keep my eyes on him the entire time I take tiny, tentative steps forward. If he was going to react in any way, I wanted to see it coming so I could prepare myself. I didn't think he'd physically hurt me per se, excluding the spanking he did that one time, but seeing him descend into such a destructive rage had scared me shitless. I wasn't so sure anymore what he was capable of when it came to me.

Slowly, I climb up the porch steps, my knee spasming hard each time I put weight on it and stop at the top when the screen door swings out with Shay holding it open for me. He shifts sideways, waiting for me to pass by, but I wasn't sure if I felt brave enough to. As he moved, the light from the kitchen fell over his face, and I stared at him in horror.

His lip was cut and bleeding, as well as his nose. One of his eyes was swelling up, his jaw and cheek were already bruising on his left side, and

his bare upper body was covered in red marks and more bruises. He was still wearing his grey sweats that he'd come to bed in, but they hung loosely on his hips, showing off the 'V' that disappeared beneath the waistline.

Holy. Shit. James kicked the *crap* out of him!

Shay beckons to me with his fingers again, but I was even more on edge now. Not only was he beyond enraged by what happened, but now he'd been beaten by his dad, whom he was already having problems with. I take a small step forward, watching him warily before I sprint past into the warmth of the kitchen. I spin around to face him as he lets the door shut with a loud bang. His shadowed eyes narrow and focus on me as he closes the main door and locks it.

"Look..." I start to say, feeling like I am starting to choke as my panic begins to steadily rise, "I know you're really pissed at me." I take a tentative step back, my hands extended in front of me as I speak, hoping to mollify him. When my backside hits the edge of the kitchen table, I jump away from it like it's electrocuted me. Even though it's not the same table where mum was... I'm finding it harder and harder to walk in here every day and eat on it. At first, in the few weeks following the attack, I'd managed to push the thought of mum's death from my mind. But after Shay's ultimatum, it's like my mind has suffered a complete breakdown, and everything from that night has come crashing back to me. Now I can't even bear to have a meal at the table anymore.

I sidestep towards the hall to our bedrooms instead and face him again. "I know you're angry. But it's done. The phone's gone. I will no longer have any contact with... *them*." I didn't feel safe admitting that the person I had been secretly conversing with was a man, even though I'm positive Shay has put together that whoever gave me that cell was the very person I admitted to having strong feelings for. I don't want to bring it up now. Not when he is looking so murderous.

To my surprise, he says nothing. He doesn't even blink or move.

At his silence, my nerves get the better of me, and I start to ramble, "It's destroyed... I-I will never talk to them again."

Still nothing.

I shiver and shift my weight onto my left leg as my knee gives a painful spasm. "And I'm h-here now... so everything's okay..."

Shay doesn't move a muscle but continues to watch me as I fidget uncomfortably before him, feeling like a scared little rabbit cornered by a

wolf.

“I’m with you now. We can move on from this... just like I promised you.” I said, my voice becomes more assertive as I defend my actions. Water beads and falls from my hair to the floor, and I definitely look like I’ve been through hell and back. But at the moment, all I can think about was how furious Shay looked, how dangerous he really was, and how I had royally screwed myself tonight. All because of a simple mistake. By forgetting to mute the damned cell, I had officially fucked up my life. “We can move forward now,” I say to him, hoping that my words will fix everything. The last thing I wanted was for Shay to decide to start looking into who my secret friend was. “Just like I promised. I’ll be good. I’m here with you, just us. Together. Let’s move on, okay? I just want to move on together...”

He stands there like a dark statue, continuing his silent scrutiny, while I feel like I’m on the verge of having a full-blown mental breakdown. I am freezing, and I am hurting everywhere. I have no idea what time it is, though I guess it is somewhere in the early hours of the morning, so I am absolutely exhausted. And I’m scared shitless, freaking out on the inside while trying to appear strong and assertive on the outside. His silence is only driving the nail in my coffin as I wait for him to react, to continue his destructive tirade, or pull me over his lap to punish me. Would he blow up again and start screaming? Or whisper more threats into my ear? Waiting for whatever is to come is eating away at my mind, and I feel like I am going to pass out from the stress and prolonging uncertainty.

But when Shay suddenly takes a step towards me, I can’t stop myself from screaming in fear as I stumble back, falling to my ass with a heavy thud, causing my teeth to click together. But Shay’s stony resolve doesn’t waver in the slightest at my outburst. He stalks forward as I cower back, suddenly afraid that he is so far gone, he might actually physically hurt me at last. *Knives... Shay plays with knives, Mina. Will he play with you now that you’ve pushed him this far? Will he cut you up the way he cuts up his victims? Will he scar your body, your face? What will he do to you now, Mina? To make you pay?* That voice in the back of my mind chides. My heart feels like it is about to burst out of my chest as images of my mother’s mutilated face flash to the forefront of my brain, instantly making me feel sick. I feel myself tense up defensively in a little ball, as I try to keep from throwing up in fear.

His warm, calloused fingers brush along the length of my arm, and I can't help but flinch in response. His other hand wraps around my other arm and pulls gently, forcing me to turn so that I face him. Tentatively, I open my eyes and peek up at him. He still looks the same, shadowed, livid... but his movements are slow and measured like he is cautiously approaching a frightened, cornered animal. His hands stroke up and down my arms while his eyes roam over my body, taking in every cut, scrape, and the mud is caked to my skin. I watch him warily, waiting for him to pounce. Instead, he carefully picks me up off the ground, holding me close to his chest as he carries me down the hall to our washroom.

Shay settles me on the counter and turns on the shower, checking the temperature until he's satisfied with it. Turning around, he reaches for my ruined pajama top and pulls it up over my head, despite my muffled protests. I instantly cross my arms to cover my chest, even though he's seen my breasts multiple times as of late. But right now, I feel so vulnerable and on edge that I just react instinctively. He makes no remark, but pulls me off the counter and yanks my sleep shorts down so that I am standing completely naked before him. I shirk away, turning towards the counter to hide myself. I can hear the rustle of material behind me, and I know he is undressing, too.

Despite how intimate we've been since the start of the summer, I've never actually seen him completely naked, and right now, I don't think I'm ready to. Anything we've done has been at night, with the cover of darkness, concealing everything from each other. For several weeks, he moved slowly, encouraging me to touch him over his boxer briefs so I could feel his hardness underneath the material. He'd hold my wrist, moving my hand over his dick, rubbing it until he groaned and relaxed. And then, I had my surgery, and he was forced to back off so I could recover.

I know he's been waiting patiently for me to feel better. Even though he pulled me from physical therapy sessions after only a week, I've been trying hard to work on it on my own. Shay had been upset they wouldn't let him in with me. Unfortunately, all the work I have been doing is not the same as having a medical professional assisting you. And now? I know he wants me. I know he's done waiting, and knowing that has my head spinning. I can't help the incredible shyness that overcomes me.

I feel his hands caress the small of my waist before forcing me to face him. Keeping my eyes closed, I allow him to move me, knowing that now is

not the time to challenge him. I might be fearful and hesitant, but I won't fight him. Not now. And he knows that.

Shay urges me to go forward, and I do, taking small steps until my toes touch the edge of the shower. When I climb in, however, I hiss as the hot water hits my frozen skin and proceed to jump into the far corner, out of range from the jetstream. He shuts the glass door, enclosing us in the small space quickly filling with steam. I peek through my lashes to see him move under the hot spray with his back to me.

His entire back is covered with a giant Celtic cross, which moves as his muscles shift while he washes the blood off himself. I've seen this tattoo countless times, but as my eyes lower, I find my mind going blank for a moment as I take in the sight of his bare ass for the first time and shyly avert my eyes when he turns.

Shay is a very, very good-looking guy. I wasn't blind. And despite how close we've become, how our relationship has shifted from brother and sister to... *lovers*... no, that's not quite right, either. I don't think there *is* a word for what Shay and I are. I feel incredibly bashful when I sense him moving closer. I think about the times he forced my hand beneath his boxers, and when I recall how huge he was, it instantly makes me cower further into the corner. I keep my back to him while he continues washing himself. This is *Shay*. And despite the lines we've crossed over the last several weeks, we are nearing a point of no return. I feel like the man, who was once my faithful guardian and protector, is now transforming into my dark demon.

Only a minute or two passes before I feel his hands on my shoulders. Heart hammering in my chest, I allow him to turn me to face him, but my body is as tight as a coiled spring. I keep my eyes closed as he moves me under the spray, the sting less painful now that my body has warmed up. Breathing a sigh of relief as the hot water cascades over me, I sag against his chest and before I know it I am sobbing.

I am not sure exactly why I am breaking down like this, but a huge part of me is relieved he is being gentle with me, despite his silence and foreboding disposition. I feel him reach behind me before the touch of my loofah on my back tells me he's cleaning me off. He wipes away the mud and dirt, leaving behind a soapy trail across my skin. Shay bends down, allowing me to hold onto his back as he scrubs at my legs until they're clean. He shampoos my hair next, scrubbing at my scalp with his nails in

careful, circular motions before he guides me under the hot jet to wash it away.

I have so many complicated, conflicting thoughts swirling around in my mind at that moment, yet the most prominent being how grateful I was to Shay for being so tender with me. I'm so flooded and overwhelmed with relief and appreciation, I can barely stand, or maybe that's because my leg is killing me. It's also the fact that it must be close to 3 am and I'm on the verge of collapsing from exhaustion, mentally and physically. Either way, I eagerly embrace the kindness he's bestowing upon me and lean heavily on him as he washes away the mud, soap, and tears.

Finally, he straightens, joining me under the spray, his arms wrapping around me tightly as he pulls me against himself. I feel every hard plane of muscle on his chest, stomach, and thighs. I can feel how hard his dick is as it presses into my belly. But I don't care. I don't. I just need a reprieve. I need to feel safe, to feel like everything is going to be okay. And because he won't say a word, Shay shows me through touch. I feel his lips on my forehead, then my temple, before running small kisses down the side of my face. He ducks down to kiss along my jaw until his lips are touching the corner of my mouth. As I gasp through my tears, Shay presses his mouth to mine, kissing me hungrily as I clutch his firm, thick biceps.

I can feel the rough whiskers on his face, and his firm kisses force open my mouth so that he can leisurely stroke my tongue with his. One of his hands slides up my spine until he's gripping the back of my neck, applying the slightest bit of pressure, as though reminding me that he is in charge. He didn't need to. I knew it. Shay always had the final say over my life. Only now, to protect Keenan, I wasn't fighting back.

The kisses slow as the water starts running cold, and he reaches around me to shut it off. Keeping his hand on the back of my neck, he guides me out of the shower and grabs my towel, wrapping it securely around my shoulders as he starts drying me off. He even rubs at my hair, getting it to the point of damp-dry before he even bothers grabbing another towel to cover himself with. My tears have dried up by this point, and though I still have so many questions for him... *Where was James? What happened? What are you going to do now? Are you mad at me? Are you going to still keep your word and leave my friend alone?* I keep silent. His silence rattles me. I bite my lip as he wraps the towel around his waist, takes my hand, and guides me from the washroom.

Seeing as my room is in absolute shambles, he leads us to his. Wordlessly, he makes me sit on the edge of his bed, and I am clutching the towel around myself as he disappears for only a minute before he comes back with my hairbrush. When he throws the towel off, I shyly avert my eyes and feel the bed shift as he climbs up and situates himself behind me. His thighs rest on the outside of mine, with the hard-on he's sporting pressing into my backside as he carefully brushes the tangles out of my hair.

I sit, quiet and docile, wincing only a few times when the brush catches on a particularly tough knot. But he's still gentle, carefully working through them until my damp hair runs smoothly down my back. For a brief period, I relaxed a bit, feeling that old comfort that he used to give me flickering to life in that moment. My shoulders droop, and my hands loosen a little on the towel that I'm still holding closed. But all too soon, he sets the brush on the bedside table, and then his lips softly sweep along the side of my throat, causing me to tremble.

I don't like being in here anymore.

When I was little, it used to be a place of refuge, a haven. Even with the knives he had stowed away because they scared me, I had always felt safe with him. Shay used to soothe my fears. Now... he is the root of them. Once he untangles my hair, he shifts, moving around to turn off the light before he stands in front of me. I shiver slightly from the cool air. I'm petrified. I can feel a change in the air, the moment of serenity has shifted to one of suspense and expectation. Slowly, I look up, ignoring his huge, hard dick that's fixed right at my eye level, and wait.

"You're *my* girl, Mina," he murmurs, at last while reaching out with his free hand to cup my face, "it's time you fully embrace that." He takes a step closer, forcing me to spread my legs so he can stand between them. "Now open your mouth and take me in."

My eyes flick to his enormous dick before I nervously peer back up at him again. I've never done *that* before, and right now, after everything that's happened tonight, the *last* thing I want to do is anything remotely sexual.

Keenan... do it for him. Protect him. Keep him safe. Keep him safe, Mina.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I open my mouth just the tiniest bit, but Shay takes that small opportunity to move forward and run the tip of his cock over my lips. It was smooth and soft, and when he gave his cock a

firm squeeze and a pull, I could feel drops of salty moisture spill onto my tongue before he nudged himself inside. I opened more as he gave small little thrusts, pressing against the surface of my tongue.

“Close your lips around it, Sweetness, and suck,” He says in a throaty whisper as he lets go of himself and cradles my face in his hands like I am something he cherishes, rather than the used toy that he makes me feel like. But I obey, wrapping my lips around his cock and begin to suck as he slowly thrusts himself in and out. He grows bigger, harder, and lets out a husky sort of groan. As I keep doing it, he reaches down for one of my hands and brings it up to his thick girth, showing me how to wrap my fingers around the soft, yet hard, velvety length and grasp it so that I was pumping as I sucked.

“Just like that,” he says in a hoarse rumble, “Just like that, Mina.” His hands leave my face to grip the hair at the back of my head, encouraging me to bob faster. “Suck harder now... a little more pressure with your hand... yes, that’s it. Use your tongue... play with the tip... good girl.” I gag when he thrusts a little too deep, and he eases up a bit, but it doesn’t stop him from doing it again shortly after. Tears begin to leak out of the corners of my eyes as I let go of him go and pull away to wipe the drool from my mouth with the back of my hand, gasping for breath.

Shay crouches down, balancing on his heels, his eyes on mine as he seizes the towel still tucked around me and rips it away, so I sit naked before him. “Lie back on the bed, Mina.”

My heart is hammering in my chest as I hesitate for several seconds before slowly sliding back, so I’m lying vertically on the mattress. Shay slowly pumps his cock several times as his eyes greedily roam over my body. Even from here, I can see the vein in his throat throbbing frantically in sync with his pulse. He places a knee on the bed, right on the inside of my thigh, before sliding it forward to force my leg up. He brings up his other knee, doing the same thing to my other leg so that I’m spread before him. I flush red and just react by preparing to roll away, but he presses a hand over my heart, keeping me where I am.

“Don’t be nervous, Sweetness,” he says in a rough whisper as he gazes down at me, “This is how it’s supposed to be between us.” He reaches up, pressing two fingers to my racing pulse on my neck, the corners of his mouth rising ever so slightly. “I just want you to be with me, Mina. Stop fighting it. Just be good and do as I say, and I’ll fucking love you with all

that I have. I'll make you feel good." His fingers reverently slide down my neck, skimming over my collarbone before drifting slowly between the valley of my breasts, "Tonight, you fucked up, didn't you? You made a mistake, and that's okay. I forgive you."

Even in the dim light, his eyes seem to sparkle. His fingers drift over my belly button, and with the rougher calluses moving down to my belly button, they leave a trail of heat in their wake.

"I'm going to fuck you now," he says in a rough sort of purr. I immediately freeze, my hands gripping the blankets beneath me. What I did with Keenan, well, that was different. It was over the clothes, he wasn't actually... *inside* me. And honestly, I had hoped that we would have inevitably gotten to that place had Shay not intervened. But now, he was taking charge, and he was going to take this from me.

If I fuck up again, he'll find out about Keenan and kill him, or possibly other innocents, in retribution to my fuck-ups. My conscience was already choking on the guilt from earlier tonight. Hearing how Key's voice broke on the other end of the phone, how devastated he sounded when I told him this was goodbye... I feel a lump in my throat as his voice echoes in my mind like a bad dream that I can't wake up from. If I'm going to keep him safe, I need to do this. I feel like I had no right to tell Shay no.

His fingers slide over the rise of my mound until they're gliding between the folds of my pussy. He works his fingers expertly, as he does every time, pumping two into me while working my clit with his thumb. I bite my lip as I grip the blankets and turn my head to the side, blinded by tears as the familiar pleasure begins to rise. I feel dirty and wrong, knowing where this will inevitably lead up to.

Play the part, Mina... just play the part. Keep him safe... But even in my mind, I hear myself sob.

Shay ducks his head over my left breast and takes my nipple into his mouth, sucking hard on it while grazing the tip with his teeth. I try to close my legs as his thumb wickedly swirls faster and faster over my clit, his fingers curling up inside to stroke at a spot in my inner walls. He lifts his head, releasing my breast, giving it a little kiss, before he moves on to the other. I squirm beneath him, so overcome with guilt, I try to push away that tingling pulse that's growing inside me. *I don't deserve this... I don't deserve this...* I tell myself over and over. *You don't deserve to feel good.*

You don't deserve to be happy. You fucked up. What about Key? What about him...

"Shay, stop!" I cry out, my voice choking on the words as he continues to rub at that spot inside, his thumb pressing harder against me. "Please, stop! I can't-I can't..." I whimper as he brings me to orgasm, my body shaking uncontrollably as he takes over. "I don't deserve to feel this-" I start to say when he seizes both my hands in one of his, bringing them up over my head as he settles himself between my thighs, his long, muscled body pressed to mine.

"I'm letting you, Mina. I say you can." He reaches between us with his free hand, and seconds later, I feel his cock rub at the moisture between my folds. "I want you to know how good it feels when I'm inside you," He says while slipping in a fraction, as my body instantly tenses. "How good it feels when we're together this way." He pulls back, only to press in a little more. "Every time we do this, I want you to let go and let me make you *feel*." He pushes forward even more and I feel the incredible pressure of him as he slowly fills me. My body tightens, wanting to expel the foreign intrusion, but Shay won't allow that. He pauses, keeping himself half sheathed in me as he brings up his free hand to cup my face tenderly. He peppers small kisses along my cheeks, over my closed eyelids, and trails them down to the corners of my mouth before whispering, "I want you to *crave* me like a drug. I want you to *beg* me to fuck you. And I will. Because it is the most right and the most honest thing that I can do, to show you how I feel about you. That I love you. I always have, and I always will."

With a snap of his hips, Shay fully thrusts into me. I feel a sharp pinch as he tears through my virginity, crying out softly against his lips as they hover a hairsbreadth over my own. He hisses sharply between his teeth as he braces himself, pressing into me completely but not pulling out. Instead, he crushes his mouth to mine, forcing my lips to dance with his as he kisses me like he wants to consume my soul. Releasing my wrists, he cradles my face between his large, rough hands, kissing me like I'm his only hope, the one who will save him and promise him rapture.

After a minute, he pulls back and stares down between us to where our bodies are joined, looking as though he is in awe at the sight. Slowly, he moves his hips back, almost pulling out of me completely, before he slides back in, bringing with it that strange feeling of fullness. I whimper when he completely buries his cock inside, accompanied by a small sting that makes

me flinch and wriggle beneath him. My whole body is shaking and my heart is racing with fear, uncertainty, and anxiety.

"It will hurt for a little bit, Sweetness," he pants, wrapping his arms securely around my shoulders and burying his face into the side of my neck. He embraces me tightly against his hot, naked body. "I have to move, though. It will help you stretch. Just relax, okay? Relax, relax..." He kisses below my ear, making me shiver as he starts to with small, almost methodical thrusts. I wrap my arms around his neck, clinging to him desperately as I squeeze my eyes shut in pain with each roll of his hips. When he bucks a little harder, I can't hold back the small cry that escapes me.

"You're a good girl, you know that?" He breathes against my skin, his movements picking up the pace a bit more now. "That's all you have to do, Mina. Be good. Do as I say, and everything will be perfect. Okay? No more bullshit. No more fighting *us*. You do as I say, and we'll all be happy. I know it. I know it..." He kisses my throat again, rolling his hips against me. His breathing begins to quicken, and as he clutches me, I tremble hard and ignore the tears that are sliding down my face. I don't feel anything except the absence and then stretch from his cock, creating pressure in my lower belly. He repeatedly hammers into me, moving faster, harder, with a sort of dark, passionate desperation. He's holding me so tight that I know I'll have bruises on my arms in the morning.

"Shay!" I cry out when he grinds his hips to mine, but I feel nothing but pain. "Shay, please!" I don't know what I'm begging for. Maybe for him to finish so that this nightmare can end? Or am I begging him to make it feel good? Perhaps even a small part of me wishes he would simply wrap his hands around my throat until I passed out and never wake up again.

At my plea, he slides a hand down my middle, over my stomach, and starts massaging my clit again. I'd orgasmed only minutes before, and with his touch added to the battering of his hips, I feel that rushing sensation start to rise again.

"That's it, Sweetness," he breathes in my ear, "Fucking come. *Come* with me!" His fingers swirl, pull and rub hard against me, causing my legs to clench around his hips. I release the blankets and claw up his back as the feeling builds, tears squeezing from the corners of my eyes as my conflicting emotions battle against the feeling of Shay inside me, forcing

another orgasm from me. I shouldn't be feeling this... not when I just broke Keenan's heart. Not when I just lost him only an hour ago.

"Holy shit, Mina..." he groans as his pace quickens to the point where the bed is rocking and squeaking with every movement. Suddenly, I feel it again, and I bite his shoulder to keep from crying out as I explode around him, my pussy clenching, and that tingling rush shoots out through my body like a throbbing pulse. He pulls back, his eyes shut tight, his mouth open as he drives himself in with several hard, final thrusts before he stills. I can feel him swell before a warm heat spreads inside me, and I realize he didn't use a condom. My heart starts hammering for an entirely different reason. My arms slide limply from around his neck and fall to the bed as I lay there trembling hard from my own orgasm and battling emotions while he finishes with several small pumps. Finally, he pulls out completely with a shuddering moan. He's breathing heavily, his brow covered in a light sheen of sweat as he turns and heads out of the room, leaving me there on the bed, horrified and feeling almost... numb. I can't move. My breathing is stilted and coming out in short little gasps.

When Shay returns moments later, he has a towel and uses it to gently wipe me down there, cleaning the mess we made. I catch a quick glimpse of a small stain of red on it before he quickly tosses it into the hamper that sits in his closet. My blood.

When he slides back into the bed with me, pulling the covers over our flushed, naked bodies, I close my eyes and try to ignore everything that has happened tonight. My leg is killing me from running on it. It's nearly four in the morning now, and I'm beyond exhausted and emotionally drained. My pelvis feels stretched and used, and I can't stop the fresh wave of tears that overcome my control. When Shay hears me sniffle, he pulls me in holding me close, and kisses my temple. When a thought occurs to me, I begin to shake for a totally different reason.

"Um, Shay?" I whisper, my face buried against the muscle of his chest.

"Hm?"

"You, uh, you didn't use protection..." I say awkwardly, my face flushing hard.

"No, I didn't," he says, sounding completely unfazed and calm.

"Wh-what about pregnancy? STIs? I'll need to go to the doctor to get-"

"Shhh, that won't be necessary, Sweetness." He starts to stroke my nearly dry hair back behind my ear, playing with the long strands. "When

we went back to the doctor after your surgery to check up on the healing... remember when he gave you a series of shots?"

I do. I hadn't been expecting it, but Shay had hovered over me while I'd gotten the needle in my arm, almost like he was watching to make sure it was done right, as if he knew better than the doctor. I thought it was weird at the time but figured it was something to fight any possible infections, so I didn't question it.

"That was a Depo-Provera shot. Birth control. You're good until October."

Fucking son of a... I quash down my anger. As much as I want to punch him in his face for having the doctor do something to my body without my permission, I'm also fucking relieved that I won't get pregnant. But...

"What about... STI's?" I can't help but think of Shay and his promiscuous past at the club when I was younger.

I feel him shift a little beside me and peek up at him to see his brows pulled down over his eyes like he's offended or something. "Do you really think I'd risk that with you, Mina?" He asks me as he slides his hand from my hair to my chin. "You better fucking believe I made sure I was clean. I haven't touched another woman in months. Why would I? I have *you* now." He leans in and presses a soft kiss to my lips before he settles back down on the pillow. "Now go to sleep, Mina. It's the last weekend before you start school, and I want to spend the entire time in bed with you."

Chapter three



AT FIRST, when Shay dropped me off at school this morning, I was relieved, though he was glaring at anyone who looked in our direction. I just want to get away from him and get back to some semblance of normalcy. I woke up every day this weekend feeling sore, weak, and mentally shattered. My leg was killing me, my privates were sore, but Shay didn't give me a moment to recover. The moment I woke up in the morning after the disaster of a night, Shay rolled me over and had his head between my legs before he was driving into me like a man possessed. He kept me in bed nearly the entire day and the next. So when I woke up on Monday for school, I was anxious to get away from him.

Now that I'm here, however, walking through the halls and feeling the stares and catching the murmured whispers from my peers, I constantly feel all the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I'm suffocating amongst the mass of bodies that surround me, and for a fleeting moment, I think I see someone reaching out like they mean to grab me, but it was only to check a poster hanging behind me on the notice board. Anxiously, I keep

my head down and limp along as quick as I can using my cane, searching for my new locker so I can take a minute to breathe before I'm forced to face everyone. I limp along, my leg still smarting, and lean heavily on my cane. I've pulled something, I know it. My vagina is so incredibly sore that every movement I make is uncomfortable. But Keenan is safe. That's all that matters to me now.

I stop before my locker, double-checking the combination number I was given before opening it. After shoving my new books and fleece sweater inside, I quickly skim over my new schedule. I can still feel everyone watching me, whispering about me, and I wish I could disappear through a hole in the floor. It doesn't help that I'm starting to feel claustrophobic for the first time in my life. There are too many people around me. Too many eyes. What if whoever had sent those guys to grab me was someone in this school? A teacher who maybe had a grudge over something the Beasts had done? Or a guy who was avenging someone Shay had slighted?

Just as the thought crosses my mind, my palms become clammy and a shiver runs up and down my spine when I hear my name being called.

"Mina!"

I look up to see a darkly dressed figure walking through the crowd, which parts for him like he's some sort of sinister God. Shay saunters my way, his eyes on me, wearing his club jacket and his hair messily strewn around his face. Even from here, I can make out the cut on his lip, the swelling around his eye, and the bruise on his chin from his scuffle with James. But his injuries only make him appear more intimidating and formidable.

"What are you doing here?" I hiss and quickly glance uncomfortably around at everyone. *Oh God, can this get any worse?* They all look either terrified or in some of the girls' cases, turned on at the sight of my stepbrother. But I'm petrified of the thought of him being in my school. *What does he want now?*

"You took off before I could give you some money for lunch," he says, reaching into his back pocket to pull out his wallet.

I flush as he hands me a twenty, feeling like a little kid again, then I start to feel sick. Real guardians would not do what he did to me all weekend. I crumple the twenty in my fist as I remember the feel of his tongue against my clit, how his fingers delved deep inside me, and how his

calloused thumb and forefinger pinched my nipple hard, and the feeling of his cock as he thrust into me again and again...

“What the fuck are you looking at?”

I snap to attention to see Shay glaring down a group of senior guys that I’ve known since middle school. They’d been watching us apparently, but now, they avert their gazes and hurry along. Shay turns his attention back to me. “Why are you wearing this today?” He asks out of nowhere.

I look down at myself. I’ve got on a sky blue long-sleeved crop top and a pair of light skinny jeans and sneakers. It’s not at all scandalous or revealing, save for a small section of my midriff that’s visible, but more than half the other girls in my school dress this way, too. When I’d gotten up this morning, it had been a little cooler, so I stepped out of the bedroom with my white fleece covering my outfit from his purview. Inspecting it, I don’t find any stains or tears, so I don’t see the problem. “I like this outfit.” I look back up at him, arching a brow in confusion, “... anyways, thanks for the-”

“You trying to catch someone’s attention?” He cuts me off.

I gawp at him in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“That top is too tight. The neckline is too low, and I can see your stomach...”

“Like, an inch of it. And the neckline isn’t too low!” I snap. “If the sight of my collarbone turns anyone on, then that’s their issue, not mine. Besides, I’ve worn this before-”

I shut up the moment Shay’s gaze darkens, the shadows gathering as he rests a hand over my head against the neighboring locker, caging me in as he leans forward, his nose barely touching mine. “You look like a hot piece of ass,” he murmurs, “and if I can see it, then these desperate little fuckheads can, too. Do you want them to look at you? Do you want them to think they have a chance? I *dare* them. I dare any of them to try...” Slowly, he turns his head, eying a group of boys who are in the midst of passing us, their eyes flickering from me to Shay and quickly away again, “... because if they do, the police will be finding pieces of their bodies for weeks.”

“Shay!” I seethe, my heart hammering at his words. I don’t doubt for a second that he means everything he just said. ”Lower your fucking voice! You can’t come into my school and say shit like that! You can’t say shit like that *period!* I’m serious-”

“I’m serious!” He turns back to me, his lips pressed firmly together. “I’ll be watching, Mina. And if you think I don’t know what happens in this school, you’re wrong. I have eyes here. I’ll know.” He reaches behind me, grabbing my fleece from my locker, and hands it to me. “Put this on.”

I’m feeling half enraged and half terrified because his threat is very real. If he says he has eyes in this school, I believe him. He may not be the head of the junior chapter to the Beasts anymore, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist now. Guaranteed some wannabe punks in this school are craving a bit of power and are willing to report in to gain some respect and hopefully be noticed by the club so they can prospect. As much as I want to throw my sweater in his face, I refrain and slip it on instead, zipping it back up so that my stomach is hidden.

“Good girl.” He kisses my forehead, my cheeks, and then my lips, lingering for a moment before pulling back to squeeze my chin. “I’ll pick you up at three.” He gives a lock of my hair a little tug before heading back out the way he came, the students and teachers all quickly jumping out of his way. I sag against my locker, my heart hammering, and angry tears filling my eyes.

Fuck him!



It has been a brutal first day back. After that scene in the morning, the whispers and stares only escalated. At lunchtime, I sit at the usual table with my group of friends in the cafeteria, but I could feel everyone watching me. Even Becca and Ashley are quieter than normal, casting me wary and curious sidelong glances. No doubt the news of my stepbrother kissing me in the hall had spread like wildfire. He might as well have come in and peed on me by how territorial he was acting.

I sit quietly, eating the lunch I bought with the money Shay had given me, only half-listening to the soft chatter around me. The girls I casually socialized with were comfortable acquaintances... they weren’t gossipy bitches, neither popular nor outcasts. But as I sit here with them, I can feel the thick tension in the air surrounding our table. When I glance up, several of them look quickly away, and I notice how Becca and Ashley whisper to each other, their eyes on me. Honestly, this is starting to get on my nerves. I

can feel my frustrations and hackles rising as I listen to my own group of supposed friends discreetly gossip about me... all while I'm sitting with them.

"What?" I finally snap, looking up to meet their inquisitive stares. The girls all flinch back, and in any other circumstances, I might have laughed, but I'm so emotionally charged right now that I can't find humour in anything today. "What is it? Something you all want to ask me? Is there anything any of you want to say? Well, go ahead! Ask! You guys are supposed to be my friends, so don't insult me by whispering away to each other, especially right in front of me. Who wants to go first? Ashley? Becca?" I raise my brows at them and wait, gripping the edge of the table to keep my hands from shaking.

Most of the girls look away, but Becca juts her chin out, looking a little resentful at my tone. Well, she shouldn't. None of them are being very supportive friends right now. "We were just wondering what that was all about this morning, with you and your brother?" Her eyes narrow, and lips curling slightly. She's clearly disgusted.

"Stepbrother," I corrected her. "Shay is my stepbrother. No blood relation."

"Still gross. I mean, he's pretty much been your brother for more than half your life." Becca goes on and crosses her arms. As she speaks, I notice that the other girls are quiet as they listen in, tilting their heads in our direction but saying nothing. Cowards.

"Sorry, Becca, but jealousy really doesn't suit you," I snap at her. She's had a crush on Shay since she first met him, but he's never once looked her way. Every time he picked me up on his bike from hanging out with my friends, she always tried to flirt and bat her lashes at him. I can see how the thought of him wanting anyone else, especially me, is like a personal insult to her.

She lets out a loud, high-pitched, fake laugh that catches the attention from nearby tables, "Please! Me, jealous? Of what? You're banging your brother! That's incest, you slut."

I shake my head at her, my heart hammering in my chest as my anger rises, "Read a fucking book, Becca. It's *not* incest!"

"So you admit it, then? You're screwing him?" She practically shouts the words. "Are you fucking your brother, Mina?"

The cafeteria is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. If I thought I was being watched before, it's *nothing* like it is now. I can feel hundreds of eyes on me, and a buzzing in my ears as I stare Becca down, wondering why I was friends with her in the first place.

"We aren't... we're not—" my voice trails off weakly. Not that it's any of their business, but I find myself choking on the lie. I feel a tightness in my chest when I glance around to see practically everyone watching me. I want to get out of here... *now*. "Shay is... he's my..." I stumble over my words, not really knowing what to say. What do I tell them? That I'm his personal toy? That I agreed to do what he says to protect someone I love? That I'm trapped in this sick game of his just to please him, all while sacrificing everything that I am? What I want doesn't matter, it never has. And here I am, trapped in this web, and I can't find a loophole to free myself. So what exactly does that make me? A weak-minded, easily manipulated fool?

"*What?*" Ashley speaks up now, her eyes just as judgemental as Becca's. "What are you guys, then? And don't lie, because about thirty people said they saw you guys kissing at your locker this morning." She announces to the room.

The buzzing in my ears is getting louder, and my face is feeling a little numb. Huh, weird. But I ignore it as I stare at the table of girls I once looked at as the nicest, easy-going group in this school. They never seemed to care about my affiliation with the town's number one, deadly MC. They didn't retreat when I mentioned Shay's name, or James. Or if I talked about family events with the club. *But now...* now they were looking at me like I was disgusting, tainted.

Looking at these girls, I realize that nothing I say would even matter. They had already painted a picture in their minds, and no matter what I said, nothing would change that. Scrupulously, I glance around to see everyone, and I mean *everyone* in the cafeteria watching with rapt attention. With shaking hands, I pick up my tray and rise to my feet, slightly wincing as I put weight on my bad knee and stare icily at the girls who I once called my friends. "None of you could possibly understand what I'm going through, even if I told you. You can't relate unless you lived through it. You only know what my world is like from an outsider's perspective, and you're too close-minded to understand and empathize. So I'm not going to bother trying to explain."

“Because it’s all true, then?” Becca stipulated, her eyes narrowing cruelly. “God, Mina... I never pictured you, Miss Prima Ballerina, Miss good grades, and Miss Mary Sue, as a brother-fucker. You *are* biker trash, after all.”

The hand gripping my cane clenches around the handle as I fight back the urge to use it to strike her in the face. *No, Mina... don’t do it... she’s not worth it, she’s not.* But then, that dark, nasty bitch in the back of my head speaks up, *Do it. DO it! DO IT! Fucking punch this bitch out!*

I bite my lip until I taste blood and take a deep breath, trying to fight the feeling of a fifty-pound weight sitting on my chest. Feeling like a coward, I turn and walk away without saying another word. All at once, the cafeteria erupts into whispered murmurs as I dump my tray by the garbage and walk out, holding my head high as I leave them all behind.



Besides being the center of unwanted gossip that has now spread following the incident in the cafeteria, I had to attend while stumbling around all day on my bad leg, leaning heavily on my cane as I tried to ensure I was on time. By the late afternoon, I was boiling in my warm fleece and ended up putting it back in my locker, ignoring Shay’s warnings. Maybe he hadn’t been bullshitting, but I was gonna melt if I kept that thing on any longer. I doubt any guy in my school would be brave enough to approach me after hearing about Shay’s threats this morning.

As I continued to limp down the halls, the whispers changed to harsh hisses and the looks of sympathy, or curiosity had shifted to one of fear and disgust. When I ended up passing Becca and Ashley in the hall, I was hailed with a series of “Slut,” “Whore,” “Brother-fucker,” and “Trash”. I kept my expression as void as possible, not wanting them to know how much their words stung. They were untrue and the fact that they came from girls I had considered friends, or was at least friendly with, cut even more. My situation was *not* my choice... not really.

By the time the bell rang, I was emotionally spent. Coming in today had already been a nerve-wracking experience, but now, the last year of my high school career was going to be spent isolated, friendless, and alone. I slip my sweater back on, figuring at least, of all the bullshit I’d endured today, I’d

gotten away with this. I was watchful, eyeing anyone who might be secretly working for Shay and the Beasts, but it didn't feel like any of them matched the bill of a potential one-percenter biker. The moment I stepped outside the school, however, and saw him waiting for me in James' truck, I withered at the sight of the scowl on his face.

I slowly meander over, dreading the confrontation I was about to have. And sure enough, the moment I climb into the truck, he snaps, "What did I say about showing off your midriff?"

"I didn't-"

"You did." He holds up his phone, showing off the evidence in the form of several pictures of me, sans sweater wandering the halls, and once even sitting in class. The shot was clearly taken from the doorway while I was writing something in my notebook.

I avoid his accusatory glare. "It was hot, Shay-"

"Wear something more suitable tomorrow." He snaps and starts the engine with a deafening roar, causing everyone in the vicinity to gape and jump back as we pull away from the curb. He doesn't mention anything about the bullying, which makes me wonder if he was even told about it.

"When I agreed to this... *thing*, I didn't realize that meant you had say over what I wore," I said carefully, fighting to keep my voice calm and rational. If I let my emotions get the better of me, he'll just brush it off as teenage hormones, I know it. But after the day I've had, I could feel the cracks in my levelheaded facade start to break.

"Mina-" he practically growls, but I keep going, determined to set things straight before he gets too used to pushing me around.

"Next thing I know, you'll be keeping me in the house 24/7. Is that what you want, Shay? To make me your toy? Your pet?"

"*Mina!*" He snarls, "Do you want a repeat of that little Jacobson fucker?"

I immediately bite my lip and sink back into my seat. No... what Shay did to Eli was more than fucked up. I have no idea what happened to him after his multiple facial reconstruction surgeries. He disappeared from our town and moved to Ashland. But no one from our school has heard from him, even his closest friends. "No..." I mumble, fiddling with the strap on my bookbag.

"So if you keep dressing like a tramp, you're going to attract more of those guys, which means an overflowing emergency room..."

“And remember how mad I was? How I shut you out? Did you not learn *anything* from the last time you injured someone close to me?” I burst out suddenly, cutting him off. I was quickly losing control of my emotions.

But my words must have struck a chord with him, because Shay suddenly and violently veers the truck to the shoulder of the road slamming on the brakes hard. I lurch forward in my seat, as the seat belt snaps unyielding across my chest to keep me in place, and I gasp hard from the sudden strain. Several vehicles honk their horns behind us as they swerve to avoid hitting the driver’s side of the truck and one or two even shout obscenities as they pass. But Shay doesn’t even look at them. He turns in his seat, arm coming up behind me, and cups the back of my neck so I’m forced to look at him. “And do you remember what happened as a result of you shutting me out?” he whispers darkly.

Yes, I remembered. Shay had utterly lost his mind that night and had trashed the interior of the Celtic Beasts clubhouse. He fought off the other members, isolating himself inside and continued his rampage. He only stopped when James brought me to him, and I opened up to him again. If I shut him out, he would only descend into the darkness like before.

“So... what did *you* learn?” He throws back at me, and it makes me seethe! I long to slap him across his face, but instead, I sit there like the obedient, pansy-ass that I am and say nothing. Shay stares into my eyes for what feels like an hour, as if searching for any sign of defiance in me. There still is... A few nights ago, I may have been more resigned to my fate at the idea of being his... but that spark in me was still alive, still flickering. So I keep my face as blank as possible, staring right back at him, hoping that it would be enough for him to back off.

Eventually, his hand eases up and he releases me, turning back to continue driving. I sit there in silence, my mind churning away, plotting...

Now that Keenan was safe, I needed to get the fuck out of here... I needed to save myself.



Chapter four

I'M SO LIVID WITH SHAY THAT I DON'T SPEAK ANOTHER WORD TO HIM THE WHOLE DRIVE HOME. AS SOON AS WE PULL INTO THE GARAGE IN THE BACK AND PARK, I THROW OPEN MY DOOR AND LIMP OVER TO THE HOUSE AS FAST AS I CAN. FOR ONCE, JAMES IS HOME PREPPING DINNER, AND WHEN I STOMP THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR IGNORING SHAY, WHO IS HOT ON MY HEELS, HIS DARK EYES FLITTING BACK AND FORTH BETWEEN US. NO DOUBT HE IS QUICKLY ASSESSING THE SITUATION.

"MINA—" SHAY CALLS AFTER ME AS I HOBBLE DOWN THE HALL TO HIS, *OUR*, BEDROOM.

"I HAVE HOMEWORK," I GRUMBLE AS I TRY TO PUT DISTANCE BETWEEN US.

"I SWEAR IF YOU TRY TO FUCKING SHUT ME OUT AGAIN—" HE YELLS AT MY BACK, FOLLOWING ME AS I TOSS MY BOOKBAG ONTO THE BED, MY MIND IMMEDIATELY BRINGING UP THE MEMORIES OF THE PAST TWO DAYS THAT WE SPENT ON IT.

"FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, SHAY!" I PRACTICALLY SCREECH TURNING TO FACE HIM, "I'M. DOING. MY. HOMEWORK! LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!" WITHOUT WAITING FOR HIS RESPONSE, I SLAM THE DOOR IN HIS FACE. TO MY RELIEF, HE DOESN'T TRY TO COME IN AND THERE ARE NO LOCKS SO IT'S NOT LIKE I'M FORCING HIM OUT. I WAIT,

listening to his heavy breathing before he finally retreats down the hall to the kitchen. Moments later, I hear James' deep voice mumbling as they both talk quietly amongst themselves. For once, they aren't arguing.

I collapse on the edge of the bed, exhaling a deep sigh as I grasp my hair, wanting to wrench it out of my skull from frustration.

Ever since I agreed to Shay's deal, he has appointed himself my guardian and master in almost every aspect of my life. He came with me to the hospital and stayed in the room as the doctors looked me over, and asked questions regarding my rehab, carefully listening when we were given instructions for how to take my pain medication. He spent every night in bed with me over the summer, touching and kissing me. Now that we have gone all the way, there isn't much I can do to stop it. Every moment that he wasn't working for the Beasts he was with me, and I am forbidden to go out without asking him first. At the beginning of August, he said it was because they were still looking for whoever orchestrated the attack that night. But as time has gone on, his rules and restrictions have only become more hindering and controlling, I feel like it's all an excuse now.

After trashing my room the other night, he has moved all my clothes and things over to his. He told me I would be staying here from now on. My room, which is still a mess of broken furniture and a flayed mattress, is now slowly becoming storage. All of the boxes that contained my Mum's clothes, jewelry, and other keepsakes have been piled in the empty space of my closet.

And James...

Not only is James hardly around anymore, but when he is, he barely speaks to me, let alone looks at me. He claims to be doing work for the club, but when he's home, it's only when Shay is home, too. If I tried to engage him in any sort of heart-to-heart, he'd duck his head, mutter some conventional response, and excuse himself. However, when it came to his response to *Shay*, there was always a healthy exchange of glaring, sometimes cursing, or murmured angry whispers between each other. The tension between them was suffocating and I almost couldn't wait until Shay's new trailer was set up... *almost*.

I have no idea what the hell happened between them. Neither would tell me anything.

Sitting here in Shay's, sorry, *our* room, I felt even more suffocated by the situation. On top of all the other bullshit, the bastard is now telling me

how to dress! *And* he had people watching me at school! This morning I had my doubts, but after seeing the proof from those photos on his cell, I am absolutely certain that Shay will only get worse if I don't do something about it now.

Keenan is safe.

Now, I need to protect myself.

I had to run.



My backpack was sitting like a beacon at the end of the bed, which wasn't unusual. It had sat there all summer. Only now, instead of holding my school books, it was stuffed full of clothes, my wallet, and any other important documents I could find on hand. I'd been discreet when I had snuck into my old room to go through my Mum's old boxes, searching for my birth certificate and social insurance number. It was during that search that I'd found a small photo album I didn't recognize. When I opened it, I found myself staring at my past... pictures of her and my Dad smiled up at me from the pages... several showed them with a tiny, blonde-haired baby... me. As I got closer to the end of the book, the pictures changed, and my Dad stopped appearing in them, leaving only her and me to fill the pages.

I stop at one photo in particular. It was taken at the first Christmas we'd spent with James and Shay. The four of us were in front of the Christmas tree, smiling as Uncle Marty took our picture. I stare at my mum, my fingers stroking the edges of the photograph almost lovingly studying her beautiful features and remembering the little details about her. Her smile always made her look so pretty, and her laugh sounded like sleigh bells, charming and melodic. Behind her, James was standing with his arms wrapped around her waist, his chin resting on top of her head, and his hands resting on her stomach. I can't remember the last time I saw him smile that way. He looked so happy. Both him and mum.

And then, I look at the two young figures in the picture. There I was, standing in the forefront of the photo, wearing a cute, red velvet-looking, poofy dress, complete with a lace neckline and my hair was done up in curls with a white bow. It seems like I was in the middle of jumping or dancing

or something. My arms are up in the air, my mouth is open like I'm cheering or shouting, and for a brief moment, my chest aches as I remember how much I loved the early years here. When did that change?

My eyes flicker to the dark figure at the edge of the picture.

There he is... a young, little lankier teenage version of Shay without tattoos or his lip ring. He's leaning against the stone fireplace, slightly away from the rest of the family, with his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his black jeans. While the rest of us are smiling at the camera, Shay's darkened gaze is focused elsewhere... his silver eyes are watching me, the smallest of smiles curled up just the slightest at the corner of his mouth. *Did he love me then?*

Yes, a voice at the back of my head says, *But not like he does now...*

I almost feel a sense of relief with my new understanding. He did love me once, in a pure, brotherly way. I know he did. But over the years, that love evolved into something more. I don't know if he was even aware of it until recently.

I find myself sliding the photograph out of the book along with one of both my parents before my Dad got sick. Tucking them both into my back pocket, I quietly hide away in Shay's room, staying out of sight from the men as they disappear into the garage to work on their Harley's. I carefully stow my birth certificate and social insurance into my backpack, followed by the photographs, which I carefully slide inside my wallet to keep them from bending and possibly tearing.

When the bedroom door opens later that evening, I remain as still as possible, lying curled up under the comforter while concentrating on my breathing, keeping it slow and measured. I can hear his light footsteps and the quiet click of the door as Shay carefully closes it behind him in an attempt to keep things quiet. For a minute, he shuffles around the room until finally, I hear the rustle of clothing as he undresses, then the shift of the mattress as he joins me in bed. Shay's body heat encloses around me like a second blanket as he pulls me into his chest and rests his cheek on the top of my head. We usually sleep this way, and thankfully, he doesn't seem to be in the mood for anything else tonight.

Perhaps my absence at dinner was enough to tell him that I was *really* pissed this time. Very rarely did I let my temper get the best of me, but when it did, the men in the house tended to scatter like mice until I cooled down. The reaction worked in my favour this time around. I lay relaxed in

his grip waiting for sleep to take him. Even then, I would wait for my moment.

It was some time before Shay's breathing finally slowed and his grip around me loosened. Even then, I waited, listening as I told myself to be patient. If I rushed, I was sure to mess up somehow. I couldn't risk it. This would be my only shot and if I was caught, I can only imagine how Shay will react. I wouldn't be surprised if I end up homeschooled for the remainder of my final year.

I think it was close to midnight by the time Shay rolled over to the other side, his breathing deep and relaxed. I begin to slither down toward the end of the bed. I'd managed to do this once before when my leg had been wrapped in a cast, so now I was feeling a little more confident in my movements. I'd gone to bed wearing a baggy pair of black sweats and a band t-shirt. This was nothing out of the ordinary for me. If Shay was ever feeling handsy at night, he simply undressed me. Lucky for me, I didn't have to worry about finding something to wear in the dark. I scooped up my backpack and grabbed the dark grey hoodie beneath it, my cane, and soundlessly tip-toed to the door. Watching Shay in the dim light of the room, I stepped out into the hall and shut him in behind me. He hadn't stirred an inch, but even so, I held my breath as I headed to the front door.

As I slipped on my sneakers, I checked the security system, and sure enough, James had armed it for the night.

But! Something I learned only a few weeks ago when he had to run out in the middle of the night... Shay and I were on the couch together watching one of our old favourite's when a call came in from Uncle Shawn. James was up and out the door after punching in the family's code into the panel. He stepped out without any alarms blaring and no notification to Shay's phone saying that the door had been unlocked and opened. It was a feature put in place for when they both had to come home in the early hours of the morning without disrupting the rest of the household, something I hadn't known before but wish I had.

I used it to my advantage now, punching in the code before I unlocked the door and opened it. Breathing a heavy sigh of relief when it didn't go off, I stepped out locking it behind myself. Thankfully, there aren't any alarms and no signs of James or Shay running out with cell phones in hand showing system notifications.

I avoided using my cane until I stepped onto the softforest floor and headed into the trees, my backpack slung over my shoulders, determined to take advantage of this opportunity and get myself the fuck out of dodge.

The walk through the woods was uneventful unless you count the hundred mini heart attacks I had from the sounds of animals moving in the night. The echoing calls of owls were haunting and sent chills up my spine. Every snap of a twig had me jumping behind a tree and counting slowly to ten to calm my breathing. If I was being honest, the darkness of the woods wasn't nearly as terrifying as was the thought of Shay finding me, or even worse, whoever organized the attack on my Mum and I. I avoided the roads so that I wouldn't catch the attention of any late-night travelers. And if Shay wakes up and finds me gone... he's going to jump on the back of his Harley and head straight into town looking for me. With any luck, I'll have moved on.

The most obvious place for me to hide would be Ashland, the city that our town bordered, and that was one of the many reasons why I was *not* going to go there. Ashland was also a major hub for the Beasts. James, Shay, and the rest of the Beasts were constantly doing business runs in and out of the grungier parts of the city. They knew it well. So I wouldn't be going there.

The next option was one of the few other border towns. There was one up north, one in the east, and west, but Shay would only check them out next. No, the best thing I could do would be to buy a bus ticket and head to an entirely new city. I'll pick at random when I get to the bus terminal. In the meantime, I'll hide out as best I can.

Walking in the dark with a cane wasn't easy. I hadn't expected it to be a smooth trip, but even with the flashlight app from my cell phone, I still stumbled often and nearly tripped on divots in the earth. Luckily, I'd made this trip before on previous occasions when I'd been avoiding my stepbrother, so in fifteen minutes, I finally made it to the edge of town. It was nearly two in the morning at this point, and all the shop windows were dark, streets were empty, and the silence was ominous. I shivered from the end of the world feeling I got from it all. Almost like it was a bad omen or something. But I ignored it and headed to the north end of town to where the bus terminal was located.

I cupped my hands over my mouth and breathed on them. It was cold at night now, and I was so grateful that I'd dressed for it. Luckily, it was just a

little too early for a frost. But even so, when I reached the bus depot, my heart sank to see it was closed. I could have sworn they had a late night or early morning trip scheduled, but clearly I was mistaken. I cursed and sagged against the rough, brick wall by the doors, desperately trying to think of what I could do now. It opened at five a.m. What if Shay woke up in the next few hours? Chances of that happening were pretty high. He'd always been a restless sleeper. I needed to hide out until then, which means I had to stay out of sight.

I shuffled along the wall until I reached the alley that separated the depot from a shady liquor store. Fully intending to hide out in the dark between the two buildings, I moved into the shadows but nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard a voice say, "What ya doing out at this time of night?"

I spun to see a homeless man by a dumpster, dressed in rags, sitting in a large, green plastic bag stuffed with crumpled up newspapers. He was older, probably ten years older than James. With the soft glow from the streetlight shining down the alley, I could make out the crinkled laugh lines around his eyes, and when he smiled up at me, I could see most of his teeth were missing. His head was covered with a toque, but his grey hair was grungy and hung about his shoulders in a tangled, dirty mess.

Instinctively, I stepped back from him, unsure if he was a user or potentially dangerous. "Nothing," I said immediately, clutching my bag closer.

His bushy, grey brows rose on his forehead, and he shrugged, "Don't look like nothin' to me, girly." His light brown eyes raked over me, taking in my baggy, dark attire, my bag gripped tightly in my hands, and shook his head, "Look like a runaway." He tilted his head back, indicating the bus depot behind him. He certainly put that together fast enough.

I bit my lip and glanced down the alley, thinking that I better find a new spot to hide out in.

"Ya gonna freeze afore the buses start runnin'," he says and huddles deeper into his smelly sack of papers, looking like he couldn't care less that I was obviously an underage girl running away from home, "What ya gonna do till then?"

"Was going to wait it out..." I mumbled, observing him. He didn't sound crazy. Nor did he make any move to rush at me and steal my stuff, and this spot was so convenient.

"Well, hunker on down, girly," he nodded to the opposite side of the alley from him, "Grab yerself some papers from that bin there," he pointed to a metal garbage can outside the back of the liquor store, "Stick 'em in yer sweater. The insulatin' will keep ya warm."

Opening the trash can, I peered inside to see leftover wads of packing paper, most likely used to cushion product in shipping, and grabbed an armful.

"Here, use this to sit on," he tossed a piece of cardboard over to me, "Will keep yer ass from freezin' off," he chuckled in a raspy sort of way like he had smoked one too many cigarettes.

I couldn't help but smile at his words as I set the cardboard down and took a seat, grateful to get off my bad leg. Taking his advice, I shoved the wads of paper into my sweater and huddled up against the brick wall of the narrow alley, and sighed wearily.

"Now, tell me, kid. What happened to ya?" He nodded to my cane.

I laughed without humour, "Was a victim of circumstance..."

"Meanin'?"

I shrugged, "My family is involved with the wrong people... so I paid the price." At least, that's what I've determined, but I didn't need to give this guy my life story. I doubted he cared that much to know. He clearly had his own problems. His curiosity had just gotten the better of him. It probably wasn't often that a teenage girl, limping on a cane, came stumbling upon him in the dead of night.

He nodded but didn't say the usual, 'I'm sorry to hear that,' or ask any questions to get me to elaborate, and I was grateful. I was too tired to explain.

"Ya can't choose yer family, that's the truth," he said as he huddled deeper into his makeshift sleeping bag, "How old are ya, kid?"

"I'm seventeen."

"Yer young, yet. Ya got a chance to start over... not like an old bugger like me," he chuckled again in that same, wheezy way, "Hope wherever ya end up, yer happy."

I couldn't help but smile at him. He really meant what he said, I could tell. "Thank you," I whispered, "I hope so, too." We both studied each other for a minute, and soon, my own curiosity got the better of me, "What's your story?" I asked.

He coughed a little and shrugged. “Mine is no different than so many others. Joined the army. Saw some fucked up shit. Came back and got no help. Turned to drugs. Then that was all I cared about... my next fix. Lost everythin’. Been in and out of shelters, but I prefer being on the streets than stayin’ in ‘em...”

“Why?” I asked, completely caught off guard. Why the hell would he want to sleep in an alley as opposed to a place where he could have a meal and a warm bed to sleep in?

“I got my problems, girly. Don’t like bein’ ‘round people...” His smile disappears, and he shudders as though a horrible memory just came to mind. “Shelters are full of dangerous people. Got body lice from a few places. Been robbed more than once. I have better chances out here. I don’t like people. Don’t like ‘em...” His voice trails off again and he shakes his head hard, “Nope. Don’t like ‘em. Don’t like em.”

He echoed this mantra repeatedly, and for a moment, I was a little scared. This all felt too familiar as I thought of Shay and how he descended into his madness. Was this guy about to lose his shit, too? I tried desperately to think of a way to calm him, to reassure him that I wasn’t going to do anything to him, but he suddenly stopped and squeezed his eyes shut, looking like he was concentrating hard on keeping himself in control. Finally, after several long, agonizing minutes, he slowly opened his eyes and breathed a long, tired sigh. “People are selfish, dangerous creatures,” he said, sounding sad, “They are capable of shit-awful things. Things I’ve seen...” he flinches and shakes his head hard, “Safer here on my own. Was in Ashland for a while. But I like the border towns best. People are nicer. People leave me alone.”

My heart wrenched in my chest at his words. This man had clearly seen some shit in his life. Most likely he was suffering from PTSD and received no assistance for it, so he turned to drugs. Sad to say that this was not news to my ears. In school we’ve talked about problems like this for veterans that come home with serious problems. And this man was one of them. He fought for us, and we let him down.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him, hoping he can hear the sincerity in my words.

His light brown eyes flicker to me, and he smiles. “Aw, I’m alright, kiddo. I’m used to this life. But yer young. Ya don’t wanna end up like me. So ya go find yer happiness and live, ya got me?”

I nodded, returning his smile as I shivered on the ground. After that, we stayed quiet as we both tried to get some rest. I don't know how he managed to sleep on the hard ground like this with the cold biting his face every night. I know humans were supposed to be adaptable, but I couldn't imagine ever getting used to this.

I don't know how much time has passed, before I hear the sounds of vehicles roaring by in the distance. All the early risers and workers were now getting up and starting their day. I check my phone and see I have another hour before the terminal opens. I could last until then. I eyed the man across from me, trying to think if there was something I could give him to help. I didn't have much money on me, and the amount I did have, I was going to use on a bus ticket and pay for a motel room wherever I ended up until I planned my next move. Maybe I could get him breakfast or something? I know the depot had a small diner inside. I could get him some food and a coffee.

As this thought occurred to me, I could hear the familiar rumbling of multiple Harleys passing the cars and trucks. At once, my blood ran cold, and I pressed back against the brick wall, hiding in the shadows as I stared wide-eyed at the alley entrance. Across from me, I could hear my homeless companion shuffle a little, the papers in his bag crinkling as he sat up himself to check out the thunderous approach.

My heart pounded against my ribcage when the sight of five black Harleys pulled into the parking lot of the depot, all wearing the black leather jackets emblazoned with the silver and blue dragon of the Celtic Beasts. They pulled up to the front, leaving their bikes rumbling as they disappeared from sight, no doubt trying to enter the building yet finding it closed.

Run, Mina. Fucking run! I looked down to the other end of the alley, but it only leads to a gated area where they kept the buses that weren't making trips. I was cornered in here.

"These the ones you runnin' from, girly?"

Helplessly, I look over at my new friend and nod, my voice temporarily lost as I struggle to think of a way to get out of here. Before either of us can move, two figures step into view at the alley's entry, their features barely discernible, blocked out by shadow as the warm orange glow of the streetlight glared at their backs. They stomp over, heading straight to the tramp, and I recognize Cody's voice immediately as he barks at the guy,

"Hey! You see a teenage girl come by here? 'Bout five foot seven? Cute? Blonde? She has a limp, so most likely is walking with a—"

"Mina!" Aron's voice shouts as the second shadowy figure spotted me trying to hide deeper in the alley. "Manic! She's here! Here!"

I get to my feet and take off as fast as I can, forgetting about my bad leg. I hiss as it gives a deep pang and sag against the dumpster for a second before I push on. I don't care if the area in the back is blocked. I'll climb the goddamn chain-link fence if I have to! I could hear more footsteps run into the alley, followed by someone's quick pursuit as they came after me. Pitifully, I didn't make it far before a pair of arms wrapped around my middle and hauled me back against them. I thrashed and screamed as I fought to break free, but a leather-gloved hand slapped over my mouth, cutting off my cries.

"Shut up!" Cody hisses in my ear, his voice rougher and much more threatening than I've ever heard before. "You're in enough trouble as it is! Don't make it fucking worse for yourself!" He turns and roughly drags me back down the alley to where the others have gathered. He mutters under his breath the entire time, but he speaks so low I can only catch snippets like, "Stupid," and, "hope he punishes you." My homeless friend was tussling with Leif, but was quickly thrown to the ground in a heap of old papers and rags, breathing hard. Gavin stands back, his dark eyes assessing the situation, while Aron watches Cody haul me over to them.

But it was Shay I stared at in fear. He stands between them all, the tallest of the group, his messy hair illuminated by the streetlight. I can't imagine how furious he is with me right now. Beside him, Leif gives my companion a hard kick in the stomach, causing him to curl up on his side with a grunt of pain, followed by an agonized moan.

"Stop it! Stop!" I cry against Cody's hand, my words coming out muffled and distorted, "Leave him alone. He's done nothing!"

Shay's voice slithers through the dark like an angry snake; deep, smooth, and vehement, "I told you what would happen, Mina, if you didn't listen to me. Do you remember?"

But my attention is focused on the poor man lying on the ground, as I keep fighting to free myself from Cody's lock on my waist.

"I said I would hurt him, Mina. That guy you think you love?" He spat out the words like they are poison. "I told you that you were mine. That if you didn't want me to lose my shit, if you wanted us to be happy together,

and not cause any problems, you just had to do what I said and be good... Do you think you running off in the middle of the night falls under that?" He runs a hand through his hair and nods to Cody. "Take her to the bikes. Storm, grab her bag and her cane. I'll make this quick."

"What? Make *what* quick? Shay? Shay!" I scream against Cody's hand as he handily pulls me away. Gavin grabs my bag and cane from the ground and follows us. I squirm as I strain to see around Cody's massive figure. Leif gives the poor homeless man another kick, forcing him further back into the dark. Aron moves behind Shay, watching everything, and says nothing.

"SHAY!" I shriek against the glove once we make it to the bikes and turn to watch. With the light shining on him, I can see how his face is cold and expressionless... the monster in his head now taking over. Shay reaches into the holster under his jacket and pulls out a shining silver handgun, pointing it towards the ground as he clicks off the safety. "STOP! Stop this now! Please, please! I'll be good! I swear! Shay, stop!" I cry over and over again. Even with Cody's hand over my mouth, I know he can hear me. He knows that I'm begging. But instead of answering me or even looking my way, he casually lifts the gun, points it straight at my poor friend on the ground, and fires three bullets in quick succession into his chest. I scream as the shots go off, the fast flashes of light temporarily illuminating the space for only seconds before leaving them immersed in the darkness again.

I sag in Cody's arms, wailing as guilt wraps around my throat suffocating me. Because of me, that man was dead. And all he had done was shown me a bit of kindness. He had done nothing. I didn't even know his name. And Shay killed him because I had run away, despite his warnings.

I hear their approaching footsteps, crunching on the loose stones on the hard gravel, but I'm so blinded by my tears I can't see a thing. I keep sobbing as the other three come closer, their voices murmuring softly as they talk over me. I can't make out their words, and at this moment, I don't give a shit. It isn't until Cody's hand disappears from my mouth and Shay's strong grip captures my chin to force me to look up at him that I momentarily stop. Tears are sliding down my face, leaving cold, wet trails on my cheeks, and I glare up at him, unable to find the words to express how I'm feeling.

“Silver, Chains... get rid of it. Be sure to collect the shells,” Shay murmurs, his seething gaze completely focused on me. “Storm, Cobalt, you two escort us back. Then I want you to check-in with Bull. Tell him I’m indisposed today. He’ll need someone else to make the run into Ashland. Got it?”

The others don’t say a word, except nod and immediately disperse to follow his orders. Cody releases me as he and Gavin head over to their bikes, while Aron and Leif slink back into the alley. Shay’s hands strike out like a cobra and seize my arms forcing me over to his bike. I obey, sitting on the bitch-seat unmoving, as he secures the helmet on my head. He climbs on and reaches back, gripping my hands to guide them around his middle, locking my fingers into place over his stomach. Revving their engines several times, the four of us leave the parking lot in a hurry, taking off around the edge of town, rather than driving through it.

As we ride along, the scene in the alley echoes over and over in my mind like some sort of nightmare. *He’s dead because of me... he’s dead because of me...*

I feel sick.

I feel numb.

And Shay had just murdered someone because of my actions.

I shudder, my body shaking with sobs and inner turmoil as we quickly make our way back home. It only takes a few minutes before we pull away from Gavin and Cody, who turn and head into the direction of the club, while Shay and I turn into the driveway. I was back in my caged world. And this time... I wasn’t getting away.



Chapter five

WE ENTER the house like a storm. Shay kicks open the door after disarming it, locks an arm around my waist, and lifts me off the ground while carrying my bag and cane in his other hand. He throws my things to the couch and slams the door behind us, quickly locking it and sliding the deadbolt home for good measure before he roughly drags me to his bedroom. Once we cross the threshold, he throws me in. I fall hard to the floor, rolling once, and then collapse in a heap. I slowly push myself up and sit on the floor with my shoulders hunched, and my hands lifeless in my lap, the feeling of defeat and surrender incapacitating me.

I hear him moving around the room, the familiar click of the pull chain to the green banker's lamp on his desk, then the bang of the door as he roughly shuts it.

"You really fucked up tonight, Mina," he says, standing over me. His voice is so cold and detached that it terrifies the shit out of me. I don't argue with him, either. How can I? Because of me, an innocent man is dead. I remain where I am at his feet, my eyes squeezed shut as I listen to his

speech. “I warned you, didn’t I? I told you... I told you not to test me. I told you to be a good girl and listen! But you didn’t! And now, there’s blood on your hands.” He stomps around me, and I hear the zipper of his leather jacket as he slides it off. I know he’ll hang it carefully, as I’ve always seen him do, on the back of his desk chair. Then I hear the clunk of something heavy when it hits the wooden surface of his bedside table, and I know it’s the gun... the gun that took a life tonight, because of my stupidity.

“I gave you time, Mina... hoping to ease you into this. I thought if I took it slow, you’d come to your senses. But you’re stubborn. Always have been when it comes to *us*.” Shay moves back to me, and I can sense him standing close. I can almost feel him as he crouches down at my side, his body hovering slightly over mine in a domineering position. I tremble hard and refuse to look up. *I saw him murder someone tonight...*

His hand comes down on the back of my head and I jump, but when he tenderly begins to stroke my hair, I shiver and sag even more, hiding my face from him. A few tears slide down and fall off the tip of my nose.

“I’m done giving you time,” he murmurs, his cool reserve now shifting to something else, something menacing and unstable. “I am done waiting. You brought this on yourself, do you understand me? Say you understand.” When I remain silent, his hand painfully grips a fistful of my hair and he gives me a shake. “Say, ‘I understand, Shay.’”

“I-I understand, Shay,” I hiccup through my tears.

“Say, ‘I will do what you tell me, Shay.’”

“I will do what you tell me, Shay,”

“Say that you are mine!”

I swallow back the lump in my throat and whisper, “I’m yours.”

The tight grip on my hair lessens, and his fingers slide along my jaw until he’s cupping my chin and forcing me to look up at him. He’s balanced on his heels at my side, his silver eyes gleaming from beneath his mess of dark hair, studying me from behind the veil, but the look is dead. I’m not talking to Shay right now... I’m speaking with Manic. I can see it by the way the shadows caress his face, how the lines beneath his gaze seem more pronounced and even darker than usual. As I stare into his eyes, I see an emptiness there that absolutely chills me.

“Prove it.” He growls, his grip on my chin tightening slightly.

“Wh-what?”

“Prove. It.” He seethes those two words out, his eyes narrowing as he continues to scrutinize me. “You failed me twice in a week, Mina.” His voice comes out rough, a deep rumble from his chest, and I quiver from its threatening inflection. “You won’t have any other chances after this. I need you to take this seriously. Because if you don’t... it’s not *you* who will pay, but someone else will... *anyone* else. Maybe I should do it anyway since you don’t seem to be taking this seriously?” I immediately shake my head, my mind racing as I think of the poor man in the alley, an innocent bystander in all of this. “Then prove to me that you’re going to fucking behave. Because honestly, Mina? I don’t give a shit about anyone else. Your teachers? The kids at your school? That bastard tonight? They are nothing to me.” He practically spits out the words and I flinch back, but he doesn’t stand for it. He releases my chin only to grasp my wrists so he can force me to rise with him, and I stumble to my feet. He holds my hands up against his chest, demanding my attention on him, and gives me a hard shake. “Now I’ll say it one more fucking time... *prove it, Mina!*” He shouts the last three words into my face, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

For a minute, I lean against him, my soul ripping apart in the process. There is no getting out of this. I’ve royally screwed myself by fucking up my escape plan. *Fuck, just like mum...* I scream in my head, thinking about the time mum grabbed me and tried to run for it, which resulted in a car crash. *Way to fuck it all up, Mina. Like mother, like daughter...* And now? An innocent man is dead, and possibly more lives hang in the balance if I don’t fucking get my shit together. If I’m going to keep everyone else safe... if I’m going to keep *Keenan* safe...

As the thought enters my mind, I release a little bit of the overwhelming sadness that is drowning me. I won’t be able to get through this if I am solely focused on my grief and heartbreak. Instead, I reach out and embrace darkness as if it is an old friend. One I’ve known for years but never really given much attention to. *To protect him... you must surrender. To protect him... you must surrender.* To save Key, I need to completely submit to Shay.

Slowly, I open my eyes, the last of my tears sliding down my cheeks as I raise my head again to meet his death stare. I stretch out my fingers, reaching up as high as he allows me with him still holding my wrists, and brush the tips over the stubble on his chin. Shay doesn’t move as I lightly

run them over his jaw again and again. I hold his gaze trying to silently communicate to him that I'm trying, that I'm giving in.

His grip loosens slightly, and I'm able to reach higher, my nails now running through his hair. I drag them through his tangle of locks and he lets out the smallest of sighs, as though the feeling of my touch is providing him the slightest reprieve. The tense way he's been holding himself relaxes just a bit, and I know what I have to do. He wants me to *want* him. If I do that, then everyone else will be safe. I twist my fingers into his hair, tugging slightly on the waves, his eyes widening ever so slightly and his expression morphing to one of anticipation.

Play the part, Mina... play the part. Do it! DO IT!

As I yank him towards me, I rise on my tiptoes, and press my mouth to his. For a moment, neither of us move, until I open my lips slightly and bite down on his lower one tugging. When I peer through my lashes, I can see the look of satisfaction on his face, how smug he is, and it only fuels my resentment and anger. I'm so fucking furious, so livid and broken that this man who was once my whole world and my savior, has literally stolen my freedom from me. For years I'd been trying to help him fight his demons, but now? He's forcing me to dance with them instead. So I rake my nails over his scalp, biting on his lip harder before I kiss him deeply, letting myself go, to be as rough with him as I please. In a way, I'm using this to vent my rage and frustrations with him.

Shay eagerly reaches around and grabs my ass, his hands gripping me so hard that I push against his chest to make him back off. He stumbles, but I don't stop. I close the distance and slap him hard across the face. Shay turns to me, his cheek only the slightest bit of pink, and his eyes shimmering in the low light of the room. I swing again, giving him another hard smack, yet he doesn't move away or fight it. Furious, I strike him as hard as I can in his stomach, slapping and hitting every part of his hard-muscled body that I can. When I go to knee him in the dick, however, he stops me by grabbing me around the waist and hauls me against him so that he can crush his lips to mine again. We devour each other in that kiss, and before I know it, we're both falling sideways onto the bed. Shay falls on top of me, but I somehow manage to roll us so that I'm straddling his lap. I'm not thinking clearly at all... I'm just reacting, going with my gut. I'm letting my emotions take control. And right now, they want to attack. I reach up and pull at Shay's shirt, and he eagerly helps me remove it. But as soon as

it's tossed aside, I dig my nails into his chest and claw down his pecs, leaving angry red lines in their wake. Shay hisses, but grins at me, biting his lip so that his teeth click on the lip ring on the side of his mouth.

Reaching up, he grips the small of my waist and slides his hands up, dragging my hoodie with them. When all I'm left in is my t-shirt and sweatpants, Shay seizes the collar of my shirt and effortlessly rips it in half, the sound so loud in the room that it makes me startle. He throws the pieces of my shirt aside and slides his hands over my bra, smoothing the silky material down so he can cup them. But right now, I don't want soft, gentle Shay. I need dark, terrifying Manic. He's the one I'm pissed at, the one I want to attack and cause pain. I reach behind me and unsnap the clasps so that my bra falls free, and I fling it aside. Shay stares up at me, his expression hungry and wanton. I grab his hands, hooking my fingers through his, and yank them up above his head on the mattress.

"You want this?" I whisper, sounding more confident than I really feel, "You want me to be your pretty little toy?" Leaning closer, I nip at his neck, leaving teeth marks behind.

However, at my words, he tenses, and Shay easily frees his hands from my grip so that he can hold my hips in warning. I pull back a bit to look at his face and note the intensity in his eyes. "You've never been a fucking toy, Mina..." he practically growls at me, "You've just been mine. You always have been, from the very first time that I held you in my arms and looked at you. I felt it then, even if I didn't understand it. You were always meant to be mine."

No... not sweet, gentle Shay. I won't be able to do this with him. It made me feel too vulnerable. Too weak. I needed Manic. I swing and slap him again before I crush my lips to his. Shay greedily kisses me back, his tongue languorously rolling against my own, while one of his hands slides down to the front of my pants to pull at the tie. Seconds later, he's wrenched them down, bringing his foot up to kick them off of me to the floor. Without a thought, he pulls at my underwear, the material wrenching painfully against my middle before it's ripped away. He forces me to roll to my back and gets up on his knees, hastily undoing his belt, followed by the button and zipper of his pants. His hands are shaking slightly, as though he's nervous, or full of anticipation.

When he gets his jeans undone, he jerks them off and kicks them impatiently away. He's fully erect. His thick, hard cock jutting up as he

climbs back on the bed. I laid here beneath Shay for two days as he took me again and again. Tonight, he wants me to prove myself to him. If I wanted to gain any sort of freedom, I not only had to play along, but I had to take charge.

Before he could wedge himself between my thighs, I sit up, my hands cupping his face, and I kiss him passionately... biting, massaging his tongue with mine, and sucking on his lower lip. He moans into my mouth and allows me to roll him to his back. I straddle him, hesitating as I second guess myself. Despite the endless rounds of fucking over the weekend, I haven't taken the lead until now. Shay watches me, and I feel like I'm being tested. He's waiting to see if I'm going to be true to my word and succumb fully to him, or not.

Keenan... protect him...

I reach down and take hold of his thick length rubbing it between my folds. I'm not wet enough, and there's no fucking way I'm taking him in while I'm like this. As though sensing my thoughts, Shay licks his fingers and reaches down, rubbing at my sex, between my pussy lips and inside of me. He plays with my clit for a few seconds in that familiar, delicious way that soon has me clenching my thighs. Shay grips the small of my waist and lifts me up, hovering me over his cock, and waits for me to make the next move. For a moment, he commands my gaze, and the look in his eyes is suspicious like he doesn't believe I'm going to go through with it.

He doesn't have to worry.

I have too much to lose if I don't.

Slowly, I lower myself onto him. It takes a few tries, and I lift and lower myself a little more each time, until finally, we're pressed together pelvis to pelvis. I gasp at the fullness, the pressure. Being on top has him seated even deeper in me, to the point where it hurts a little. When I move to pull up a bit, Shay grabs my hips and holds me down, keeping me in place so that he remains buried completely inside of me. I look up at him in confusion, but when I see his face, I freeze. His eyes are shining, his mouth slightly open, and he's looking up at me with a sort of euphoric expression. I'm his world.

I start to roll my hips over him, wincing a little when he reaches that spot deep inside that twinges a little like he's brushing my cervix every time I bounce back down. His hands slide down to cup my ass and he starts to move me, showing me how fast to go. He has me rolling forward and back

for a minute before he makes me bounce on him, roughly thrusting up into me so that we meet with a hard smack each time.

Any time he starts to slow our movements, and it begins to feel more sensual than just rough fucking, I smack his face or scratch his chest and his muscled arms. I lean over him and bite his pecs, then suck on his throat and nip his skin with my teeth, while consistently kissing him as roughly as I can. He moans into my mouth each time, and his pumping motions pick up the pace again, becoming more raw and frenzied. Without warning, he sits up still holding my ass and stands. I yelp and wrap my arms around his neck to steady myself, but before I can comprehend what he's doing, my back is being slammed against the wooden panels of the wall as Shay presses his hips to mine battering into me.

"That's it, Sweetness," he pants in my ear with each loud bump our bodies make hitting the wall again and again, "Don't tell me you don't love this. Don't tell me that this isn't right. This is the most fucking right thing in the world... you and me." He runs his tongue up the front of my throat until he reaches the tip of my chin and then delves into my mouth again, kissing me with a ravenous hunger that leaves me breathless. I even forget about my anger, fear, and hopelessness as Shay tirelessly fucks me against the wall. I just hold on for dear fucking life as I feel a tightening in my lower belly, like the coil of a spring that's about to snap.

"C'mon, Mina," he breathes hard by my ear, as I dig my nails into his back, "Give it to me. Give me *all* of you. Now..." He thrusts faster, rolling his pelvis so that he's smacking against my clit again and again. I squeeze my eyes shut, biting my lip as I feel myself on the brink of reaching a precipice. Shay squeezes my ass, pulling me into himself with each pump of his hips. Each time he does, it only pushes me closer and closer to my impending orgasm. I fasten my legs around his waist, biting into his shoulder, feeling like I might die if he keeps it up, and then he hisses, "Now!"

I feel it snap, and I explode around him, my pussy clenching around his dick as I toss my head back and cry out. I feel tears in my eyes, and my entire body is shaking, like a bolt of electricity is running through my bloodstream, all the while that hot pulse in my lower abdomen throbs. Shay keeps going while I go limp in his arms, but he holds me up easily for another minute until he finally slams into me one last time and groans loudly as he comes.

I can feel him trembling hard, and I worry that his knees might give out. But instead, he turns and lowers me onto the bed before he turns off the banker's light, and crawls in beside me. I can't see him in the darkness of his room, and for a moment, that old familiar fear comes rushing back. The fear of someone watching me from the darkness, of someone hunting me. And then, I feel Shay's arm wrap around me tight, pulling me in close to his chest, as he settles. His hand slides down between us, down over my stomach, and runs a finger through my folds, feeling his cum and my juices there. He spreads it around the area before shoving it back up. As his lips brush along my temple, I can't stop the overwhelming feeling of disgust, guilt, and shame that suddenly floods my system. The emotions I'd bottled up after his threat suddenly came rushing to the surface and I burst into tears. Shay holds me as I cry, hushing me and stroking my hair while pressing kisses to the crown of my head.

"Good girl, Mina," he whispers, his breath tickling my ear. His thumb brushes away one of the errant tears on my face and, in the dark, I can make out the slow, sultry smile that curls his lips, "Very good girl."

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Chapter Six

IT WAS the middle of September, and one of the last few warm weekends we would probably have until the cold was here to stay. Since the night Shay killed that man, I've been living in a nightmare... a horrible, fucking nightmare. He had purchased a double-wide trailer, and it was nearly ready for us to move into. It was a couple of hundred yards away from James' house, hidden amongst the trees and close to the creek. He insisted I help him furniture shop, and if I liked anything, he bought it. It felt like how we used to be... best friends for a little bit. But then he'd glide his hand and cup me over my jeans or press a slow, sensual kiss to the corner of my mouth. He wanted my complete obedience, and I gave it to him. Every move I made was with Shay in mind and whether or not he would be happy with me. Everything in my life revolved around him. He was no longer my protector. He was my tormentor.

I'd given in to him, but I was still navigating on how best to survive with him. There are times when I'm just not in the mood to be intimate, but instead of fighting, I don't react at all. It was more to protect myself

mentally from the situation than anything else, but it only pissed him off, resulting in playing with me until my body responded. He blamed my attitude on my stubbornness instead of the actual reality of the situation... I was trapped, betrayed, and caged by the one person I had loved and trusted most in the world. It was a learning curve. And I was trying to adjust, as quickly as he wanted, but it was hard at times to pretend to be okay when I was having a moment of repentance.

Honestly? I was terrified to disobey Shay at all. I had no one else. With everything that's happened to me this year, I *needed* someone. I needed someone to want me, hold me, and love me. So, I gave in to his touches, his kisses, and finally started reciprocating. If I was going to be trapped like this, I might as well get something out of it. I *needed* the affection and love he was offering. It was either him or no one.

At school, I'd become a recluse, ostracized by my peers, unless you counted the occasional sneering remark or prank pulled by some of my so-called old friends. I hadn't told Shay about the bullying yet. Sure, these girls had become almost psycho bitches overnight, but even stupid seventeen-year-olds didn't deserve the wrath that he would bestow upon them. He would play with them, fuck with them in ways that would leave permanent scars on their bodies *and* their minds. To think of someone paying that price because my skin wasn't a little thicker was not something I wanted on my conscience.

Almost every night these past two weeks, we've fucked, sometimes more than once. After the third time, I stopped crying afterward. And by about the seventh or eighth time, I grew disgusted with myself when I realized I was beginning to enjoy it. What the fuck was wrong with me? Who the hell enjoys sex with the very person holding control over every facet of their life in their greedy hands? It's like I've lost all self-respect. But when his lips run over the skin on my neck, right by my ear, or his hand rubs me just right, I can't help but melt and give in.

Fuck. I *was* a fucking slut. A *brother-fucker*. Trash. Just like Becca had said. Now all the girls were calling me that, not just the ones from my old group, but the cheerleaders, band kids, and girls who were into musical theatre and drama. They were all gossiping about it. News travels fast in this school, but evidently, not all the guys had gotten the message.

Shay bought me new clothes to wear when I wasn't around him, and I limped down the halls in baggy hoodies and jeans, or cargo pants, with my

hair hanging down to further hide my face from my peers. I hoped to avoid the attention of guys in my school, and though it seemed to work most of the time, a few still sidled up to me at my locker or in classes, hoping I'd engage. But I didn't speak to anyone, in case a junior prospect of the Celtic Beasts would see and report in to Shay, putting another innocent life in danger. I coldly ignored them, looking away and saying nothing, or waiting for them to get the hint, and leave muttering 'bitch' under their breath. It was for their own good anyway. I even sat in the corner of the lunchroom by myself, ignoring the whispers and gawking from everyone else as I stared out the window, getting lost in my own dark thoughts.

And now?

I was sitting on the edge of a low concrete wall outside my school. My black hoodie pulled up over my head, a pair of headphones over my ears, and ignoring everyone around me. My music drowned out the laughing and shouting from the other students in the courtyard. Everyone was milling around, enjoying one of the last warm, sunny days of the year. But I was alone, as was my new normal. I couldn't really remember the last time I felt as carefree as the rest of them.

A sudden sharp shooting pain in my knee makes me hiss, the corners of my eyes tightening. I was doing my best to keep up with my rehab at home with stretches, but with the weather getting colder, I noticed my injury had been acting up a little more than usual. This always soured my already miserable attitude. Each flash of discomfort was just a reminder that I would never dance again. Ever. My dream was dead. Just like everything else in my life. The thought sends a murderous rage thrumming through my veins and all I want is a chance to vent my anger out on the four assholes who did this to me, who broke me, who stole my mum away.

But Shay had taken care of that for me. I was told that the men were taken into the clubhouse for questioning and that Shay had insisted on being the one to interrogate them. He waited until hearing from the doctors that I would be unconscious for some time, then showed up at the club in a deranged state. He fought several of his MC brothers in his fury as they tried to talk him down, but his main focus was getting information from the attackers. They only relented when Shay made it clear he wasn't about to calm down any time soon, and any suggestions of someone else going in the room only seemed to rile him up further. It was personal to him. Finally, he was unleashed on the men.

All I was informed about the “interrogation” was that Shay was ruthless in torturing the guys for information. By the time he finished with one man, there was hardly anything left of him. Their corpses were flayed, fingernails ripped away, skin peeled off, teeth pulled, eyes gouged, burns on the exposed muscles, and endless stab wounds, with knives that were his favourite form of “play”. In the end, he got nothing out of the guys that I hadn’t already heard from them. They had broken in, asking for me, then they had mentioned something about bringing me to a fifth person for a trade-off. Obviously that never happened. Whoever hired these guys to kidnap me were still out there and we had no idea who it was.

During my time at the hospital, I had been under constant guard by the Beasts as they took rotating shifts. They had men combing the area searching for leads, or any signs of more attacks. The club president, Shawn, or Bull as was his road name, even arranged meet-ups with the other gangs to try to sniff out the guilty party, but they seemed as clueless and ignorant of the attack as the rest of us. And so the question remained; who had arranged it? Had it been a rogue Black Spade? Or some other up-and-coming mafia group we weren’t aware of just yet, who wanted to attack first while they were unknown? Who would send a group to take out a woman in her thirties and take her teenage daughter? Why? And why have they been silent since?

Tired of waiting for my ride, I carefully jumped down off the low stone wall and strolled along the grounds of my school, hands in my pockets and head bowed as I listened to my old dance playlist. I was just getting used to moving around without my damned cane, and on a whim, I toss my bag aside and try a passe en releve. My knee wobbles precariously and I fall forward, catching myself on the brick wall of the school. I grit my teeth and kick at the ground in frustration. My dream was gone and buried. Just like my father... like my mother...

Mum... her body lifeless on the kitchen table... the blood dripping off the side... I stop trying to dance as my brain conjures up the mental image that continues to haunt me. The horror she experienced in the last minutes of her life...

“Hey, Mina,”

The voice is barely audible over the noise of my earphones. I ignore it, thinking it had been my imagination as it started to spiral down a dark path. *No, Mina! Don’t fucking think of it!*

I shake the thought away and distract myself as I try a first arabesque. I manage to hold the position for a few seconds before my knee begins to shake, and I stumble again. Exasperated, I scoop up my bag and cane turning to head back to the curb to wait for my lift. When I look up, I find myself staring into the dark grey eyes of Austin Bankshaw, one of the popular jocks in school. As of this summer, he was somewhat new to this town, but was already making a name for himself on the football team. He was a good-looking guy, with ashy blonde hair and boyish good looks. He carried himself with confidence through the halls and always had a trail of drooling female fans in his wake.

But not me.

I've never bothered giving Austin a second glance, and for good reason.

"Hey, Austin." I paused the song on my phone and nervously snuck a look toward the road, searching for any sign of a black Harley Davidson. But all I could see were three school buses, and several cars parked along the curb with parents waiting for their kids to hurry their asses up so they could get home. Shoving my headphones down around my neck and tossing my hoodie back, I fixed my gaze tentatively on Austin again, suspicious of his intentions.

"What was that you were doing just now?" he asks me, leaning against the wall. He was wearing his letterman jacket, a red t-shirt, and faded jeans. His ashy hair artfully smoothed back from his face, and he was grinning down at me with that perfect, Hollywood movie star smile. He looks relaxed, almost curious, and I catch him ogling my body, which was pointless as I kept myself hidden beneath baggy sweaters and dark skinny jeans. My blonde hair hung in loose waves around my face, further shielding me from the world, which is how I preferred it now.

"I was just trying a pose... wanted to see if my knee could handle it..." I sigh and shake my head, dismally stuffing my hands back into my pockets, "... I probably looked like a baby giraffe trying to learn how to walk, hey?" I laugh lightly, but it lacks warmth, and I cringe inwardly at how fake it sounds. Anxiously, I glance around, wondering if anyone is watching, more specifically, junior prospects.

"You miss dancing, huh?"

It was no secret that I had been a ballet dancer. For years I dedicated my life to dance. I practiced five to six days a week. I danced in every local theatre production as well as the town's annual Christmas Show. It was my

thing. What I was known for and that I had a terrifying older stepbrother and stepfather who were members of the city's ruling MC and surrounding areas. Surely, he had heard the whispers from other students about what had happened to me last June. That was all *anyone* seemed to talk about lately.

"Not as much as I miss other things." I said grimly, my eyes drifting away, lost in thought. I snap out of it when the sound of a motorcycle passing by breaks through the silence, but it was a crotch rocket. The engine sounds entirely different from the cruiser bikes I was used to riding on. Geez, I was freaking paranoid.

"There's no way to rehab it?"

I shake my head, "I'm doing it now. But even working it every day, I won't be able to carry myself the way I used to... and it still hurts sometimes..." I grimace and stretch it out, still eyeing Austin skeptically. Why was he talking to me? *No one* talked to me. Either they thought I'd become a weirdo, or they were too terrified of Shay to risk coming too close. Maybe he wanted to see if the rumors were true? Perhaps Austin didn't get the memo. It was that, or he was straight-up suicidal.

"I wanted to ask you something, Mina..." he said, eyes on the ground, looking suddenly nervous. I furrow my brow and wait. We were in the same English class, maybe he had a question about our latest reading assignment? When he peers up again, his cocky grin is gone and his eyes are open and vulnerable, "Would you want to go on a date with me?"

I feel like I'd been doused in ice water. *Shit, shit, shit!*

If I was any other girl, no doubt I would be nodding excitedly leaping at the chance to give him my number. I'd hurry home and wait for him to call, and then I'd message all my girlfriends, and we'd plan what I was going to wear and how I would do my makeup for my big date. But my life was complicated now. Different. My first thought was, of course, of Shay. Dear God, if he finds out this guy was not only talking to me but also asked me out, he would lose his shit. He has scared guys away for years, going way overboard with his brotherly protectiveness. That all changed over the summer, and after witnessing what he did to that poor homeless man in the alley...

So much had changed. My life was a mess, and I wasn't the same girl I used to be. These past few months have been complete hell. I've been trying to adjust to it, to survive, but each day felt like torture.

And now, here was Austin, a popular, good-looking guy, asking me out. For a moment, I feel so... *normal*. It's oddly refreshing. I think about how living with James and Shay has prevented me from having a standard, conventional life. I was certain it was because of them that I had been attacked. A cruel tactic that not all MCs and gangs followed. But the ones who did, were the monstrous, most dangerous of the bunch. Punishing the ones their rivals loved... that was seen as a low blow. Especially if they went after women and children. In the end, it all came back to the fucking club.

"Austin, I'm really sorry, but I can't."

"What, you got a curfew or something?"

I shake my head and nervously start playing with the ends of my hair, "No, I just... don't date."

"You're almost eighteen though, right? You're a big girl," he laughed. Teasing, he was teasing me.

"In July," I divulged, though I'm not sure why I even bothered. It was a moot point. Seventeen, eighteen... it didn't matter. I wouldn't be going on a date with him.

Austin shrugs, unfazed, "Either way, what's the issue?"

I ignore him and hitch my school bag more securely on my shoulder, determined to save his stupid ass by putting as much distance between us as possible. I don't even bother speaking to him as I limp away. I've learned that the best way to deter a guy who is interested in you, is to act like a total bitch. That way, it spares his feelings, and he leaves you alone. *And he won't end up dead in an alley somewhere.*

"Hey! Mina? I'm talking to you," Austin runs up behind me before I get more than a few steps away, and grabs my upper arm.

As soon as I feel his hand on me, it's like underneath my skin is crawling with insects. A reaction I've felt only in the past few months when other people, besides Shay, touch me. Unconsciously, I cry out and flail my arms, trying to rip away from his grip. Desperately, I look towards the road searching for that Harley.

"Jesus Christ, Mina! I'm not trying to hurt you!" Austin says loudly, releasing me at once and holding up his hands. He looks wholly bewildered and takes a step back from me, "Why are you so scared of me?"

"I'm not scared of you!" I snap at him, trying to get him to shut up. At this point, we've started drawing a crowd thanks to his shouting. My panic

is setting in, making me feel like a cornered animal. Other kids are watching, some moving in a little closer to hear what's going on. Shit, this is the *last* thing I need, "Just go, Austin! Leave me alone." I start to walk away again when he runs up beside me. Thankfully, he keeps his hands to himself, but the idiot just won't go away.

"What the hell?" he snaps, his voice rising again, "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Just-just go, *please!*" I plead, picking up the pace, and heading as fast as I can to the sidewalk. My hopes of losing Austin in the crowd of students are thwarted as he keeps pace with me, refusing to accept my cold shoulder.

"What has you so freaked out? Did I do something?" What really kills me is how genuinely concerned he sounds. Another nice guy... *Like Eli... like that poor man in the alley*, I think, guilt boiling as it churns in my stomach.

"It's *not you!*" I whisper harshly and jump back when he steps in front of me, blocking my way. We're still thirty feet from the curb and I try to side-step him, but the idiot won't back off. I lunge to the side, managing to get by him, but he grabs my hand, preventing me from getting any further.

It's then that the loud, deep rumble of an approaching motorcycle freezes my insides. *Oh God no...* I twist around, seeing a black Harley pull up and lurch to a stop on the sidewalk. The rider is dressed all in black with a leather MC jacket and wearing a half helmet decorated with a blue Celtic Dragon on the side. Terror grips me as if I am being constricted by a bloody Burmese python. I whip around to Austin, "I'm sorry, but you *need* to go..."

"Are you always this nuts?" He hasn't noticed the threatening figure that has climbed off the bike, removed his helmet, and is now scanning the grounds, searching...

I shake my head, "No, it-it's just not possible. Please, go into the school! Now!" I try to push him back, my dread almost choking me, but he simply furrows his brow in confusion. When I glance over my shoulder again, the biker's stare locks on to me, and though he's still wearing a pair of black aviators, I just know he's glaring daggers this way.

"Mina? What's wrong?" Austin asks, looking seriously freaked out now, and I realize I'm shaking like I've fallen through thin ice.

"You need to get inside now! Please go! Please!"

“I-”

“Mina! What the fuck are you doing?!”

I spin around to see Shay standing directly behind me, but his focus is on Austin. He removes his sunglasses, silver eyes narrowing and burning with pure loathing. He stands almost a head taller than the teenager, is twice as broad, and emits danger in hot, pulsing waves.

“N-nothing, Shay. Austin was just asking me about-about our English assignment. We were just talking-”

“You don’t need to be talking to her,” Shay’s voice was clipped and sharp as he stared Austin down, who in turn, took several steps back, “You or any other asshole punk in this shithole. You don’t need to be concerned with Mina... ever.”

“Shay, please!” I beg and tug on his rough, calloused hand, “Stop it, *please*,” I feel like I’m going to pass out. I’m afraid of what he might do, undeterred as he takes a step forward.

Austin holds up his hands, his face pale with fear evident in his eyes, “Hey man, it was just an innocent conversation. Chill out-”

“Chill out?” Shay’s voice was practically a growl, “*Chill out?* Who the fuck are you to tell me what to do? You little shit,” he takes another step forward, and I tug hard on the back of his jacket, still desperate for him to stop. My heart is racing, my palms sweaty, and I pray to any God listening, to intervene and stop this before Shay hurts someone. The crowd watching us had grown exponentially, and I spotted some parents and several teachers amongst the students. This was going from bad to worse.

“Shay!” I step around him and grasp his face in my hands, forcing him to look down at me, “If you touch a student at this school, you will be arrested. Come on, I know you’re smarter than this. This was just a misunderstanding. I swear. Now let’s go home, okay?” When he tries to look back up at Austin again, I give him a little shake, forcing him to keep his eyes on mine. A different part of me awakens inside my mind, and I run a finger along his jaw while smiling sweetly at him. Arching an eyebrow when his silver eyes fixate on me, his attention diverted off of his next potential victim, “He’s not worth it. Do you really think I give a shit about some high school boy when I have you?” He blinks down at me, eyes widening ever so slightly like I’ve surprised him. As long as I can keep Manic from coming to the forefront of his mind, then I can keep everyone safe. “I wanna go home with you. I want you to take me to bed and make

me forget about every other guy. I want you to make me feel good again. Can we go? Please?" I stretch up on my tiptoes, my nose only reaching his throat, press a light kiss to the hollow of his collarbone. Beneath my lips, I feel him shiver ever so slightly.

When I look back up at him, I notice how his eyes have softened for just a moment, before he gives Austin one last death glare. Finally, he takes hold one of my hands and stalks back towards his bike, tugging me along. When we reach it, he shrugs off his jacket, putting it around my shoulders and zips it up as if I was still six, then gives me his helmet before he climbs on. I clamber on after him and wrap my arms around his waist, knowing the drill. He starts the engine, revving it a few times as he glares daggers back at the crowd before flipping them off and pulling away from the sidewalk.

I rest my head between his shoulder blades as we drive. My insides are clenching and unclenching painfully, making me feel sick. Was this what my life was going to be? Any time I tried to interact with anyone, would Shay simply turn up, threaten them, and then carry me off? The answer was yes. I was the shell of the person I had once been. I wasn't strong. I wasn't capable. I would never be free. This was my life now. This is what I need to accept... I was *his*.



"Oh fuck, Mina!"

My fingers grip the sheets beneath me as Shay continues to thrust his hips with deep, hard punishing strokes. He holds me down beneath the heavy weight of his muscled body. The back of my neck is cradled by one of his large, calloused hands, while the other roughly cups one of my breasts. His shoulder-length, dark, wavy hair hangs around his face as he leers down at me, his eyes burning as they swallow me up. We're both covered in a fine sheen of sweat, panting as the only sound in the room is the smack of our connecting bodies. He leans down, lips barely brushing against mine, momentarily sharing each other's breath, before he kisses me fervently. His tongue delicately glides over my bottom lip before he slips it between my teeth and strokes it against mine.

"You will *never* talk to him again," he huffs when he pulls away, his mouth close to my ear.

“I will never talk to him again,” I whisper breathlessly, as he continues to pump between my thighs.

“You will tell me if he approaches you again,” he breathes against my skin, making me shudder.

“I will tell you if he approaches me again,” I promise.

Shay rears back suddenly, and both his hands move to the small of my waist where he firmly grabs me before forcefully hauling me down to meet his thrusts again and again. I can’t help but moan as I feel myself getting close *again*. I’ve already orgasmed twice since we got home, given that the first thing he did was haul my ass to his room where he threw me onto the bed, ripped off my clothes, and proceeded to fuck me like the crazy, possessive, asshole that he is. God, I hate him.

“You are mine,” he rasps between his clenched teeth as his pounding rhythm changes, moving faster and harder. I know I’m going to bruise. I turn my head to the side and my eyes squeeze shut as I bite into my bottom lip, hard. *Fuck, I’m so close... just a little more...*

“Mina?” he growls, and the fuckhead stops!

I snap to attention and glare up at him.

“You are *mine!*” he practically snarls the words at me, and I realize that I haven’t responded to his statement. It was like my subconscious had taken over at that moment and just said, *Fuck it, I don’t think so...*

Shay jerks his hips against me, spurring on that aching throb, and I whimper. *Ugh! I hate it when he does this!* It’s been happening way too often in the last two weeks... almost like he knows that the best way to control me is withholding an orgasm.

“Mina!” he barks, his tone filled with warning.

“I-I’m yours...” I breathe, giving in like I always do, and he starts again.

“No one loves you like I do,” he says, picking up his pace.

“No one...” I say breathlessly, my hands moving back to the sheets beneath me. I clench the material tightly in my fists, squeezing my eyes shut as I allow myself to go there again. I need to. I *need* to feel good, in some way or another. Unfortunately, the only way for me to get that far away, blissed-out, but temporary, state of consciousness, has been at Shay’s hands.

“If anyone comes near you, I’ll kill them, Mina.” He swears to me tossing his head back, nearing his own point of ecstasy.

Finally, I feel that beautiful, bursting surge explode in my lower belly, and the sensation rushes through my body again and again. I cry out, arching my back, as the feeling pushes me over the edge. He's close behind, thrusting hard for another thirty seconds before groaning loudly with several quick jerks, and stills inside me. After another minute, he pulls out and collapses onto the bed at my side, and we both lay there utterly spent.

For a while, we say nothing, and gradually, my heart slows its racing pace. After another minute, I sense that all too familiar feeling of disgust, shame, and overwhelming resentment, slowly seep into my mind. I instantly roll to the other side of the bed and curl up into a ball. Shay hasn't said a word. He's experienced me do this nearly every time we're done. If it bothers him, he hasn't conveyed it. I wonder if he knows I need a few minutes to myself afterwards?

He gets up, grabs the soft patchwork quilt from where he had thrown it to the floor, and covers my cooling body with it. Sliding on his jeans, he zips up and leaves the room, heading down the hall. Moments later, I hear him moving around the kitchen, and I know he's preparing food for us. God, this whole thing is practically routine now.

I do what I always do after. I wait, lying there as I stare blankly at the wood-paneled walls of his room. It smells like cedar, mixed with that once comforting scent of Shay's that is so distinctly him, a mix of leather and his cologne. My eyes move over the patterns in the grains of wood, my mind numb and quiet as I wait for the devastating emotions flooding my brain to subside. The time it takes varies, and I have no doubt that it will take longer this time.

Someone almost got killed today... again. And it was because of you, Mina...

I shudder and quickly distract myself by concentrating on my breathing. Slow in, hold, then out... repeat. Slow in, hold, and out. Again. I don't cry. There is no point. It doesn't help. It doesn't change anything. All it did was piss him off, and I am trying to keep Manic at bay, not summon him to the surface! Besides, the only time I feel remotely good was when he brought me to orgasm, so might as well just ride that out and take it when I can.

From down the hall, I hear him open and close the microwave. I guess that means leftovers for dinner tonight. I give myself another minute to prep my mind, to put up that hard exterior I've been embracing since the night I tried to run away. Before sliding out of bed, I grab some clothes from our

shared dresser and tiptoe down the hall. I hustle into the washroom, grateful to see Shay's back is turned from where he's standing in the kitchen. Most times once isn't enough for him, but if I can lock myself in the bathroom and change, by the time I come out he's cooled off, at least temporarily. I guess the extra time I steal to clean up in between fucking simmers his libido.

I take a long, hot shower, and scrub my skin hard with my loofah until it turns red. No matter how much I clean myself, I still feel like there's a film of dirt on my skin that I can't wash away. By the time I'm done, dressed in sweats and a t-shirt, my wet hair French-braided down my back, I furtively open the door and peek through the crack. Down the hall, I can hear him moving around still, getting things ready. Sticking my head out a little more, I see the little kitchenette space and Shay has already set the coffee table for us, seeing as I can no longer bear to eat in the dining area. He's dishing out warmed-up shepherd's pie onto plates and has already opened a bottle of beer for himself. Unable to delay any longer, I step out and quietly move over to the couch, where I take a seat and wait.

Whenever I'm in the main part of the house, I feel my heart race a bit. I avoid looking at the dining table, trying my best to ignore the sounds of my mother's screams echoing in my head. I purposefully angle myself so that I'm looking away from it, my hands slightly shaking and my heart pounding to the point of pain.

I jump a little when Shay sets my plate before me, food steaming hot. For a minute, I watch the swirls of hot air that rises from the food, my mind zoning out until the weight of him dropping down beside me snaps me out of my reverie. I jolt to awareness and hunch over my plate as I dig in to eat.

"I got a letter in the mail from your school," He says after a few minutes of silence, "It was a newsletter talking about a Winter Formal for seniors..."

I nod and don't say a word. Posters had been hung up all over the school this past week, advertising that tickets were on sale for the dance. Of course, everyone was excited about it, mostly all the girls. I watched as my old friends avidly talked about it, showing each other pictures of dresses they liked on their phones and eye-fucking any guy that walked by their table. For once, no one was talking about me. It was a relief. That was the extent of my interest in regards to the Winter Formal. I mean, it's not like I could go.

My eyes flicker to the small window by the door. Outside, the sun is already setting, the sky turning a beautiful shade of purple and pink as it disappears behind the trees. As usual, James wasn't home. When Shay was here, it meant he was gone, usually at the club or running errands in Ashland. In the distance, I could make out the beginnings of construction for Shay's new trailer, which sits closer to the creek hidden amongst the trees, where we used to hang out as kids. He was building it on the same plot of land James owned, but with a comfortable stretch between the two homes. Since it was going to be smaller, and because Shay was paying the contractor more money, it was supposed to be finished before the holidays.

"So you want to go?" he asks me suddenly, catching me off-guard.

I shrug, "Not really," I mumble, confused by his statement. *Why was he bringing this up?*

"I'd be glad to take you," he said, and my head snapped to look at him, shocked. Did Shay seriously just offer to take me to a high school dance?

I watch him as he lounges back in the cushions of the couch, his hair messily strewn around his head, shirtless so that his muscles and tattoos are on display. His right shoulder has an armor tattoo that turns into a looping Celtic tribal design down the rest of his arm. His left side has a Celtic dragon on the shoulder that runs down the entire arm. His newest addition is a black inked daisy on the inside of his left forearm, worked in to be partially hidden beneath the dragon's tail. If you look closely at it, you can see that in the stem of the daisy, my name is written in script. He got it weeks ago after we'd first had sex, and was damned proud when he showed it to me.

But besides that small sentiment and his obvious good looks, he looks like one of the last guys you'd want to fuck with. He exudes confidence like he doesn't have a care in the world. Why should he? He's gotten everything that he's ever wanted. He has respect from his club members, especially over the past few months as he's worked even harder to establish himself as an enforcer, the one who does the dirty bullshit for them. He'll soon have his own place. He has money, his good looks, but most of all he also has the thing he's always coveted... me.

An unwilling me.

But he has me, nonetheless.

Staring at him, with all his tattoos, knowing how lethal he is, I can't picture him at a high school dance. It's too bizarre. Not to mention, I would

be entirely negligent for bringing him amongst high schoolers. That and why go when the whole school thinks I'm biker trash? "I don't feel like going," I say simply and pick at the food on my plate that's resting on my thighs.

"You sure? Because if you want to go, I'll buy you a dress and take you." I can feel his eyes on me as I avoid his inquisitive stare.

Repressing a shiver, I shake my head, not trusting him at all. "No, really. It's not like I can dance anyway... even if I rehab it at home every day, it still hurts. I'm not really up for dancing."

"Fine," he says, easily. I doubt he actually wanted to go. Why was he offering? Did he not want me to miss out on a right of passage? I shake that thought away. I couldn't accept that Shay was seriously considering my feelings about this. Only last June he had been more than happy for me to miss the dance at the end of the year. He hadn't seen the big deal about it then, either, even if he had tried to make it up to me with dinner and the daisy by my plate... sometimes he made it really hard to be mad at him.

"Now, I know you would like to get out more, besides being at school," he begins slowly, changing the subject. I can almost feel my heart lift with hope, but on the outside, I force myself to remain cool and collected. If he thinks I'm too eager to get time away from him, then he'll never let me go. I need to keep acting nonchalant. So I keep chewing my food, eyes on my plate, hoping that I look bored by his change in subject. "I can't have you running around town on your own."

"Why?"

When Shay remains silent for several seconds, I glance up at him and realize he's watching me with a deadpan expression. "That piece of shit who hired those guys to grab you hasn't been caught, Mina."

I flinch at his words, and instantly, my heart rate picks up double time. Whoever hired those guys to try and take me and killed my mother was still out there. While Shay was the reason I feared for other people, the person behind such a cold-blooded attack was the real reason I feared the dark. I was always afraid of him watching me, looking for another chance to finish what he started. I have no idea what his plans were, but after what he did to mum, well... I didn't want to know.

My hunger vanishes in an instant at the thought of that night. I feel sick to my stomach and start to convulse, hastily dropping my fork with a clatter

on my plate and push it away. I hold back the bile in my throat and shrink back into the couch, my eyes closed, and concentrate on my breathing.

Almost instantly, the weight of the couch shifts, and I feel Shay's arms wrap around me, pulling me in close. He drags me over to his side and gives my forehead a firm kiss. He positions himself a little so he's lounging back, and I'm more or less sprawled over his stomach and chest, nestled in between his thighs, as he strokes my hair. I feel safe. If there's one thing Shay has always been good at, it's been making *me* feel safe. "I'll never let anyone touch you, Mina. Not fucking ever. I'd sooner die than let someone lay their hands on you."

I tremble at his words because he says them with such conviction that it frightens me a little. Despite everything that he has done to me, the thought of anything actually happening to Shay makes my heart wrench painfully. The thought is too painful to bear. "Don't say things like that," I whisper sharply into the warmth of his chest. "Just... don't."

He wraps his arms around me and hugs me tight. "It's okay, Sweetness. Nothing is gonna happen." We lay there for some time before I feel my heartbeat begin to slow, and soon, my hands which have been clenched into fists, start to loosen, and the tension in my body ebbs away. Shay feels the change and sits us up a bit, not allowing me to pull away as he reaches for his plate of food and resumes eating. I stay huddled against him, waiting as patiently as I can now that I've calmed down from my minor panic attack, for him to continue on about the possibility of me having more freedom. But he seems more content to just lay here with me while he finishes eating his dinner.

Inside, I'm full of knots, waiting to hear what he has to say, but I keep my focus and snuggle into him instead, reminding myself to keep Shay here with me and not do anything to summon Manic to the surface. Sweet, kind Shay will be more amiable and most likely ready to talk about having more opportunities for time to myself outside of this house and school. Manic, well, he'd sooner tie me to the bed than let me walk ten feet around the house, let alone venture into town.

"So about you having after-school excursions," he says finally as he pushes his empty plate away.

I go to sit up, but he keeps me there with a hand pressed firmly to my back, reaches for my plate, and slides it close until he can reach my fork. He scoops up a bite and holds it out to me. When I try to take it from him,

he moves it away from my reach. I scowl at him, only to receive a smirk in return. *Fucker!* I think before obediently opening my mouth so he can feed me.

“I’ve been given some important work for the Faceless, which means I won’t make it back in time to pick you up in the afternoons after school.” He says finally as I chew, and scoops up another forkful.

The Faceless? This is news to me. *What the fuck does he mean, work for the Faceless? What kind of work? Weren’t they just another gang in the city? And since when do the Beasts work for anyone?* I can tell by the tone of his voice that he doesn’t like the idea of having to do any sort of work for them, but is obviously being forced to follow orders from someone higher up. Maybe Uncle Shawn? Or James? That would explain the hostility. “And the only other people I trust with you are my brothers...”

“James?” I ask, hopefully. It’s been ages since I’ve had one on one time with my adopted father. I miss him.

“No. Gavin.”

Even though I like Gavin the most out of Shay’s friends, I can’t help but deflate a little when I hear I won’t be spending time with James. Any time I’ve tried to speak with him alone, Shay intervenes and glowers down at his father. “Why Gavin?” I ask before he feeds me another forkful of shepherd’s pie.

“Because, as loyal as he’s proven himself to be to me, I still don’t fucking trust Cody with *you*,” he grumbles, “And I’ll have Aron and Lief accompanying me on my runs into Ashland.”

Huh... this was news. Cody was always flirtatious, but he was like that with every girl. Perhaps Shay, having seen Cody’s escapades, doesn’t want to risk him working his “charms” on me. As if I would fall for it. “So, what are the rules?” I ask softly, hiding my excitement at the prospect of being out without Shay attached to my hip. I mean, yeah, Gavin will still be there, but he has always behaved platonically towards me. And if my assumptions from my birthday are correct, he definitely has a thing for Lindsey, the bartender at the club.

“Rules are simple. Gavin will pick you up after school. He’ll escort you to wherever you like, but only in town. He has to have you home by six. I should be back by then.” I wither inside at the old curfew, but I won’t push it tonight. Not with Shay even allowing me this. “But I need you to prove that I can trust you, Mina.” He says pointedly, so I listen close, “I know it

would make you happy to get out more. So if you truly want this, I want to know that you will follow the rules I've established. Until I'm convinced that you won't be a brat about it, you'll just have to put up with staying at home every night." I swallow my food and raise my head to look up at him.

Keep Shay happy... keep him happy and then you won't have to feel like a prisoner. Keep him happy and you'll be able to feel some... small ounce of complacency, I remind myself. I need more in my life than just him. I want to feel contentment outside of him again. And if that means keeping him happy to prevent Manic from rising so I can earn more freedom, then I'll fucking do it.

So I lean towards him and press my lips to his. I feel him melt into my kiss, his free hand sliding up my spine to cup the back of my head. "Thank you," I whisper against his mouth, and I feel the corners of his mouth pull up slightly in the smallest of smiles.

"You're welcome, Sweetness," he gives me another, small kiss. "Now finish up your dinner and then get some studying done. I want to fuck you at least two times before bed." In one sentence, Shay quickly goes from being Mr. Domineering and possessive... *lover?*... to my caretaker, my big brother and protector, and then back again. Our relationship is so confusing and complicated that even *I* get whiplash. And since he's pushed James out of the picture, he has made himself my guardian on top of it all. He is the one who comes with me to doctor appointments. He's the one who asks me about my day and tells me to do my homework. And I respond like a typical teenager. My day was fine, never mentioning the bullying, as I trudge down the hall to go over my notes and assignments. Then later, after supper, he takes me to bed and fucks me like a demon... and I let him. I let him, not because I have no choice, really, but so that I can *feel*. The only times I feel remotely good is when Shay is inside me, making my body sing.

But soon, I'll hopefully have another source of joy in my life. Small moments of freedom that I will cherish, no matter how minute, because I may have sold my soul and body to the devil, but the thought of being allowed a little more freedom gives me a sliver of hope. If I continue to play ball with Shay, if I do things his way, I'll be able to do more of the things I once took for granted.

Chapter Seven



OUR MOUTHS ARE SO CLOSE TOGETHER, our lips brush, our breath mingles, and when I peer up through my lashes, I can see how Shay's eyes are solely focused on me. His gaze is full of longing, desire, and awe. His hands grip the swell of my hips, encouraging me to keep going, and I do. I rock my hips a little faster, grinding into him as I move, and he lets out a groan. We are in our bed, and the only light comes from the golden morning sun that's beaming through a small opening in the curtain that shines across the far wall. I was riding him hard, desperate for release. Shay was sitting up, holding me close as I moved, and guiding my hips over his pelvis, encouraging me as I rocked over him. My fingers twist around his long dark hair, as I move faster, tossing my head back feeling myself building closer and closer to the precipice. His hand smacks me hard twice on my ass before he squeezes it and starts thrusting up into me as I bounce. Then he presses his lips to mine, his tongue slipping past to stroke against my own. His kiss is fierce and all-consuming, leaving me breathless.

“Fuck, I love you, Mina,” he whispers, his lips hovering over my throat. His warm breath makes my skin prickle, and I shiver with pleasure as he presses kisses all over my body, encouraging that chasing feeling, “I love you so much... so much, Sweetness. So fucking much!”

“I-I love you, too, Shay,” I gasp into his ear. And I mean it. I do love Shay in my own confusing, twisted way. He groans in response, his arms encircling me, hugging me against him so he could flip us. Once I’m beneath him, he turns me onto my stomach and wraps an arm under my belly, pulling my ass up into the air. With a hard, brutal thrust, he’s deep inside me again and starts pumping relentlessly. I moan and bury my face into the blankets, gripping the quilt as his balls smack against my clit again and again while he fucks me. My knee is screaming in protest of having my weight added to it, and I extend it out a bit, desperately trying to alleviate the tender ache without stopping what’s happening.

God, I’m so close...

“Come on, Mina, come for me!” He groans and slides the hand that was under my belly up until he is caressing my breast, fingers pinching my nipple hard. I bite my lip as he moves harder and faster until I feel it, that intoxicating release that sends hot shivers and tingles racing through my body. I cry out and collapse on the bed, my ass still held in the air by Shay as he pounds into me for another minute before he gives a powerful thrust, and I feel him come. He lets out a strangled sort of shout and grips me hard, his body shuddering over mine as he slowly moves in and out.

Finally, he pulls out completely and sinks onto the bed at my side. Before I can even think of moving away, he embraces me so that my face is buried against his chest, and his fingers are in my hair as he strokes it off my sweaty forehead. “Perfect. Always perfect,” he whispers giving me a firm, biting kiss before he sinks back into the pillows, holding me against himself.

I lie there with him, knowing that by now, he likes holding me close after sex. At first, I hated it, as I was always consumed with shame and disgust, but over time I’ve found I actually like it. It’s nice to be held by someone that wants you more than anyone else in the world. And I desperately crave the comfort and love he gives me.

I glance at the clock on the bedside table. “Shay, we have to get up and get ready,” I whisper, trying to pull away. It was Saturday, and Shay told me he was getting me a present today for being a good girl for the past two

weeks. But he only squeezes me closer and presses his lips to the back of my neck. I close my eyes, hating the ache in my chest that I feel every time he's sweet like this. It makes it hard to be mad at him for everything he's done to piss me off. "Shay!" I scold. "We're going to be late."

"Like I give a fuck," he murmurs and licks just below my ear, making my body shiver with excitement. I quash the feeling down and squirm more in his arms, trying to break free. "You keep moving against me like that, and I'll fuck you again," he says kissing along the length of my neck, and I freeze. I've been cooped up in this house for too long now. I was craving for a chance to just be out amongst people, have some food, and not be stuck in the house all day, holding my mask in place. I wanted to go out and have a real reason to smile again.

He gives my lips one last, firm kiss and releases me, rolling off the side of the bed to find his clothes. I'd set my alarm, excited at the prospect of spending a weekend *not* locked up in the bedroom and treated like a sex toy. I had been in the midst of changing when he woke up, caught sight of me in my pink lace panties and bra, and charged at me like an animal, tearing my undergarments into pieces, despite my protests. Our fucking was always brutal and violent. It was how I unleashed any pent-up anger and frustrations, and I always had plenty within me stored away that needed an outlet. Lucky for me, it suited Shay's sexual tastes.

Each time Shay and I fuck each other with such primal abandonment, it gives me a sort of small reprieve, and I feel myself falling deeper into the rabbit hole he's thrown me in.

I found a black, satin thong to replace the torn pink panties he'd ripped off of me and slide those on. I was about to grab a hoodie and some baggy jeans when Shay stops me. He opens several drawers at the bottom of the dresser, pulling things out until he finds what he's looking for... an old pair of light skinny jeans and a black Harley Davidson tank top he'd given me last year. I stare at his outfit choice, feeling instantly uncomfortable.

"What's wrong?" He asks absentmindedly as he pulls on his own dark jeans.

"Won't this be a little... revealing?" I ask him, holding up the tank top. If this were over a month ago, I would have chosen an outfit like this for going out in a split-second. But after weeks of dressing like I was hiding from the world and several months of being treated like property, I felt a little uneasy about it.

“I’ll be with you,” he comments as he pulls on a black t-shirt with the Celtic Beasts logo covering the back in a white outline, “No one will touch you. If they do, I’ll fucking gouge their eyes out of their skulls.” He says it so casually that I can’t help but tremble a little. I absolutely believe he would follow through on his promise, which was why I reached for the hoodie anyway.

“No, you don’t.” He snatches it away, throwing it towards the closet.

“Shay, please!” I could feel my heart start to beat a little faster as my anxiety began to rise. “I don’t feel comfortable-”

“I’ve got something for you to wear while we’re out, don’t worry.” He shoves my clothes at me, and I reluctantly take them. I’m not sure what he meant by that, but if he was truly okay with this, then maybe I just need to trust him? He leaves me to change, and I do before I run a brush through my long, blonde hair and quickly put on a little makeup. But when I step out into the kitchen and see what it is he has waiting for me, I stop dead in my tracks and frown at the leather jacket in his hands.

“What the hell is that?” I snap at him, eyeing it suspiciously.

“It’s for you, Sweetness. Put it on and let’s go. We’re late.” He declares like our tardiness is my fault. He holds the leather out as though he is going to help me put it on. Instead, I snatch it from his grasp and turn it over, checking the back. Sure enough, it is a woman’s jacket, but sewn onto the back is a small Celtic Beasts patch with a smaller emblem spanning the top, with the words ‘Property of Manic’ written inside.

“I. Am. Not. Wearing. This!” I vehemently spit out each word, my lip curling as I throw it back at him. Since the night he gave me the ultimatum of being his, he has been pushing the idea of getting me to wear his property cut, and I’ve been adamantly telling him *no*. The idea of wearing it, knowing the significance it holds to bikers, is too much for me. I grew up in this life. I am not stupid. I know what it means to wear leather with one of those property patches on it. Mum proudly wore one with “Property of Sheik” on the back. But she was his actual *wife*. Shay giving me this, it might as well be a fucking diamond engagement ring! If I wore Shay’s, I’d be considered his old lady, and that was as close to marriage as it got without a ring in the biker world. I was only seventeen for crying out loud! I was *not* ready for this. “I am *not* your old fucking lady!”

That did it.

Shay lunges for me, his hand lashing out and seizing me by the nape of my neck as he viscously yanks me towards him. “Do you not fucking get it?” He shouts right in my face, “You *are* my fucking property, Mina! You *are* my fucking old lady, whether you like it or not! You think I’m gonna go fuck some other bitch now that I finally have you? Are you fucking stupid? Are you crazy?” His words cut through me, but I can’t dwell on it, not while he is squeezing my neck to the point of pain as he shakes me. “You *are it* for me, Mina. So you will put this on, and stop fucking fighting me on it!” He releases me, only to then roughly throw the property jacket over my shoulders and force my arms through the sleeves. When he has it on, he lets go of me, watching as I stand there, shaking hard and feeling like I am going to scream.

When I say nothing, he seems satisfied, and grabs my hand, roughly tugging me along behind him. *Fuck... that had been close.* I’d almost pushed him completely over the edge, forcing Manic to come forward and lose control. What if he’d taken away the chance of future excursions or outings? I curse myself for not being more cautious with him.

It’s just a jacket, Mina. Suck it the fuck up... I tell myself as I obediently follow in his wake.

No, it’s not, idiot... a property cut isn’t just something to get you warm when the weather is cold, that voice in the back of my head sneers at me and I cringe inside. No. It’s not just a jacket. Not to Shay. Not to any biker who sees it. But, this is something I’m going to have to compromise on. What if he took away any sort of chance for freedom? What if he gets fed up and decides to search down the man I’ve been in contact with? Keenan? I’m going to have to do better.

“Uh, Shay? Where are we?” My eyes widen in alarm when his bike pulls up outside a small, brick building. I stare up at the sign, “BB’s Tattoo Parlour,” and immediately, all the hairs on my arms stand up on end. On Tuesday, Gavin was going to pick me up from school and take me somewhere, allowing me the tiniest margin of freedom. But when Shay mentioned he was taking me out this morning, I felt a small ray of hope in my heart at his words, wondering where we would be going? I was hoping that maybe he had planned something fun like we used to do. Like getting ice cream and then walking along the old abandoned train station, or catching a movie, or even going to the park and hanging out by the river... like old times.

But now, pulling up to this place, a parlor that I've heard many of the Beasts refer when discussing their tattoos I feel like I've been dunked into a bucket of ice water.

"What are we doing here, Shay?" I question, my voice filled with trepidation as he waits for me to climb off. But I don't want to. I've never expressed a desire to get a tattoo, and a niggling suspicion tells me that I won't even be the one choosing the design.

"Just get off, Mina," he asserts, sounding a little impatient.

Begrudgingly, I do, stepping away from his big Harley and onto the sidewalk. This place is located near the end of one of the main streets in our town, far enough away from any curious onlookers, but not totally isolated. I look back at Shay as he kicks out the stand and turns off the engine. He swings his leg over and strolls casually to my side, looking pleased, but the tightness around his eyes tells me that he is bracing himself for my reaction, and my nerves get even more frazzled.

"C'mon, let's go. We have an appointment."

"Are you getting another tattoo?" I ask him, not moving from the spot. But I know precisely what he is going to say, and I am *not* having it. If anything, I am delaying the inevitable.

"Let's. Go," he says darkly gripping my upper arm before hauling me behind him into the shop.

"Manic! Good to see ya," A robustly large, burly man, covered head to toe in ink, gets up from one of the leather couches by the front desk. The two men clasp hands and bump shoulders with each other, looking like old friends.

"Hey B, how're things? Any more visits from that annoying fuck Bryant?" Shay's brows pull together when he asks this.

I stare in confusion. *Bryant?* Why is that name so familiar?

BB shakes his head, "Nah, last time he came in here was about three months ago. Haven't seen anything since. Though I've noticed a few unfamiliar cars parking nearby..." he nods to the front window, but when we turn to look, the street is empty.

"Keep me posted," Shay lets go of his hand and turns to me, "This is my Mina."

BB grins at me, showing off a gold tooth in the upper corner of his mouth, "Hey, pretty girl! So, you ready for your first ink?"

"Uh, I'm not getting a tattoo..." I cross my arms over my chest, glaring daggers at Shay. *Fuck this!* I have a horrible suspicion as to what he's going to do, and I am not at all for it. No fucking way.

"Yes, you are," Shay says calmly to me before turning back to his friend, "It's the one I emailed you, and I want it on her wrist."

"Upside or down?" BB asks.

"Um, hello?" I raise my voice at them, "Did you not hear me? I said I'm NOT getting a tattoo!"

"I want it on the inside of her left wrist," Shay continues talking as if I hadn't just spoken.

I feel that little spark in my chest flicker as I find myself suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, specifically... anger. I was fucking pissed. For the last few months, I've been trying to keep my temper in check, knowing it would set Shay off and risk everything. But this, this was too far. *You just had to go and bitch about the damn jacket, didn't you, Mina?* The bitch in my head sneers at me. *It doesn't seem so bad now, does it? You were going to play along...* Now, what are you going to do?

A part of me knows I should have expected something like this, but all the same, being here and seeing it happening in the flesh has me feeling agitated. It was too fucking far, too permanent. A tattoo lasts forever, which means the implications behind it, the meaning, was forever, too. All I could think of was that I was done. I was so done. I couldn't mentally grasp this. I needed to get some air. I needed to get out and just... breathe!

My blood starts to boil, and I can feel my cheeks reddening. I spin on the spot and head for the door, determined to run down the street into town. I'll find a phone somewhere so I can call the clubhouse and tell James to be a fucking man and put a stop to this. I'd call him now if only Shay hadn't taken my phone from me this morning. He had most definitely foresaw this reaction from me.

As I am pulling open the door, the sight across the street causes me to freeze in place. Behind a row of trees, in the parking lot of a donair shop, I spot a familiar-looking, charcoal grey SUV parked amongst the other cars. I feel like my brain is moving in slow motion at the sight of it. I know, it's Keenan's. I remember seeing it in the winter, parked by the abandoned theatre where we had spent endless afternoons together. He'd even driven me close to home in that vehicle to save me from the cold. *Key...* his voice was a whisper in my mind, and for a moment, I felt like I was floating,

followed by a slight buzzing in my ears. But before I could even look around for some sign of his golden blond hair, a pair of arms wrap around my middle and yank me back. I scream in surprise and rage and fight Shay as he drags me back, “I’m not doing it!” I shout as I kick my legs, trying to free myself.

“You will!” Shay grunts when I manage to stomp on his foot, but he still doesn’t release me. In the background, I can hear BB moving around as he preps a table. Shay is able to remove the property jacket I’m wearing and tosses it to the side as he continues grappling with me.

When I swing my arms behind me, I manage to clip him in the head. However, the angle is so awkward, it does little to deter him. Shay hauls me back into the parlour, but I don’t stop fighting him the entire way. I shout and cuss him out. I yell to BB not to do it, that I don’t *want* a fucking tattoo, but he doesn’t even meet my eyes. He ignores me completely. Fucker is probably so far up Shay’s ass, there’s no way he’ll listen to me.

“You gotta get her to sit still, Manic...” BB says as he takes a seat in his swivel chair and moves over beside the table. He has on a pair of blue gloves, his needle and ink ready, and he observes nervously as Shay hauls me up to the table. I fight even harder, wiggling in his hold and swing my legs when he lifts me up off the floor. He grunts and fights to lay me down, but I don’t make it easy for him since I keep struggling. When I happen to get a hand free, I swing it at his face and manage to slap him across his cheek. BB noticeably stills, his dark eyes widening in shock and panic. I’m not surprised. Shay’s notoriously known around town as an unstable, deadly individual... a loose cannon. Seeing a girl not even half his size hit him in the face is not what anyone else would dare think of doing.

Except for me.

Shay doesn’t react as he seizes my wrists and yanks me up off the table, all the while grunting to BB, “If I hold her in that chair, can you do it?”

“Uh, I guess so. If you can get her to hold still...”

Before he even finishes speaking, Shay drags me over to a nearby leather armchair for guests to sit in and takes a seat, positioning me in front of him, resting my ass between his muscled thighs. He firmly wraps an arm around my middle, pinning my right arm to my side, stepping on my feet to keep my legs still. Shay yanks my left arm out and holds me there with my inner wrist facing up. I swear loudly at him, calling him every dirty name I know, promising that I’ll never let him touch me again... but he doesn’t say

a word to me as he nods to BB, who moves his tray of supplies and rolls his chair over to us.

As BB applies the stencil to my skin, I glare over my shoulder at Shay. His silver eyes meet mine and hold my stare. His cheek is slightly pink from where I slapped him, but other than that, despite all my struggling and fighting, he doesn't even look the slightest bit winded.

“How’s this, boss?”

We both look down to see the stencil outline that's been transferred to my skin and I stare in horror.

It's a small image of a Celtic dragon with a banner beneath its body, partially concealing the tail that says, ‘Property of Manic’.

“No!” I shout and try again to free myself, “No! Absolutely not! No, Shay!”

I wish there were someone else in the shop. Anyone. Someone I could appeal to, that I could beg to call for help on my behalf. But even if they did and the cops showed up, the Celtic Beasts have the local police department in their back pockets. On top of that, they knew Shay, and they were terrified of him. They wouldn't do a thing. I needed James.

“I want to make a phone call!” I cry out suddenly as Shay tilts my arm up and inspects the placement, “I need to call someone!”

“Looks good. Let’s get it done.” Shay nods and sits back in the chair, his grip on me tightening, and ignores my plea completely.

BB nods, glancing at me warily as I continue to shout and protest before turning away to clean and sterilize the area.

“Shay, please!” I beg him, “Please don’t do this...” I’m exhausted from fighting him, but I refuse to stop until the very last second, hoping against hope that I can appeal to him, “Look, I’ll wear a property cut. I’ll wear a t-shirt with your goddamned face on it! Just-just not this. Not something so permanent. I don’t want *this*.” I plead, sinking back into his shoulder as I peer up at him. I can feel the sting in my eyes as I fight the urge to cry, and my hair is slightly mussed around my face from our struggle.

As the buzz of the tattoo gun turns on, Shay looks down at me. I feel the first sharp scrape of the needle on my skin, and I sag against him, feeling so utterly defeated. When he feels me relax, he eases his hold around my middle and lifts his hand to brush my hair away from my face gently. But he maintains his grip on my extended arm, making sure it stays in place as

his friend permanently etches the property tattoo onto me, forever branding me as his.

He gently wipes the one small tear that escapes the corner of my eye away, kisses my forehead, and settles back, wrapping his arm over my chest.

We're there for a few hours as BB works away on the design. Shay keeps hold of me the entire time, though he knows I'm no longer a flight risk. Even though I hate this tattoo, it's already well underway. There was nothing I could do to stop it now. He takes out his phone, responding to several messages. When I sneak a peek at the names of who he's talking to, I recognize a few... Bull, Cody, Aron, some guy I never heard of named Elias, and another one I didn't know called Viper. Probably a biker from another Beasts' chapter. As for who Elias was, well, I had *no* idea. I was curious enough to see the names, but I didn't want to know what it was he was talking to them about. I didn't want to know what he did to other people, or how cruel he was with his assignments. Or worse, hearing about how much he enjoyed it. That part always made me feel sick.

My wrist is stinging a lot now, but I bite my lip, fighting back the urge to wince and pull away. I didn't want a tattoo to begin with. If I ended up with a screwed-up one from pulling, well, that was even worse...

"All done, mate," BB announces finally. I think my butt had fallen asleep by this point, "Take a look." He says after he cleans the area off.

Shay tilts my arm up so it is in front of our faces. The small, fierce dragon was beautiful, with hints of blue amongst the scales. I might've come around to liking it if it wasn't for the banner with the property statement, which turns me off it completely.

"It's perfect," I can practically hear the grin on Shay's face as he says it. His lips softly touch my temple while I stare lifelessly at the new brand on my skin. Because let's face it, that's what it is. A brand.

BB goes on to pack me a bag with a small bottle of ointment after he bandages the area, and meets us at the front desk. Shay pulls out his wallet and hands over several bills, "Job well done, man." he tells him.

BB looks noticeably relieved and nods to him. I wonder if he had messed up, what would Shay have done? I'm sure he was worrying over the same thing.

I don't say a word. Not even thank you. Call me a brat, but I can't bring myself to. But the moment Shay guides us out onto the sidewalk, I turn and

slap him again in the face. He fixes me with a punishing stare but flashes a small, cold smile. He doesn't reprimand me. Not here. Most likely, he'll take me home and take it out on me there.

In fact, that's exactly what he does.

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Chapter eight

WHEN I WALK into school on Monday morning, my guard is up. I've wrapped a tensor bandage around my wrist to hide the tattoo, and to keep the bandaging on for another day or two. But the moment I climb out of Shay's new truck he bought just the other week, I feel a shift in the air around me. I'm wearing his property jacket, and I can feel everyone in the vicinity watching again, just like the first day of school, only now I walk with my head high and I ignore the whispers. Fuck them. I quickly head inside, put the jacket away in my locker, and move on, wishing everyone would just go back to ignoring me again. I'd gotten used to it over the past few weeks.

But my day doesn't improve. In every class I attend, I hear my name being whispered and the mention of the jacket. Most seem to be wondering what the hell it means, while I catch snippets of others sounding disgusted by the phrase, "Property of..." on the back. I can't blame them. Honestly, I hate it, too. If only they saw the tattoo under the sleeve of my sweater.

By the time lunch rolls around, I can't take it anymore. I go outside, sans jacket, glad that I am wearing a hoodie today, as the late September air is swiftly changing to Autumn. I just want to be left alone. Though I try to hold my head up and act unbothered by everyone, the injustice of my situation is eating away at me. So I head around the side of the school to sit against the brick wall, closing my eyes to soak in the rays of the sun. It's quiet here, peaceful, and for a brief span of time, I let myself breathe and my mask slips a little taking this time to allow my emotions to surface.

Once in a while, I open my eyes and lazily scan the grounds around me. In the distance, I see small groups of kids idly strolling around, ignoring me as they are lost in their own little worlds. Across the street, where a small mini-mall is set up with a gas station, a coffee shop, a Subway, and a Dollarama. A glint of gold catches my eye, and my body instantly tenses as I sit up to get a better view. I swear that flash of golden hair was Keenan's. Wasn't it? I search the parking lot for that same charcoal grey SUV, but it's absent, which makes me wonder if I was imagining things. I must be going crazy. A flood of disappointment fills the pit of my stomach as I sink back against the wall and close my eyes again, feeling like an idiot for thinking that Keenan was still around, watching over me.

Stupid, foolish, Mina. You let him go. Don't fucking go there! A voice screams in my head. She's right. I still feel a pang in my chest that makes my breath catch, like I am in pain. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to keep calm. *Don't lose control, Mina. You got this. You got this... just keep your mask on, and everything will be okay...*

My moment of solitude doesn't last long before I sense that I am no longer alone. The hairs on the back of my neck rise, and my eyes fly open to see a small group of girls gathered before me. As I take them in, I feel my stomach surge. Becca, Ashley, and several others that I'd once considered close acquaintances stare back at me, their eyes looking me over with disgust, and I have no doubt as to why they are here. I wince a little and rise to my feet, my mask slipping back into place, trying to look unperturbed by their presence when actually, my guard is on high alert.

For weeks these girls have been bad-mouthing me, whispering as I walk past, and occasionally, shouting out, "Whore" or "Biker Trash" my way in the lunchroom. Their close proximity now has me bracing, preparing for some sort of onslaught. Why the hell else would they be here?

When they don't leave, I sigh heavily, quickly preparing myself mentally for their bullshit as I notice a small crowd starting to form in the distance... sheep, all of them. I face Becca and the others. We couldn't be more opposite from each other. The girls are all wearing the typical high-waisted jeans, crop tops, with their hair all smooth and shiny pulled back from their faces, which are perfected by the makeup tutorials they watch online. Then there was me.

I am wearing a pair of dark blue skinny jeans, a pair of black chucks, and an oversized dark grey hoodie with the Canadian maple leaf on the shoulder. My hair is loose, its natural wavy state around my face, and the only makeup I prefer to wear lately is mascara and lip balm. We stare each other down for several seconds until I finally snap, "You know, if you take a picture, it will last longer."

"So, you're wearing a property cut now?" Becca says, ignoring my comment. I roll my eyes at her, shaking my head. The only reason she knows what the hell that means is because I told her years ago after one of the rare occasions that they saw my mum wearing James'. I quickly quash down the ache in my heart at that thought of my mother, not wanting these vultures to spot any sign of weakness in me, or else they'll pounce. They're here because of jealousy. I can practically see it blazing in Becca's eyes. Petty bitch.

"What do you guys want?" I say, cutting to the chase. I'm not engaging in this back and forth with them. What's the point? No one is going to change their mind. They'll continue hating me for something stupid, and I'll go on with my suffering in silence.

"Just wondering how you can even show your face here, wearing that jacket," Becca crosses her arms over her chest and narrows her eyes at me, and I can't help but wonder why she even fucking cares. "You proud to be a whore to him? What about what happened to Eli? Did you forget about him? I hear his face is so scarred up that no one can look at him."

The memory of what happened to Eli whirls to the forefront of my mind and my hands clench causing my nails to dig into my palms.

Eli's body laying on the leafy ground of the woods, his face crushed in as Shay delivers blow after blow to the innocent thirteen-year-old boy... the blood... the blood... it's everywhere. It spatters across the dead leaves beneath his motionless figure... Eli's destroyed face. I close my eyes, biting my lip as I fight to keep my mind from going there, but...

The blood... the blood... it drip, drip, drips off the side of the table...

NO! I shake my head, stopping myself from finishing that thought. I never allow myself to think about it.

I sway on my feet as all the blood drains from my face. I step back, leaning against the school's brick wall, and take a deep breath. A bubble of rage is growing in my chest, a swirling, sick feeling of injustice and anguish consumes me, and this bitch keeps going as I desperately try to get a grip.

"He's homeschooled," Becca goes on, "after being bullied at the fancy new prep school for his face. His life is ruined because of what your brother did. No girl will even date him because he's so ugly-"

"Then those people are superficial assholes, and that's their fault for picking on someone and judging them, not mine!" I snap at her, gritting my teeth as my fists shake.

"And now," she continues, as if I hadn't spoken at all, "you're fucking him and wearing his property jacket like you don't care. You're a stuck-up hypocrite... for years acting like you were too good for everyone else in this school. Miss Virgin Ballerina... wanting to leave our town for the big city... and look at you now," she smirks at me then sneers, "trash, sleeping with your brother, and will probably end up an alcoholic fuck up, just like your mum-"

I don't remember punching her first. I really don't. All I can recall is a buzzing sound in my ears and my vision literally went red. When my senses start coming back to me, I am on the ground, Becca beneath me, and I am throwing punch after punch at any part of her I can reach. The kids around us are shouting, and I am vaguely aware of someone tugging at my hair and my arms like they are trying to pull me off her. I feel like I am possessed. My only focus is to hurt her, to beat the shit out of her for the poison she just spewed at me.

To her credit, she doesn't take it lying down. She claws at me, bucks her hips to try to get me off her, and manages to get a few hits in herself, but I barely feel them. I feel all the pent-up emotions of prejudice and animosity simmering in me since the beginning of the school year suddenly erupt. All the whispers and cruelty fueling my violent frenzy as I beat the shit out of Becca.

She finally wiggles her way free by sliding back and kicking my shoulder, sending me back just enough so that she could get up. She pounces on me, but my impulse to hurt her is stronger than her idiotic

grudge. So when she tackles me onto my back, I manage to roll us across the cold, leafy grass, with the crowd around us dispersing as we wrestle each other. I feel one of her pristine, claw-like nails scrape down my lip, and I taste blood on my tongue. I am on my back when I lick the small dribble away, then when I look up at her, I smile, enjoying the look of doubt that is now evident on her face. Despite the fact that she is on top, and her hands are now wrapping around my neck, *I was the one scaring her.* Fucking good!

When she hesitates, I reach up and seize the small gold hoops that hang from her lobes and rip them away. Her scream is like music to my ears, and her hands immediately fly away from my throat grasping the now torn tissue of her ears, blood oozing from the gaps I created.

“Fucking bitch!” she shrieks as she launches herself backward, screaming and wailing. I’m breathing heavily, glaring daggers at her as she cries and clings to what remains of her lobes. All around us, I hear shouting, and people are shoving each other back but I have no idea what any of them are saying, and I don’t care. I taste the blood in my mouth and I spit it in her direction as I shove someone off of me who was trying to yank me back. I’m not gonna fight anymore. I don’t need to. I think I made my point perfectly fucking clear. I rise to my feet, my hands and knees shaking from the adrenaline just as I hear the distant shouting of teachers hurrying this way.

I look down at Becca, who is sitting on her ass, bawling her eyes out as though she’s just lost her whole world, rather than just having earned herself a stitch job. Her dark hair is a tangled mess, her makeup smeared down her cheeks, with dirt and grass stains all over her clothes. Her face is starting to swell by her jaw and temple and I can make out the various scratch marks on her hands, forearms, and face. She even has a small trail of snot dribbling out her nose from crying so hard.

Miss Gibson, the school guidance counselor, Mr. Daley, the Vice Principal, and Mr. White, the Principal, push their way through the crowd. They look between us, taking in the scene... Becca, sitting on the ground looking worse for wear, to me, standing over her with a bloody lip, my hair tousled, but evidently the victor and aggressor in this fight. I don’t care about getting into trouble.

I hold up the earrings so she can see them dangling from my fingers and narrow my gaze, curling my bleeding lip in loathing at the sight of her, and

toss them her way. One lands on the dead grass in front of her, while the other bounces off the front of her shirt, making her flinch back and stare up at me with fear in her eyes.

“Clean yourself up,” I say, my voice flat and emotionless. “You look like shit.”



I’ve been dragged into Mr. White’s office while Becca is taken to the school nurse. She’ll definitely need stitches for her ears. I flop down in one of the chairs facing his desk and cross my arms, lounging back while he takes a seat across from me. Miss Gibson is here, too, sitting at my side, looking greatly concerned and rattled by the whole thing. I stretch my legs out before me and brush my hair away from my face. I saw my reflection in the windows when they marched me in here, and the cut on my bottom lip isn’t that bad. I also have a scratch on my chin and a red mark along my jaw where she managed to get a hit. Luckily, my heavy sweater protected my arms and body from her nails. Overall, I didn’t do too badly, considering this was my first physical fight.

But despite how I feel, when I meet Mr. White’s angry stare from behind his wire-framed glasses, I can tell he’s not impressed. I don’t care. I have plenty to say to him in my defense.

“Now before you say anything, David,” Miss Gibson says swiftly, obviously noticing his disapproval, “Mina has been a model student at this school since her freshman year. I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding and that she’s sorry for-”

“I’m not.”

“Wh-what?” Miss Gibson turns her wide, brown eyes my way, evidently shocked by the assurance in my statement.

“I’m *not* sorry for what I did,” I say, still lounging back in my seat.

“Physical violence is *not* an acceptable way to resolve your differences, Miss Westberg,” Mr. White barks from behind his desk. From the window behind him, the sun shines down on the growing bald spot on top of his head and I notice how there’s a gleam of sweat there. Huh... I study his scowl, how he’s sitting up as straight as he can. But beneath the desk, I hear

the sound of the heel of his foot thudding on the carpet over and over again at a rapid pace. He's nervous as hell. And then it hits me.

"Have you called my guardian?" I keep my face calm and impassive when I ask him this and watch as the corner of his eye twitches. His hands, which are clasped together on his desk, tighten to the point where his knuckles turn white, and I see the apple in his throat bob as he swallows. Yup. He's scared shitless. And I know exactly why.

"Miss Gibson called your brother, yes. Mr. O'Hare," he says after swallowing two more times. I almost want to laugh. Almost.

"Not my stepfather, James?" I inquire, though I already know the answer. I'm slightly enjoying watching this man squirm.

"Your brother... uh, informed me at the beginning of the school year that-that he was to be notified should any... *matters*... that concern you arise," Mr. White mutters between clenched teeth. I'll bet Shay did. Oh, to be a fly on the wall for that conversation. I can only imagine the threats he made to my principal about removing James from my file and being replaced in his stead.

"Stepbrother," I correct him and let my head relax back against the hard edge of the chair.

"Mina," Miss Gibson speaks up then, her voice doesn't waver as much, tells me she's never had a reason to fear Shay, which means she's never actually met him before. "You are a good girl," she goes on and I cringe at those words, "and I'm sure that this was just a lapse in judgment-"

"It wasn't," I say, my voice firm.

She stutters for a moment but goes on as if she hadn't heard me. "But if you apologize to Miss Perry, I'm sure her parents-"

I cut her off again, tired of the bullshit she's spewing, "Let me make something perfectly clear here," I tell her as I straighten up in my chair and meet her wide, surprised eyes, "I am *not* sorry for what I did. The bitch had it coming-"

"Miss Westberg, language!" Mr. White snaps, but I ignore him.

"And you!" I seethe as I address him, "hauling me in here after almost a full month of being bullied by practically everyone in this school... and no one in the faculty did a thing to protect me..."

"Watch yourself, Miss Westberg," he raises his voice a little more, trying to cut me off, but I won't be silenced. My pent-up anger is brimming to the surface again.

“Where were any of you when my locker had the words ‘Whore’ and ‘Trash’ scratched into the door? The words are *still* there!” I raise my voice to match his, determined not to let this man make me feel an ounce of guilt for what I did to Becca. “Where were any of you when I sat in the lunchroom each day for nearly two weeks, and for the entire lunch hour, I had to endure the taunts of my peers yelling ‘brother-fucker’, and ‘slut’ at me?” In the corner of my eye, I see Miss Gibson nervously look at Mr. White and purse her lips, as though silently accusing him of something. I realize then that it was his fault the teachers didn’t step in to stop it. And I can only make one guess as to why. “Whatever you did to piss off the Beasts, if you think coming at me will be some sort of retribution for you, you are sorely mistaken.”

“That is enough, Miss Westberg!” Mr. White’s flabby cheeks turn bright red, and he snarls at me, standing up on his side of the desk, his fists clenched upon the wooden surface, “You are suspended for the rest of the week! Keep pushing; I have no qualms making it two! If I ever hear of you disrupting the peace in this school-”

The door to his office bursts open with a loud bang as it smashes against the wall, causing us all to jump and look over to the looming figure standing there. Shay is dressed in his Celtic Beasts Jacket, dark hair mussed, lip ring gleaming, and his dark jeans fitted over his muscled legs. He automatically finds me, his eyes narrowing in on the cut and bruise forming on my jaw before he turns his attention to Mr. White, ignoring Miss Gibson completely, “What were you saying, Darryl?” he asks, his voice deepening to that level that makes my spine chill. Right now, Shay is gone, and Manic has taken over.

Mr. White opens and closes his mouth like a goldfish several times, the blood that had pooled in his cheeks drains, leaving him pale and even more sweaty looking than before. Shay slams the door shut behind himself and locks it. He stomps into the room and kneels beside me, gently cradling my head to turn me to face him. His silver eyes move over my face, his thumb softly brushing over my lip as he inspects me. I obediently stay still, knowing that when he is in this state, it’s best not to try to reason.

But Mr. White didn’t seem to know that. “As you already know from my phone call, Miss Westberg instigated a fight that resulted in the injury to-”

“Has Mina not been taken to the school nurse for her injuries?” Shay doesn’t even look at him. His eyes are narrowing further on the few scratches he’s noticed on my neck. The air in the office is thick with tension, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep laughing when I catch Mr. White’s lip quiver. Seeing this man go from Mr. Tough-Guy to petrified, weak, and pathetic in seconds has seriously made my day. Normally, I would have felt sorry for him, but that was before I put it together, he was doing nothing to help me during my month of suffering in this school.

“She has not sustained any serious injuries that require-”

“Are you the fucking nurse?” Shay’s head whips to face him, and Mr. White actually jumps back a step, his legs hitting his chair and sending it flying into the small bookshelf beneath the window. Shay rises to his full height, murderously glaring at my principal. “She is a student in your school, and she has clearly been hurt yet you’ve done nothing for her!” He gestures at my lip and my chin, “But you know what? I don’t trust this shithole with her health and care. From what that chick said on the phone-”

“Um, I called you, Mr. O’Hare,” Miss Gibson clears her throat nervously. I glance over to see her shrinking back into her seat, looking as though she wished she was elsewhere. “I’m Miss Gibson, the guidance counselor for-”

Shay ignores her completely like she hadn’t spoken at all. “Mina has been subjected to bullying since her first week back at school. Why has nothing been done to stop this? Why did no one fucking tell me?” At this, he scowls at me, but I just shrug at him and lounge back in my chair again. He’s pissed that I didn’t say anything, and I know it was something he would have wanted to be informed of. But the last thing I wanted was blood on my hands. Honestly, I’m surprised the prospects didn’t say anything about it to him. But I wasn’t going to question it. He knew now.

“That little bitch has been coming at Mina for weeks,” he practically spits the words out, “I don’t give a shit that she threw the first punch. You’ve fucking failed in protecting her and left her to fend for herself.”

“Now, Mr. O’Hare,” Mr. White seems to be recovering from his initial scare at Shay’s aggressive entrance, but I’m not buying it. His shiny, sweaty head and trembling hands give him away, “We have a no-bullying policy in this school. If I thought matters had surpassed typical teenage hormonal-”

“That is a crock of shit!” Shay hisses his words like their venom. The man facing him in turn recoils, his shoulders slumping like a coward. “I was

notified on the way here of what's been going on! The name-calling and slander... the vandalism on her locker? Then I hear she was cornered outside by that bitch and her gang of cunts-"

"Mr. O'Hare!" Miss Gibson's mouth drops in alarm, and her hand reaches out to clutch my shoulders as though she fears sending me off with him. I almost pity this woman. She really has no idea what's going on. I have nothing to be afraid of. It's everyone else in this school that I'm *more* concerned about. After today, however, I'm beyond caring.

"A bunch of fucking *cunts*!" He repeats, finally turning his death glare her way. To my surprise, Miss Gibson steels her back and grips the arm of my chair, managing to slide it over to her. I stare at her in awe, my brows arched high on my forehead as she leans forward, angling herself a little so that she's slightly blocking me. *What is she doing?*

"Mr. O'Hare, this is a school, and this sort of vulgar language is unacceptable here, especially in regards to our students!" She moves forward even more, almost completely hiding me from his view. I watch her curiously, a weird sensation in my chest flickering to light at her defensive gesture as it hits me. She's trying to protect me from him. "If you cannot calm yourself, I will have to notify Social Services and inform them of the disturbing behavior and concerns I have for Miss Westberg's welfare." As soon as the words leave her mouth, I feel a cold chill run over my body. Was she threatening to have me removed from his care? I instantly look around her to see Shay take a step closer at her words, his eyes brimming with fury as they burn in her direction. His fist is clenched tight as he begins to lift it...

Manic...

I jump to my feet then, and quickly insert myself between him and Miss Gibson and wrap my arms around his middle, burying my face into his chest, "I'm okay, Shay. Really I-"

"If you call Social Services, and they have the fucking balls to show up at my door, I'll make sure none of them are able to walk-"

"Shay!" I say louder, tilting my head back to get his attention. "My lip!" I practically shout at him, determined to say something to distract him. This works, as his eyes, though still alight with fury, flick down to me, locking onto the small wound, and wavers ever so slightly. "Fuck this school and everyone in it. Let's just go home, okay? Please take me home, and we can just be together. Just us." I reach up and softly trace his jaw with my

fingertips before I press my forehead to the center of his chest again, right over his thudding heartbeat. I can feel it racing so I lower my hand, sliding it beneath his jacket so that I can run lazy circles on his back as I wrap my arms around him again. After a few seconds, I feel his arms wrap around me snugly before he lowers his chin to rest on the top of my head.

“Miss Westberg has been suspended for five days, Mr. O’Hare. Effective immediately,” Mr. White suddenly finds his courage again, and I just want to tell him to shut the fuck up. “She may return next Monday after you both attend a Student Support Group-”

“Will that little bitch be suspended as well?” Shay snaps, not looking his way as he holds me.

“Miss Perry’s involvement in this matter will be looked at once her parents-”

“No. You better fucking tell me that she’s suspended, too,” he raises his voice a little but doesn’t let go of me as he clings desperately to his lifeline. “You said you have a no-tolerance policy for bullying in this school. She and several others should have been dealt with long before what happened today.”

“Miss Perry is the victim in this situation, Mr. O’Hare. Her past conduct is not the issue at present-”

Next thing I know, Shay has whirled me around and I find myself passed over to Miss Gibson who, though as startled as I am by the sudden move, wraps her arms around me. He storms across the office, moving so quickly that even Mr. White doesn’t even see it coming when Shay grips him by the back of his neck and slams him face-first onto the surface of his desk. I hear the loud crack from the impact, followed by a sickening crunch and moments later, when Shay lifts his head back, blood is pouring from Mr. White’s nose. Miss Gibson screams but doesn’t let go of me. If anything, she holds me tighter and turns us away, like she’s trying to shield us from the violence. Too late for that. When she tries to maneuver us towards the door, Shay yells, “You two stay *right* where you are!” and we freeze.

I peer over her shoulder to see Shay smash my principal’s face into the desk again, only this time, he holds him there, pressing hard on the back of his head, his nose compressing and snapping even more. The man yelps in pain, reaching around desperately in an attempt to try to shove Shay away, or to free himself. But my stepbrother knows what he’s doing...

Shay leans over Mr. White's back, twisting one of his arms with him as he forces it up at an unnatural angle, and the man moans in pain.

"My God, stop!" Miss Gibson cries, but everyone ignores her.

Shay releases the man's neck and reaches over for the stapler on his desk, his hands caressing it as though it's so much more than just office supplies. He sees potential for more from it. Manic is out to play. He presses it to the sweaty bald spot on the head of his new plaything, a cruel smile on his face when he does. "I don't think you fucking get it, *Darryl*," Shay growls at him, "Maybe the senior Beasts have gotten soft on you, but you know who I fucking work for now, right? You know Elias?"

At this, Mr. White whimpers, blood still dripping from his nose onto the desk. Dripping...

The blood... the blood... it drip, drip, drips off the side of the table. It pools from the holes carved into her chest. It leaks from the pits that were her eyes...

STOP IT, MINA!

My breath leaves my chest in a rush, and now I'm actually grateful that Miss Gibson is holding me. I sag in her arms, and she lowers me into one of the chairs brushing my hair out of my face. I can feel her fingers slightly shaking and her face completely white and disturbed. She's terrified right now, and yet, she turns her back to the danger to check on me.

Behind her, I hear the loud thunk of metal as it strikes its target, followed by a loud groan. As I gasp for air, Shay bashes his victim several more times with it before the heavy thud of metal falling against the wooden surface of the desk tells me that he's finished. His voice is deep and sends chills down my spine as he speaks quietly and with an eerie calm that commands everyone's attention in the small office. "You will suspend that fucking bitch for ten days. She bullied Mina. She approached her and baited her. She's gotten away with too much. You're lucky I'm only asking for justice against *her*," He lowers his voice a little more. "Mina and I won't attend that fucking meeting. And if Social Services shows up and tries to take her away..." I look up as Shay leans in and whispers into Mr. White's ear. The man whimpers at his words. His head is bleeding profusely from the top, and from what I can see the glint of the staples that are jutting out from beneath the blood and the purple bruising that is already forming. Shay speaks softly to him for another minute before Mr. White subtly nods his head, moaning in pain. Shay releases his arm and steps back like he's

disgusted that he was even touching him. Reaching for the kleenex box, he pulls several free, and wipes the blood from his hands, carelessly letting the soiled tissues fall to the floor.

Without another look at the man he just beat down, Shay circles around the desk straight to where I'm sitting with Miss Gibson. For a moment, despite the fact that she just watched him beat down her boss before her very eyes, she stands her ground, tilting her head way back to look Shay in the face. He carelessly glances at her and goes to reach around her to me, but she grabs his arm, tugging on the leather of his jacket. I still, my heart stopping as he turns his sinister glower her way. I'm about to leap to my feet to save her when she speaks. Her voice, though quiet, is steady as she addresses him, "I need to know that she is safe with you," she says slowly, "if I'm to look the other way from everything I've witnessed today, I need to know that Miss Westberg will come to no harm should I let you leave with her."

Shay blinks at her, but his expression doesn't change. "If you *let* me leave with her?"

"You heard me. The welfare of the students is my responsibility. Directives were given..." she glances over at Mr. White, who is shuffling on the floor as he holds his bleeding head, "... and I regret that I ignored my better judgment and did not intervene sooner. So," she turned back to Shay, "I need to know now... is she safe with you?"

For a long moment, no one says anything, and the only sound comes from Mr. White, who is groaning and sobbing softly. Finally, Shay leans in, close to her face, and murmurs, "She is the *only* person I would *never* hurt." Without waiting for a response, he reaches around her again, grasping my upper arm, and pulls up. I get to my feet, my head still spinning a little from the sight of blood, and go along with him as he unlocks the office door and leads us out. The receptionist, Mr. Daley, and several other teachers are waiting, phones in hand, eyes wide with fear when we emerge and the sight behind us unveils itself.

"Anyone calls the police, and I can promise you, the Beasts will seek retribution." He tells them, not even bothering to look their way. He guides me out into the hall in the direction of my locker. Neither of us says a word as I collect my things, shoving it all into my backpack. Shay takes it from me, slinging it over his shoulder, and gently clasps our hands together, our

fingers intertwining. He tugs me along at his side as we leave the school behind.

His truck is parked in the faculty parking lot, which doesn't surprise me. It's the most convenient and closest to the school. I can just imagine how crazy he drove trying to get here. When I climb into the passenger side and buckle up, Shay finally speaks. He starts the engine, turning up the heat, and twists in his seat to face me. "Who are the other bitches, Mina?"

"Don't, Shay," I tell him, knowing exactly where his mind is going.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"How did you find out?" I counter meeting his gaze. He's much calmer now, and he has his sinister mask in place.

"Prospects. After news of the fight reached them." He speaks so coldly, I shiver, despite the warm air blowing from the vents. "They'll be taken care of for neglecting to tell me what's been going on this past month."

"I'm sure they were just watching to make sure no *guys* talked to me, not *girls*—"

"I don't give a shit!" He practically hisses between his clenched teeth. "Their job was to report to me and tell me about what was fucking happening in that school. They failed. So they'll be punished. I don't see any of them making it past the Junior chapter to become full prospects. They fucked up. Now tell me... these other girls... want me to deal with it?"

For a moment I am stunned, disbelieving that he had actually asked me what I want to do for once. I hold his stare, a small smile curling up on my lips as I think about how good it fucking felt to slam my fists into Becca then I shake my head at him. "I dealt with it myself." That's all I tell him as I relax back against the cushy seat and cross my arms over my chest. I hear him chuckle as he shifts gears and backs out of the spot, taking me home.

Back at the house, Shay leaves me to unpack my backpack in the bedroom while he heads out to the garage to make some calls. As I go through my notebooks, a small folded-up piece of paper falls to the floor. What the hell?

I pick it up and carefully unfold it. The writing is messy, hastily written up with a pen, with ink blots and everything. My eyes flicker as they skim over the first two words at the top...

Hey Sunshine...

I stare at those two words for several seconds, my mind frozen until I go into auto-pilot and quickly hurry over to close the bedroom door. I sit on the floor, leaning back against the door, and carefully stare down at the letter again, my hands trembling slightly as I read the message.

I know you told me not to contact you. I know you said to let you go, but I can't. I fucking can't. I haven't been able to stay away, and I need to be able to reach you again. Seeing as every time I call that burner cell, it cuts off, I'm guessing you got rid of it.

Please don't end, whatever the fuck you want to call this thing between us, because of him. It would be different if you didn't want me... if you wanted nothing to do with me. Can you tell me that, Mina? As creepy as this is going to sound, I haven't been able to stay away. I've watched you, and you aren't happy. You're not. And you're fooling yourself if you think otherwise.

I'll have a prospect deliver a burner cell to you next week... if I don't hear from you, I'll take that as an answer, that you want me to leave you alone and that you are absolutely positive this is what you want, Sunshine.

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Chapter nine



THE WEEK that I was suspended, Shay assigned Gavin as my official babysitter. While any other seventeen-year-old would be left at home to do their work, I had to have company at all times like I was six. Since I didn't have school on Tuesday, Gavin showed up at our house first thing in the morning just as Shay was getting ready to ride into town on "business," as he put it.

"The school sent her an online homework package to follow. I looked over it, and it's nothing she can't handle. But she has to finish the first section and email it in to the administration by three this afternoon." Shay casts me an amused sort of look that has me rolling my eyes at him, making him chuckle. Hearing him talk as if he's James is a joke, and he knows it. Especially after the morning fuck-fest we had. I'm sitting on the far end of the couch, munching on a toasted bacon sandwich for my breakfast and some tea. I probably look like a disgruntled teenager with an attitude problem to Gavin. Last he saw me, I had tried running away, resulting in that poor homeless man being murdered before our very eyes. Did he see

that as my fault? Did he think I was just being a difficult emotional brat? Probably. I have no idea how Shay talks about our situation to his friends, but I imagine it's his own watered-down version.

"Since she was a bad girl yesterday," Shay goes on, and I glare resentfully at him, earning another amused chuckle. He had been calling me that all morning while I rode him or when he had me crushed against the wall. "So her right to an outdoor excursion has been postponed, depending on how she behaves today."

Gavin's dark gaze moves back and forth between us curiously, as though he senses something is off with what Shay said, but makes no comment. He's always been a quiet one. He removes his cut and hangs it carefully on the coat tree by the front door and strolls over to where I'm lounging and gives my foot a little kick with his toe. "Is she allowed cookies or sweets, or is that a no?" he asks and gives me a cheerful, lighthearted wink.

"Douche-goof," I mutter under my breath as I kick him.

Gavin laughs, running a tatted hand through his black fauxhawk turning back to Shay, "Anything else? Do I need to let her outside to piss, too?"

"Ass!" I snap at him, but both guys just laugh.

"Stay on the property, and she doesn't leave your sight," Shay says as he grabs his helmet and walks across the room to me. "Be a good girl, okay? Listen to Gavin and do what he says, or else no trips anywhere this week. Ya got me?"

I stick out my tongue at him but nod, earning a small smile in return before he grabs my chin between his thumb and forefinger and kisses me. There's no tongue, but it's still intense as his lips move with mine until he finally releases me. Embarrassed, I quickly glance over only to see Gavin busying himself making some coffee in the kitchenette area.

"I'm out. I'll call when I'm heading back. Keep me posted, Storm," Shay says, addressing Gavin as he opens the front door.

"No problem, Boss." Gavin doesn't even bother looking over as he searches the pantry for the coffee grounds. Taking pity when I see him moving further away from where we store it, I put my stuff aside and go over, pulling them out of the narrow pantry by the fridge and scoop some out for him.

"And keep the doors locked, yeah?"

“No problem,” Gavin replies, watching as I set the machine before I collect a mug for him.

“Okay. I’ll check in soon, alright?”

“Bloody fuck, Manic! Go! It’s fine. I got shit here.” Gavin finally turns to Shay, his pierced brows raised high, tone exasperated by my stepbrother’s lingering and insistent concern. I guess it’s a side of Shay he doesn’t see very much.

Shay grumbles something in response, and I can practically feel his eyes on me. Still, I keep myself busy getting together something for Gavin to have for breakfast, deciding on making him a toasted cheese and bacon sandwich. I finally hear the door click shut, and the stomping of biker boots on the floorboards before the sounds of the two deadbolts and chain slide into place. Oddly, the sound reminds me of those movies that take place in a jailhouse, when the barred doors slide shut for the night. For a brief moment, my shoulders stiffen, causing my body to coil like a spring before I catch myself and force the tension to away. Exhaling shakily, I finish making Gavin’s breakfast just as the coffee beeps that it’s ready.

Once I pour him a cup and turn to ask him how he likes it, I pause at the sight of him sitting at the dining table, relaxing back in one of the chairs with his arm resting along the smooth surface. I can literally feel the blood slowly drain from my face, knowing I must look like one of those cartoon characters from Saturday mornings as it happens. My mouth goes dry, my fingers trembling as I see it, that memory that tries so hard to come to the forefront of my mind. That table, her body, the blood dripping off the edge of the table’s surface... *oh, fuck!*

The blood... the blood... it drip, drip, drips off the side of the table. It pools from the holes carved into her chest. It leaks from the pits that were her eyes. It streams from the sliced remnants of her nose...

Oh God, stop it. Stop! Don’t go there! Stop! *It’s not the same table, Mina. It’s not the same table... it’s not the same table... it’s not the same table!*

“It’s not the same table!” I scream suddenly and I launch backwards, stumbling into the fridge so hard I hear the contents inside clang and rattle together before I slide to the floor, sitting on my ass, grateful that the counter obscures the view of the dining area. I pull at my hair, tugging at the ends as I squeeze my eyes shut and gasp for air. I can see spots behind

my closed lids, and my face feels fuzzy like it's going numb. *Shit! Shit! Shit!*

Her cries, her screams, the moans that followed... the way she lay there so still, the blood pooling at the numerous open wounds on her chest, oozing from the gaping hole that was once her nose... her eyes gone...

“Mina!”

My eyes snap open just as Gavin’s hands seize my shoulders, his grip firm and unyielding as he gives me a hard shake. His black eyes are wide, and his mouth open in shock as he stares at me like I’m scaring him.

“Wh-what?”

“You’re screaming... what the fuck happened?” His eyes move over me like he’s looking for some sort of injury. Slowly, I unfurl my fists, my blonde hair falling from my grasp, and several strands that I’ve managed to rip from my skull float down to my lap like spiderwebs. “Breathe, okay, hon? Just breathe in deep, hold it, then let it go. Okay? Let’s do it together.” Gavin loosens his grip and rubs at my arms like he’s trying to warm me up or something. I follow his pacing, matching him as best I can, breath for breath until finally, the dizziness and trembling stops. When he sees that I’ve calmed down, he lifts me up, carrying me like a child, and brings me over to the couch. I curl up on the end, putting as much space between me and that area of the house that continues to haunt me. Even James and Shay have stopped eating there when I’m around. I just can’t handle it. I wish we could board the area up, so I don’t have to ever see it again.

“You alright now?” Gavin asks me, his expression still in a state of shock at my outburst. I don’t blame him. Any time I’ve been around him before, besides the night I ran away, I’ve been bubbly, little Mina. Even at my seventeenth birthday party, I’d been more amiable and calm. But that was before the shock of everything had caught up to me.

“I’m sorry, Gavin,” I whisper as the feeling in my face starts to come back.

“Don’t be. Just... what the fuck happened?”

I close my eyes and shake my head, not wanting to get into it with him until I remember I’d been in the middle of making him breakfast, “Oh, your food! Your coffee! It’s right-”

“I don’t give a fuck about that right now, Mina. What the hell happened just now?”

I shake my head again, biting my lip and meeting his stunned face, “Please, don’t. Don’t ask me to explain. I can’t bear it... Just get your breakfast, alright? And I’ll start on my school work.”

Gavin studies me for a minute, and suddenly, I feel like his black gaze can see right through me. I meet his stare, forcing my features to remain calm and collected. I don’t want to get into it, especially with one of Shay’s friends.

Finally, when I don’t break away from his scrutiny, he gets up and silently walks over to the kitchen area. I see his head turn as he studies the countertop as though searching for evidence of a knife and blood like perhaps I’d cut myself or something, but obviously finds nothing. Nothing but his breakfast and coffee. He picks up his plate and mug and moves over to the dining table again. I’m about to shout at him to stop, when he suddenly rears back, almost spilling his hot drink on himself. He casts a curious look at the table before his gaze flickers my way, understanding now evident in his stare. He changes course and comes to me, setting his food down on the coffee table and taking a sip of his coffee.

After another concerned look my way, he reaches over for my backpack and laptop that Shay had set out, and pulls it over. “Okay, honeypie. Finish up your breakfast so we can get your schoolwork done and enjoy the rest of the day.”



Although Shay only had to go into Ashland once this week, he claimed he had shit to do around town, and so every day, I had a babysitter at home.

For the five days I was home, I still heard things through the rumour mill online. On Facebook, I learned that Ashley and the other girls weren’t in school for the rest of the week, either. From browsing around on different profiles and updates, I learned that they were seen with black eyes, their fake nails gone, and fingers all bandaged up. To top it off, their parents had gone into Ashland and purchased wigs for them as their heads had been shaven. Becca had been taken to a doctor to get her ears stitched up again, but the word was that her parents were talking about pressing charges against me for assault. The next day, Mr. Perry’s car blew up in the parking

lot of the accounting firm where he worked and Mrs. Perry's beloved Persian cat, Giggles, went missing.

I should have known that it didn't matter in the end when he asked me what I wanted to be done. Shay was going to do what *he* felt was right. What he considered to be justice. But I'm not even mad at him for ignoring me. I feel oddly satisfied knowing that he went after those bitches in a weird way. *Safe*.

By the time Friday came around, I was ahead in the schoolwork they'd sent home with me. Gavin, it turns out, was quite well-read, and when I started on my English homework in Canadian Literature, he was eager to jump in and help. I'd chosen to read two of Farley Mowat's books at his suggestion, and decided to do my book report on *Never Cry Wolf*. He even went over my thesis and made a few corrections by telling me I'm too "comma happy" and needed to shorten several run-on sentences. However, when it came to my French homework, he quickly backed out and disappeared out the front door for a smoke.

Our days were pleasant and relaxing. Gavin has always been sweet and has this calming presence whenever I am around him. He wasn't constantly on edge like Shay. He didn't flirt like Cody. He respected physical boundaries, unlike Aron. Then Leif, well, I was invisible to him, except when I used to come by the clubhouse with baked goods. Now that I think back on it, Gavin was the only one I don't remember seeing at the club the day I'd walked in on their drug-infused sex party.

At midday, I made our lunches, usually sandwiches, and he would have us sit out on the front deck to get some sunlight. The air is chillier as the summer begins its transition to fall. The canopy of leaves above our heads is nearly all red, gold, and orange. I always found it beautiful when all the fallen leaves are littered on the ground with so many colors. From here, you can't see Maple Drive. Even when the leaves are completely gone in the winter, the tangle of trees and dead-looking branches of the bushes and shrubs obscure it completely.

Gavin is perfectly comfortable sitting in silence, which gives me time to think about the note Keenan managed to get to me. Since I discovered it, it has been on my mind, but the letter itself I had destroyed the first chance I got by setting it on fire using Shay's lighter before dumping the ashes into the toilet to flush. I wasn't taking any chances of it being found.

Key was going to try to contact me again. The question was, did I want him to? Did I want to risk opening that door and having that communication with him again? The whole point of Shay and I being together now was because I was trying to protect Keenan. This seemed counter-intuitive. My immediate thought was, *No! Absolutely not! Not worth the risk...* but a painful stabbing sensation quickly followed this in my chest and my mood plummeted at the thought of saying goodbye to him again. It's like I have the smallest opening, but I'm trying to decide whether or not I want to slam the window closed or open it all the way and run.

The question is... should I? Do I want to? Will I risk it? If I did, I needed a more careful way to communicate with him. I have to make sure Shay has no doubts of my devotion to him.

In the distance, I hear a loud bang and my heart hammers in my chest as I leap to my feet and stumble back until I hit the outside wall of the house. Gavin is on his feet in an instant, his hand flying to the back of his pants withdrawing a black handgun. He moves in front of me, his weapon held aloft as he squints through the trees and murmurs, "Mina, get in the house. Now!"

I don't need to be told twice. I slide along the wall until my hand touches the cool metal of the door handle and I rip it open throwing myself inside. Without thinking, I run to Shay's room and tear open the drawer to the side table grabbing the silver handgun I know he keeps there. I have no fucking clue how to use it, but Gavin hasn't come back inside, and I'll be fucking damned if I just sit in this house like a victim again.

I race back to the front and peer around the doorway, trying to see where Gavin is. He's there still but has moved behind one of the thick pillars made out of a cedar log. It hides most of his body, and he watches the driveway. The gun in my hands is heavier than I expected, and I don't even think the safety is off. I look down at it, trying to figure it out when a rumble of a large engine breaks through the silence outside, approaching much faster than I was comfortable with. I snap to attention just as a large white moving van makes its way around the bend and... disappears?

What in the fuck? Where did it go?

I push open the screen door as Gavin shoves his handgun into the back of his pants again, appearing quite at ease with the fact a moving truck has vanished before our very eyes. He spins at the sound of my steps and pulls a

cigarette box out of his pocket before snapping, “I thought I told you to stay inside?”

“What the hell was that? You saw that right?”

“I did,” he said, lighting up before leaning back against the pillar. “Now get your ass back inside like I told you.”

“Where did it go?”

“That way,” he nods to the right side of the property where the trees and underbrush are thicker. “Now get inside.”

“But what the hell is it doing on our property?”

“Don’t worry about it, Mina. Just get in.”

“But-”

“Bloody fuck, girl! No wonder you get yourself into trouble all the time! Just listen and do as you’re told!” He exhales a large waft of smoke, his brows furrowed as he dramatically bangs his head back against the smooth wood.

I glare at him and cross my arms awkwardly because of the weapon I’m still clutching. His eyes flick down, finally noticing it, and balks, his eyes going so big it’s almost comical. He lunges forward and snatches it from my hands, “Where the fuck did you get this?” he asks incredulously.

“The bedside table. It’s for home protection.”

“Why the fuck do you have it?”

“Because I thought we were getting attacked!” I half-shout at him, frustrated. “I was trying to help! Do you really think I was going to cower inside the house like I did before when... when...” My voice trails off as I think about how I hid in the closet while my mother tried to buy us time before the Beasts could get here. My stomach twists into knots and I feel sick as the sounds of her screams get louder and louder in my head. Gavin’s stare goes from angry to confused, but I don’t wait to explain. I turn and run back into the house, making it to the washroom just in time before I throw up my lunch. Behind me, I hear the stomping of his biker boots as he follows. Moments later, his hands carefully pull my hair away from my face as I heave again.

“You’re safe, Mina,” he says gently, and I can hear how worried he is as he tries to calm me down. “You’re safe. What happened last time... it was a tragic, a fucking *tragic*, thing that happened to you and your mother. And it shouldn’t have. Just know that there is no way that any of us will allow anyone to get their hands on you again. Ever. You got me?”

I nod wearily, spitting a little into the basin before I reach up and flush. I hear the tap run for a few seconds before Gavin shoves a glass of water under my nose, and I swallow it back before I shakily set it down on the counter. He leaves me alone to wash my face and clean my mouth out. I know he's right. After what happened, there's no way Shay or any of the Beasts would allow the asshole behind the whole attack a chance to try again. Maybe being babysat wasn't completely insane, after all?



Friday night, Shay comes home a little later than usual. Gavin and I are playing a round of Call of Duty in the sitting area when he finally steps through the front door, looking exhausted. It was night out, the sun setting earlier now, and as comforting as Gavin's presence is, it is nothing compared to how safe I feel with Shay. I find myself jumping to my feet and practically skipping over to him before throwing my arms around his middle, catching him off guard as he stumbles back a step.

"Hey, are you okay?" He asks, trying to tip my face up to his, but I just bury it against his chest, any little traces of anxiety now gone that he is home.

"I'm fine. Just happy you're home."

His arms wrap around me then, and he squeezes tight, his lips pressing into the crown of my head as he hugs me back. "Everything okay today?" he asks, not letting me go.

"All her school work is done and sent in. Should have no problems with it." I could hear Gavin moving around as he got ready to leave. "And an email was sent by the school to her student account. I guess that sniveling ass-hat, White, decided to comply and waived the Student Support Group meeting requirement." I peek over at him and catch his knowing smile. No doubt he knew about Shay's attack on Monday. "All Mina has to do is sign in at the office, and she can attend her regular classes as usual."

"Good. Glad the fucker listened, or else I'd have to drive something thicker into his skull than those staples..." at the sound of his voice deepening, I quickly focus my attention on him and press a firm kiss over his chest, moving aside the silver dog tags that he always wore. When I

look up at him, I notice how the corners of his mouth lift ever so slightly, Shay's version of a smile.

"Did you finish everything you needed to?" Gavin asks. I furrow my brow in confusion, surveying both of them. When Shay nods, I narrow my eyes a little.

"Uh, what's going on, guys?"

"Nothing, nothing," Gavin smirks as he slides his arms through the sleeves of his leather jacket and gives me a playful wink, being anything but convincing. They are hiding something. He nods to Shay, "I'll see you soon?"

"I pushed off till next week."

Gavin stops dead in his tracks, eyeing Shay warily, "What?"

"I'm taking a few more days in between the runs."

"Does Elias know?"

"It's fine, I got it, Storm." Shay snaps at him, but Gavin doesn't appear convinced. He chews the corner of his mouth, his weight shifting from side to side. He is about to speak again when Shay cuts him off, "I said, *it's fine*. I got things. Don't freak out about it. I can deal with the Faceless."

"They're no fucking joke, man,"

"I know. I got it, okay?"

Again. A mention of that city gang. Why was Shay so involved with them? And who was Elias?

Gavin lingers in the doorway, his face troubled, but he doesn't push it. Instead, he opens the door, stopping to nod at me, "It was a blast seeing you again, kid."

I roll my eyes at the nickname but smile as he waves and sees himself out. I want to ask Shay who the hell Elias is and what that whole conversation was about when he reaches for my property cut and hands it to me, "Put this on, Sweetness. I got a surprise for you."

I tug it on, curious, as Shay isn't one for surprises. "Where are we going?" I ask as Gavin's motorcycle rumbles from outside, the sound petering off in the distance as he leaves.

"Just for a little stroll. C'mon." He waits while I shove my feet into my shoes. When I straighten up, he holds his hand out to me, and I take it as he leads me outside into the gathering night. We wander a little ways down the drive and I shiver in the cool air. Shay releases my hand only to wrap his arm around my shoulders pulling me in close to his side. I burrow into his

warmth, wondering where we're going when we swerve off the main street and turn onto a new gravel road through the trees. My breath catches when I realize it's in the bend where I saw that moving van disappear to.

"Shay?" I breathe, unable to hide the fear in my voice. It's dark, my mind is racing with the thoughts of being watched by those who want to kill me, but he is completely relaxed.

"You're with me, Mina," he leans in whispering in my ear. "No one will fucking touch you."

His words encourage me to keep going, to trust him as he leads me through the path, our feet crunching under the newly laid gravel until a glow in the distance breaks through the trees.

"I think things have been better lately between us," he says as we stroll along, "so much so that I've decided to grant you your excursions after school."

My head snaps up in his direction, hope swelling in my chest.

"Gavin will pick you up and take you out for an hour or two, and then bring you home when I get back into town after my business runs into Ashland." He turns his head, and even in the low light and shadows of the trees that surround us, I can make out the warning in his eyes. "You will do as he says. You will stay *close* to him, and no fucking backtalk. You got that?"

"Yes, Shay," I nod seriously and rest my head on his shoulder. "Thank you," I whisper.

The arm around my shoulders gives me a squeeze before he murmurs, "You're welcome, Sweetness." His voice is incredibly smug and content.

At this point, the trees break apart to reveal a single-wide mobile home. From the light on the small front porch, I could tell it was dark forest green, with natural wood trimming, and actually quite adorable looking. More like a little cottage than anything. I stare at it in awe, realizing that this was what he's been sneaking around doing the past few days. Only, I know that he must have been working on this for much longer. There's no way he did this in just five days. He pulls me along behind him, like he's excited which is a rare thing for him, and practically drags me up the steps to the little porch and inside.

The walls are cream with dark wood trimming, and the peaked ceiling has identical coloured wood beams. He had gone out and bought furniture, too. The couch was a dark, rich blue colour with a patchwork throw, and the

kitchen is decorated with a grey backsplash and white cabinets. The small, round kitchen table has an antique white-wash effect to it. To complete the simple, but cozy feel of the place, he also had a wood stove put in.

“What do you think?” He asks, taking my property jacket off my shoulders to hang on the coat tree by the door.

“It’s... *nice*,” I answer honestly. It wasn’t at all what I expected. Shay’s room at James’ place was very much like his personality, black, dark, and like a cave. This place, well... it felt like a *home*. Before I get the chance to inspect the place further, he takes my hand again and pulls me down the hallway. The first door opens to a spare room that he’s set up with his desk, computer, and guitars... an office. Huh, so that’s where his guitars had disappeared to. When I asked him last night where they had gone, since the walls were suddenly bare in their absence, he told me he was getting them restrung, which I knew was a lie. He did that himself. The washroom is behind the next door, its counter made out of a grey butternut wood, white marble top, with pale pistachio green tiles along the wall of the shower and muted gold hardware. Again, not what I was expecting.

The last room was *our* room. The far wall was paneled with horizontal planks of wood, ranging in assorted shades from maple, walnut, oak, grey, and the occasional bright, almost orange shade of mahogany. The other walls were painted a soft white, with dark curtains closed concealing us from the outside world. The bed is massive, with emerald green blankets and white sheets, and his old patchwork blanket was folded at the end of the bed. There is a dresser and a closet. On the dresser, I notice my personal belongings like my brush and small jewelry box, arranged on one end while Shay had his sunglasses and watches on the other end.

“When did you do all of this?” I ask him, opening a drawer to the sleek, mahogany dresser seeing that it was empty. Of course, as all my clothes were still at James’. My chest starts to constrict, tightening up, at the realization that Shay had been working on *this*. On building a home for just us. He had mentioned it fleetingly during the summer, but to see him actually stick to it and build us something special just for us two... it chokes me up.

“Been working on it since the end of August,” he says, leaning against the doorframe, watching me.

Fuck Mina... you’re such a goddamn piece of shit. You keep fighting him at every fucking turn, that mean bitch screams at me, And look at what

he has done for you? He fucking loves you! And you're thinking about meeting with his worst enemy all over again! I want nothing more right now than to punch myself in the face.

“Why?” I ask him, “Why did you... do this?” I gesture at everything, including the homey touches he’s added like lining my favourite books on a shelf in a little case by my side of the bed. I had to pack those into a storage box in my old room after he trashed it last month. And now here they were, back on display. He also had a picture of the two of us that happened to be the same one James had in his office, only it sat on the bedside table on his side.

“Because, Mina,” Shay moves slowly toward me, his silver eyes never leaving mine for a moment. “I wanted to give you a home. A place that’s just ours where we can be together and fuck everyone else.” He reaches for my jacket and slides it off of me effortlessly, carefully laying it over the top of a distressed, ancient-looking wooden chest at the end of the bed. His hands glide up the sleeves of my shirt until he’s gripping my upper arms, his face reddening. “I want you to have a place where you feel safe. Where I can keep you safe,” he whispers finally. I feel my throat close at his words like he had somehow managed to break open my chest and actually heal my heart just a little.

These past few months have been hell. I’ve been a nervous wreck, terrified that the bastard who sent those four men after mum and me, was going to try again. I mean, he only got half the job done. Mum was dead, but I was still here. I was never brought to the “exchange point” or whatever it was they’d called it. So I’ve been lying awake most nights, jumping at loud noises, feeling claustrophobic in crowds, and coming back to James’ house. Forget it. Every time I had to walk into that dining room, my heart dropped.

But he’d gotten this place, a small, little home just for us... for me.

Guilt envelops me like an old, unwanted friend. *See Mina? You don’t deserve good things... why should you? You’re a piece of shit for refusing Shay and his love. And of all people you had to go and befriend behind his back, you chose someone he hates more than anyone else? Way to go, you fucking bitch.*

BUT... an even smaller voice spoke up at the back of my mind, demanding to be heard. *You are human*, that voice in the back of my mind whispers, *forgive yourself for wanting what you want, Mina*. But Shay. It

would kill him if he knew. I quietly sniffle and slump where I stand, feeling like the shittiest person on the planet.

Shay lifts one of his large, rough hands and I feel his thumb wipe a tear from my cheek before he stoops low and kisses me. I can't help but cling to him as he does, I'm so grateful to him at this moment, that I kiss him back.

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Chapter ten

MONDAY MORNING I'm allowed back at school. Thanks to Shay's influence, I can skip my meeting with Mr. White. All I have to do is walk into the office, sign in, and I can continue with my day like last week never happened. I put on a pair of dark skinny jeans, a black Celtic Beasts t-shirt, and slip the property jacket over my shoulders. I tie my hair back into a fishtail braid, slip into my high tops and step outside with my book bag slung over my shoulder. Shay is waiting in his truck, and even from our front porch, I see the slight smile on his face as he looks me over and gives an approving nod.

I climb into the truck and lean over, giving him a kiss on the lips before I buckle up and lounge back in my seat. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see him smirk as he shifts gears and backs us out of the driveway.

When we pull up outside the school, everyone who is in the vicinity turns to eye us anxiously, but I just smile and pucker my lips, blowing them a little kiss. I turn to Shay to say goodbye when he reaches over and wraps an arm behind my head, pulling me in for a deep, languorous kiss while his

other hand slides down my seatbelt to unbuckle me. When he finally pulls back, I'm slightly breathless, and I take a few seconds before I open my eyes to find him watching me with his small little grin. Leaning forward, he gives my mouth two more little pecks and finally releases me.

"Have a great day at school, Sweetness."

I step out of the truck in a daze, and when I look up at the others in the quad, they quickly avert their eyes. Good. I don't need another incident like last week. So I roll my shoulders back and walk with my head held high. My victory from last week's fight and the property jacket on my back give me a boost of confidence today, which I need. I am done with these assholes treating me like garbage every day. They have no fucking clue what I've been through, and honestly, their opinion means less than nothing to me now.

When I step into the office, the receptionist truly jumps back a little in her seat, and the door to Mr. White's office slams shut. It's almost comical how everyone is suddenly afraid of me now when really, they should have been acting like this since my first day back at school when it became apparent that I was Shay's. As I approach the front desk, the receptionist slides an approval slip towards me to sign. Once it's signed, she quickly snatches it away and answers the phone, not even looking in my direction.

Huh, well that was easy, I think as I turn and head out into the front foyer. It's a little disarming as I make my way down the halls to my locker. Kids who had shoved into me to knock me over, catcalled, or even sneered as I once walked past, now skirted around, giving me a wide berth of space. I mean, I'll take it. It beats having to fight my way through the halls. I could have used this last month when my leg was worse off, but I won't question the reprieve I'm being given now.

Just as I make it to my locker, I notice a group of girls a short way down the hall, all whispering together, and after the past week's worth of bullshit, my guard is up. My mouth drops at the sight of them. It's a group of cheerleaders, the ones who had joined in with Becca and the others in heckling me. They are all wearing wigs, bad ones, but I guess that's all they could find on short notice. The ends of their fingers are bandaged, shorter now that their nails are gone, and they're dressed up in sweaters and tights. When one of the girl's sleeve falls back from adjusting the wig on her head, I catch sight of the bruises.

Holy shit... I think. The rumours are true. Shay did have his goons go after them.

Before I can look away, one of the girls catches my eye and she blanches, jumping back to hide behind the others, which in turn, sets the rest off like someone had just thrown a stick of dynamite into the middle of their huddle. They all scramble, slamming their lockers shut and running away, eager to put as much space between us as possible.

I want to feel bad for them. I do. And maybe a tiny, a very tiny part of me does. But then I remember the taunting, the pushing and shoving, the name-calling, the vandalism on my locker, all of it, and I turn away, my resolve hardening. *Karma is a fucking bitch, you sheep. Wallow in it.*

I spin the dial on my lock, open the door, and stop dead in my movements. Sitting inside my locker on the little shelf is a small, black cellphone. A burner cell. Key.

I look around me, searching for any prying eyes, but for once, everyone is minding their own business and carefully avoiding me altogether. I move closer, my front half practically immersed inside the narrow opening, and snatch the small device, holding it carefully as I turn it on. I hadn't forgotten about the note and what he had told me, but seeing this little device in my hands, makes it all feel real. I hadn't imagined it. And when it powers on and I check the messages, one sits there from Captain Stud Muffin. I feel like someone's fist is crushing my heart when I see that familiar nickname, and I just want to break down and cry. But I manage to hold it together as I press on the unread message.

Captain Stud Muffin: Hey Sunshine. God, I hope you got my note safely. In case you didn't, I want you to know I'm not giving up on you. I need to know that you're okay. I need to know that you are actually happy, even if it is with him.

But you don't look happy, hun. Yeah, yeah, I know. How the fuck do I know that? I'll admit it, I've become something of a major creepy stalker and I've been following you around, love. The way we left things, I've just been fucking worried as all fuck...

Like I said before... if YOU don't want me, that changes things. But if it's just because of him, then that's bullshit. So tell me... what do YOU want, Mina? Do you want to say goodbye to me forever? Do you

want to live like this? As his property? You want more than this, Mina. I know you do. If you stay, you'll shrivel up and die and you know it. Do you want to turn into a shell of yourself? Because that's where you're headed.

So please, love, just tell me.

If you want to stay, I'll leave you alone. I won't message you again. I'll officially remove myself from your life and disappear. Think on it, okay? I'll give you a week, because I know this is hard for you. If I don't hear from you by the end of next Monday, then I have my answer.



By the time Gavin pulls up in front of the school, my mind is a blur. All day I'd been consumed with thoughts of Keenan, so much so that I didn't notice how everyone else was avoiding me like the plague. Lunch had been admittedly bearable for once, with a table to myself, and everyone else keeping their distance. But I sat there, going over and over in my head, asking myself what the hell I wanted to do. If he had brought this to me in July, I would have leapt at the chance. But now? Things were so different.

When I climb into Gavin's jeep, he doesn't say a word to me as I slouch in the passenger seat, not really noticing the world drift by my window as I deliberate on what I want to do.

Yes, Shay was menacing. Yes, Shay scared the hell out of me because I knew how dangerous he could be. But he wasn't like that with me. A part of me *does* genuinely love him. Did it make sense? No. Absolutely not. It's just how I feel.

But... and this is a huge one... I am *not* Shay's equal. I'm not.

In the end, it is all about him. It is about making him happy. Making sure *he* is okay.

Another but... I *do* love him. And he loves me.

I step out of Gavin's jeep, utterly unaware of where we are since my mind is such a mess. When I straighten up, I realize we're in the parking lot of the town public library, which sits in the middle of a beautiful square. In the summer everything is so bright and alive. There are vibrant flowers everywhere, and the fountain in front of the old brick building usually

sprouts sparkling water from the mouth of the koi fish centered in the stone gazebo. But now, with it being the first week of October, the grass is almost completely dead and yellow, the leaves on the trees are barer, and the breeze has that brisk edge to it that makes me pull my jacket tighter around me.

Absentmindedly, I let my eyes wander looking around at the buildings that surround the square in town. There's the old ice cream shop on the far street corner that borders the old abandoned railway platform, the station house, which has since been turned into an Italian restaurant. I remember many afternoons spent at the ice cream parlour with Shay, or with one of my old friends like Becca or Ashley, until he came to pick me up most evenings. There was a liquor store, a book shop, a barbershop, and several ladies' clothing boutiques that I consistently promise myself I will never step foot in.

I'm about to turn back to Gavin when a familiar SUV catches my attention. It's parked close to the corner by the old railway station, and though the windows are rolled up, I see the faint shadow of a figure behind the tinted glass.

I'll admit it, I've become something of a major creepy stalker and I've been following you around, love... Keenan...

"Mina?"

I startle at the unexpected proximity of Gavin's voice at my side and spin to face him, but his dark eyes are locked on the charcoal SUV that I'd just been staring at with strong suspicion. *Shit...*

"So, you have some books that are due back? Trying to avoid that twenty-five cent late fee, eh?" I laugh and grab his shoulder, attempting to redirect his attention away, but even to me, my laugh is off and fake. *Goddamnit...*

"Who is that, Mina?" Gavin asks me, his voice exuding malice.

"Who is who? C'mon, where are your books? Let's get inside. It's cold out here." I reach for my bookbag and slam the door shut, pleased when the loud bang distracts him.

"Careful, geez!" He snaps at me, looking over his black jeep like I might've actually caused it pain. When he turns back to me, his eyes are narrowed and looks again to where the charcoal SUV used to be. Once he'd turned away, I saw it pull out and tear away. Breathing a little easier, I head up the walkway, determined to get inside and divert him from any curious assumptions he may be making. I didn't need him reporting the mysterious

vehicle sighting to Shay. It wouldn't take long for them to figure out who it belonged to.

Gavin ran up and fell into step just as I walked around the fountain and trudged up the stone steps to the old, oak doors. Inside, the place smelled of polished wood, paper, and that sort of antique smell you often find in old buildings. Of all the remaining original structures in our town, the library was one of the oldest ones, having first been used as a town hall before it was converted. It was almost a hundred and fifty years old. The entry doors opened to a more modern set of glass ones which opened into the foyer of the space.

It was two stories, with most of the newer books located up along the second floor, overlooking the round, green marble stoned lobby, the shining walnut reception desk at the center. Two clerks were sitting behind it, and at the sound of our arrival, looked up, appearing bored and done with the day. But after one look at Gavin in his leather Celtic Beasts jacket, they sat up eyes wide, and immediately looked nervous as hell. I don't blame them. The Beasts owned this town. There wasn't a single person who didn't know who they were.

To his credit, Gavin did give them the smallest of smiles to help reassure them. Though his tall physique, the tattoos snaking up his throat, and multiple lip rings didn't exactly do him any favours. If anything, they shrank back in the seats, cautiously watching us as we strolled past, heading for a table near the back hidden in a corner beneath the second-floor balcony.

"So what's the plan?" I ask him as he takes a seat at the long, narrow table and kicks his feet up on one of the spare chairs.

"You're gonna do your homework, and I'm gonna rest my eyes for a bit," he says, tilting back in the seat, his hands folded behind his head closing his eyes.

"Are you serious?" I gape at him. "*This* is my outing?"

"Take it or leave it, kiddo," he mumbles, unmoving. "It's your first one. Don't get greedy. Be glad I didn't take you to the clubhouse."

He was right about that. Despite my birthday party having been hassle-free, I wasn't eager to return to that place—too many bad memories. So I thump down into a chair across from him, reach into my bag, and pull out some math homework I desperately need to review. My mind has been so preoccupied today with thoughts of Keenan, contemplating what I am going

to do about him that I failed to pay attention in most of my classes. And I still wasn't sure of what I was going to do.

We sit in silence at the table, the only sounds coming from the creaking floorboards above as other patrons move about, the echoing thud of the front doors opening and closing. While I re-read the handout and chapter from math, every so often, I'd catch Gavin peeking through his lashes, always watching, even as he rested. I glance around feeling uneasy in a new environment with people I don't know walking close by. Though my anxiety had been churning away in my stomach at first, eventually, I managed to calm myself enough to concentrate on my work.

Beep! Beep!

The alert was so unexpected and loud in the quiet space, I jolted in my seat and searched for the source. It strongly reminded me of the old ringtone to my first burner cell, and for one horrifying moment, I thought that I had it on me and forgot to mute it. When Gavin dug around in his pocket and produced his own phone, I somewhat relaxed.

Calm down, Mina. The old one is buried, and the other you left in your locker. You're good. He's safe. You're good... calm down...

Watching Gavin's fingers fly across the screen as he responded to a message, I forced myself to keep still and steady my breathing. I didn't want to give him any reason to question me. What if I slipped up? So I lower my head over my homework, trying hard to focus when really, the numbers might as well have been animal tracks in the snow for all the sense they made to me.

Beep! Beep!

I startle again at the sound and from the corner of my eye, I can see one of the librarians flick an irritated look our way. But there was no way in hell she was going to come over and tell Gavin to turn off his phone. He was a Beast. He could do as he pleased.

I glance up at him through my lashes, noting how his dark brows pull down as he reads the text. He was frustrated. His fingers flew again across the screen, moving with purpose as he furiously typed back to whoever was messaging him. I bite my tongue, knowing better than to ask. Most likely, it was club business, and I wasn't a member. I had no right to know anything that went on there. He would more than likely tell me to mind my business if I even dared question him.

Beep! Beep!

This time, Gavin lets out a harsh sort of growl and when he reads the message, he scowls at the screen for several seconds, until his red cheeks pale and his scowl turns to one of horror.

“Mina, I gotta make a call... you good here?” He says in a rush.

“Uh, y-yeah...” I stare at him in shock, caught off-guard by how terrified he looks. Who is he messaging? What did they say? Gavin doesn’t wait for an answer before he storms off, phone already pressed to his ear as he calls out, and tears out the emergency exit out the back. I stare at the door as it slams shut behind him, the sound echoing loudly throughout the space, but no one makes any sort of complaint. I hesitate, my suspicions rising as the seconds tick by. Who could make Gavin so nervous that he’d abandon his orders from Shay to look after me? Who could make someone go from angry to beyond scared with just one message?

Shay... it could only be Shay.

I rise to my feet, my chair scraping against the marble floor, which earns me a warning look from the librarian. Apparently, being one of the Beasts’ women doesn’t exempt me from their stickler rules. I waggle my fingers at them, flashing an innocent smile, before turning and abandoning our table to follow Gavin. I carefully ease the back door open a crack, watchful in case he’s standing directly outside it, but he’s nowhere in sight. Swinging the door wide, I look around, wondering where the hell he had gone to. I’m standing behind the library, the back end is more of an alley than anything else. The space between the outer brick wall of the building and the grassy knoll with a support wall lining is just big enough for a garbage truck to motor through. I look both ways, not seeing anything, and am about to give up when I hear an angry shout, followed by the sound of someone slamming something into metal. I spin to see the back dumpster and beyond it, the top of Gavin’s messy, black fauxhawk.

I lightly step over to the other side, staying low as I hunker down to eavesdrop on him.

“... fucking touch her I swear to God, I will kill you!”

Holy shit! What in the fuck is he talking about? I lean my back against the cool brick wall, almost holding my breath as I try not to make a sound.

“I know it’s you, you prick! Who else would break in and leave that shit behind for her to come home to? You’re the only one crazy enough to do that shit-” I have never heard Gavin so angry in my life.

“Come *on*, Manic... the headless dolls? Really? You fucking took her little girl’s doll heads and left the bodies in the fucking oven! Lindsey has done *nothing* to betray the Beasts’ trust! I don’t give a fuck what delusional fucked up theory you’ve come up with, but the bullshit stops now!”

What in the ever-loving...? I sit in horror as I listen in on the one-sided conversation, wondering why the hell Shay would do such a disturbing thing to Lindsey. From what I could remember from my birthday, she had been perfectly content working as a bartender at their clubhouse. She liked the security they provided her, the money, and I always suspected Gavin had a soft spot for her. Why would Shay be suspicious of her?

“You’re fucking delusional, man... you’re losing it. The Faceless have made you so fucking paranoid you’re constantly coming at the rest of us... no, I’m *not* full of shit! Pull yourself together! Fuck!”

There’s another loud bang against the other side of the dumpster, and I know he’s probably kicked or punched it. I understand his frustration. Dealing with Shay when his mind is set is impossible. Include his dark delusions with it? Forget it.

“Just calm the fuck down, alright? You don’t... no, don’t. Fucking *don’t*, Manic! If you touch her, I swear to God!” Gavin’s voice breaks as though he’s choking on uncontrollable tears. “She’s innocent, I swear it. Lindsey would never... she wouldn’t...” he stalls as though he’s being cut off on the other end, “Look, just-just get yourself back into town, and we can hang at the club, yeah? I’ll get us some food and drinks, and we can just hang out with the boys. When was the last time we just had a night out together that wasn’t because of some menial task Elias sent us on, huh?”

Silence again, and I strain to hear the strangled words out of his mouth next.

“Please, Manic... please. Just leave Lindsey alone. Don’t touch her or Jenny... *please-*” he goes silent again, and I slowly rise to my feet, feeling numb as the realization of what is happening fully hits me. Lindsey and her little girl, Jenny, are both in danger from Shay. Doll heads, bodies in the oven... threats. This is how Manic warms up when he’s toying with someone. If Gavin is this scared for them, Shay must be getting ready to push it even further, and I am not going to give him a chance to do it.

I hear Gavin’s footsteps walking around the dumpster. I see him before he sees me, and his eyes are red, his face pale, and his hands are shaking as he quickly fires off a text. But when he raises his head and catches sight of

me standing there, he stops dead. His dark eyes are fixed on me, his expression still distraught and in a state of shock. For a long while, we stare at each other, unmoving, the cold autumn wind buffeting us and filling the silence that's deafening.

Without taking my eyes off him, I reach into my pocket and withdraw my phone. I press a button and bring it to my ear, listening as it only rings once before Shay's deep voice answers, sounding apprehensive.

"Mina? Are you okay?" he says in a rush before his tone changes, temper rising, "has Gavin done something to you?"

"Gavin is right here with me," I say, holding his penetrating stare, and I feel a sense of calm wash over me as my decision solidifies. "We're at the library. He just came back from the washroom. I'm finishing up my math homework, but..."

"But? What is it? Is he doing something? Is he trying to get you to go somewhere with him? Has he said anything to you?" he snaps. I hear it in his voice... I'm not talking to Shay at the moment. It's Manic.

"But," I continue, like I hadn't heard his paranoid questions. "I was wondering if you're able to come home early tonight and hang out with me? I don't really feel like being here. I just want to have a night in with you. Maybe I can make us something to eat? Watch a movie together?" I lower my tone, making my voice sound breathy and serene, hoping the calm in it will help steady him. "Would that be okay, Shay? Will you come home so we can have a night together?"

Gavin watches me, eyes tightening as he listens, appearing dubious but patient. On the other end, Shay is breathing heavily, and I know he's fighting the darkness in his mind, most likely trying to convince himself that everything is alright and that there is nothing to worry about. I can picture him, phone held to his ear, one hand clutching a fistful of his hair as he battles his demons back.

"Yeah, Sweetness?" he says finally, his voice breaking slightly. "You want that?"

"I do. I want that with you. I really do, Shay."

He sucks in a deep breath, holding it before he lets it whistle out between his teeth and murmurs, "I'd like that too."

"So you're coming home, then? You're spending tonight with me?" I nod to the phone in Gavin's hand and fix him with a stern look. He snaps out of his uncertain haze and scrolls through his contacts.

"I'll be there in an hour," he tells me, already sounding happier at the idea, and I breathe a sigh of relief as I nod again to Gavin.

"I can't wait to see you," I tell Shay as his friend pulls out his phone and holds it to his ear. I barely hear him as he moves a few feet away, murmuring softly but rapidly firing off instructions, "Lindsey? I need to talk to you... no, listen! I want you to get Jenny and pack a suitcase..."

"I can't wait to see you, too, Sweetness."



Gavin brought me home right after he hung up with Lindsey and we waited for Shay to return. He had been antsy as hell, sitting on the sofa in the living area, checking his phone every thirty seconds while I put together something for dinner. The very moment we hear the rumble of Shay's truck as he comes down the drive, Gavin is on his feet and out the door.

I tip-toe to one of the windows and draw the dark curtain back a smidge. Below, I can see Shay stepping out of his new truck, his scowl in place as Gavin steps up to him. I try to listen in on their conversation, but they are so far away that I can't hear anything through the glass. However, judging by the expressions on their faces, they are having it out. I doubt that Gavin is telling Shay he will be moving Lindsey and her little girl tonight. Maybe he is making one last appeal? Either way, I will be keeping Shay here with me, giving Gavin a chance to safely relocate the two girls where they won't be found.

Gavin takes off, furious after his discussion with my stepbrother, and disappears through the gravel drive between the trees. I quickly drop the curtain and hurry back to the kitchen to pile the chicken alfredo noodle casserole onto our plates just as Shay comes through the front door.

For Gavin... for Lindsey... for Jenny... I'd told myself this over and over again as I amped myself up for tonight. I am going to act like the most abiding, lovey-dovey girlfriend that he's always wanted me to be. So the moment he steps in and hangs up his jacket, I skip over and throw my arms around his neck so I can give him a kiss, which he eagerly returns. Breathless, I giggle and pull back to see his smirk, like he is incredibly content. When he sees that I have dinner prepared and ready, his smile only broadens and with ease, he lifts me up off the ground and carries me over to

our tiny circular table and plunks me down in a chair. He brings our plates over, grabs a beer for himself, a coke for me, and for the first time in a long time, we share an evening that feels very much like the old days.

After we eat, he helps me clean up, and we watch an old Arnie movie snuggled up together on our new couch. The only thing missing was James, but I quickly push the sad thought aside and concentrate on keeping our night light, happy, and most importantly, keeping Shay distracted. Soon, we are laughing at old scenes we once loved, and I find myself leaning into him, enjoying his warmth and feeling like that old sense of camaraderie was back. I had missed it, longed for it again, as the shift in our relationship caused its absence.

Now though, his hand travels down to squeeze my ass every once in a while, or at times he'll turn my face up to his so he could give me a sweet kiss, the comforting feeling doesn't go away like before. It feels... different. I like it. When the movie ends and Shay turns me again so he can kiss me, I wrap my arms around him and let myself feel.

He makes love to me there on the couch, and afterwards, carries me to our bedroom, where he tucks us both in after securing the house locks and setting the alarm. I fell asleep easily that night, feeling a sense of peace that I've missed for so long.



My eyes snap open to find myself lost in darkness. I'm on my side, with Shay spooning me from behind as we lay in bed together and it is the middle of the night.

Something has woken me up. But what is it?

The small beeping sound is coming from the other side of the bed—Shay's phone. I turn in his arms and lightly shake him, doing my best to rouse him, but it's like he's dead to the world.

"Shay!" I whisper in his ear when the beeping goes off again. Whoever is messaging him, they were not being very patient. I grab his shoulder and give him a shove, grunting against his heavy weight. "Shay, your phone!"

"Hmmm, wha? What... was... what?" he slurs, coming to, and rubs his eyes hard.

“Your phone, Shay!” I say just as the beeping stops Instead, it begins to ring in a high shrill tone.

“Fucks’ sake!” he growls, reaching for it to check the number. He curses again under his breath and turns to me, giving my forehead a little kiss. “Go back to sleep, Sweetness. I gotta take this.”

I glance over at the alarm clock on his side. 4:23am.

“Shay, it’s almost four-thirty in the morning. I don’t think the Beasts have *ever* called you this early.” *Oh God, was it James? What if something had happened to my stepfather? When was the last time I’d spoken to him? Given him a hug?* I couldn’t remember. My heart starts to race at the thought of something happening to him. It is painful to think about. What if he is hurt and I never get a chance to tell him I love him? Or say goodbye? I feel a tightness in my chest at the thought.

But Shay just shakes his head at me. “No, Mina. It’s not the Beasts. It’s my other work associate. Go to sleep and I’ll be right back.” He slides out of the bed and quietly steps out of the room. I can hear the door to his office click shut. His *other* work associates? *The Faceless, idiot... who else has he mysteriously been bringing up again and again?*

I feel a chill run up and down my spine at the thought. I didn’t know much about these guys. A city gang, yes. Dangerous as hell, yes. They run the entire east end of Ashland and the downtown city core. I know that they have fought with the Beasts in the past when they’ve gone into the city. Shay infamously carved a smile into one of their member’s faces when he was just nineteen. So why was he so close to them now?

Curious, I slide out from under the covers and grab my fluffy pink nightgown he remembered to bring over for me, and sneak out of the room into the hall. I can hear his deep voice coming from behind the door to his office and creep as close to it as I can. Leaning against the wall, I strain to listen, trying to make sense of his one-sided conversation.

“You think I’m slacking? I’ve got my own shit going on.” Shay sounds pissed as hell at whoever called. “Not my fault people aren’t buying... Tell Elias not to lose his shit. I’ll be making a run tomorrow.”

A run tomorrow? What the hell does that mean? And he mentioned that name again... Elias.

“What?” Shay’s voice changes from angry, to confused and somewhat hollow, like what he heard has caught him completely off-guard. I want so

badly to peer into the room to see his face, but I don't make any sudden moves. *What did they tell him that made him sound so... unnerved?*

"But... in the schools?" he says softly, disbelief evident in his tone. "Look, I don't give a fuck about passing off product to some piece of shit in the city. But to high school kids... I don't know..." His voice trails off. *Passing off product?* I think and suddenly feel my blood drain from my face. *Is he talking about drugs?*

"No, I just—" he starts but stops like he's been cut off. "No, you don't need to call in Jeremy." he says in a rush, and I'm unnerved as I hear a slight hint of panic in his voice. Since when is Shay afraid of *anything*? *And Jeremy... Jeremy... that's not the first time I've heard that name, either.* "Look, I've done everything you've asked of me... I delivered intel on Bryant. I make weekly runs into Ashland and the border towns. But—" He goes quiet like he's been abruptly cut off again. *Intel on Bryant? Shay's been spying on someone? Bryant... Bryant... that name is familiar, too.* Why? I feel like I haven't heard it in years, but my memories are struggling to make the connection.

"You don't need to go to Bull. I got this," he snarls, his frustration returning. "Yeah, I fucking moved and shit. And I have club business going on. I'm a Beast, not a member of the Faceless. I prioritize my club first." I hear his chair slide back roughly like he's jumped to his feet. I shrink back a little from the door, preparing to run, but I don't hear him move again as he listens to whoever is on the other line.

"You leave her fucking out of it." Shay's voice drops dangerously as he whispers this so softly that I almost don't catch it. His words make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as they echo in my mind. "If you send him or anyone else after her, I'll fucking kill you *and* Elias. You got that?" he bites out, absolutely livid. "Don't fucking push me!"

He's silent for a bit, and I end up crouched on the floor, attempting to catch my breath. *Leave her out of it. Who the fuck else could it be?* Not a sweetbutt. There aren't any other women in Shay's life other than me. I feel numb all over and start shivering as I lean back against the wall, balancing on my heels as I work on slowing my breathing. *Slowly in... hold... and out.*

"Haven't heard from those guys in months. Not my responsibility to know. Can't you keep an eye on your own men?" Shay sounds less angry now and more bored. I can't stop myself from lingering to listen in, but I am

slowly inching back towards the bedroom with every footstep I hear him make. I'm desperate for information. "Don't fuck with me, then." Shay goes on, "It's a coincidence. Nothing more. Don't know where they went after our meeting. Don't give a shit. Now is that all? Or can I get back to fucking sleep?" He goes quiet for a minute. "They were grunt guys. Why should Elias care? They probably OD'd somewhere or fucked off to another city." Whoever he's talking to, they seem incredibly invested in these people who are missing. *Grunt guys?* To me, that sounds like men at the bottom of the totem pole. "I'm just saying, either they left, or they're dead. They're replaceable... Well, sorry to disappoint. I don't know anything. We done?" He pauses for a second before snapping, "Fine!"

At the sound of his footsteps approaching the office door, I rush back to the bedroom, running on the tips of my toes as softly as I can. Even with my limp, my ballet training is still there, and I move silently down the hall and back inside the bedroom where I throw my dressing gown aside and hide beneath the covers feigning sleep. All too soon, I hear the creak of the door as Shay enters, then feel the dip of the mattress as he joins me in bed, followed by the gentle touch of his hand as he slides it over my stomach, running circles over my skin with the tips of his fingers.

I let out a soft moan as though I'm waking up, "Shay?" I mumble.

"Shh, it's okay, Sweetness," he whispers in my ear.

"Who was calling?" I ask softly, trying to sound sleepy, when in fact, my mind is reeling with what I'd overheard, desperately piecing it all together.

"No one important. Come here," he pulls me so that my back is flush with his front, and I feel his naked body, hot and hard, against me. His fingers continue to stroke, slowly making their way down over my mound, until they slip between my folds. I instantly respond, arching into his touch. He knows my body so well. When his soft lips kiss the curve of my neck, moving slowly up just below my ear, I can't help the excited flutter that rushes through me. When I feel him touch me, a warmth spreads from my chest throughout my body, all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes. When Shay turns me over to lie beneath him, that feeling only grows, and I cling to him.

My protector is here. After overhearing that conversation, besides scaring the shit out of me, also seemed to reassure me, too. I believed him when he said he would kill those men if they came after me. He would. Of

course, he would. He took me away from the home that haunted me with dark memories and gave me a new one. I am *starving* for love. Craving it. I *need* to feel wanted. I need to know that someone out there *wants* me. And Shay does. Even if his love is unstable and forbidding, it is still love, isn't it? Isn't that a good thing? Shay loves me. He loves me more than anything. So I should be happy.

It's not the right kind of love, that voice in the back of my head whispers. *You know it's not.*

I shake the thought away. No. Love is love, isn't it? This is love. Someone who wants me, needs me, would do anything for me... *but only if it's what HE wants*, the voice snaps, refusing to go away.

Shay's fingers begin to move, flicking over my clit while sliding two into my pussy, distracting my mind from its inner conflict. His lips move across my collarbone until he reaches my left breast. Giving it a small nip, he takes my nipple into his mouth and sucks hard. I gasp at the pull, my thighs automatically closing around his muscled body that's stretched between them while his hand is pumping faster into me now.

This isn't love, that voice cries louder now. *He can't truly love you for you while he's trying to mold you into what he wants.*

Shay releases my breast and moves on to the other, his thumb now working my clit harder, faster, his fingers curving inside of me, sliding along that spot that has me quivering.

Does he ever let you do what YOU want, Mina? Or what HE wants? That voice won't shut up. No, maybe he doesn't let me do what I want some of the time, or... pretty much all the time. But it's for my own safety, right? That guy who orchestrated the attack is still out there. If Shay wasn't looking out for me, who would?

Shay bites my breast hard before he sweeps his tongue over my lips and plunges it into my mouth. I return his hungry kiss, sensing how desperately he wants me, needs me. I could feel that delicious pulse between my legs growing more, and more... I want him, too.

He's irrational. He's insane!

My orgasm hits me, and I cry out against his lips as I lift my hips off the bed, desperately chasing the feeling. But I shouldn't have worried because a moment later, I feel his cock slide inside of me, and I immediately feel content at the fullness. He starts to move, thrusting quick, deep strokes, causing my breasts to bounce with each jostle. I bite my lip and grip his

waist, urging him deeper into me. This feels good; Shay feels good. *He makes me feel good.*

Shay has killed people because of his “love” for you. Do you remember that?

I shake my head, squeezing my eyes shut as I dig my nails into Shay's back. He emits a groan of pleasure when I do and moves faster, pumping roughly into me, the sound of his dog tags clinking together as they dangle above my face.

I let out a choking sort of gasp when I remember how the flashes from the gunshots lit up the alley and Shay... Shay standing over the body of that man... *Shut the fuck up!* I scream at that nagging voice in the back of my head, quickly stomping down on the guilt that threatens to suffocate me. Shay continues to pound away, his movements becoming more aggressive and forceful, almost to the point of pain.

“Shay,” I whimper. “You’re hurting me.”

He shakes his head, not saying a word as he seizes my hands and braces them on either side of my head, rolling his hips into me with such force, I can feel myself sliding up the bed.

“Shay!” I cry, squirming as he hits me so deep it mixes pain with pleasure.

It’s all your fault... it’s all your fault. You’re so fucking stupid, Mina. You’re so goddamn useless. You’re a horrible person. That’s why anyone who has gotten close has either ended up dead, disfigured, or has run away. The voice screams over and over in my head at me. Wrenching my hands from his grip, I reach up to grab Shay’s face and forcefully pull him close so I can greedily kiss him, sucking and nipping on his lower lip as though he will save me from the taunting.

You’re lucky that Shay even loves you as much as he does... and what do you do? You’re thinking of talking to Keenan behind his back... after everything Shay has done to protect you...

Shay grinds his pelvis into mine keeping a firm hold on my hands and eagerly returning my kiss with equal enthusiasm. The roughness of his lovemaking distracts me from the voice, and I fight the quieter voice that whispers, *Keenan, Keenan, Keenan...* his name reverberates in my mind with each thrust, like an echoing reminder to my heart that I am guilty of so much.

Keenan is better off without you, you traitorous bitch....

For just a moment, I struggle battling my inner turmoil, pulling at my wrists and squirming. I want to slide out from beneath him and run from my own mind, but Shay wraps his arms around me and holds me tight to his body as he pumps between my legs relentlessly.

“Mina,” he pants. “Be a good girl, okay? Just be good and...” His voice trails off as he thrusts desperately, losing all rhythm until he finally stills inside me. I feel him pulse within me, followed by the flooding heat of his cum. He doesn’t pull away. He just lays there, holding me down, allowing himself to soften until he slips out slowly. Reaching between us, he runs his finger through the wetness that’s leaking out of me and smears it all over my pussy before pushing it back in. “This is mine,” he rasps, voice husky and rough. Like he’s been screaming for hours. “This pussy, this body... it’s all mine, isn’t that right?”

“All yours,” I whisper, feeling like a piece of my heart has suddenly hardened from saying so willingly.

“No one else can touch you,”

“No one else.” I press a kiss to the side of his throat, reveling in the gentle way he strokes my hips with that familiar, comforting touch.

“No one will take you from me.”

I sigh, closing my eyes as I huddle into him, desperate for his love, and breathe, “No one will.”

Chapter eleven



WHEN I WAKE up the next morning, the golden sunlight is streaming through a crack in the curtains, and beyond it, I see the bare branches of the trees, the leaves having since fallen to the forest floor. Autumn is officially here, I guess. I roll over to see the empty spot in bed beside me. *What time is it?* I glance over at the clock on the side table and yelp, jumping out of bed, when I see it's a quarter past seven. With my suspension hanging over my head, I can't afford to taint my record even more.

Unless one of those bitches gets in my face again, I tell myself, as I scramble around the room, not even looking at the clothes I'm pulling out of the drawers. It's only when I go to yank on a pair of black skinny jeans that I see the bruising on my inner thighs from last night. I stare at them for a second, the purplish colouring against my paler skin stark and apparent. Shay's marked me a few times when we've fucked, but not like this. Whatever they had told him on the phone last night, it had clearly perturbed and triggered him enough that he hadn't held back as much as he usually does with me.

I ignore the marks and pull my pants up before finding a loose, forest green blouse to pull on overtop. I run a comb quickly through my hair and step out into the hall, hearing Shay's voice coming from the kitchen.

"... I can't tomorrow, I have to run into Ashland. You *know* what for. Fuck! Who else does Elias trust with his shit?" I slow my steps, uncertain whether or not this is a conversation I should be listening in on. Like last night's. "Not my problem... well, that's your fault now, isn't it, Sheik?"

Sheik?

I freeze at the mention of James' road name. A small pang in my heart has me leaning against the wall as I continue listening.

"Not tonight. Mina has schoolwork... yeah, she was... it's *fine!* The other bitch started it!" Shay says, clearly exasperated by his father's prodding questions. "I *know* she's had a perfect record. That's what I'm saying! That little cunt has been coming at Mina for weeks now, and she was defending herself... I don't give a *fuck* that she got stitches! Serves her fucking right! Mina *is* a good girl! So don't fucking shit on this. She's fine. She's back in school, and I've made it clear to the rest of those little bitches that if they fuck with her again... Jesus, Dad!" Hearing Shay call James 'dad' after months of addressing him by his road name throws me for a loop. "I didn't kill anyone, so you can calm the fuck down. A message was sent. No one will give her a hard time anymore, so she can concentrate on her schoolwork in peace, alright? Now can we fucking drop it?" He goes quiet again before sighing heavily, as though irritated by whatever it is James is telling him. "Okay, fine. Thursday night. Yeah, yeah, I know. Knowing her, she'll wanna make something. I'll ask her. No, *I'll* ask her... watch it. Be glad I'm even allowing *this*. Fine. Yeah, I'll see you at the club later. Bye."

I peek around the corner just as Shay hangs up and throws his phone onto the tabletop. He's lounging in his chair, coffee in front of him, his iPad in his other hand as he scrolls through some sort of word document. I tentatively step around the corner, and as though sensing my arrival, he looks up. At the sight of me, Shay's silver eyes brighten, and though he doesn't smile, I know he's happy to see me. I never see him look at anyone else that way.

"Morning," I walk over to the coffee machine and pour myself a cup, deciding that since I'm running late, I'll skip breakfast. "Who was that on the phone?"

“Sheik,” he says, his honesty catching me off guard. I quickly look over at him, brows raised, hoping he’ll tell me more. I watch as he continues to scroll through his iPad, sipping his coffee slowly.

“How is he?” I ask when he doesn’t volunteer anything further.

“Fine,” he grunts, clearly not wanting to discuss him.

But I’m too curious about that whole discussion to drop it. “What did he want?” I ask, leaning back against the counter, holding my mug in my hands as I breathe in the comforting smell of my hot drink. It really is the best smell to wake up to... besides James’ pancakes. I miss those.

“He wants us over for dinner on Thursday,” he grumbles, shifting in his seat to kick his feet up on the extra chair.

I feel a bubble of hope swell in my stomach. “Really? Are we going?”

Shay glances up at me, obviously hearing the excitement in my voice. “Do you want to?”

I nod, biting my lip as I wait for him to confirm he’d agreed to it from what I overheard, but I can’t be sure if that was just Shay saying what James wanted to hear so he could end the conversation or if he really meant it.

“Fine,” he grunts again. “We’ll stop by after I pick you up from school, then.” He goes back to whatever it is he’s reading.

I can’t stop the smile that practically cracks my face open. I haven’t seen James in over a month. The prospect of seeing him, *talking* to him, has me unbelievably happy. I don’t even hesitate when I put down my drink and skip over to wrap my arms around Shay, hugging him so tight around his neck, he actually coughs and I have to ease up. “Sorry! Sorry!” I say, apologetically, but stoop over him to kiss the hollow of his cheek.

The corner of his mouth rises the tiniest bit, a typical Shay smile, “You happy, Sweetness?”

“Yes! Very much!”

He reaches up, cupping the back of my head with one hand, and draws me closer until he’s softly kissing my lips. When he pulls back, his nose brushing the tip of mine, he wraps a lock of my hair around his index finger, as though it’s a rope tying me to him. “You ready to get going?”

I nod eagerly and he releases me so I can quickly chug the rest of my coffee. Most of his conversation with James makes sense now, and I realize what he meant by, *knowing her she’ll wanna make something*, because I

was already planning on making James' favourite spaghetti and meatballs with garlic bread for Thursday night.

As soon as I open my locker at school, the burner cell Keenan had managed to get to me, catches my attention. It sits there on the single shelf, like a burning, torturing reminder of the decision I have to make. Did I dare accept the safety line he was giving me again? Things were so different now. I wasn't an eleven-year-old, living in a home with a dysfunctional family. I am seventeen, and I have Shay, who is now so much more to me than just my stepbrother. My protector had turned into my tormentor, and now, he is something I don't know how to live without. He is the only one that makes me feel truly loved and safe. He is all I have.

I hang up my property jacket carefully inside the locker, grab my books, and slam it shut. Ignoring the phone, completely. As I walk through the halls, enjoying the relatively wide berth the other students now give me, I tell myself I wouldn't hurt Shay in such a way. How can I betray him when he's done everything to keep me safe? I couldn't. I wouldn't do that to him.

As I went about the rest of my day, I felt better about my decision. It was the right thing to do. That little bitch in my head that likes to call me out on shit can kiss my ass about it. It's only when I climb the stairs to the second floor that someone catches my eye. A guy who is probably a year behind me is coming down the steps, wearing a pair of torn jeans, a black t-shirt, and his long brown hair messily strewn about. He has bruises all over his face, yellowing in most places, but it's obvious he got the shit kicked out of him. Even his arms are marked up, and at least thirty narrow slashes are traveling up his forearm that have been stitched up. He looks like whatever piercings he had in his eyebrows were torn out, and the tips of his fingers have fresh bandaging wrapped around them. When he looks up and spots me, the parts of his face that are more or less healed pale significantly. He ducks his head and hurries past without looking back.

I feel a sense of unease seeping through me at the sight of his injuries, and understanding hits me like a ton of bricks. I have no doubt in my mind that that boy was one of the junior prospects, most likely one that had been in charge of reporting back to Shay about my activities during the school day.

They'll be taken care of for neglecting to tell me about what's been going on this past month... Their job was to report to me and tell me about

what was fucking happening in that school. They failed. So they'll be punished.

I can't imagine what other injuries that poor kid has hidden beneath his clothing. I've always heard that Shay enjoys "playing" with his victims. I've overheard him and his buddies back when I was younger, when they were drunk and hanging out in the living room at night, talking about some of the stuff he'd done. I hadn't understood all of the references at the time, but like most things, experience is everything. James and Shay had done their best to shield me from many things when I was little. Probably too much. But then, like most lies and falsehoods, it started to unravel, and I caught glimpses of their deception until finally, all the darkness they'd been hiding became suddenly clear.

And now, the only thing protecting me is the darkness itself. Shay's demons will never harm me. But no one else is safe. I could only do so much to protect everyone else. But I can't save everyone.

I push the boy from my mind and head up the stairs, and soon, I forget about him completely.



On Thursday, I insisted that Shay stop by our little home before we headed over to James' for supper. I haven't seen him in so long, I wanted to look my best, especially now that I knew he was aware of my suspension. It is just above freezing this evening, one of the last remaining warmer nights we would have before the snow finally decides to fall. I change into a light, sky blue dress with a cream cardigan overtop. I'd stayed up last night making cheesy garlic toast and meatballs from scratch in preparation for tonight. All I have to do is warm it all up and we are good to go. I pack it all into a tote bag and Shay takes my hand as he leads us through the woods towards our old house. When we step out onto the main drive, I take in the sight of my old home and have the strangest feeling of foreboding run through my veins like poison. My excitement leaks away and I feel a sense of dread as we near the front porch, the light bright in the twilight. I could feel my body locking up as Shay's boots thudded on the steps, and for a moment, I feel like running away. I can't explain why, but I am suddenly terrified to go in there.

Just as I was about to wrench my hand free from Shay's grasp, the front door opens and there stands my stepfather, the warm light from the kitchen illuminating his features. His dark hair was streaked with grey, including the whisker on his chin. The crow's feet around his eyes seem more prominent, but underneath his black long sleeve shirt, I could still see the evidence of his muscle. His dark eyes, so unlike Shay's silver ones, light up when he sees me, and he steps out onto the porch and lifts me up in his arms, forcing me to drop my tote bag of goodies.

Almost all at once, the moment of uncertainty and rising panic vanishes. I hug him back fiercely, burying my face into his shoulder as I breathe in his familiar cologne that reminds me of home.

"How are you, Baby Girl?" he rumbles softly in my ear, and I feel tears spring to my eyes at the old nickname and cling to him.

"I'm okay," I whisper, clinging to him. I can hear Shay moving around us, then the slap of the screen door as he enters the house, giving us a moment of privacy.

"You sure?" he murmurs back, "You're safe? You're happy?"

"Come on, you two! I'm starving!" Shay bellows from inside, ending our moment before I am ready. I retract my arms and give my stepfather a small smile as I step back, suddenly shy for some reason. He looks me over but stops at my face, his dark gaze boring into mine and I see how his face tightens ever so slightly.

"God, your eyes are so much like your mother's..." he says, his voice cracking once.

I feel the tears unwillingly rise again, but he wraps an arm around my shoulders and guides me inside. It's odd being back here, with both men in the same space together. When Shay and I were home, he was always out. And I'm sure when we were sleeping, he would slink in and head up to bed. We moved like ghosts around each other, and it felt like walking on eggshells. I couldn't stand it. But now, I'm looking back and forth between the two of them, hoping beyond hope that the old chapter is behind us and things can go back to some semblance of how they were.

My hopes are temporarily ripped to shreds when I turn and my eyes land on the long dining table, sitting in the exact same spot as the old one.

It's not the same one, Mina. It's not the same one. This one has never had blood spilled on it. Has never had someone tortured and mutilated on its surface. You're okay. You can do this. You can do this. You can...

I can feel the blood drain from my face. I think I'm about to faint when a steady hand supports my elbow and guides me over to the kitchenette area. Shay has brought in the food I'd packed, but now, he is moving me away and distracting me from the growing anxiety that was about to ruin everything this evening. I remove myself from the descent into my dark thoughts, and I start preparing supper.

I dump the sauce and meatballs into a pot and fill another with some water. It's then that I notice how quiet it is in here. I see James and Shay leaning against support beams on opposite sides of the sitting room from each other. They both seem eerily calm however I notice their rigid stances and how they are eyeing each other like two territorial wolverines.

"Uh, how about some music?" I call over my shoulder as I turn on the stove to warm up the water and sauce. I hear the floorboards creaking behind me and can only assume that it's James. Soon, I hear Led Zeppelin's 'Babe I'm Gonna Leave You' blaring from his speakers. I was hoping that maybe father and son would talk a little, perhaps even put something on the TV to watch together and bond again. Instead, they stare each other down, arms crossed over their chests, watching every movement the other makes.

"How have things been, James?" I call out as I set the rolls on a pan waiting for the oven to warm.

"Not bad, hon. Just the club, home again, and back to the club. The usual," he says slowly, and I can't help but cringe slightly from how cold he sounds. I peer over my shoulder and see that he's observing Shay, like he doesn't trust him.

"That's right, always at the club, right?" Shay interjects, his silver glare just as hard as his father's. "That's all you and the older guys ever do anymore. No ambition to—"

"Lock it up, Shay."

"I hope you missed my cheesy garlic rolls, James!" I say loudly, quickly intervening before they can fight and spoil the evening. It's only been five minutes and already I can sense an argument brewing on the horizon. I stick the pan of small loaves into the oven to warm up and then pour the spaghetti noodles into the boiling water. "I added extra cheese, just the way you like."

"Thank you, Baby Girl," James says, his eyes still fixed on his son. "You're a good kid. Always have been." His voice is heavy with

implication, and I see how the muscles on his arms seem to bulge as he flexes, like he's restraining himself.

Thank God, it only takes me about fifteen minutes to have supper completely ready to serve up. In the meantime, James has set the coffee table, angling the couch and easy chair away from the direction of the dining table. I smile at him appreciatively when I bring his and Shay's plates over and he flashes me a warm, knowing smile. Back when my anxiety over eating at the table started becoming an issue, we moved our meals over here for a time. I was glad to see he still remembered. I sat on the couch next to Shay, planting myself between him and where James settled in the easy chair. Conversation is strained, with mostly James asking me about school and how I am doing. I gloss over the fact that I'd been suspended and talk about my classes, which I am still managing to keep on top of.

When I ask him about his life, he doesn't really say much. He simply shrugs and mutters something about the club, all while casting Shay a dark glower as he bites into one of the rolls I baked. I quickly look between the two, feeling nervous as the tension amps up again.

"Are you seeing anyone?" I blurt out without thinking and immediately regret it. *Fuck, why did I ask that? What the hell is wrong with me?* James must have been thinking along the same lines, because he stops chewing, lowers his fork, and slowly looks up at me like he is bewildered by my line of question. I don't know what made me ask it, but I guess, knowing how he'd been with my mum when their relationship started really going south, with his infidelity, I wouldn't be surprised to hear that he'd started dating around a bit.

"What was that?" he asks, his voice catching a little.

Oh shit, oh shit! I can't tell if he is so furious that he was doing the dad-thing where he goes incredibly still and quiet right before he explodes, or if he actually didn't hear me properly. He could even be asking that to give me a chance to change my question and save myself. But for some reason, I find myself actually wondering if he is. With everything going on in my own life, I hadn't really considered how lonely James must be feeling. Or maybe, because he and my mum argued non-stop, he is officially partaking in the bachelor life again. My heart goes out to him, and I suddenly decide that I want to make sure he knows how I feel about it.

"I mean, it's okay if you are, James. You can't be single forever unless you want to, that is. That's totally up to you. I just wanted you to know that if you were seeing someone, or dating, that I am okay with it."

James says nothing, his dark eyes staring at me with an odd sort of vacant look that makes me shift a little closer to Shay, who is eating with gusto like this whole conversation is boring to him.

"Mina," James says finally, his voice slightly strained as he clears it and sets his plate on the coffee table. He leans towards me, elbows resting on his knees as he bows his head and releases a deep breath, "I know your mother and I had our bad times. I know shit got real bad between us. A lot of shit went down that I regret... but I still *loved* your mother..."

I feel my throat constrict at his words. Beside me, Shay gets to his feet and leaves the room, heading towards the back where our bedroom once was, leaving James and me alone.

"I did love her. *A lot*. But... just because you love someone, just because you want them, doesn't mean that you should be together. Doesn't mean it's right. Emily wasn't..." He stops at the mention of her name and I see his throat bob several times as he regains his composure. My hands are clasped together in my lap, the remnants of my food forgotten on the table as I watch him with rapt attention, wanting so desperately to hear this.

"She didn't like my world, Baby Girl. But I didn't wanna let her go. And when she turned to drink as a way to deal, depression hit her hard. I didn't know what the fuck to do... so I just turned a blind eye to it, hoping that as time passed, everything would somehow work out. But it didn't." He sucks in another deep breath and lets it trail out between his teeth as his shoulders sag, like he is carrying the world on them. "I loved her so fucking much. She was sweet, beautiful... After what I went through with Shay's momma, I was drawn to Emily and how different she was from the women I usually chased after."

He shakes his head, his eyes glazing over slightly, his mind temporarily elsewhere until he continues, "I hoped that I could ease her into it, that she'd get used to it. I held off introducing her to Shay because I knew he'd scare her. Fuck, he even scared me sometimes." He glances towards the hallway where Shay had disappeared to, but seeing that we were still alone, James runs his hands through his dark hair, pulling at the ends slightly before letting them fall into his lap. "Emily and I fell in love hard and fast. And I wanted to keep her. When I met you, you were such a sweet, shining

ball of light. I wanted to be a good daddy to you. I wanted our two broken families to join together and just... fucking live.” He scoffs then and shakes his head again, still refusing to meet my eyes. “It was fucking naive of me to think that she’d understand or be okay with any of this. But I was too selfish to let her go. I *couldn’t* let her go. And in a way, she didn’t want to leave. She *loved* me. But our love was toxic, Baby Girl. You know that...” His voice trails off and to my horror, a single tear slides down his cheek, lining up with his nose, until it drips from the end to the wooden planks of the floor. It drips...

The blood... the blood... it drip... drip... drips off the side of the table. It pools from the holes carved into her chest. The leaks from the pits that were her eyes. It streams from the sliced remnants of her nose...

Fuck, Mina! DON’T! Don’t finish that thought, ever!

I curl my fists, refusing to allow my mind to go there. Not now. Not with James opening up more than he ever has. I force myself to breathe slowly, ignoring the quiet sobs coming from James. I somehow manage to get it under control, even with my fingernails digging into the palms of my hands and with the sound of my stepfather’s heart breaking beside me.

“It’s been less than a year, Mina,” he says finally, the sounds of his soft crying finally stopping. “I know I’ve been a bastard, but I wouldn’t insult her memory like that. But thank you, sweetheart, for your blessing, regardless.” He reaches over, carefully untangling my clasped hands so that he can hold one. I squeeze his back, tighter than I initially meant to, but he just squeezes right back. I peer up at him, and I know that the broken smile he’s giving is mirrored right back by me.

Shay comes stomping back into the room then, spying our hand-holding, and somehow manages to emit an odd sort of rumble from his chest. He trudges over, using the small space between the couch and lounge chair, and forces James and I to let go, as he gathers the dirty dishes. “Are you guys done? Are we gonna watch a movie or what?” he snaps. I am caught off-guard by the intensity in his tone. He glares at James, who glares right back. Wanting to put a stop to whatever weird thing they have going on before it starts, I grab the plates from Shay and carry them over to the kitchenette, pausing midway to turn James’ music back on. I fill the sink with water and soap then roll up my sleeves.

“What the fuck is that on your arm?” James barks suddenly, and I startle in surprise.

I looked up from the dishes I was washing to find him standing there, his dark eyes locked on my left wrist. He's caught sight of my new tattoo, and is glaring angrily at it before casting Shay an accusatory scowl. "What is that, Shay?"

"Nothing you need to be concerned about," he replies coolly, watching his father closely. He stands on the other side of the sitting room, with his father standing between us.

But James ignores him and strides over to where I am washing the dishes. Plunging his hand into the soapy water, he seizes my forearm and pulls it up so he can see the ink etched into my skin. I watch as his lips silently form the words, 'Property of Manic', before releasing me. His face goes beet red, and he balls his fists as he faces down his son. "You *branded* her?"

"It's a tattoo, Sheik," Shay says nonchalantly, unafraid of his father. "It's not like I took a hot iron and burned my name into her skin."

"You marked her," James sounds incredulous, as though he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Did Mina even *want* the tattoo? Did you?" He whirls around to face me. I cringe and move back a step, trying to think of a way to diffuse the situation, but Shay rushes over, his face like thunder, and wedges himself between his father and me. "You don't get to ask her that-"

"She's *my fucking daughter!*" James yells, the fury in his eyes becoming more pronounced as he assesses Shay like he was seeing him for the first time.

"No, she's not, Sheik. She's *mine*." Shay's voice drops to that dangerous, silky tone he uses when he gets angry. "Mina has always been mine."

"You're going too far, *Manic*," he roars, "you promised me-"

"And I've kept my promise, haven't I?"

"This proves otherwise!" James gestures around him, pointing at my arm. "This is too much. I won't allow it! I'll call up Bull and put an end to-"

Before James can finish his sentence, Shay moves so fast, I don't even catch what happened. One minute, they are nearly chest to chest, glaring into each other's eyes, and then the next, James is thrown back against the wall, with Shay pressing his forearm into his throat, his other smashed into his gut. James swings and manages to punch his son on the side of the head,

but Shay doesn't even twitch. I cry out in shock and scream, "Shay, stop it! You'll hurt him!"

But he ignores me as he shoves his face close to his father's and seethes, "You threaten me like this again, and I will go around you and Bull, got it? I have a good relationship with the Faceless. All the assignments they ask us to do for them, you've been sending *me*. Do you think they even give a shit about you, old man? That Elias even knows your name? Not when I'm the one doing all the dirty work and making shit happen." Both men fall silent as Shay's words echo in the quiet space. I hold on to the counter, afraid that if I let go, I'll fall. *What the hell were they talking about? What promise did Shay make to James in regards to me?*

"You'll betray your brothers to the Faceless?" James says finally. It wasn't the words but the way he says them that disturbs me. He sounds so... disappointed.

"It all begins and ends with them. Or did you and Bull not consider that when you agreed to make our club their little bitches? I *told* you repeatedly that the decision to work for them would destroy the Beasts because they are bigger than us, and they won't let us just walk away now. But did you listen to me? No, you fucking didn't. So I've done what I needed to do for the next generation of the Beasts to survive this bullshit you and the other old fucks have gotten us into." Shay leans in close to James and judging by the wheeze in his breath, means Shay has pressed harder against his throat. "Now... you can either man up and accept the fact that you, Bull, Blade, and the rest have screwed us and back the fuck off. Or, challenge me, and see how quickly Elias responds to you shutting down his best man, hm?"

"Elias... won't... reward... you!" James gasps against Shay's muscled forearm, his face bright red as he chokes out the words.

"Your words are meaningless to me." Shay shoves off him and steps back as James hunches over, coughing and wheezing while he tries to catch his breath.

Shay strolls over to me, still standing in shock, and picks the dishtowel up off the counter and dries my forearms for me. "Leave the dishes. We're going."

"But-but I-"

"No. If Sheik doesn't piss me off again, I'll allow a visit. But-" He looks over his shoulder at his father, who slowly rises to his feet. "It's *my* call." James' dark eyes flicker up to his son's and for one, suffocating

minute, they lock eyes with each other. I'm terrified they're going to exchange blows again.

I stare in shock between the two, only snapping out of it when Shay finally lifts an arm around my waist and nuzzles my neck, "Let's go home, Sweetness." And in a lower voice, twisting his head slightly so that he's staring his father down, "I wanna fuck you twice before bed."

My mouth drops in shock at the crude picture he just gave the man who raised us, and I know I've turned so red I could probably cook an egg on my forehead. But Shay simply pulls me toward the doorway, leaving the dirty dishes behind, and a silent, fuming James, who watches us leave with pure rage burning in his gaze.

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Chapter twelve



IT WAS Friday morning at breakfast when Shay's phone began to ring incessantly. I look up from my cinnamon raisin toast to see Shay check the call before he hits ignore and drops his cell back onto the table, turning back to his iPad to continue whatever it is he's reading. I go back to my breakfast, pausing to check the clock to make sure I'm not running late when the phone rings again. Curiously, I cock a brow when Shay lets out an irritated sort of huff at the caller.

"Just answer it, Shay," I tell him.

"I know what they want, and I'm not into it," he says, ignoring them again.

"Who is it?" I ask, not really expecting an answer.

"Cobalt."

It was weird hearing him address Cody by his road name. Their road names were never something I adjusted to. Although everyone else seemed fine with changing their names once they were initiated into the club, I had always known them as they were before, and was the only person ever

allowed to refer to them by their birth names. Cody became Cobalt when Shay became Manic, just like Gavin became Storm.

“Why are you ignoring Cody?” I ask, trying to keep my voice indifferent. I don’t want to seem like I’m prying, but Shay’s argument yesterday with James kept me up most of the night as I replayed it over and over, creating more questions stuck on repeat in my mind.

What promise had Shay made to James? He had said he would go around James and Bull to the Faceless. So the Beasts answered to the Faceless now... why? He also said something about being the one to do all their dirty work. The very thought sends fear running through my body. It sounded like Shay had been against the Beasts aligning themselves with the Faceless, but the older generation of Beasts ultimately decided on it in the end. Now, the tables were turning, and Shay and his friends had aligned themselves with the other side, while James and the others wanted to step back. I didn’t get it and wouldn’t be asking any questions on the subject. Chances are, he would tell me it was club business, and I wasn’t a Beast, so I wouldn’t need to know. Bikers *never* told their girls anything about the ongoing activities in the club. It was too dangerous, and the information could be leaked accidentally or purposefully. Never trust a woman scorned.

“He’s been bothering me to go out with him and the boys for a few weeks now,” Shay mutters, looking down at his iPad again.

“And?”

“And I see his dumb ass almost every day when we do our runs or at the club,” he says, not bothering to look up.

“I don’t understand, then,” I say, confused. “He wants a night out. A boys night. Why don’t you want that?” I’ll be honest, the idea of Shay having a boys night actually sparks a tiny hint of jealousy in my mind. I know very well what a “boys night” to him and his friends means. It means alcohol and women. My mind flashes back to that disgusting drug-infused orgy I’d walked in on when I was thirteen. I remember the shock, the nauseating feeling I got at seeing the men I’d felt so close to snort coke and fuck the club’s sweetbutts. Shay himself had had a girl against the wall and was fucking her ruthlessly. The memory made me feel sick to my stomach, and it churned with bitter animosity. I felt the incessant need to punch something. The thought of him with another girl, and a sweetbutt no less, has me fuming. I’m glad that the girl he’d been with has moved from the

club. I am not sure where she ended up, but I really didn't give a shit. I don't want her around Shay.

I take a large swallow of my coffee, burning my tongue in the process as I fight to control this unexpected jealousy fit building inside of me.

"I don't need a boys night out," he says smoothly, not sounding the least bit upset at the idea.

My gaze snaps to him and I can tell by the relaxed way he's sitting that he's serious. "Why not? When was the last time you went out and just... did what twenty-three-year-olds do?"

"I don't want to, Mina," he sighs, as though annoyed by my questioning.

I narrow my eyes at him, deciding to wheedle a little more. A favourite pastime of mine was teasing Shay, and I see an opportunity arising. "What's the matter? Afraid you won't be able to keep up with your friends?"

When his silver eyes pierce me from beneath his dark brows, narrowing at my playful taunt, it only fuels my ammo.

"Afraid Aron is gonna drink circles around you? How about Cody? Are you terrified at the idea of all those hot, single ladies coming on to him and not you?" Though I'm teasing, I know deep down I'm fishing. I can't help it. A small voice in my mind is pushing me to find out what he would do if another woman came onto him. "Afraid you lost your touch there, O'Hare?" I wrinkle my nose as I giggle at the scowl on his face, recognizing it from the times in the past when we'd engage in playful banter.

"I haven't lost my touch," he says finally and looks back down to his iPad.

His words slice through me, and I stop teasing at once, the smile falling from my face in an instant. "What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" I ask him, my surprise now giving way to rage.

"It means what you think. I still get women crawling all over me when I'm out," he says, taking a sip of his coffee, and I want nothing more than to tip it so that it falls all over his face. The fucker! I feel gross. I feel like he just stuck a knife in my stomach. How fucking dare he? After everything he's put me through? After he had threatened all other men off me, he's out there hooking up with other women, then coming home and fucking me? My God... I want to jump into a hot, scalding shower and clean myself... after I kick the shit out of him first.

I stand, my chair scraping back across the floor. My hands are clutching the edge of the table to keep myself from throwing my own hot beverage into his face. He peaks up at me, and when the corner of his mouth lifts slightly in that classic Shay smile, I forget about the coffee and decide my fist will work much better.

“Something wrong, Sweetness?” he asks, sounding incredibly smug.

That sets me off. In an instant, I’m around the table and ripping the iPad out of his grasp. I throw it and it lands in a thump on the thick rug in the sitting area. But Shay doesn’t yell, nor does he even flinch at the sight of me standing over him, *clearly* livid. He reaches up and snatches my ass, tugging me closer, but I slap him across the face in response.

“Don’t you *dare* call me that nickname! Not after this!” I yell in his face.

But Shay, that fucking asshole, just grins a little more, a spark igniting his features with clear amusement and satisfaction. I want to claw his fucking eyes out for it! But before I can even move to do it, he catches my wrist, holding my arms out to the sides, and shifts me so that I’m standing between his legs. I think about kicking him right there in his dick, when he finally speaks.

“Mina, I’ve never cheated on you. You think that I go out and bang any girl that hits on me? *Fuck* no. I tell those bitches to get the fuck off my lap and send them on their way.” I blink, now feeling utterly confused. *What the fuck?* Shay’s smile broadens more, until I can see just a hint of his white teeth. It’s probably the biggest I’ve seen him smile since... well, ever. “All I’ve ever wanted was you, Mina. Even before I understood how much... why the fuck would I throw that away for some *nothing* when I have the only thing my heart cherishes right here, waiting for me?”

I feel my words get stuck in my throat, inhibiting me from speaking. I bite the inside of my cheek as if that will help me retain my composure.

Shay releases my wrists and slides his hands up my thighs until he’s gripping the swell of my hips. “When I say I don’t want to go out with the boys, it’s because I’d rather be at home with you, Mina. So no, I don’t want to go. And I don’t want to leave you at home alone, either.”

“James-”

“After last night, Sheik needs to fucking get with the program if I’m going to let you over there again.” He glowers, shaking his head, and muttering so softly I only catch the words, *fucker... Em... Bull... idiots*. The

shadows around his eyes seem to spread, and I quickly try to redirect his attention.

“You deserve a night out, Shay. I can... I’ll...” I find the words getting lost as I try to tell him I’m fine on my own, but am I really? I think about it, being here alone, with the growing darkness outside, and I feel a shiver race up and down my spine at the thought. Even with the doors locked and the system armed, what if someone tried to break in? What if whoever wanted me is waiting for an opportunity to grab me and run? Shay wouldn’t be able to get back here in time before they would manage to break in, impair me, and make a break for it. Or... just kill me.

“You aren’t staying here alone,” he says, reading my thoughts. At that, his phone rings again, and he rolls his eyes to the ceiling in frustration. As though finally pushed to the end of his patience, Shay picks it up and practically snarls, “What the *fuck* do you want?”

I instinctively cringe at his dark tone, even if I’m not necessarily afraid of him hurting *me*, per se, but more fearful of Manic coming to the surface and wreaking havoc on others. “I am *not* fucking coming out tonight!” he seethes. “I have Mina with me. I’m not leaving her alone... no, I won’t fucking leave her with *Sheik*... I don’t trust him for shit...”

I start to pull away, but he wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me down so I’m sitting on his lap. His hand slides up and down over the thick sweater I’m wearing like he’s trying to reassure me. “Why the fuck would I bring her out with us?” Shay goes on, his tone borderline savage. I react without thinking when I hear his tone and start running my fingers through his dark, wavy hair. He sighs heavily, closing his eyes at my touch, and gives me a gentle squeeze. “I don’t give a fuck if everyone is pissed at me. I’ve done enough for the club that I deserve a little time to myself...” But even as he says it, I can see how his dark brows pull a little at that. “I’ve paid my dues... Bull owes me.” He goes quiet as he listens to whatever, I’m assuming, Cody says on the other line. Shay goes so incredibly still and pale, that I stop trying to soothe him and stare in shock. Why does he look... scared? “Yeah, well... *he* owes me, too...” His voice wavering as he says it. *Who is he talking about?*

As though sensing my sudden unease and scrutiny, his silver gaze flickers to me and he shakes himself out of his brief lapse in control and winks at me, nudging my hand with his head to urge me to continue what I

was doing. I keep combing through his shoulder-length locks, waiting to see what he's going to do.

"Okay, okay... I'll come out with you guys tonight. But I'm bringing Mina... I don't give a shit if you bring some sweetbutt, you fucking walking STD." This instantly confirms that it's Cody he is talking to. Who else has the highest "hit" record in the club? "Tell the guys we're in... no, we'll meet at Colby's... cuz I'm not in the fucking mood to see Sheik, Bull, or any of the other fucking senior guys. They're getting on my last fucking nerve." Shay starts biting at his lower lip, playing with the silver ring piercing and looking agitated.

Again, there's the mention of the growing tensions between the older and newer generation of Beasts. And from what I can gather, it all comes back to the Faceless.

"Good. See you all then." He hangs up, throws his phone onto the table with a thud, and exhales sharply. "We're going out tonight with the boys."

"I gathered," I say and lean in to give him a small kiss. But Shay grips a fistful of my hair at the back of my head and keeps me there, deepening the kiss as though he needs it more than air.

"You stay at my side at all times, got that?" he breathes against my lips, touching his forehead to mine.

"I will," I promise.

"And do what I say, okay?"

"Okay."

I feel his mouth curve as he smiles, and he gives me one last little peck before he pulls back and gives my hair a playful tug, "Now hurry up. Gotta get you to school."



Music is blaring over the speakers of the bar. Colby's is a local pub whose clientele were younger and a little on the rough side. The center of the long space had round tables arranged, decorated with small menus of fried foods and a decent drink list. There is even a gaming area with several pool tables, darts, and some arcade games on one end. On the opposite end of the bar is a small dance floor where a small group of girls are already dancing.

It wasn't owned by the Beasts, nor any other biker club, but as the Beasts were the dominant MC in the area, they were treated like rockstars here.

When Shay and I approach the door, he nods to the large, muscled bouncer, whose eyes immediately take in the blue and silver dragon emblem on his cut and allows us in with no questions asked. Draping an arm around my shoulders he saunters in, quickly scanning the space, spotting his friends sitting at a table near the dance floor along the wall. This way they were hidden from the entrance but had a perfect view of everyone coming and going.

I quickly look around the space, noting that it was decorated to look more industrial, like the inside of a small warehouse or a shipping container. Fluorescent lighting was snaking through the piping and vent systems in the high ceiling, and the walls were lined with rusted corrugated metal sheets and brick columns with old street signs and license plates from all over the country bolted to the sides as part of the decor.

I pull my property jacket tighter around me, feeling a little overwhelmed by the crowd of strangers, and huddle into Shay's side as he wraps an arm protectively around me. He had picked me up after school and brought me home so I could finish some homework while he went to his office to, "make a couple of calls", as he put it. By the time I had finished my reading, and changed into a pair of dark tights and a silky, blue cami top, he was *still* on the phone. I'd listened at the door, but his voice was low, almost strained, like he was stressed to hell, yet his tone remained calm and steady. Was he talking to the Faceless?

"Look who finally crawled out of the asylum." Cody gets to his feet while the girl on his lap squeals from falling on the floor as he steps over her like she isn't even there. I glare at him as he claps hands with my stepbrother and brings him in for a bro-hug, "Where the fuck ya been? Too busy screwing like a savage animal to come out and spend time with your brothers?" I flush at his words. It shouldn't surprise me that Cody would be the one to call attention to the fact that Shay and I are together this way. Most likely they had known about his growing affection for me for years. I was the one who was too stupid to see it, or understand how serious and obsessive he was becoming.

Cody releases him and flashes his handsome, dimpled smile my way, but I just roll my eyes, not in the mood for his flirtatious teasing and

bullshit. He comes over and chuckles, “What’s wrong, cutie? Ya miss me?” He wraps his arms around me, his hands resting dangerously low on my backside as he crushes me to himself. I’m about to push him off when he murmurs in my ear, “Has big bad Manic been giving you what you need? Hm? Have you been behaving, little girl?”

My eyes widen in response. Cody was always flirtatious, but his words, and the heavy implication that they carry, catch me off guard. What the fuck? I try to pull away, and when I manage to peek around his arm, I see Shay is too distracted greeting Aron and Leif to notice how Cody is manhandling me.

“I hope you’ve been a good girl, Mina,” Cody goes on, his hand whipping up to the back of my neck, seizing it tightly as he keeps me still. His mouth is right at my ear so that I can hear him over the music overhead, “Cuz this is our life, sweetheart. You may have been sheltered from it for most of your life, but you’re *in* it now. So you need to fall in line. Got it?”

I nod subtly, his hand in my hair restricting me from moving it much more, and he suddenly releases me to step back, moving back over to his date. She has since picked herself up off the floor and is now glaring daggers at him from where she stands, arms crossed and hip jutted out. She is beautiful, of course, with luscious, chocolate brown locks, dark eyes, and a face made up perfectly. She’s wearing a skin-tight purple dress which shows off her generous assets that barely covers the bottom of her ass. The multiple butterfly tattoos on her right ankle complete her look. A bombshell; she was exactly Cody’s type.

I’m reeling from his unnatural, almost formidable words. Where the hell has this part of Cody been hiding all these years?

I watched as he ignored his date, who was scowling from the seat he’d vacated when he had greeted us. When he made his way back to her, he lifted her easily and settled her into his lap like he hadn’t just shoved her off it a minute before. Though she huffs at him, she settles easily enough and whispers in his ear, a grin curling up on her lips. Looks like she’s forgiven him pretty quickly. He didn’t even have to apologize. I wither internally at the sight and look away.

Aron and Leif sit with their backs to the front door, though their chairs are angled so that they can keep an eye on their surroundings. In the back was Gavin, ever terrifying as usual with his dyed black hair that was now long and in his face. I had to bite my lip before asking him what had

happened with Lindsey and Jenny. As he approaches me, he gives me the tiniest wink before he brings me in for a tight hug.

“Thank you,” he whispers to me so softly that I almost miss it. I squeeze him in return, my heart feeling lighter now at his words. He wouldn’t say that if things hadn’t worked out. When he releases me and turns to Shay, for a moment, I have an inkling there’s resentment bubbling up between them. But Shay reaches out, grabs Gavin by his black leather vest, and pulls him in for the longest hug of all his brothers.

When they let go and step away from each other, Shay immediately pulls me in close, setting me in a chair between him and Gavin before pulling the chair over so it was adjacent to his. Slinging an arm over the back of mine, he stretches his legs out and nods to a server, who immediately rushes over to take his order. He gets a beer and a beef dip, and a Pepsi and chicken quesadilla for me. I don’t argue over him ordering for us both. Instead, I snuggle in closer, fighting back my anxiety at the overwhelming crowd around me. My fears are running rampant at being in this unfamiliar territory. Every time a person walks behind me, I seek Shay’s protective warmth to control my tremors.

Sensing my unease, he squeezes my shoulder and pulls me in as he talks with Aron and Leif about something to do with their bikes. But even at his side, I can still feel myself hyperventilating and my heart pounding. When I hear a high-pitched shriek from the direction of the dancefloor, I cower as I frantically search for the source, and spy a girl being thrown over some guy’s shoulder. She is laughing and screaming in delight as he spins her on the spot, ignoring one of the servers who told him to stop. *Fuck... relax, Mina! Chill...* But I couldn’t help it. The last time I heard someone scream like that...

Mum.

“Hey, kiddo. How’s school been this week?”

I peek to my left to see Gavin surveying me curiously, his brows pulled low over his eyes as if he noticed my discomfort.

I shrug. “It’s been okay,” I mutter, still nervous with the crowd.

Gavin frowns, no doubt from my cold response. We had a great week together, save for that time I freaked out about the kitchen table, and when that moving truck scared the hell out of us resulting in me grabbing a gun, all the while having no clue how to fire it. But besides those two incidents, it had been an easygoing time. After our comradery with my distracting

Shay so he could relocate Lindsey and her little girl, I feel closer to Gavin than before. But I can't shake this horrible feeling like I'm trapped in an ice block.

"What are your plans for after? You going to college?" He takes a sip of his beer, his eyes flickering over to the front door as a small group of patrons enter, before looking back at me. He's always on guard. Always. At this realization, I relax a little.

"I don't know," I say, honestly. "To tell you the truth, I had no other plans besides dance."

"What about working in your old dance studio?" He gives a once-over at my leg before he casts another look around the room.

I am scared to try anything with my leg. Any time I put all my weight on it, I can feel my knee shake uncontrollably. I shrug at Gavin, not sure of what else to say. I hadn't given much thought at all to what I would do after high school. I was too preoccupied with all the changes in my life. "My leg-"

"Your leg is still shit, I know." No doubt, he has noticed how I still walk with a slight limp. "But that doesn't mean you're completely out. You could still teach it. You've been a dancer for most of your life. You can't just give up."

"Gavin, it's fine," I mutter. He leans in, trying to hear me over the loud music blasting near the dancefloor. "I said it's fine!" I shout a little louder.

He shakes his head vehemently. "No. You can rehab it a bit. Maybe in the new year, you can-"

"Drop it, please," I huff, not wanting to talk about it further. Thinking of dance only reminds me of the night I last performed, the same night my leg was fucked to hell, and mum...

He glances over at Shay, for some reason, and I catch the tiniest shake of his head before he huffs angrily. Thankfully, he drops it and lounges back in his seat to have another sip of his beer while scanning the pub and keeping an eye on us. Every person that unintentionally meets his gaze quickly averts their eyes and scurries away. Gavin's appearance screams danger starting with his tattoos that were exposed by the t-shirt he is wearing right now, along with the multiple facial rings...well, he was probably the scariest person here, but to me, he had the kindest heart.

By the time our food arrived, Cody was pawing and dry-humping the sweetbutt in a corner on the dancefloor. Leif and Aron were flirting with

every passing server, all of whom seemed *very* pleased to have caught their attention, and Shay had me enfolded into his side, insisting on feeding me my fries by hand. When his finger lingers on my bottom lip, tugging it down slightly, his other hand comes up to stroke my hair. I run my tongue out to tentatively flick over his fingertip, and he lets out a soft groan shifting in his seat.

“So, Manic,” Gavin speaks up in that moment and I look over to see him lounging back in his seat, but studying Shay with an odd sort of inquisitive stare. “What is Mina going to do when she graduates high school?”

I instantly freeze and my mind is screaming in panic as Shay shifts his attention from my mouth to his friend. “She can get a job at the club,” he says, returning Gavin’s penetrating stare.

“Yeah? Is that what *she* wants to do?” Gavin asks him, taking a sip from his beer.

“It’s the safest place for her to work. Right amongst the Beasts, close to me,” Shay tilts his head slightly, his look veering to one of suspicion, almost like he’s studying Gavin..

“Yeah? Safest place, eh?” Gavin smirks and leans one elbow on the tabletop, “The clubhouse is the last place I’d call safe-”

“It is since we haven’t caught that asshole who hired those men after her,” Shay snaps, cutting him off. The hand in my hair lowers until it wraps itself around my neck and he pulls me sideways into him. He leans forward, body stiffening, and his hands turning into fists. “Until we catch him, I’m not convinced that Mina is safe anywhere unless she’s chained to my side. Since I can’t be here all the time, I put my trust in my brothers to keep her safe.” Shay’s features darken ever so slightly, making my skin crawl as the man looking out of those shining silver eyes is no longer the sweet, safe one that I love. This is Manic.

“Are you saying I can’t rely on my brothers, Storm?” Somehow, with the music and the noise from the other customers, both Gavin and I are still able to hear the menace in Shay’s tone. “Are you saying that I should question your loyalty? That I shouldn’t trust you with her? Will you not have my back when it counts?”

Gavin grinds his jaw and I notice how his nostrils are flaring. He looks like a volcano ready to explode, but he holds it together as he faces off with Shay. “I just thought she would want to work somewhere like her old

studio, perhaps teaching a younger class. That'd be perfect for her, don't you think? I bet she misses dancing, don't you, Mina?" Gavin says, not taking his eyes from Shay's for a second.

I stiffen further, wholly panic-stricken. Shay's grip on my neck contracts as he leans in closer to my side, facing off with his friend over the top of my head. "I know what is best for Mina. I take good care of my girl." I just sit there, sort of wishing Cody would come over and say something stupid that would distract everyone.

"Did Mina say she even *wanted* to work at the club?" Gavin goes on, making me feel sick with nerves that he was pushing this so much. "Because I don't recall her ever saying she liked being there in the past few years. Besides her birthday, she's ducked out of every family event and even stopped coming by to see us. You know the company we've been hosting lately... Do you really want her around them? Around Elias's men?"

Shay's handgrip falters for a moment before he regains his composure and hugs me so that my face is pressed against the leather of his cut. "You see the patch she wears?" His free hand runs over the smaller patch on the back of my jacket. "Mina is *mine*, and any decision in regards to her ends with me. She'll work at the club. You fucking got it? You're crossing the line with me, Storm. Now back the fuck up." His words hold a very clear threat in each word, and they slash through the air like a knife. I squirm a little against him, and he loosens his hold a little before he presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Sorry, brother, meant no disrespect," Gavin says, his voice devoid of any emotion. "I guess I'm just a little confused, is all. When you said you and Mina were together, I figured it was a long time coming. But after spending some time with her again, I can see that she's a scared, timid fucking kitten. Why, Manic? Why?" His tone shifts, his words accusing, clearly displeased and confused by the situation. Shay's fingers wrap into my hair, gripping it hard to the point where I squeeze my eyes shut and bite my lip.

"What are you saying?" Shay spits back at him. "Mina is obviously traumatized from the attack back in June, you fucking idiot!"

"Shay!" I squeal when his grip tightens even more. If he wasn't careful, he was going to rip my hair out of my head.

At my plea, he lets go, instead wrapping his arm securely around the back of my neck, holding me to himself.

"Then why aren't you getting her help? Why have you stopped the investigations into the prick who did this to her and Emily?"

This is news to me. I try to pull back, to look at Shay to see if this is true, but he holds me firmly in place. "Mina is *not* your business." Shay pauses for a moment before he chuckles darkly, the sound vibrating against my cheek that is pressed to his chest. "Just like... *Lindsey* is yours. Isn't that right?"

My gaze snaps to Gavin, my heart thudding in my chest at his words. *Does Shay know where Lindsey and Jenny are hiding?* Gavin's expression is fierce, his hand gripping the bottle of beer so tightly I worry it could break at any second.

"It's funny," Shay goes on, leaning back finally. I can hear the victory in his voice as he lounges back in his chair. He releases my hair but moves me so that I'm sharing his seat, sitting sideways with my legs draped over his thighs and pressing my head to his chest again. He's completely at ease, uncaring of any spectators watching our intimate interaction. His sole focus is on Gavin, and he drives his point home by saying, "Isn't it curious that this morning after I dropped Mina off at school, I found Lindsey's apartment abandoned? Half her clothes are packed up, toys missing, and she didn't show up for her afternoon shift."

Holy fuck! "Shay!" I cry out and push against his chest, "What the hell are you saying? Stop it! Don't say shit like that!"

He ignores me completely, "She may not be there any longer... but curious kittens eventually come crawling out of their hole, thinking it's safe." He lets that hang there, not bothering to elaborate.

"Shay, I'm hungry," I say, trying to think of something, anything that will distract him and divert his attention away from Gavin. But he holds his brother's stare while he reaches for a french fry and holds it before my lips. I take it, though it's like styrofoam in my mouth.

For a full agonizing, tension-filled, crawling minute, the two men stare each other down, not saying a word, until finally, Gavin gives the smallest of nods to Shay and looks away first. I feel Shay relaxes beneath me. He tips my chin up with his fingertips so he can peer down at me. My heart is hammering in my chest, and I feel dizzy from fear. Shay didn't scare me,

but Manic did. Manic was like a demon that appears when the darkness sinks its claws in and takes control.

Even though I'm reeling from that harrowing confrontation, he doesn't give me a moment to process before his lips press to mine to give me a deep, languid kiss, his tongue stroking mine again and again until I'm dizzy. When he pulls away, he gives my forehead one last peck. And then, he is feeding me again, stopping every few bites to offer me more of my soda.

It was an hour later when the atmosphere finally relaxed a bit. We were lounging together as a little group in our corner of the pub. Cody and his date disappeared into the back for about five minutes before they reappeared, her makeup smeared and her hair a little disheveled. He looked incredibly pleased with himself, and after that, he didn't pay her as much attention as he was earlier in the evening. Instead of following him around like a puppy, like I've seen other girls do, she simply went to the bar, got herself some shots, strolled over to the dance floor, and started rocking some seriously sexy moves. I have to say, I admire her for it. Cody rarely doubled down. The only girl he saw seriously for some time was Olivia, but that had been years ago. I haven't seen her since, nor heard what had happened.

Shay is leaning back against the wall with me standing between his legs, his arms wrapped around my middle holding my back against his front while he talks with Aron about something to do about some trip they made recently into Ashland. I barely pay attention, as their work with the club rarely interests me, since it was primarily dark, violent stuff I wanted nothing to do with. Instead, I nestle into Shay's hold, feeling safe in his arms, and constantly scanning over everyone in a paranoid state.

I notice how the crowd gives our little group a wide berth. There is no mistaking the Celtic Beasts emblem on the men's jackets, nor could you ignore the air of confidence and danger around them. Leif and Gavin are sitting at the table beside us, and their heads are bent together so they could hear each other murmuring over the music. Every few seconds, one or the other would do a quick, cursory glance around the room before they resumed their conversation. Occasionally, I felt Gavin's gaze on me. All night he's been casting scrutinizing looks my way, his dark eyes catching every movement Shay makes around me, and how we interact with one another. It's like he was trying to see beyond what we were showing everyone else. I am not sure what he is thinking, but I just stay close to my

protector's side, flinching every time someone screams with drunken glee or if a glass shatters. I turn and burrow into Shay's chest, and he brings his thick arms up to hold me tight, his discussion with Aron not faltering for a moment. He is completely content at this moment, and doesn't feel like there is any danger nearby. But he still senses my discomfort and instinctively holds me close without having to think about it.

Every once in a while, I press a kiss over Shay's chest, occasionally getting the dog tags instead of his body. The same tags that I gave him so many years ago that he hasn't gone a day without wearing.

"Manic... some fucking Spades are here..." Aron suddenly growls close to Shay's ear.

"What the fuck-" Shay's chest rumbles against my head while I turn to stone. *Spades? The Black Spades? Oh my God... Keenan!* Unable to stop myself, I peek sideways to see five tall, thick young men walk in wearing dark grey cuts with the Spades emblem on the back. One of them has golden blond, tousled hair, but his back is to me, and he guides the rest over to one of the vacant pool tables on the other side of the bar.

"It's neutral ground, Manic," Gavin's deep voice is filled with warning. He has been standing beside us and notices Shay's immediate hostility toward the newcomers. "They have every right to be here. So just fucking ignore them, yeah?"

"I can't ignore that prick, Mathers, and his fucking pretty boy face," he hisses between clenched teeth.

Hearing Shay's words confirm that the blond is most definitely Keenan. A strange feeling twists in my gut, a strong sense of anticipation and dread slowly pulsating there until I feel queasy. I want to see him, I do. But... *Shay.* My whole submission to Shay by becoming his was all to protect Keenan. It had been to keep him safe. And now...

Shay's arm protectively envelops my stomach further. For all he knows, the last time I saw Key was in the woods all those years ago when I was just a little girl helping him pick flowers. Insults were tossed back and forth, threats were made, and it was the first time I'd learned how far Shay's violent tendencies had taken him. His pleasure in mutilating junior prospects of Keenan's club, the Black Spades, had been a horrifying revelation. One that had made my blood run cold.

Key had always felt like Shay's opposite. He'd always been warm, always safe. He was encouraging and so different in his attitude towards the

MC life than the other bikers I knew. I always got the sense that he wished he was elsewhere, that he wasn't involved with his club. But his dad was the VP for the Spades. He had no choice.

My affection for Keenan only grew as I got older, and it became the catalyst to how I ended up here in Shay's arms. But now, my feelings for Shay were different than they were when I agreed to be his. I *needed* Shay now. I trusted him more than anyone. He was the only person who made me feel loved and wanted. At the end of the day, I wanted to be with *him*.

But knowing that Keenan is here, in the same room, my curiosity keeps growing and I long to look over to just catch a glimpse of him.

Over my head, Shay is murmuring something to Aron. Just *one* peek, I tell myself. I stretch out my arms and yawn, trying to act like I'm bored with the proceedings, that the news of the Spades being here means less than nothing to me. Shay's hold on my stomach loosens as I stretch out, and when I tilt my head back, I take the brief opportunity to turn my head and peer over at the group by the pool tables.

It really is him. Keenan. The same beautiful man I had once wanted so desperately, but could never have. Even from a distance, his eyes are that same icy blue that seemed to sparkle from the lamplight beneath the stained glass lanterns that hung over the pool table. His skin is sun-kissed, his golden hair falling over his brow, and I can make out the black tattoos on his arms and snaking up the side of his neck. It has been so long since I've seen him, and if possible, he is even more beautiful than I remembered.

I stare at him, my heart pounding in my chest as I turn a little more to see him better and watch as he laughs with his friends, chaulking the tip of his cue. He looks happy, not at all like he's been suffering. He didn't look like he was missing someone... *me*. My heart wrenches at the thought that he doesn't miss me at all, that he has moved on and is enjoying his life. But at the same time, I am happy that *he* is happy. That was the whole point of me casting him aside to be Shay's. I wonder if I ever loved him or was more attracted to what he represented to me? A true friendship, a life preserver, an escape option if I wanted.

But... the phone. He is still waiting to hear back from me, and I haven't replied. Was he *really* wanting to see me again? Or was that an act? Is him being here, laughing with his friends, the act? I don't know what to think anymore.

Just as I see his crystal, blue gaze flick up in my direction, I feel Shay's fingers slide into the back waistline of my jeans, laughing as he calls, "Earth to Mina? Where are you going?"

I snap my gaze away from Keenan and look around. I'd taken several steps away from Shay like I was walking in some sort of hypnotic trance. All the guys are watching me, chuckling like they thought I was funny. Even Shay is smirking, like he thought I was having a moment or something. No one saw who I had been looking at. No one, except Gavin. His black eyes flicker from Keenan to me, and back again, his face expressionless, but clearly he'd noticed something.

I blush as Shay tugs me back, wrapping an arm over the front of my chest as he chuckles, "You tired, Sweetness?"

"Yeah, I think so... haven't been sleeping well..." I mumble, fixing my eyes to the ground. I didn't trust myself to look towards the beautiful, blond God across the room again, though it pained me not to. *Don't fuck this up, Mina... don't put him in danger...*

Cody bursts out laughing, "Not sleeping well, hey? Manic, give your girl a break, you fucker!"

Shay's fingers start stroking softly over my collarbone, and I feel him rearrange behind me, pulling me in so my ass is pressed to his crotch. "I let her get plenty of rest, fuck-face. I treat my girl like a princess. Can you say the same for any of the bitches you bring home?"

Cody is completely undeterred, "Those cunts aren't the same as someone like Mina." As he says it, his deep blue eyes momentarily flit down to me, and my skin crawls from what I see there. What the hell was wrong with Cody tonight? Ever since Shay publicly made me his, every interaction with Cody has been strained and atypical.

Gavin moves to stand fully in front of me, hiding me from the view of the pool tables, while he crosses his arms over his chest. "Can you guys just shut the fuck up?" he growls. I glance up to see him peer back over his shoulder. "The Spades have seen us. Keep your minds focused on *them* and not on your fuckin' dicks."

Shay leans around to get a look and I feel him vibrate as he speaks in a deep, silky undertone, "If any of them come over here, I want you to take Mina and get out of here, Storm."

"Why him?" Cody asks, sounding slightly offended. "He got to spend the most time with her tonight. I can take her home."

"Cuz out of all of you, he's the most responsible, shithead. Now fucking focus! Animal is going over to the bar..."

I don't know who Animal is, but I could only assume he is a Spade, and with a name like Animal, I shiver at the thought of what he did to earn a name like that. Shay gives me a reassuring squeeze. "It's okay, Sweetness," he whispers into my ear, his lips brushing against the curve as he speaks. "I won't let any of those fuckers touch you."

I know he is referring to the time he had found Keenan and I alone in the woods. But I genuinely believe Key would never have actually hurt me. I remember how thrilling it had been to have the attention of a good looking, teenage boy. I even let him carry me around like a little kid. I had been so attention-starved since my father died, that I sought it out from Shay, James, and then Key. And Keenan had continued to give me that special attention as the years went on. Why, I don't know... but he did.

The relaxed atmosphere had changed, and the Beasts were now constantly eyeing up the Spades on the other side of the room. I am almost suffocating on the testosterone. It was near midnight when I tug on Shay's sleeve while he is talking seriously with Aron and Cody, and whisper, "I have to pee..." I need a breather. Knowing that Shay and Keenan are in the same vicinity is making my anxiety spike. I am doing my best to keep acting natural, but my nerves feel shot to hell.

He is distracted, but not enough to be careless about anything regarding me. He looks to Gavin, who immediately nods and places a heavy hand on my shoulder guiding me in front of him to the washrooms, which just so happens to be located on the other end of the bar closest to the gaming area. As we get closer, I forget to breathe and my palms begin to sweat. I could practically *feel* Keenan's gaze on me.

Unable to stop myself, I look up as I pass. Sure enough, his blue eyes are locked on me, his jaw clenched, and his hands are white-knuckling the cue in his fists as he balances it behind his shoulders, waiting for one of his comrades to make a shot. At the sight of him, and the look in his eyes... a sort of tortured, pained look, I stumble. It's like my feet have a mind of their own and are trying to steer me in his direction, while Gavin is pushing me the other way. I catch myself and quickly avert my gaze, looking down at the ground as I'm directed down the short hallway to the ladies' room.

"You got seven minutes," he says after he shoo's out two other girls, and the space clears. He leans against the wall outside the door, his dark eyes

staring a hole through me.

“Seven? That’s a very specific number?” I raise my brows at him, confused.

“Just shut up and get in there.” He nods to the doors and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans, waiting. I head in, grateful that he had emptied the space. I needed a minute to myself. I don’t need to go, so I lean over the sink, running the water as I brace my hands on the edge of the counter trying to concentrate on my breathing, my mind whirling in turmoil. *What the fuck am I going to do?* I feel like a fucking mess. I don’t know what I feel for Keenan, but I do know how I feel about Shay. That much, I am certain. But seeing Key again, in the flesh, is like a punch to the stomach and has sent me spiraling.

I could hear the door open.

“It hasn’t been seven minutes!” I grumble loudly, turning the handles to turn off the water, not bothering to glare over at Gavin for cutting my time short.

“No, we have five minutes.”

I freeze at the sound of that voice, one I haven’t heard in weeks. Slowly, I turn to see Keenan standing there, the door shut behind him and locked, his chest puffing slightly as though he can hardly breathe. His hands are clenched at his sides and for a moment, neither of us speaks. I think it was me who broke first, a small, quiet sob escaping me before I stumbled towards him. I manage to take a few steps before he swoops in and gathers me in his arms. I feel his lips touch my temple as he hoists me up further into his arms, crushing me against his lean muscles. He isn’t as broad as Shay, but he is strong as he carries me over to the sinks, my feet dragging along the floor until he lifts and places me on the counter. I don’t even realize I’m crying until he pulls back to cradle my face, brushing my tears away with his thumbs before he presses his soft lips to mine.

He moans into my mouth as his pillow lips move in tandem with my own, both of us clinging to each other as our time ticks away. I don’t want to let go. Seeing him again, smelling his amber and leather scent, brings back everything... every moment in the theatre, every word, every touch, and the day on the beach...

“Key,” I whisper into his mouth, feeling dizzy and out of control. “Please... please...” I don’t know what I’m begging for, but I can’t stop myself from doing it anyway.

Keenan embraces me, burying his face into my neck as he holds me, and rocks us gently from side to side.

“I’ve missed you, Sunshine,” he murmurs. I didn’t realize until now how much I missed him calling me that. “I’ve been fucking losing my mind worrying about you. I know you said to stay away, and that you haven’t messaged me back, but...”

I bite my lip to keep from speaking. How the hell do I explain things to him?

“How are you? You aren’t looking so good. You look... peaky. Have you been eating? And you’re limping still. Are you not rehabbing it?” He looks down at my leg and back to me, concern etched into his features.

“I am... just...” my voice trails off and the bubble of happiness that is in my chest suddenly pops as I come back to reality. “It’s been... hard. With Shay.”

Keenan’s face twists into an ugly sneer, “Has he hurt you?”

I feel nausea remembering the night he killed that man in the alley, the light from the gunshots blinding my memories as they flood back to me. But Shay has not hurt *me*. In fact, after I gave in, everything in my life has beautifully simplified. Shay keeps me safe. He loves me. Everything that he does is for me. And here I am kissing his enemy. I retract my hands from Key and gently push him back and step away. I move across the space to stand by the stalls before I turn around to face him. Keenan stares at me, his expression guarded and tense.

“What the fuck is this?” He snaps, staring hard at my face, looking like he sees something incredibly disturbing. “Tell me. What is this, Mina? Why haven’t you gotten back to me?”

“Key, I...”

“Don’t say it!” he says abruptly, throwing his hands into the air as he commences to pace before me. “I don’t believe it. I refuse to believe this!”

“It just sort of... happened.”

He stops walking and spins to face me, angrier than I’ve ever seen him. “It just *happened*? Are you kidding me? It doesn’t just *happen*! What about all the bullshit he’s put you through?”

“He cares for me, Key-”

“You’re nothing more than a goddamn *thing* to him. Like a piece of property for him to keep to himself! I mean, look!” He storms over, and I flinch back as he reaches for me, but he just grabs my collar and pulls at the

jacket I'm wearing. "You're wearing his *property* cut now?" He drops it back to my shoulder as though it's something infectious and steps back. "You and I used to talk about what those jackets mean... you *hated* the thought of someone making you wear one. Now, look at you!"

"Stop it!" I raise my voice and glare at him. "How dare you come in here and accuse me of anything? What I did, I did it to protect *you!* I was keeping *you* safe!"

"I don't need your protection, Mina. I was going to get you the fuck out of here! I wanted more for you than this—" he gestures to the jacket again. "*This* life!"

"Do you really think that Shay would accept the idea of me running off? With another man, no less? He would hunt us down, and he would kill you."

"He's not invincible. And he *wouldn't* find us."

"Yes, he would, Key!" I say desperately. "He would. The shit I've overheard these past few days... you have no idea what kind of shit he's involved in..." my voice trails off, catching myself from voicing anything specific to him. I trust Key, but not with anything to do with Shay. They hate each other too much.

"You think I don't know what he's doing?" He runs a hand through his blonde hair and scowls at me. "Come on, Mina. Wake up! You think I don't know that he runs drugs for the Faceless?"

Drugs? I blanch at the word.

"Yeah, that's right." He steps toward me again, noticing the stunned look on my face. "Drugs. Shay has been running drugs onto the streets and the border towns for Elias. Know what else he's done?"

"I don't want to hear it." I turn away and rest my head on the cool metal of the washroom stall.

"High school, Mina. He's supplying the high school crews and gangs with drugs. He's Elias's fucking lapdog."

"I don't know who Elias is..."

"He's the goddamn kingpin of the Faceless!"

"They're just a gang," I turn my face a little towards him, so I can look up into his beautiful, icy blue eyes. "The Faceless? They're just a dirty city gang. How much power can they actually hold?"

"Mina... The Faceless are the leading crime syndicate in Ontario and Quebec. The bloody mafia! Elias is the head! The Beasts and the Spades are

fucking nothing to them. Shay and his friends? They're just street soldiers, used to distribute their product, a small source of their muscle in areas outside the city. Nothing more."

"I-I don't believe you..."

"You need to hear me out, because Shay has done more than just distribute drugs around-"

"No, don't tell me-"

"The Faceless are into more than drugs and gambling, loan sharking and fraud schemes... did you know that they traffic women?"

"Stop talking!"

"They distribute "product" all over Canada, but into the States, too. Obviously, the RCMP has been investigating them for years. Who do you think they sent to send a message to the police to back off-"

"Stop!"

Keenan reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing it hard. "Please, Mina. Think about this. Do you want to stay in this life? What is here for you?"

"I-I don't know..."

The door bursts open then, and Gavin enters, slamming it shut behind him. His dark eyes move between us, not missing a single thing about how tense and angry Keenan looks, nor how upset and shaken I am.

"Time's up," he nods to Key and steps aside, waiting. "Out."

Keenan lowers his head, his eyes giving me one last lingering look, one that breaks my heart and makes me want to punch a hole in the wall as I choke on guilt and my mind spins with the information he's just thrown at me. He releases my hand and steps away, pausing once at the door to give Gavin a subtle nod before he peers out like he's checking to see if anyone is watching, and disappears.

"Why?" I whisper, still standing in the same spot. My hands are shaking as Keenan's words echo in my head.

Gavin's dark eyes flicker between my own and for a moment, it looks like he is struggling before he shakes his head and breaks eye contact. "Don't know what you're talking about. I brought you to the washroom, you had a panic attack which is why it took a little longer, and now I'm taking you back to Manic. Isn't that right?"

Tears fill my eyes at his words. He isn't going to say anything. He really isn't. He is going to safeguard this secret. I can't help myself when I lunge

at him and hug him tightly. Gavin stumbles back a step like I caught him off-guard with my sudden embrace. Someone like me making a man his size lose his footing is only because he hadn't been expecting it. But he hugs me back for only a few seconds before he says, "Manic is going to freak out if we take too much longer. Don't look *his* way... you're lucky I was the only one who noticed *anything* before. Watch yourself." He untangles himself from my arms and fixes me with a warning stare.

I know he is doing this because of Lindsey, because I helped him. His repaying me with this kindness isn't something I am going to question right now. Now is not the time. So I nod and follow him as he leads me into the busy pub. I keep my word, though it was difficult to keep myself from looking towards the Spades, and I manage to focus on where Shay is, as he storms over in our direction, his patience evidently gone. He takes one look at my face, no doubt seeing the tears there and how distraught I look, and his stony expression dissolves into one of alarm. He rushes to me and pulls me into his arms while growling at Gavin, "What the fuck happened?"

"She isn't feeling well, Boss." Gavin lies so effortlessly, it was a little disarming. "Had a panic attack in there for a bit before she could pull herself together."

"Mina?" Shay tips my chin up so he can see my face. "Are you alright? Do you wanna go home?"

I nod and lean into him. My mind is still reeling from my brief encounter with Keenan, and honestly, I *am* exhausted. Shay nods and huddles me close to his side as he lists off instructions to the other guys... something about a run into Ashland soon on behalf of Elias (*Elias?*), and contacting BB (*BB?*) for an appointment as soon as possible. Gavin obediently nods and heads off to the others, not sparing me another glance.

"C'mon, let's get you home." Shay holds my chin and presses a slow, lingering kiss to the side of my mouth. Before I can react, there is a loud smash from behind me, and I jump at the sound of breaking glass.

"Jesus, Dodger! What the fuck?"

"Shut up... it slipped..."

"Yeah, slipped out of your hand right into the goddamn wall! You almost fucking hit me!"

"You're fine. Everyone's fine, right?"

It was Keenan's voice. I spin to see the wet brick column and the puddle of beer and broken glass at its base. Keenan stands at the pool table, his

hands gripping the polished wood lining and his face beet red. It was a look I've never seen on him. It was absolute fury and honestly, It scared me.

"What the fuck, Mathers?" Shay booms behind me, sliding his arm around my waist. "Your fragile fingers too dainty to handle a beer?"

"Mind your fucking business, O'Hare," Keenan manages to snarl between his clenched teeth. His icy eyes have darkened somehow, and they graze over Shay's hold on me, but he avoids my eyes. Instead, he looks over my head to where Shay is standing and casts him an absolutely murderous look.

Shay just chuckles darkly as he caresses my stomach. "How's Alfie doing? And Taz? Enjoying their new smiles?"

Who were Alfie and Taz? What the fuck was he talking about?

Keenan narrows his eyes, his nostrils flaring. He looks like he is about to come over here and punch Shay out, but instead, his friends gather around him, looking like they are bracing themselves to hold him back. One beast of a man, with golden, brown hair hanging down his back, and a long beard to match, stands about a foot over Keenan and Shay, as he cracks his knuckles. "Move along, Manic. Don't start something here." His dark eyes move around the bar where civilians are busy enjoying their night out, unaware of the storm brewing right in their midst.

"See, Animal, I couldn't give a fuck where we are," I can practically hear Shay grinning as he speaks. "I see a Spade, I just get this... *urge* to carve some pretty little pictures... to take one of my blades and just..." his voice trails off as though he's getting lost in a fantasy.

"You're fucked." The man called Animal shakes his head, clearly disgusted. "They were just boys. Young prospects. Why?"

"Why not?" Shay laughs. It was like he had forgotten where he was and who was with him. He was delving into his dark fantasies, turning into the Shay I was the most scared of... *Manic*. "Why the fuck not?" He goes on. "My God... you called them prospects? I've never heard such wailing in my life. They weren't *men*. I saved your pathetic fucking club from crippling itself further. You should be thanking me for the favour."

Keenan releases his grip from the table and straightens, but at once, his friends move in, all reaching out to press a hand to his chest, or hold onto his arms to keep him back.

I'm so horrified hearing him talk like this, that I almost collapse to the floor. But I need to reign him in. I can't let him lose control here where so

many innocent people are vulnerable and exposed.

“Shay!” I cry and sag against him, letting my knees buckle. At once, his attention focuses on me. He wraps his arms around my waist, holding me up as his sick, sadistic smile shifts to an expression of apprehension and concern.

“Shit, sorry, Sweetness! C’mon, these fuckers aren’t worth our time. Let’s get you home.” He casts Keenan and the others one last twisted smile before he hoists me up in his arms and turns to leave. I haven’t even noticed his friends standing behind us, silently backing him up. But as he walks by them, I notice Gavin glowering at his brother. Even Aron appears a little uncomfortable. But they say nothing. “Gonna get you home and in bed. You can sleep as long as you want, alright?” Shay whispers into my ear as we step out into the fresh air and head over to where his truck is parked. “You gonna be okay?”

I nod weakly, but oblige him by climbing up into my seat and buckling in. My diversion worked. Hopefully, there wouldn’t be another confrontation any time soon.



Chapter thirteen

I STUMBLE through the halls of my school in a daze. It's Monday morning, and I almost didn't make it here. I'd spent my weekend in a haze, and Shay was convinced I was ill. He almost took me to the doctor at one point, but I assured him I was fine, just stressed from midterms. But I lay in bed, my mind churning, feeling like it was about to explode.

The Faceless... organized crime... drugs... human trafficking... the two prospects... and Shay. Shay being at the center of it all. He came into the room at one point, a glass of cold water in hand and some Advil in the other. In a way, I could not believe that Shay had immersed himself in such dark, evil bullshit. But in some ways, I could. Not this Shay, not the one tucking me into bed with his forehead etched with worry. The other one from Friday night. The one who talked about making those two young Spades squeal with pain as he hurt them. Manic.

I stop at my locker, staring at the property jacket hanging there, the books stacked away on the shelf overhead, and lastly, the tiny black burner

cell. I wanted to pick it up, to message Keenan, and ask for more information.

You've been in the dark for too long, Mina. You need answers! Ask him what he knows! But, how could I betray Shay that way? I couldn't. My fingers itched, longing to pick up the little device and fire off a message, but I know the guilt for contacting him at all would eat away at me. I stand there, not even aware of the hallways emptying as I hadn't even heard the bell ring. I feel like a zombie, my blood whooshing in my ears, staring off like I am in a trance, the voices in my head repeating the same mantra again and again.

Text him. Get answers.

Don't! He's in the past. What about Shay?

You deserve to know what's going on.

But it would betray him...

You are in the dark, and because of that, you've been hurt before, Mina.

What about mum? What about your leg? Your future?

I love Shay.

Every reason you have not to contact Keenan is because of Shay. What about you?

I bite my lip, hesitating for just another few seconds before I reach out and snatch the phone up. I turn it on, go to the messages and hit reply to Keenan.

Mina: I want answers. Is there any way you can meet me during the day? I have alternating free periods. It's the only way I can get time away.

I put the phone on mute and place it back in my locker, not wanting to risk getting caught with it in class by a teacher and having it removed. Slamming my locker shut, I head off to class, not even bothering to apologise to my teacher when I stroll in fifteen minutes late. I just move to the back of the classroom to my usual seat, sit, and stare at the whiteboard, my mind a million miles away.

I check my phone at lunch, but there's no response from Keenan. I'm beyond frustrated with the situation as I've now been regretting my decision to reach out again. I keep flip-flopping back and forth, the pros and cons battling it out in my head until I finally decide I won't be satisfied until I have answers. I turn the phone on vibrate, stick it in my pocket, and head to the cafeteria to take a seat in the corner of the room at a table on my own. Thankfully, since my fight with Becca, no one bothers me.

Just as I'm about to bite into my sandwich, I feel my pocket vibrate nearly jumping out of my seat. I drop my food and turn to face the wall, concealing the phone from prying eyes and open the message.

Captain Stud Muffin: I can pick you up outside by the back buildings in ten minutes.

I stare at the message, my heart pounding in my chest. But I needed to know... I needed to know what *he* knew. I needed to know why he cared so much. Why was he always reaching out to me? Why was he always there? I type back.

Mina: Ok.

I hit send, shove the phone into my pocket, then pick up my tray of food and dump it in the garbage. After gathering my jacket and my bag from my locker, I hurry along the halls, avoiding the cliques that are aimlessly wandering indoors, as the wind has a sharp edge about it that actually hurts your skin, so everyone was inside. Since the hallways were full, I decided to sneak downstairs into the basement where the gymnasium, sports medicine, and training rooms were. There was a set of fire exit doors that are always left unlocked during the day, leading to the two trailers at the back buildings, acting as storage for equipment.

As I hurried down the stairs to the basement, the crowds thinned out. Most students wanted to be nowhere near those stinky training rooms and musty wrestling mats. I hurry through the hallways below the school, spotting the basketball coach, Mr. Haverford, taking his lunch in his office. But he didn't even look up as I rushed past. I turn the corner, spotting the doors just ahead practically sprinting towards it. I was about to pass the entrance to the boys changing rooms when it suddenly opens and a figure steps out. Our bodies collide so hard from the momentum of my run, that we fall to the ground. I land smack on my ass on the hard tiled floor, my teeth clicking together hard, and look over at the boy I knocked down, going rigid when I recognize him.

It was the prospect I'd seen last week, the one who had clearly suffered from Shay's wrath, with cuts and bruises. He looks mostly healed now, except for the stitches on his arm that look like they might even be infected, judging by how red the skin appeared. He snaps his head up, his long, messy, brown hair hides the stitches in his eyebrows from where piercings had been ripped free. He looks up, his teeth bared, face red, and spits, "Watch where the fuck you're-" and stops at the sight of me lying beside him. He sucks in a breath, eyes narrowing slightly, but doesn't finish his sentence. Instead, he pushes himself away, his anger from before looking like it's building.

I can't blame him.

Because of me, Shay kicked the shit out of him, and most likely he lost any sort of chance of joining the Beasts and becoming a real prospect in the next couple of years. In my defense, it wasn't directly my fault that he messed up. I'm sure Shay was thorough in his orders to this kid. He would have been. This guy obviously had no idea how serious Shay was or, hadn't taken the role as seriously as he should have.

But judging by the look in this kid's eyes, he clearly blames me to some extent for his misery. Rising to his feet, he casts me one last scornful look and walks away, heading back in the direction I'd just come from. As soon as he rounds the corner, I'm on my feet and shoving one of the doors open, freeing myself from the stench of teenage BO, stepping out into the crisp, Autumn air. I look between the two trailers, and beyond the dead grass of the schoolyard, seeing a charcoal SUV parked by the sidewalk, the windows so tinted that I can't see the driver. But I would know that vehicle

anywhere. I'd seen him drive it in the colder months over the years that we would meet at the old abandoned theatre. *Key...*

I feel a sense of liberation flooding through my veins as I make the final decision to leave with him. *It's because Shay and the Beasts are so secretive*, I tell myself. That's why I'm doing this. *That's why I'm leaving with Keenan.*

My feet launch me forward and I sprint as fast as I can to the curb. When I'm about ten feet away, the door flies open for me and I throw myself inside. Quickly slamming it shut behind me, Key steps on the gas and we shoot forward, taking off up the street. It takes several attempts to click my seatbelt into place, my hands are shaking so bad. But once I do, I turn and stare breathlessly at him. Even though I saw him just days ago, I used to see this man several times a week for years, and after going so long without that, I feel starved for his presence. Yes, I want answers, but...

My eyes sweep over him, taking in the sight of his masculine, rough hands as they clench the steering wheel while he drives us quickly away from the school, cutting down a backroad. His golden hair is strewn about his head, falling just over his icy blue eyes, and his chiseled jaw has a shadow of whisker lining it.

When my school is a safe distance behind us, Key reaches over, sliding his arm around my shoulders, and hauls me as close to his side as my seatbelt will allow. He crushes me against his body, feeling his lips in my hair as he kisses my head.

"All good, Sunshine?" He asks, his deep voice sending a thrill through my body that I have a hard time ignoring.

You're trying to get answers, you slut! Focus! That bitch snaps at me. Well, fuck her! I've missed Keenan. I miss our friendship, not just how I used to crush on him. Unable to help myself, I wrap my arms around his waist and squeeze, nestling my face into the pit of his jacket. As I do, I feel my anxiety, trepidations, and paranoia slip away like the air from a tired balloon. I just feel... calm. Safe. As this realization hits me, I can't help the tears that start to slide down my cheeks as guilt chokes me. *Shay...*

"Hey, hey, it's okay, love. It's okay." Key whispers as he strokes my hair so gently that I barely feel it. He kisses my temple before stepping on the gas even more. I have no idea where he's taking me, but I don't give a shit. I'll go anywhere with him right now. So I sit clinging to him while he

curls me close, winding our way down the backroads out of our town, but I know we aren't heading into the city.

It isn't until more aspens start to take over that I realize where we're going, and my heart aches. He takes a turn-off which is pure gravel but is practically hidden from view by the thick shrubbery. The leaves on the trees are bright yellow, as opposed to the last time we were here at the beginning of summer when we were surrounded by rich greenery. Now, the sights and smells of autumn have taken over, and if possible, it's even more beautiful than before. When we break free from the treeline, I see the beach and the lake ahead, empty, as it was before. Keenan pulls the SUV to the side so that we're hidden amongst the trees and underbrush, overlooking the water and parks, but keeping the heat going.

At once, he removes his seatbelt and reaches over, clicking mine free, before he cradles my face in his hands and kisses me as if his very life depends on it. I sigh against his lips and clutch the soft leather of his jacket, holding onto him like I'm afraid someone will tear me away. His lips are so soft, yet they mould against mine so perfectly. When I feel his tongue stroke against my lips, I part them, inviting him in, and he greedily massages his tongue over my own, groaning into my mouth. One of his hands slides to cup the back of my neck before the other slides down beneath my jacket until he moves it up underneath my shirt, caressing the bare skin at my hip.

In a flash, he hauls me out of my seat and settles me on his lap so I'm straddling him. He even tilts his seat back to give me more room, and tightly holds me flush to his chest as he continues to kiss me so deeply that my head spins.

"Key!" I gasp into his mouth after a minute. I can barely catch my breath.

This isn't why you're here! I scream inside my head, and I somehow manage to push against his chest and pull myself away. He lies beneath me, panting hard, his eyes sparkling as he stares at me like I'm... well, it's almost like how Shay looks at me. When I think of his name, I instantly clamber off of Keenan and move back into my seat, shakily running my fingers through my hair as I comb it away from my face.

"Key," I whisper, hearing him sit up and shift towards me in his seat, waiting.

"Yes?"

"Why?"

His whole body seems to still and he woodenly asks, “Why, what?”

“Why did you befriend me all those years ago?”

He bites his bottom lip, rolling it between his white teeth as though my question has seriously thrown him. But honestly, why *did* he decide to reach out to an eleven-year-old girl? This was just one of the many questions I had rolling around in my mind that needed clarification, and only Keenan could tell me.

“That’s a long story, Sunshine...” he mutters, at last, brushing his hair off his forehead, looking like my question stresses him.

“I asked you to meet me today so that I could get answers. Are you not going to?” I fix him with a steely look, frustrated if he was seriously going to try to dance around this. I have had enough of that from everyone else.

“No, hun, of course, I’ll answer,” he says quickly. He reaches out and takes one of my hands in his, squeezing it. “It’s just... it’s a sensitive subject for me.”

I raise my brows, utterly confused. “What do you mean?”

Keenan lowers his head, shaking it slightly. *What was wrong with him?* I’ve only seen him upset a handful of times, and now, I feel like I’m watching him descend to that place where I’ve witnessed Shay go so many times before. Only Key didn’t react to the darkness the way Shay did. Shay flew off the handle, becoming violent and possessive. Keenan becomes quiet, eerily calm, but still visibly distressed. His jaw flexes and his eyes become even more vibrant as he slowly raises his head to meet my gaze.

“When I first saw you, Mina, you were just a kid. And not just any kid, but the kid sister to someone that had wronged my club and me,” he says softly. I try to remember back then, but it was so long ago. I can only recall a few details, like that I had helped him pick flowers, and there was that hostile confrontation between the Spades and the Beasts. And how panicked Shay had been to see me with Keenan. It was those little moments that stood out to me most.

“Shay had gone after fellow prospects of my club. You know how much he loves his knife play...” his voice trails off, and I feel a shiver race up and down my spine. Yes, Shay does love his knives. He only uses a gun if he feels like it’s not worth his time or if he’s trying to move on quickly. But to picture a *thirteen-year-old* version of Shay already into that sort of sick, twisted sort of violent play is rather disturbing, now that I think about it.

Shay loves his knife play... a soft voice whispers in the back of my mind. NO! I quickly shut that down before the thought could fully manifest and refocus on Keenan.

“He hurt my friends, Mina. I wanted to kill him. I *would* have if my club prez had allowed it.” Keenan’s expression shifted until his eyes were blazing in rage at the memories, “But we were trying to change our image. The Black Spades didn’t want to be a part of the sort of illegal bullshit that the Beasts are involved in. With all the blood spilled in our pasts, he just wanted it to fucking end. So we decided to step back,” he lets out a sharp breath, exasperated “It was fucking hard to do, Mina. I’m not gonna lie. It felt like defeat. But I bit my tongue and bided my time for a chance at retribution. And when Shay kept coming at us, it was decided a message had to be sent without spilling any blood. We didn’t want to give Bull a reason to come at us. Because Shay had fucked with my fellow prospects, and given that my old man is the VP, I was handed the task.” His voice gets quiet when he says this and I feel sick to my stomach.

“What do you mean?” I’m suddenly slammed by the memory of him holding me in his arms, just a little girl thrilled to have the attention from a cute teenage boy. A girl who was so desperate for love and affection after her father’s death that she unwittingly trusted a stranger she met in the woods who showed her the smallest bit of kindness. I don’t remember every word that was spoken between him and Shay, but enough to understand that the boys hated each other. A sinking feeling was pooling deep in my stomach and Key’s eyes tense around the edges, his grip on my hand tightening like he was afraid I was about to pull it away.

“I needed to scare him, Mina,” Keenan says softly, “I needed to make him afraid for once. And at the picnic, I saw an opportunity.”

“An opportunity...” I whisper, as I remember seeing him walk over to the picnic area after he and Shay had glared daggers at each other.

“I saw him with you. I saw how he held your hand, fed you, allowed you to put daisies in his hair... he didn’t even throw them away after he and his friends went down to the river to drink. He tucked them into his pocket. He was so different with you than he was with anyone else. I felt like I was looking at a completely different person.”

I feel my body break out in a cold sweat at his words and a quiet fury begins to churn away in my gut as I remembered what happened next, “So you lured me into the woods...”

“I did,” his voice is still calm, but I can hear the strain behind the words as he speaks, “I wanted to talk to him away from the senior members. I wanted us on even ground. So I had my boys watching as I led you away, knowing he would look for you.”

I attempt to pull away from him, but he won’t allow it. Keenan releases my hand only to wrap his arms tight around my back, crushing me to his chest, forcing me to stay. It’s an awkward hold being in the confined space of the car, but I manage to struggle enough to punch him hard enough in his side that he grunts. But he just continues to hold on. “Fucking let me *go!*” I grit out between my teeth.

“Not until you hear everything I have to say, Sunshine.”

“Don’t fucking call me *that!*”

“I’m too much of an asshole to agree to that, love.”

“Don’t call me *that*, either!”

One of Keenan’s hands snakes between us and grips my chin, tilting my head back to meet his gaze again. I glare hard at him as he searches my face, his expression pained. “I was supposed to use you as a crutch against him, Mina.”

“Can you stop fucking talking right now? I need to process this!” I half-shout in his face as my cheeks burn red with humiliation. “I get it! You used me to try to control Shay. Congratulations! I hope it worked out well for you and your club!”

“Mina!” Keenan snaps at me as I continue to struggle in his arms. Sighing heavily, he grasps my upper arms and shifts back again, forcing me to sit on his lap, my legs straddling his lap, “I did what I did, and because of it, I probably saved the lives of several young prospects for my club. But do you really think I would have hurt you if he crossed us? Do you think I’m capable of hurting an innocent little girl?”

“I don’t know anything anymore, so you tell me?”

He shakes his head, clearly distressed. “Mina, I didn’t have to seek you out afterwards. Shay was behaving and leaving us be. But after that day in the woods, with-with my past and what...” his voice cuts off suddenly like he was choking on his words, “The shit I saw as a kid, as one involved with a club that was knee-deep in blood at that point in time, I couldn’t help but be afraid for you. You were... *good.*” He inhales so sharply through his teeth it sounds like a hiss of pain and the hands holding me in place shake. “Knowing that you were *his* little sister, and after seeing what he could do, I

couldn't help but be afraid for you. I knew enough about Shay and James, and from what I'd observed with-with your mum," he shakes his head, his face filled with remorse. "I saw a bleak future ahead of you. And, I suppose, I saw a little bit of the child I'd once been, in you as well. Trusting and hopeful that everything was going to turn out okay. Only I knew that wouldn't be the end to your story. Not while trapped in that family."

"I didn't see you for years after... if you felt so responsible for me, then why wait so long?" As much as I wanted to, I didn't believe him. Not yet. It didn't make sense.

"I saw you, Mina. You didn't see me, but I was there. And finally, one night, I watched as Emily stumbled into our clubhouse, drunk off her ass, demanding that we serve her drinks." I feel my cheeks burn with shame. *Goddamit, mum....* I fought back the tears that stung the backs of my eyes. I could picture her now, dressed up for a night out, a total wreck, most likely having taken a cab after a fight with James or some stupid thing, looking to go to the very place he would hate most as payback.

"James came by not long after. He didn't come in, but my dad went out to talk with him one on one, and said he'd been respectful enough. We dragged her out to him and he took her home. A week later, I saw you both in town, shopping for Christmas presents. Seeing your mother the way she was... it hit me in a personal way, Mina."

"What do you mean?"

I think about Keenan and his home life. In the past, I hadn't gotten much out of him. But I remember the few things he let slip.

When I was a kid, we didn't have much money, love. I had to make do with whatever I could find around the house...

He reaches up, his hands cradling my face so carefully, he makes me feel like I'm made of glass. I'm about to pull back from him, remembering my loyalty to Shay, and am prepared to draw a line, when he murmurs, "My mother... she was very much like yours."

I go rigid for just a moment, his words catching me off-guard, and I furrow my brow at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she wasn't born into this life. She was from a small town out west but came out here looking for work in Ashland." His fingertips tremble a little as they linger along my jaw, his unease apparent by the stressed way he feels beneath me. If he were Shay, he would need me to wrap my arms

around him and hold him until his demons left him alone. But Key, he wasn't like that. He simply held me a little closer, took a shaky breath, and kept going. "Living in Ashland is fucking expensive as hell, unless you live in Harley, and *no one* wants to live in Harley," I knew about Harley. It was the dodgy side of town, full of poverty, drugs, and crime. Most break-ins, holdups, and gang fights took place there. "So she moved to our town, making the commute into the city each day for some accounting firm."

"She met my dad at a diner at the edge of town there and fell hard for him. He kept his MC life a secret from her," his eyes flash to mine when he says this and I now realize what he means when he says our mothers were alike. "At that time, the Spades and the Beasts were in a bloody turf war... fights, deaths, all of it. By the time my mother became aware of the situation, my dad had gotten her pregnant to keep her around."

My blood runs cold at the thought. To intentionally impregnate someone in order to keep them around was absolutely heinous and disgusting.

"My mother felt like she had no choice but to stay. My dad wasn't a rich man, and so she was left alone in our trailer for most of the time. He didn't like her being out, especially with the constant fights and attacks by the Beasts. He was worried she'd be taken. So she was forced to stay home most of the time. Being isolated, with a new baby... I guess it started to take its toll on her." I can hear his voice tighten up as he speaks and I reach down to cup the side of his face in one hand. Keenan turns into it, and presses his lips to my palm, closes his eyes, and rests his cheek there. "My mum turned to drugs. She hated the life my father led, and no matter how hard she tried to leave him, he wouldn't let her. Her addiction began to rule her life, and after I turned six, she overdosed."

"Key..." I whisper, wanting nothing more than to wrap my arms around him and hold him close. But he wouldn't let me. He keeps me at arm's length, not allowing us to get closer than we are.

Years ago, when we exchanged letters back and forth, he'd hinted that his mum had been into drugs. But to hear he lost her at such a young age breaks my heart, as I could relate, thinking of my own mum and even my father, who passed away when I was little.

"Don't, Sunshine... I asked you once before not to pity me and I stand by that. I barely remember my mother," he murmurs, giving my palm another kiss.

"But, you were so young—"

“As were you when you lost your dad, and your mum had to work and started seeing another man.”

I’ll admit, his words hurt, but he was right. When I lost my father, I craved the attention I was missing when he’d been alive. With him gone and my mum having to suddenly work full-time, I was left alone with a babysitter most days or had the television for entertainment. When she started seeing James, he took up most of her attention. That was one of the many reasons I latched on to Shay so quickly. The fact that he doted on me and gave me the love I’d been craving and missing had me running to him all the time. When I met Keenan, it was the same thing. I’d been left alone at that picnic, and the idea of a handsome teenage boy wanting to spend time with me had been exciting. I even let him carry me around like a little kid. But I didn’t care. I just wanted someone to *want* to be around me.

“My dad didn’t know what to do with me, Mina, so he left me alone. I had to take care of myself for the longest time until I became interesting enough for him to pay attention to. All my dad knows is this life, so he forced me to be a part of it, too.” He turns his head ever so slightly so that his piercing eyes were looking up at me. “When I saw your mother, I felt like I was seeing a ghost. The little bits and pieces I remember of my mum were staring back at me through Emily’s eyes. And then, there was *you*...”

I inhale sharply at his words, trying to understand what he was saying.

“What about me?”

“You were this little ball of pure innocence, Mina,” Keenan moves his hands to the sides of my hips, gripping me carefully as he speaks. “Trusting, sweet, and *good*. Untainted by this fucking world. And it tore my fucking heart out because all I could see for your future was what mine ended up being. Stuck in this place, with a life you never wanted. I saw myself in you, and I wanted you to get the fuck out, because I couldn’t. I wouldn’t have chosen this life for myself, Mina. Not after knowing what it did to my mother. And then I saw it happening again with your mum. With the direction the Beasts were going in, I saw nothing but blood and pain in your future. I decided that since I hadn’t been able to save myself... I’d save you.”

My mind flashes back to that Christmas when he had shown up at the department store. “You befriended me.”

“I did.” He slides his hands up my sides, making me quiver.

“You looked out for me.”

“I did.” Keenan’s fingers caress the swell of my hips, stroking over the material of my shirt, his eyes never leaving mine. “I wanted you to have someone on the outside who cared. Someone who could help you if you ever needed it. I wanted you to pursue your dreams and leave, not get trapped here like I did. I wanted to see you get away and live a life I’d once hoped to live.” He lets out a shuddering breath and shifts to sit up straighter from his slouching position and stares at me with such intensity, I find it hard to function. “I never dreamed I would fall in love with you.”

Shay!

I shake my head and grab at the handle to the door, ready to fling myself from the vehicle, but Keenan stops me, grabbing my wrist and hauling me back in. He holds me by my upper arms, peering down at me like a man desperate for air as he takes in the expression on my face. “You love *him*, don’t you?” he whispers.

I lower my head and nod, unable to meet his accusing eyes and the hurt there.

He scoffs, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I do, I can’t help it, but I do.”

His hands clasp hard on to me, his entire body going rigid like he’s holding back from punching something. When I peek up through my long strands of blond hair, he’s livid.

“The only reason you feel this attachment to him is because he has isolated you from anyone else who cares!” He half shouts in my face. “He’s made himself the only one available to you. He is the only one who has had a chance to show you any love. That’s why you think he’s all you’ve got. But it’s not real. It’s dark and twisted! It’s an illusion! He’s broken you down and put you together again in a way that suits *him*, but it’s not who you really are!”

“That’s not how it is-”

“Yes, it is! Or have you forgotten how it felt with me? Have you forgotten how it felt when we were together? Have you forgotten that I was once your protector, too?”

When he speaks those words I want to crawl into a hole and simply die. It’s true. What he’s saying, I know it’s true. I know Shay broke me down and put me back together again, and that he isolated me from everyone else. But... I also *know* Shay. And because I know him, I know that he *could* have done so much worse. So much worse than the tattoo, than the nights at

home with him alone. He could have chained me in a room for weeks. He could have easily overpowered me time and time again. He could have tried correcting me with physical punishment. But he didn't.

When I don't say anything, Keenan goes on, "I started to care for you more and more as the years went on, Mina. I truly did. I wanted to see you get the fuck out of here and live a dream. Because I never had a fucking chance." He releases one of my arms to cup my cheek. "And then one day, it all fucking changed. One day, I saw you standing in the golden light like a fucking angel meant just for me. I was horrified with myself because you were so young, still. What the hell was wrong with me? I was disgusted when I got home. I tried to ignore it, telling myself that you still needed me, and so I kept meeting with you at that shitty old theatre."

I remember that moment so well. We'd been standing outside the theatre as the sun set, and when I heard the loud 'caw' of a crow, I had been momentarily distracted as I turned toward the bird. *Dad...* He loved crows. *Bad crow*, being something he said whenever one scolded nearby. It was a habit I'd carried on, and when I had turned back to Keenan, he'd touched my heart with his words.

I want your real smile, Mina. And one day, I'll get it...

"I miss that place..." I whisper finally. It's true. That old, crumbling mess had been a sanctuary for me, somewhere to escape to and find solace in Keenan's arms. It was so much more to me than a simple hideaway to practice dance. It was where I formed my bond with Keenan.

"My God... let it go. That place is a piece of shit. It stinks. It's old. And I'm shocked neither of us got some sort of an infection from the mold." He smirks at me then, the playful Keenan surfacing at last. "I continued to see you, Mina. And it wasn't fucking easy. I kept fighting with myself, hating myself, feeling disgusted for being so attracted to you. But I wanted to see you. I wanted to spend time with you. I liked it when you teased me. I liked your bratty attitude-

"I am *not* bratty!"

"So bratty," he winks at me, "I liked seeing you grow into the beautiful dancer that you were, knowing that you were going to get the fuck out of here and live a life free of this bullshit. But, at the same time, I wanted you to stay. So badly. Spending that time with you was a break from the life that I had been forced into. A life I didn't want. My moments with you were my time of peace." I feel his thumb gently stroke along my cheek before he

leans in closer and kisses the tip of my nose before resting his forehead to mine, and both our eyes close. “I didn’t mean to fall in love with you. I knew it was wrong, that it made me a sick person. And I fought every urge I had to want to hold you and kiss you. But that day on the beach, when I saw you standing in the sand, the wind whipping your hair around, your pink cheeks, and your bright green eyes... I fucking fell apart.”

I didn’t mean to fall in love with you. I didn’t mean to fall in love with you. I didn’t mean to fall in love with you. His words echo in my head like a beautiful bell, making my heart feel lighter than it has in months.

I bring my hands up and wrap them around his neck, remembering every kiss, every touch, from that day. It had probably been the best day of my life. Even better than the final performance I did before the attack. “You came to see me dance that night,” I whisper.

“I did. After all that training, all those afternoons yelling at you to stretch, how could I not?” His other arm comes up around my back, stroking the length of my spine. “I was so fucking proud of you, love. You were so beautiful and perfect. I saw you dance, and then I let you go. You would go away to dance school, and you’d be safe from this life, from Shay, from *me*.” He pulls me closer and buries my face against his throat. “And then the next day at the club, Mav tells me that one of the Beast’s little girls had been attacked, their old lady killed. It took us another day to find out who... and when I did, I fucking lost it. I thought for sure Shay had gone absolutely insane and had attacked you and your mum for whatever the fuck reason. And then Bull requested to talk with us, and we learned about the three guys-”

“Four,” I correct him, holding him tight.

Keenan pauses as though deep in thought. “Four? I swear Bull said they had three?”

Confused, I frown, remembering that night so clearly that I know I’m not wrong. “No. It was four. One had my mum, and three had me...”

He is quiet for a minute before he sighs heavily, “I must be remembering wrong. All I know is that I was so fucking desperate to get to you, but no matter what I did, you were surrounded by Beasts. The hospital was fucking off-limits, and then Shay never left you alone. I kept the burner cell on me at all times, waiting to hear back from you...”

I had been eager to message him, too. To hear his side had my heart swelling. I leaned back to look up at him, “I’m so fucking sorry, Key... for

everything that's happened."

"It's not *your* fault," he tells me firmly.

"I can't help that I love him..."

Keenan sighs wearily, and touches his forehead to mine again, "Either way, I'm here, Sunshine. If you change your mind, ever, I'll still get you out. I promise."

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Chapter fourteen

“YOU KNOW the moment you want to, I’m stealing you away with me, right?” Keenan murmurs against the top of my head, his face buried into my hair. We’re parked across the street from my school, hiding behind the tinted windows of his SUV.

I squeeze my eyes shut at his words, my hands grasping the soft leather of his grey cut before I press a kiss to the side of his throat, and I feel him tremble beneath my touch. “I won’t risk you, Key. I wouldn’t be able to take it. Not after I’ve lost...” my words catch in my throat. I can’t say *mum*, or *dad*. And honestly? I’ve lost James, too. He was a father figure that I loved dearly, but he has been cut out of my life. However I love Shay. For the longest time, he made me feel safe and loved. And though he has slowly morphed into a dark, warped, and tortured soul, I can’t change that. He has loved me completely and I’ve fallen back.

Once upon a time, I would have run away with Keenan, but even if the threat of Shay hovering over his head were gone, I still wouldn’t leave now. I don’t say anything as we hug each other. Outside the vehicle, the sky is

cloudy and grey, the wind buffets us as it blows, and the dead leaves that scatter the ground fly around us as if they're dancing. It *feels* like goodbye. Goodbye forever.

"Keep the phone, okay? Turn it off, hide it away. If you ever need me, and I don't give a shit if it's a year or two years from now, you message me on it. I'll always be waiting in the wings for you, love."

"Key," I whisper, my voice breaking. I feel so torn up inside like I'm splitting myself in half, but I know this is right. He'll be safe. Shay will be happy. And I can keep going, hoping to find a way to heal the broken pieces inside of me. "I'm so fucking sorry."

He pulls my face back so he can look at me, his touch gentle, and leans forward to kiss the tip of my nose. "Don't be, Mina. I can't force you to do anything. And I won't." He smiles, but I can see the effort he's putting behind it, and it fucking breaks my heart. "Now I'm gonna sit here until you get back into that school. Then I want you to work hard, get into a great University, and make what you want of your life. You got me?"

I don't tell him that Shay has no intention of letting me go away to school. That he wants me to stay here, and work in the club so that we're closer than before. There was no point. What good would it do? So I just nod against him, give him one last squeeze as I breathe in the beautiful scent of him that I missed so much, and climb out into the cold, Autumn air. Across the street, I can see the school sitting next to the soccer field, which is empty. I'll sneak in between the back buildings again and make it to my next class with hopefully a minute or two to spare.

As I walk away from Keenan, my heart wrenches. The feeling of protection and stability starts to dissipate, and the more distance I put between us, the more anxious I become. I peer over my shoulder to see that his SUV is still parked at the corner of the parking lot, waiting until I get inside as he promised, and I feel a bit of comfort knowing that he's still watching me. Tearing my eyes away, I run along the sidewalk towards the two trailers. I feel less nervous as I get closer to the school, relieved in knowing that I managed to get away undetected. It helps that there are no longer prospects watching my every move since Shay got rid of them all.

Only, when I near the end of the trailers, a figure steps around the corner, and my heart stops.

"C-Cody?" I stammer, screeching to a halt, reaching out with a hand to steady myself against the cool metal exterior wall. "What are you doing

here?”

Cody’s blue eyes flash, his dark hair slightly tousled, and for the first time since I’ve known him, he looks so beyond pissed that I instinctively take a step back in fear. He isn’t Shay. I have *no* idea how to handle Cody like this, and it takes everything in me not to turn around and run.

“Where the *fuck* were you?” he snarls.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t fucking lie!” He stomps over, wearing his Celtic Beasts jacket, and his breath coming out in puffs that cloud in the cold air. His biker boots crush the ice of a small, frozen puddle, causing it to crack, making me startle from the sound. “I get a phone call from Manic, screaming at me to get my ass down to the school to look for you!”

Shay was in Ashland today, and for a moment, I’m utterly speechless and at a loss as to how he knew I was gone. But then...

From behind Cody, I see the face of the prospect I’d ran into earlier, eagerly peering out the back window of the emergency exits, and it clicks. The little fucker did this, most likely to try to get back into the Beasts’ good graces. He probably followed me after I left, watched me climb into Keenan’s car, and tattled to Shay that I had run out. He meets my eye for a second, his look full of hate mixed with a sort of smug satisfaction, and disappears.

“The junior prospects,” I whisper.

“Yeah, the junior prospects,” he sneers, absolutely livid, “He messaged Manic, and because I’m the closest one, I had to drag my ass down here to search for you, only to realize you were nowhere in the fucking school or even in the area! Your cell phone was in your locker. So tell me, where were you, Mina?!” Cody shouts, stopping a foot away from me. I lean back against the wall of the trailer, craning my neck back to meet his glare, but I’m in so much shock, my mind goes completely blank.

“I-I...”

“Where. Were. You? It’s not a hard question.” He narrows his blue eyes, and when a group of kids come around the corner, chatting away and carrying some PE equipment, his head whips in their direction. But one look at the blue dragon on the back of his jacket, and the teens scatter, running back the way they came and leaving us alone again. Cody turns back to me, nostrils flaring, “So? Tell me, Mina. And don’t fucking lie.” His

hand whips out and seizes my throat, slamming my head back into the wall of the trailer so hard, my vision blurs for a second.

“C-Cody!” I gasp around his tight hold, shocked by his rage. Cody is usually so calm and collected, more playful than any of the others. Seeing him like this, well, it reminds me that he is still a Celtic Beast despite all of that, which means that he is more than capable of committing monstrosities. I’m so in shock at how this backfired that my mind remains hopelessly blank as I struggle to think of something, *anything* that is at all convincing.

“Don’t bullshit me!” he snarls in my face, “You left your phone behind on purpose. You’re coming *back* to the building now, so where were you? Who were you with?”

“I was just-just...” *Think, Mina! Think, you fucking moron!* “I-I was just in town. Wanted to get out for a b-bit-”

“That’s a fucking lie.”

“It’s not-”

“Mina, I’ve known you as long as Manic has, and when you’re caught off guard, you’re a shit liar,” he leans closer to my face, his nose inches from mine. I had no idea how perceptive Cody was, or how much of my behaviour he was attuned to. I reach up to try to pry his fingers loose from around my throat, but he doesn’t budge, nor does he take his eyes away.

“I was in *town*!” I hiss at him, maneuvering myself as I try to get free. I so badly want to kick him in the balls, but I know that won’t do anything to help my situation other than to *really* piss him off. I wouldn’t put it past him not to storm into the school once he’d recovered and simply drag me out of class. And I’d still have to answer to him, and then to Shay, once he’s back in town.

“That is a fucking lie!” He releases my throat and seizes my upper arms, shaking me so hard my teeth rattle. *Why is he so pissed?*

“Cody, what the fuck?” I cry out when his fingers dig into the muscle.

“Do you have a fucking death wish? What if that psycho who was after you and your mum was waiting for an opportunity where you are alone and vulnerable? Did you even think about that?”

His concern touches me, but his grip fucking hurts! “I was careful, I swear-”

Suddenly, I feel a sting in my cheek, and my head goes flying sideways. I slump against the wall when he releases me, one of my hands gingerly touching my cheek in shock. He hit me. Cody *hit* me! I don’t move as he

hovers over me, growling angrily, “You’re a fucking liar and a spoiled brat, and if you were mine, I’d fucking beat you down and fuck you so hard you wouldn’t be able to walk for a week. Every time you moved, you would think twice about disrespecting me or going against my word.”

His speech shocks the hell out of me, and I shrink away from him, still lightly touching my cheek, but he doesn’t let me get far. His hand whips out and seizes my forearm, yanking me back to himself so that I fall into his chest. “But that’s not up to me, Mina. You’re Manic’s. And though I respect the shit out of him, he’s too fucking soft on you.” He moves away from the trailer, hauling me behind him as he drags me between the two structures towards the road where his own truck is waiting. I try to plant my feet, but they slip on the frost-covered surface of the pavement.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I ask breathlessly, tripping as he roughly tugs at my arm.

“Taking you home to babysit until Manic gets there. Then I’m telling him what he needs to fucking do to get you to fall in line,” he says without looking back at me.

“Cody, what the hell? Stop! Shay... Shay wouldn’t allow this!” I practically scream as we emerge from between the two trailers and head to where his old, rusted truck is parked down the street. There is no fucking way that Shay would allow Cody to have *any* say in regards to me.

“Sometimes a bitch needs a fucking slap as a reminder of where her place is. He’s always been weak when it comes to how to deal with you, but it needs to stop now. I’m sick of this shit. We got enough going on right now with the club and you’re causing nothing but problems...”

“I love Shay, Cody!” I scream as I continue to fight him, panting hard from the struggle. “I’m not *trying* to cause problems with the club, and if there are any, I haven’t heard of them!”

He drags me close, crushing me against his chest and narrowing his eyes, “How many secrets do you keep from him? How many times have you lied? How many times have you acted out, which resulted in him going off the deep end?”

“That is *not* my fault!” I shout in his face, furious. When I try to pull away from his grip, to free myself from him, Cody only becomes even more enraged and yanks on my arm so hard that I lose my footing completely and fall to the dead, frost-covered, yellow grass.

“Fucking let go of her or I’ll kill you!”

We both look up to see Key standing about ten feet behind us, breathing hard as if he'd just sprinted, his icy eyes flashing angrily as he takes in the scene. Instead of feeling relieved, my heart drops. *Oh God, no! Key, run!*

"A Spade," a smile creeps onto Cody's lips as he recognizes Keenan in his grey leather, "And not just any Spade, but *Dodger*." He smirks, stepping forward to block me from view as he stares Key down.

"Cobalt," Key snaps, addressing Cody by his road name.

"What are you doing here?" I can't see Cody's face, but I can hear the animosity in his voice as he spits out his words, "Creeping on high school girls?"

"You're one to talk," Keenan's eyes flicker down to me and I can see how they move to the side of my face where, no doubt, my cheek is probably red from Cody's slap. I shake my head at him, pleading with my eyes for him to leave.

Cody is having none of it. "Don't you fucking look at her!" He takes a step forward, attempting to hide me behind him. "I haven't forgotten the last time we found you with her, fucker!"

"It's okay," I say loudly and rise to my feet, "Cody, it's fine. Let's just go." I lower my gaze, afraid to even look at Key and give myself away. I don't want him to get involved. It's too fucking dangerous. I reach out and tug on the loop of Cody's jeans, trying to divert his attention back to me, but he refuses to look my way. "Cody!" I raise my voice and pull harder. "Come on! Let's just go, okay?"

"What were you doing to her?" Keenan asks harshly, catching my attention. I peer at him around Cody's shoulder and notice how his knuckles are clenched so hard they've turned white. "Did you hit her?"

"Mind your fucking business, you fucking Spade!" Cody spits at him, "Move the fuck on-"

"I can't stand by and watch a prick like you touch her. What the fuck do you think you're doing laying your hands on her?" Keenan takes half a step forward and I pull on Cody's pants, forcing him back to keep the distance between them the same.

"You know," Cody says in a playful tone that actually sends a tremor down my spine. "Before the other night, the last time I saw a Spade, he was squealing like a pig being gutted by a butcher in a slaughterhouse... poor Ari." He shakes his head and I want to throw up at the joy in his voice. I can only assume that Ari is just another poor victim of the Spades.

“Because that’s what he was... a fucking pig. And Manic made him cry and squeal as he sliced him open and played with his insides. Do you know what it smells like when you press a lit cigarette to someone’s intestines? I know what sound they make when they realize they’re dying, when they finally understand that there’s no hope for them. And when *he* did, Ari cried like a-”

Keenan moves so fast that Cody doesn’t have a chance to brace himself. One moment he’s being as twisted and as evil as Shay, and the next, I feel his body fly into mine, and I go sailing backwards, hitting the ground hard. I roll once and look up, bracing myself on my elbows to see Keenan and Cody wrestling on the ground with each other. Their faces red, practically snarling at each other, and fists flying.

“Stop it! Stop!” I scream as I push myself up off the ground.

But both men are completely lost, their focus only on inflicting as much damage as they can on the other. I want to throw myself in between them, to separate them, but they’re both relentless as they land punch after punch on each other. It’s only when I see Cody reach down for the knife strapped to the side of his leg, that I really start to panic.

“STOP!” I shriek at the top of my lungs and run forward, my hands wrapping around Cody’s arm, and pulling back as hard as I can. He grunts, kicking Keenan’s gut, which sends him rolling off to the side. I cling to Cody’s arm, holding it with all my strength to prevent him from using the weapon that glints in the cold, grey light, feeling like I’m on the verge of passing out. “Cody, don’t!” I cry.

“Let go, Mina!” He pushes himself up and, with his free hand tugs at my fingers curled into the sleeve of his jacket.

“No! Not until you drop it and back away! Enough! Enough of this!” I shout up into his face. A few feet away, Keenan starts to get up, his golden hair tousled and a trickle of blood oozes down his chin from his lip. There is so much rage in his eyes that it frightens me. He rises upon a knee, his hands pressed to the ground, looking like a panther who is about to pounce.

I need to de-escalate this now!

I push off of Cody, the force unbalancing him so that he falls back again, and leap to my feet just as Keenan rises to his. Panting, I sway on my feet as I extend my hands out to each of them. “Enough!” I shout as a chilling breeze whips my hair around my face. “Stop it, now!” Keenan’s eyes flicker to me, the hatred subsiding ever so slightly before the scraping

of Cody's boots on the rocky pavement tells me he has risen to his feet, too. I turn to him, but his glare is fixed on Key. Behind us, the school bell rings, signalling for the next class.

"Look, I-"

But before I can finish, I feel a heavy weight hit me hard and I stumble to the side, my head slamming into the wall of the PE trailer. I slide to the ground, a high-pitched ringing in my ears practically drowns out everything around me, except for a shout that was so loud, I swear that it could be heard inside the school. Head spinning, I lift it to see Key and Cody on the ground, Cody's hand still wrapped around his knife, with Keenan holding onto his wrist to keep it aloft from where he lay on his back. Cody straddles his hips, and the look in his eyes has nothing but pure murder in their depths. Before I can move, Cody twists his hand, forcing Keenan's grip to slip just the slightest, and he slashes up at his face, missing him by a centimetre.

"N-no... Cody, no!" I slur as I try to stand, my head whirling in such a way that I sag back, completely disoriented.

Keenan forces them to roll, kicking his leg out to the side to stop from being forced to the ground again and with both hands, grips Cody's wrist, twisting it down the same time Cody bucks his hips upwards, an attempt to throw his adversary off.

It's like everything suddenly starts moving at half speed. I hear the grunt of pain, the sharp inhale of breath after, followed by a haunting, almost gurgling sound from deep within Cody's throat. I sit up, my eyes focusing on the two men. Keenan stares at Cody in shock, his blue eyes bright and shining. I follow their gaze until I see the blade of the knife that has completely disappeared up and into the front right side of Cody's body. Both men are motionless, both staring at each other as though caught in some sort of stupor.

"Cody!" I scream, and the sound snaps Keenan out of his trance. He releases the knife and quickly climbs off of him and steps back several paces. I crawl forward, ignoring the pain in my palms from the sharp rocks and ice, my head still spinning to the point where I fear I might vomit, but manage to make it to his side. I stare at the knife that is still sitting in Cody's front. His jacket has fallen open, and I can see a large stain of blood that is pooling beneath his navy shirt. His fingers, which are still wrapped

around the handle of the knife, slowly uncurl until his hand falls with a heavy, thud to the ground beside him.

Cody's blue eyes are fixed on me, and they are terrified. His face is turning white, his lower lip quivering like he's freezing cold, but he doesn't make a sound. I look back at Keenan, whose eyes are on the knife, his expression stiff and strained. Slowly, he looks up at me and whispers, "It will take longer if I leave it in."

"What will take longer?" I ask, desperately, "Keenan, call an ambulance! Or give me your cell, and I'll call them myself!" My bag is back about thirty feet from where Cody had initially dragged me. I go to stand when a shaking hand weakly touches my wrist. I turn back to the man on the ground, covered in his own blood, and his ocean blue eyes are on me, pleading. His mouth moves a little, but I can't hear him, so I lean over his face so that my ear is close to his mouth. "Say that again?"

"T-t..." he splutters, and tries again, "Take... take it... out." I turn to him, my body going cold at his words. Keenan quietly comes over and kneels at Cody's other side. Cody's eyes shift to him, begging, "*Please...*" His forehead is sweaty and his eyes spin like he's dizzy.

"Key-"

"It's fatal," he says and without hesitation Keenan pulls the blade free, while Cody's flinches hard, gasping. I go to press my hand over the wound, but the soft brush of Cody's fingers reach for mine. He guides our hands away, his cold touch shaky as he weakly holds onto me. I wind my fingers with his, staring down at him, tears flooding my vision. They fall onto his wound, but I hold his gaze, watching as his face slowly turns stark and ghostly against his dark hair.

"Mi... na..." his speech is heavily garbled, and I have to lean closer to his mouth to hear his words, "... so... rryyyy..." His breathing becomes rapid and shallow. As I hold his hand, I feel how cold he's become, his palm clammy. I smooth his hair away from his sweaty forehead and lean over to press a soft kiss there.

"Shhhh," I whisper to him as I continue to hold his hand and stroke his hair, "Shhh... it's okay. It's okay..." I feel my throat constrict to the point where I feel sick, and my tears are falling onto his face. I carefully wipe them away and watch as his eyes move over my face one last time before they close. His body is shaking, his hold on mine becoming weaker and

weaker until... he limply releases me and drops to the blood-covered, dead grass beneath him.

For a long, agonizing minute, I sit there, staring at Cody. He's dead. Cody is *dead*. I start to shake, and when I look over his body and see the blood everywhere, an alarm goes off in my head.

The blood... the blood... it drip, drip, drips off the side of the table. It pools from the holes carved into her chest. The leaks from the pits that were her eyes. It streams from the sliced remnants of her nose. She's been carved up. She's been played with. The knives. Shay loves his knife play...

Shay!

I hear the sound of a Harley in the distance just as I turn to the side and throw up. No, fuck no. No! I won't let myself think that. No! I spit several times and wipe my chin with my sleeve, feeling clammy and so cold I shiver.

"Mina!"

I look up to see Keenan standing on the other side of Cody's body. He hears the approaching Harley, too. I peer over my shoulder to the road as the sound of a single Harley Davidson gets louder and louder. *The Beasts...*

I spin back to Keenan, our eyes locking with the others, and I shout one word, "Run!"

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Chapter fifteen



“MINA? Mina, what happened? What the fuck *happened?*”

The words sound very far away, like I’m trapped underwater and don’t know which way is the surface. It’s a question they’ve asked me over and over again, but one I can’t answer. I’m sitting on a stool at the Beasts clubhouse, staring straight ahead, my mouth slightly open in shock. When Gavin found me at Cody’s side, I’d spaced out. *Shay... Shay... I needed to talk to Shay.*

Next thing I knew, Gavin was calling his brothers to the school. When they arrived, he picked me up, put me in his Jeep, and brought me here. I was vaguely aware of him calling Shay on the way, but whatever words he’d said were muffled and distorted to me. Now here I was, the clubhouse filling up with Beasts, young and old, and there was a flurry of activity. The sweetbutts, minus Lindsey, had run upstairs to get out of the way of the bikers. Some were shouting, red-faced and livid. Others were quiet, almost comatose like myself, and a few were acting like they were ready to hop on their bikes and seek vengeance.

But first, they all wanted to talk to me. They wanted to know... who killed Cody?

“Guys, back the fuck up!” Gavin barks when Cooler, one of the older men, stomps over to me and shouts in my face, demanding answers. Gavin shoves him aside and I discreetly peer up at him. There are tears in his eyes, but he is in control. He’s known Cody longer than anyone who is currently here. Shay, Leif, and Aron were still heading back into town after their trip to Ashland.

Oh my God... please, no Shay. Don’t let it be true...

Gavin kneels before me and takes my hands in his, rubbing them to get the blood flowing. I am still shivering, my face and fingers numb as I try to regulate my breathing. Cody is dead. It had been an accident, but he was dead. And Keenan. Fuck, what was I going to do?

Keenan was protecting himself. Cody had baited him to swing first, but in the end, *he* had drawn out the knife. If Key hadn’t turned the blade, it would have gone into his throat. *He* would have been the one bleeding out on the ground. But still... *Cody*... I fight the urge to vomit again.

“Mina?” Gavin’s voice is gentle, though I hear it crack with grief at the loss of his friend. I raise my eyes to his black ones, and he leans in closer, our faces inches apart, and murmurs, “A prospect said that he saw you with Cody last.” When I say nothing, he goes on, “Who did this to you?” He lifts a hand and touches my temple, and I immediately feel a throbbing pain in my head. I wince and hiss through my teeth, pulling away from his touch.

“Someone hurt you... someone killed Cody...” he says slowly, like he’s talking to a child, “I know you didn’t do it, but you *know* who did, right? Nod or shake your head.”

I bite my lip as tears well in my eyes, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t stop them from sliding down my cheeks. I give him the slightest, minute, nod.

“Will you tell me who?” He asks earnestly, reaching up to carefully hold my shoulders.

I open my mouth to speak, but my voice is lost. Do I tell Gavin? What would he do in my situation, where someone he cared for so deeply was at risk? And that is my answer. I lean close, holding his stare, and whisper, “Lindsey.”

He stares at me, utterly confused for just a moment, until it hits him. I see the slow understanding dawn as his eyes widen and his mouth opens a

little. It's like by saying her name I've pleaded the fifth, and he knows it.

"Where is she?!"

I jump in my seat at the shout that breaks through the noise of the lounge, and I feel my veins turn to ice as I spot Shay storm into the room with Aron and Leif hot on his heels. His silver gaze finds me almost immediately and he rushes over. Gavin quickly gets out of his way as he drops to his knees before me, his arms wrapping around my waist and pressing his face into my stomach. He's trembling, like he was scared to death. A part of me wants to console him, but another part is... well, terrified.

I awkwardly place my hands lightly over his tangle of dark hair. I feel immobile, like a statue, beneath his crushing hold. When he finally raises his head up to look at me, the shadows around his eyes are prominent and now red, like he's been crying or rubbing around them again and again. Aron and Leif stand by, their faces deathly white and clearly upset. I turn my attention back to Shay.

"Are you okay, Mina? You're alright? They didn't fucking hurt you? They didn't touch you?" he says in a rush. But even as he asks, his eyes notice the mark on the side of my head from where I hit it against the back building, and the bruise on my cheek from when Cody struck me. His glower deepens and I can practically feel his fury radiating off of him.

I have no idea who he thinks did it, but evidently, he has drawn some conclusions. I shake my head at him and mumble, "I'm fine. It doesn't hurt that bad."

He exhales a long, stuttering breath, and presses his face to my stomach again, kissing it through my clothes, and holding me tight.

"Ask her who the fuck did it, Manic!" One of the older guys shouts from the back. "Ask her who the fuck killed Cobalt!" Several others roar in approval, and I shrink back on the stool until the counter of the bar presses into my spine.

Shay whirls around, rising to his feet, and yells, "Are you fucking kidding me, Mask? I know who the fuck did this! Who the fuck else could it be?" And the others go quiet, an uneasy feeling rising in the space that has these men, these tough MC guys, looking nervous for the first time in... well, ever. And *that* scares the shit out of me.

"Shay, I need to talk to you," Gavin says suddenly, stepping forward.

I eye him, wondering what the fuck he's doing. Is he seriously about to sell me out? I want to say something, but I know that the moment I get my voice back, the others will pounce and I won't get a chance to stop him.

Shay ignores Gavin for a minute as he turns back to me and holds my face in his hands. I flinch at his touch, where once I would have leaned into it, unable to stop the nightmare that is forming in my mind.

"Mina," his voice snaps me out of my trance, and I look up into Shay's handsome face, praying, fucking *praying* that it isn't true. "Ava is going to bring you to the washroom to clean up, okay? I'm just gonna talk with Storm first, and then we're leaving."

"O-kay..." I tremble when he leans in and kisses me, but he doesn't seem to notice, not with his adrenaline racing. He follows Gavin down the hall towards the conference room where the Beasts hold Church, and where James's and Bull's offices are. But instead of heading to one of them, Gavin unlocks one of the side doors that I know leads to the basement, a no-go zone for me. Since I was a kid, James stressed to me time and time again that I was *not* allowed down there... ever. Well, fuck it all. I was breaking that rule today.

"Come on, hun," a sweet, familiar voice says in my ear. I spin to see Ava, a sweetbutt that I recognize from my birthday, standing there and reaching out to me. She's been crying, too, I can see. Her face has zero makeup on it, and her eyes are red and puffy. I look down at myself. The knees of my jeans are covered with blood... Cody's blood.

The blood... the blood... it drip, drip, drips off the side of the table. It pools from the holes carved into her chest. The leaks from the pits that were her eyes. It streams from the sliced remnants of her nose. She's been carved up. She's been played with. The knives. Shay loves his knife play... Shay loves his knife play... and he hated her... he hated my mother...

"Let's get you cleaned up, hm?" Ava gives me a wobbly smile, but takes my hand and helps me to my feet. The bikers have calmed since Shay arrived, and though I look around for James, I don't see him here.

She leads me down the hall, past the door leading into the basement where Gavin and Shay have disappeared to, to one of the private washrooms in the back.

"Need any help with-with that?" Her puffy eyes spot the bloodstains on my pants and I can see them brim with fresh tears again.

"I'm okay... go and hang out in the conference room for a bit," I tell her, my heart aching. *Cody is dead... Cody is dead... and Shay... what did he fucking do?* I teeter and give her a small smile, "The guys are busy. Just take a breather."

Ava tries to smile back, but fails. With a soft sob, she nods and leaves me alone. I tear a bunch of paper towels from the dispenser, soak them a bit and rub furiously at the legs of my pants. The blood comes away, but not all of it. Most of it is stained through, and I dry-heave. Washing my hands, I try not to think of Cody's final moments. It tears me up inside remembering that death rattle in his throat when he exhaled his last breath.

I shut my brain down, dry my hands, and peer out the door and into the hall. Down at the other end, I hear the noise from the others in the lounge, and I know I'm alone. I'm safe. I move like I'm on autopilot, determined to understand, to know once and for all, just what the fuck is going on. I silently move past the conference room, spotting the light shining from beneath the crack of the door. Ava. Looks like she took my suggestion and is taking a minute alone. Good. I won't have to worry about her looking for me.

Normally, the door to the basement is locked, but when I check it, I find it left open just the slightest. I pull on it and peer down the stairwell, instantly feeling a chill race up and down my spine. The steps are made of metal grating, and the walls are just plain concrete. The only light is at the bottom, harsh and white. It looks like something out of a horror movie, and if I had any sense, I'd run away in case some psycho is lurking down there, waiting for a brainless idiot like me to just waltz down into his clutches.

But I remind myself that this is the Beasts' clubhouse. I'm probably safer here than I am back at home, in the trailer. And I need to know what Gavin is telling Shay. I suck in a steady breath and move cautiously down the steps, knowing that if I fell on these, it'd do more damage than just give me a couple of bruises. More than likely the metal grating would tear my skin away, and with my bad leg, I didn't want to take any chances. So each step is careful and light as I move soundlessly down the stairs.

What I was expecting and what I found, were two very different things. I thought I was going to come to a massive storage space, or one with maybe a furnace area, and a room off to the side where dried goods and cleaning products were stored. What I wasn't prepared for was the creepy as fuck, long, hallway made entirely out of concrete with bare, harsh white

lighting. It was cooler down here, not freezing, but enough to give my skin goosebumps. There are eight doors, four on each side of the long hall, and they are... I guess the best word I can use to describe them is "intense." All except two were made entirely out of metal, with slots halfway up the door and a little square window that was covered with a thick cover that locked in place. They look like jail cell doors.

I thought about the sketchy shit that these men did and how Shay had wanted to be the ones to "deal" with the guys who had attacked me. My best guess was this was where they brought men in for questioning or...

I gag a little at the thought. I couldn't imagine being someone they dragged in here, seeing these doors, knowing that you are probably not ever going to get out of here alive. I shudder and brace myself against the wall. No wonder they keep the basement door locked at all times.

I am about to shake the thought away and try one of the two that look normal and were made of wood, when I hear a shout. I nearly jumped out of my skin, thinking that I had been caught snooping where I shouldn't have been, when I realized that the call came from one of the doors down the hall. Nervously, I wring my hands, hesitating for just a few seconds, when another harsh, abrupt shout echoes down the hall, and my heart stills. I know that voice anywhere. It was Shay's.

I move quickly, tip-toeing down the narrow corridor until I reach the last door at the end. I plaster myself against the wall, leaning towards the sliver in the opening to hear better.

"... touch Lindsey and I'll fucking kill you, Manic!"

"Don't know what you're talking about, Storm," Shay's voice was deep, silky, the way he speaks when he's pissed, but also, when he's actually *becoming* Manic. Dangerous. The urge to "play" close to the surface, and my heart starts to pound as a trickle of fear slowly envelopes me like a cold fog.

"Don't fuck with me, man. Don't. I know you better than anyone. I know you went after Lindsey! I would've put a bullet into your goddamn knee if you went through with it!"

"I didn't touch her," Shay replies, his voice still calm and rational, but I know better. That deep undertone is saturated with warning.

"Only because I moved her, and you know it!" Gavin is seething.

"And what did I tell you?" Shay asks softly.

Gavin goes quiet, so quiet that if a penny dropped, I think it would echo down the hall. The wall is cold against my back, and though my heart is hammering against my chest, I can't move away.

"I *told* you to stop looking into shit. I *told* you not to stick your nose where it didn't belong."

"Do you really expect me to just turn a blind eye to what the fuck is happening? To what you're doing? To what you've *done*?"

"Don't!" Shay roars. "You don't know shit!"

"I know enough! And I gotta say, *Manic*, I stuck by you because I am loyal to you. But now what? Cody is fucking dead! We're a running joke to Elias! And *her*? I know how you've always felt about her. I know how much you fucking hated-"

"Shut the fuck up!" I wince when the sound I recognize is a hard crack and heavy thuds of fists striking a body breaking through the stillness of the basement. The sound takes me back to the field where Cody and Keenan had their final fight only an hour ago. I stagger back from the door, but judging by the silence that follows and heavy panting, their clash ended as quickly as it had started. "You don't know, Storm," Shay murmurs quietly.

"What don't I know, man? I *know* that you've always had a soft spot for Mina. I *know* that over the years, as you both got older, that affection grew into something more. I could see it every time you two were together. The other guys might've joked around about it, but I know when you're serious, Shay. And I know that you love that girl more than anything in this world," Gavin sounds tired, and honestly, his words surprise me. I didn't realize how much he actually witnessed Shay's and my relationship. How much he suspected. Even before Shay or myself were even aware of it. "But something's wrong. She's not who she once was-"

"Don't!" Shay chokes out, his voice breaking at the word.

"She's scared-"

"Stop it..."

"She's suffering,"

"Stop," Shay's voice cracks.

"You've broken her and forced this relationship-"

A loud crack has me jumping back as the sound of fist against flesh follows Gavin's last statement, then several more. I didn't need to peek into the room to know that Shay is attacking him. I don't even realize I'm crying until several tears fall from my chin onto my shirt. I quickly wipe them

away, wishing I could just disappear into a hole in the floor, when Shay whispers, “You’re wrong.”

“I’m not wrong,” Gavin huffs breathlessly, “And maybe the others didn’t see it before, but everyone knows now. Including Elias. Do you really think you can keep her safe from him?”

“There is no reason for Elias or any of the Faceless to go after her!” Shay snaps furiously, but I can hear the doubt in his voice. The fear.

“We both know that Elias has been on a witch-hunt searching for those three missing men of his. And I think we *both* know what happened to them.”

Silence follows and all the hairs on my arms stand on end. The missing men. What had Keenan just told me today? The Spades had been told about only three attackers that night. I *know* there were four. I’m not crazy. What if... what if three of them had been sent to attack me? What if Shay had been disobedient to Elias, and so he had sent those men after mum and me as retribution for the Beasts’ wavering loyalty? But then... who was the fourth?

You know, Mina... you know who the fourth is. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head. No, shut the fuck up! He wouldn’t...

“He’ll *know* it was you who killed them,” Gavin’s voice trails off, so low, that I can barely hear him, “And then he’ll come after the Beasts, he’ll come after you, which means he’ll come after...”

“Don’t fucking say it!”

“But he will! And you know I’m right!”

“Don’t, just... fucking don’t!”

“We can’t fight the Faceless, Shay!” Gavin says desperately. “You need to think of something-”

“I have been! I’ve been leaking bits of information to the Underground, saying that the guys pissed off to Montreal. They can’t be the first guys to disappear from his ring.”

“But he knows that you were one of the last of his affiliates to be seen with them. Weren’t they doing a drop-off for you?”

“Yeah, like... fucking months ago! I didn’t think Elias would give a shit about some low-end, runner fuckheads!”

“Doesn’t matter. They were *his* men. Anything against his guys he sees as a personal hit against him. *Fuck, Shay... what were you thinking?*”

Shay's breathing is heavy as if he ran several miles and is on the verge of collapse. "I just... I..." he trails off, sounding so lost that all I want is to go in there and comfort him. Despite everything Shay has done to me, I do love him, in some twisted, sick way. I can't explain it. But right now, I'm doubting everything I've come to know and trust over the past month and a half.

There's a small thud, followed by soft, almost tentative steps from heavy boots, and a sound that scares me more than anything I've heard thus far erupts in the silence of the room. It's only for a minute before it's quickly muffled, like someone has shoved something into their mouth to quiet it. I take a chance and peer around the corner of the doorway. In a room that looks very much like a cell, concrete walls and floor, a single light above, and no furniture, is Shay and Gavin.

Shay is slumped on the floor, one of his hands pulling on his dark locks, but Gavin's crouched in front of him, holding him close in a tight hug. Shay bites down on his fist as he fights to get control, his eyes shut and face twisted like he is experiencing the worst kind of pain. When he finally removes his fist from his mouth, he whispers, "I just wanted her. I didn't want her to leave me."

At his words, I still.

No. No fucking way.

A loud, piercing ring shatters the moment, and the two men break apart. Shay's hand flies to his jacket pocket and pulls out his cell, checking the number first. His face pales as he reads it, and I see his throat bob as he swallows hard.

"Elias?" Gavin asks.

Shay just nods in response.

"Don't answer it. Don't fucking take it. You can run, man. Just run."

"You don't run from Elias," he says in a hollow voice, "He'll find me, no matter where I go. He'll send Jeremy. But... it won't be *me* who pays..."

They remain silent as the phone rings three more times, until finally, Shay holds Gavin's stare, his expression determined, "My dad should be here by now. Hand Mina over to him. He'll keep her safe for now."

What the fuck? I'm still reeling when Shay lifts the phone to his ear and says a quick, "Yeah?"

I turn on my heel and run.



Gavin finds me huddled in the corner stall of the washroom. I've been crying, wishing that everything was just a bad dream that I needed to wake up from. I slapped my face. I pinched my skin. I bawled and begged whatever powers above that were listening to please help me. But nothing happened. This was real. When he comes in and finds me sobbing, he says not a word but lifts me like he used to when I was little, and carries me out.

When he steps into the club, more men have arrived, and I know they are getting amped up, wanting to fight someone, and all I hear is them murmuring, *Faceless Ones*, again and again.

“Mina!”

At the sound of James' voice, I snap to attention, hiccuping from my bout of crying. Across the room, I see James standing there, and he pushes his way through his brothers to reach me. I let go of Gavin and hold my arms out for my stepfather, as he scoops me up and holds me tight. I hug him back fiercely, afraid of being taken from him. He presses several kisses to my cheek.

“Hey, Baby Girl,” he murmurs, his voice rough as he rumbles in my ear.

“Hey, yourself,” I say, smiling into the leather of his jacket, the smell of his cologne hitting me like a ton of bricks. Nostalgia overwhelms me as I breathe it in, and with it, all the memories of our years together.

“You good, honey? You ain’t hurt?” He carefully sets me down on my feet, acting like I might break if he handles me with anything but kid gloves.

“I’m okay...” I tell him, refusing to let go.

“Sheik, you need to get her out of here,” Gavin says suddenly.

James tenses, “The Faceless?”

“On the phone with Manic, now.”

I feel James nod and he wraps an arm around me, scoops my bag off the ground by the barstool I’d occupied earlier, and guides me out. Several members try to stop him, but he shakes his head at them, muttering something about Bull arriving any second. Without looking back, he guides

me from the clubhouse, gets me into his truck, and we take off into the gathering night.

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Chapter sixteen



“WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED, BABY GIRL?”

We’re home. Not at my trailer, but my old home. James’ cabin. He found me an old pair of sweats that I’d forgotten to pack and a clean t-shirt, and after I took a quick shower, he had me sit with him on the couch in the sitting area, the fire crackling in the grey stone hearth of the fireplace.

“Cody...” I whisper, hugging a pillow tight to my chest, and closing my eyes. I can’t say it out loud.

“Cody...” he says his name softly, and I can hear the hurt in his voice. He knew Cody as a young teen and has watched him bond with Shay and grow into a full-fledged member of the Beasts. I look over at him and see how much his death has rocked him. I slide my hand over to his and clasp it. He gives it a little squeeze back.

James meets my eye and I see the shine of unshed tears there. But none fall. He shifts so that he’s facing me and his eyes flicker to my leg, “How’s it healing?”

I don't expect this turn in the conversation, but I'm relieved he isn't putting me on the spot and asking what happened with Cody. I shrug and stretch it out a little. "I mean, it's okay. I have a small limp, and it hurts when it's really cold."

"What about your rehab?"

"They wouldn't let Shay in with me. He lost it on the medical staff, and after two sessions of him refusing to leave, we got kicked out. Ergo, I wasn't allowed to go there anymore. So I did my exercises at home."

A shadow passes over his face and his grip on my hands tightens slightly. He looks as though he is about to erupt, but instead, he closes his eyes trying to gather himself and relaxes. When he opens his dark eyes again, he gives me the smallest of smiles. "Do you miss it?"

I feel a small pang in my chest.

Did I?

I mean, yeah, dance was a huge part of my life for years. I was good at it. No, great. It came naturally to me. I pushed myself to be the best I could be. But... was it actually a passion of mine? Or just a ticket out of here? As I grew older, my dancing became more of a reason to escape this brutal, violent world rather than a dream I was pursuing. I thought it had been a dream, but maybe I was just using it to get away? Since the attack, I haven't pushed myself as much as I could have to heal. In fact, I sort of just accepted that it was over and done. Yeah, it hurt, but I think it hurt more that it meant my easy ticket out of here was gone. With Key helping me during the week, I looked forward to seeing him more than actually dancing. He had been so supportive and encouraging in my false dream that I just kept going with it.

So I shake my head and say, "No. I don't miss it."

His brows rise high on his head, but I don't say anything further on the subject. Dance is the past. Not my future. It was never meant to be. As we sit there in comfortable silence, I feel his fingers twitch, like he's holding himself back.

"How are you?" I ask him gently.

His shoulders noticeably slump, and his head hangs a little as if he's completely drained. I can only imagine. I know there has been some serious rifts between the newer generation and the senior members as of late. The tension when both groups were together was claustrophobic and this evening, I could see the divide in the room.

"It's been tough," he admits, "but you already know that, don't you?"

I nod. No point in denying it. "What's going on?"

"What has he told you?"

I know who he means. Who else could it possibly be? "More like things I've overheard but definitely wasn't supposed to. I know you guys are in deep with the Faceless," I narrow my eyes at him when I say this and he actually looks ashamed. *Good!* "Drugs, James? Really?"

He sighs heavily and runs his free hand through his salt and pepper hair, and for a moment, I'm strongly reminded of his son at the gesture. It's like seeing what Shay will look like when he's in his early fifties. "Bull's idea, but I won't lie. I supported him when we initially struck the deal. But what we were promised versus what we've become is not something we wanted for the club."

"So what was it supposed to be, if you weren't hired to be their little bitches?"

He glares at that comment, but doesn't refute it, choosing to ignore it instead as he answers, "Bull has been sore about the Spades for years. His dad and their prez's have an ugly history. Lots of deaths between the two clubs back then. He didn't believe that they'd changed their image after Maverick took over. He's been paranoid that they've been working quietly behind the scenes, preparing to take over turf and move us aside as the dominant 1% club in Ashland and surrounding areas."

I remembered how Uncle Shawn had been acting so paranoid during outings where the Spades had made appearances. He always wanted them watched.

"He wanted to gain the upper hand on them," James went on, clearing his throat like he was having difficulty admitting this stuff to me, "And the Faceless are the only ones more powerful than us. He figured if we agreed to back each other, we would be set if Mav turned out to be a snake. With Elias and the Faceless backing us, we were untouchable."

"Elias-"

"He's the head," James says, cutting me off, not realizing I'd already pieced that little tidbit together. But I don't say anything as he goes on. "Elias promised us any backing against challenging MC's in all the border towns and the streets of Ashland. Our chapter would be the most powerful from here to Ottawa, to Vermont."

"And what did he want in return?"

James ducks his head, his face turning red. If he looked a little guilty before, he was absolutely shame-faced and disgraced now in how he held himself.

“James?” I snap at him, “What did you agree to do?”

He lets out a long, tired sigh, refusing to meet my gaze. “You know who the Faceless are, right? Has... *Manic*... said anything?”

“No... it’s just what I’ve overheard.”

“They, the Faceless, run the drugs in Ashland, the border towns, and in the surrounding areas. They traffic...” his voice trails off at that and I feel my heart drop, “... they take, I mean... I haven’t been involved in any of the transactions or seen any of them. But, they... move... girls-”

He didn’t need him to finish, and I tear my hand away and gape at him in horror. Keenan had been telling the truth. I thought I was going to pass out. James reaches for me, his expression concerned. But he doesn’t get a chance to touch me, because I swing my arm up and punch him as hard as I can, managing to get him in the jaw with a loud *crack!*

His head snaps back, and he holds his face, while I cry out in pain, clutching my hand to my chest. Tears squeeze out the corners of my eyes and I curse under my breath. *Fuck! That really fucking hurt!*

“You okay, Baby Girl? Let me see,” James reaches for my hand to inspect it and I can’t help but feel a little resentful when I see that he’s completely unfazed by the fact that I just hit him. His chin is a little red, but might as well have been a slap. Though I cringe from his touch, he doesn’t let it go. Instead, he gently, but firmly, takes my wrist and holds my hand up to his face, his thick, calloused fingers pressing down on my knuckles and feeling up and down the length of my hand. “Not broken, but we better put some ice on that.”

I watch, feeling numb and broken as the man I admired and loved as a father, gets up and gathers some ice from the freezer, wraps it in plastic, and comes back to me on the sofa, pressing it over my knuckles. James got involved with a group that runs girls... humans. Probably girls my age or younger. And it didn’t stop him from backing Uncle Shawn in his decision to join forces with the Faceless, who I now realize are basically a cartel. Drugs, girls... probably weapons, too. Everything Keenan told me about them, what they were involved in, he hadn’t been lying. He knew that the Beasts were involved in dirty shit this whole time. No wonder he was afraid for me!

I can't believe that *this* man, who is so tenderly holding my hand as it trembles from the cold of the makeshift ice-pack, rubbing his thumb soothingly over my skin, is capable of stomaching involvement with such things. I feel like I don't know him at all.

"So, what happened?" I ask.

"What do you mean?"

"I know there has been some fallout in the Beasts, James. I hear things. What happened between you and Shay?" If James and Shawn and the other senior members of the Beasts had originally been involved with working for the Faceless, they seemed to have pulled back from all of that, leaving the younger generation to pick up the mantle there and dedicate their duties to pleasing Elias. The club was falling apart. And it felt like it all started and ended with James and Shay.

James' eyes squeeze shut for a moment as he fights to control himself. When he opens his eyes, I can see how they are shining until finally, a single tear falls. *Holy shit... James is crying! What the fuck happened?* "It's... it's a long story, hun..."

As much as I still love my stepfather, at this moment, I am so disgusted and disappointed I can barely stomach it. Holding the ice pack over my hand, I take a deep breath and lock eyes with him. "Tell me."

James lets out a long, drawn out breath and leans forward, elbows on his knees, not even bothering to look my way, which tells me that whatever I am about to hear isn't going to be easy. "The first mistake I ever made, was with Shay..." he says, his voice raspy and pained, "I wanted to be there for him after his fucking mother left. And the only way I knew how was to bring him into the club life with me. I couldn't leave it. But I couldn't abandon my kid. So I combined the two. That decision is one I'll never live down. I didn't see the early warning signs in his childhood that he was suffering from mental illness. I thought he was sad because of his bitch of a mum. I thought showing him the brotherhood of the MC life would fill that void. But when he continued down that path, I figured he was just putting up a wall to protect himself. He took to the life very well. Too well. It started to bleed into his everyday life... school, friends... even with me. He was unhappy. He was tortured. And I didn't know how to fix it."

I wiggle in my seat, remembering when I first saw Shay. He was thirteen, fighting *five* other guys, and won. He smoked. He chided my mother and seemed entirely detached from everyone around him. A sad

thought comes to mind from that first meeting... one of the boys he'd been fighting with had been Cody...

"And then you came along, Mina," James whispers softly, "And from that very first moment, you made him act like... like a human again. He loved you more than anything else in this world. I could see it. Your mother saw it. I think everyone did." At this, a second tear falls, and it slides down the side of his face until it drops off the edge of his grizzled jaw. "To see my son smile, to see him actually give a shit about-about... *something*. I felt like I could breathe. I felt like everything was going to be alright." At this, he frowns and ducks his head, "And then Emily tried to leave."

The night of the car accident. I can still remember how it felt to be suspended in my seat as it had flipped over off the side of the road. That night was the scariest of my life, that is, until the night mum was killed. I bite my lip and shake the thought away.

"I loved her, Mina. Please know that. I couldn't bear to think of her leaving without giving this life a chance. I thought she was being... I dunno, irrational? I'll admit I'm not the best when it comes to understanding women. I didn't want her to go. And Shay wanted you. I couldn't let us lose you both. So I stopped it. And this is where I fucked up again because I scared her into staying, hoping that would work and that over time, she'd be back to the Emily I loved when I first met her. It was the only thing I could think of to do because it's what I know. And, well, you know how that all worked out..."

I am crying, too. I sniffle as I use my forearm to wipe my tears off my cheeks. Mum had descended into her addiction after that. She'd begun to drink more and more, and each year, she pulled a little farther away from all of us. She never came around. James had scared her, threatened her, when all she needed was that sweet man she'd initially fallen in love with. I glower at the man sitting with me and I want nothing more than to throw myself at him and throttle him. I want to beat him senseless. He fucking ruined her!

But he was giving me the answers I needed. And he still hadn't gotten to the fucking point yet. I grit my teeth and release the ice bag so that it slides to the floor, not caring about making a mess. My wrist is numb from the cold, so the pain is manageable, but my chest feels like it is being squeezed from everything he's told me so far. And he isn't even fucking done yet!

“Shay is... he’s troubled.” James went on, stating the obvious. “And my decisions regarding his life only deepened those scars in his mind. But for someone like him, with what he’s done, what the club has done, he can’t just march down to a psychiatrist’s office and tell them everything. He’d get locked up in a heartbeat. If we think he’s afflicted now, it would be nothing compared to after serving time. Jail changes a man, for better or for worse. In Shay’s case, I know with absolute certainty that it would be the latter.”

“I’d tried talking to him. Even got my hands on some pills that he could try-”

“You do realize that it takes more than a bottle of pills to help someone with serious mental issues, right, James?” Not hiding the contempt in my voice as I raise my brows at him, shaking my head in disbelief, “You need therapy, and a *doctor* to prescribe medication-”

“I know, I *know!*” His head falls into his hands again, his body tense and vibrating like he is refraining from jumping up and tearing the house apart. I brace myself, recognizing the signs from when Shay has lost it countless times. But James isn’t Shay. He keeps his cool, and soon he relaxes before continuing. “But then you came bouncing into his life and changed it all. Changed him. Another side to him came out that I hadn’t seen before. It was caring, gentle. It gave me hope that I hadn’t fucked him up so much that he was incapable of being saved. I knew he loved you... but over the years, I watched it change and evolve into something more. I could see it around the time you turned thirteen. When your mother and I found out you had both been sharing a bed.”

“We *never* did anything to-”

“I know,” he quickly cuts me off, reassuring me. “But then, when you cut him off that day after he attacked that poor kid... when he came into the clubhouse and completely trashed the place. None of us could reach him. It was like he couldn’t even hear or see us. I panicked. I thought it had finally happened. My son had officially snapped. He needed to be locked up. I failed him. But then he *saw you.*” James *finally* peers up at me, his eyes shining. “I saw it that day. I don’t think he was even aware of how his feelings changed until a few years later... but I saw it. Shay is my son, Mina. And I wholly and utterly failed him in every sense. And I love you. You’re my little girl, and I don’t give a shit that I wasn’t there at the beginning of your life. You became my daughter when I married Emily, and I always stood by that. It wasn’t an easy thing to see my son fall for who I

came to see as my child. I hoped I was wrong. But I couldn't deny you from him. He needed you. You were the only thing anchoring him from descending into madness. So I let it happen."

"And Mum?" I whisper, my voice cracking as several more tears slid down my cheeks.

"She saw it happening, too, and she didn't like it. You know how their relationship was. She and Shay had such a powerful animosity toward each other. I tried to talk to her, hoping she would come to see it from my side of things, but she couldn't. She wanted you as far from Shay as possible, while I wanted only to fix my son."

"And me?" I snap, my breathing coming fast, "Did it not matter what *I* wanted?"

"Of course it did!" He says quickly, reaching over to touch my leg, but I flinch away, and he backs off, ignoring the slight. "I wanted you *both* to be happy. I suppose I-I had hoped that when I realized Shay's feelings had changed, *maybe* yours would, too. As uncomfortable as the thought of you two together makes me, seeing both of you happy matters more."

"So you don't have a problem seeing Shay and I together?" I ask incredulously. James had *never* given any sort of inclination that he accepted the relationship we were in. He avoided talking about it altogether. Any time Shay kissed me or showed any sign of ownership over me, James averted his gaze.

"You love him, Mina," he says finally. "You love him, I know." He stops for a moment, staring me down as if he's trying to see through me. "But you aren't happy. You aren't who you really are. You are a shadow of the girl you once were."

My chin quivers. Like a little fucking kid. I could feel the tightness in my throat at his words. I have no idea how to respond. Once more, Keenan had called it, and I didn't listen. Hearing James say it was like a wrecking ball to my heart. I open my mouth to say something, anything, but all that comes out is the smallest of sobs. Before I know it, James is sitting at my side and has me in a tight, crushing hug. I let go of all the tension, all the confusion and despair I have been swallowing down for months and release it, wailing as he rocks us side to side. I have cried so much today, I didn't think I'd be able to ever again.

"I'm so sorry, Baby Girl. I'm so sorry," he whispers over and over, "I really hoped for the best like I had with your mother. I am a fucking idiot.

By the time I saw it, it was too late. Shay had told me he wanted you, that he was going to take you. We argued about it that night.”

I remember. James had come home first, looking worn out and conflicted as I had served him dinner. When Shay showed up about an hour later, the tension in the room had been thick and menacing. It was the first time they’d looked at each other like they were enemies instead of father and son. After that, they addressed each other by their road names. But I couldn’t believe it was all because Shay wanted me, and James thought I felt different. No way.

“Who is he, Mina?” James says softly.

I sniffle, reaching up between us to wipe my cheeks as I pull back a bit in confusion meeting his gaze. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“Who is... *Stud Muffin?*” He makes a face as my heart drops. “Captain Stud Muffin, I think you called him?” I can hear the gruffness in his tone as he speaks. *Fuck...*

“How... how did you...?”

“I found your phone, Mina. I’d found it about a week before everything went to hell. You think the night Shay trashed your old room was the only time you forgot to put your phone on mute?”

I feel a chill all over. *Oh, holy shit...*

“Who is he?”

“A-a friend.”

“I gathered from all the texts and old, folded up letters. But I wanna know who he is.”

“I can’t say...”

“*You will.* Because darlin’, you *do* love him, and he wants what’s best for you. As much as I fucking hate the fact that you snuck around with this guy under my nose without me knowing it, and I want to blow his goddamn brains out with my gun, I can tell that he loves you too. And *that’s* why I can’t approve of you being with Shay. Because he doesn’t want what’s best for you. He wants you to be what he *needs.*”

I can’t tell him. How could he understand? He told me himself the whole reason he and Shawn agreed to work with the Faceless was that they sensed danger from the Spades.

“Mina?” He gives me a little shake. “Tell me.”

“And what are you going to do if I do tell you?”

“There is no *if* about it, hun. You’re telling me. And I promise I won’t... fucking kill him.” The pause almost has me chuckling, as it reminds me of back in the day when he had sworn me off all men, acting like the protective dad that he is.

“You won’t hurt him? Or approach him? Or send anyone else after him?”

“I swear it.”

“Swear on Mum?”

James swallows hard and looks down at me, a sad smile on his lips as he nods, “I swear on your beautiful, brave mama, little girl. I won’t let anything happen to the man who loves you.”

I press my ear over his heart and wrap my arms tight around his middle, holding him to me, and shut my eyes tight, “It’s Keenan Mathers.”

At once, his heart begins to pump hard and loud against my ear. I could *feel* it against my cheek. His arms flex and relax over and over again. I can picture his face turning red in rage and most likely, clenching his jaw tight as he fights to keep his emotions in check.

“I see...” he bites out finally.

“I know you don’t approve...”

“That’s an under-fucking-statement.”

“But I *know* that he would never hurt me.”

“How?”

Oh God... how do I explain the relationship Keenan and I have? It’s friendship, evolved into something more, and now, I have no fucking clue. But I do know that I trust him. His haunting, icy blue eyes come to mind... the feel of his lips on mine. I can remember how different it feels when *he* holds me in his arms, when *he* kisses me.

That was real... a voice whispers in the back of my mind.

“I know him,” I say finally, “And he knows me. He’s the only one who, after all these years, pushes me to do what I need to for myself. He’s the only one who really... *sees* me.” I come to this realization as I say the words out loud.

James grips a handful of my hair, his fingers wrapping up in the blonde locks as he fights to keep his control. I lean back finally, and sure enough, his face is bright red and furious. Reaching up, I touch his whiskered jaw and say softly, “Key is the only one who isn’t selfish with me.”

James flinches noticeably at my choice of words, but honestly, it's the truth, and he needs to hear it, especially after everything he's just confessed to me. He owes me. He'd essentially given me to Shay, hoping it would just work out, because he saw that my presence kept his son from completely going over the edge. James peers down at me, his almost black eyes searching mine for a minute, as though hoping to see a shred of doubt there. His hard expression falls, and is replaced with sad acceptance. Finally, he nods heavily, his body slumping slightly against the back of the couch, but he doesn't let me go. He brings me with him, still cuddling me close, and I snuggle into his fatherly embrace. Despite how fucking furious I am, how disappointed in him I am, he is still the only parental figure I have left in the world. I need this.

For a long time, we sit there together, father and daughter, holding each other as the information, lies, and secrets we've unveiled sink in. After all this time, after everything, to hear that James was behind it all, orchestrating it, pushing it, and then when it got too far ahead of him, he'd lost control.

He wasn't an evil bad guy. He was human. And his mistakes, his errors in judgment cost us all so dearly and ended disastrously. Sometimes even good people make mistakes and regret them. But the consequences, in this case, have been tragically permanent. Mum is gone. Shay is damaged beyond measure. The Faceless owned the Beasts, and thus, are running serious criminal activities in Ashland and the border towns. And me? What did the future hold for me?

The roar of an engine tearing up the drive broke our silent reverie. James is on his feet instantly and stands beside the window, peering out between the curtains. For a terrifying moment, I felt like I was flashing back to June, and I almost started screaming until I saw him visibly relax.

"It's Shay," He says and moves over to the door to unlock it. I scoop up the ice pack from the floor and sit back against the couch to continue icing my hand. I now knew what James was guilty of. Now... it was Shay's turn.

Chapter seventeen



SHAY BURSTS through the front door of James' home in a frantic craze, his eyes wild when he comes face-to-face with his father.

“Where is Mina?” he says immediately.

James nods to me, sitting back on the couch, hair now damp dry, wearing sweats and an oversized t-shirt. After what I’ve heard today, seeing him sends a convulsion of uncertainty and fear through me. What has he done?

I thought he would relax seeing that everything here was fine, but instead, Shay rushes to my side and hauls me up into his arms.

“Shay!” I cry as he spins and heads for the door.

“Stop it, just wait a second!” James steps before him, temporarily halting him in his tracks. “What the hell is going on?”

“I need to go... I need to get her out *now!*” Shay practically shrieks. He’s panicking. He’s lost it. His body shudders violently, and though his grip on me is strong, I’m afraid he’s about to drop me.

“What’s happening?” I cry, terrified of seeing him acting like this.

Shay ignores me for a moment and stares at his father, his eyes imploring, like he's on the verge of dropping to his knees to beg James for help. But he doesn't. All he says is, "Elias. Jeremy."

James pales, his face transforming to one of dread. Seeing both these men fear those names makes me sick. James looks down at me, his expression unreadable as he reaches up, cups my face, and chokes out, "I love you, Baby Girl." Leaning in, he presses a kiss to my forehead and steps back, moving aside for us to pass.

"Dad?" Shay says, his voice strained and halting.

James presses his lips firmly together when his son addresses him that way, and he nods to him and croaks out, "I know, son. It's okay." I stare between the two, trying to understand what seems so clear to them. James' arm snaps out like a whip, and he grabs Shay by the scruff of his neck and hauls us both into his arms. Father embraces son, and I get the feeling that I'm witnessing something monumental. Being in Shay's arms, I feel him leaning into his father's touch, and when I peer up between the two men, I see James kiss Shay on the forehead before releasing us both.

Shay doesn't say another word, but when he returns his father's nod, I see both their eyes are shining with unshed tears. Without another word, Shay tightens his hold on me, and we head out into the night.

"Where are we going?" I ask, unable to hide the panic in my voice as he marches, through the trees surrounding the cabin.

"We're going home so you can pack a suitcase."

"Pack a suitcase. Wh-why? What the hell is happening?" I suddenly remember that I left my backpack behind, "Shay! I left my bag at James'! We need to go back for it!"

"Mina, fuck... just give me a minute, okay?" He ducks under a low-hanging limb of a maple tree, and I feel the bare branches snag at my hair like long, scraggly fingers trying to rip me away from him. When we make it through the thick underbrush, the tiny mobile home looms ahead, lightless and empty. Shay stomps up the steps, punches in the security code, unlocks the doors, and steps inside. As soon as he sets me on my feet, he spins and locks up behind himself.

"What is—" before I can finish, he grabs my hand and storms down the hall to the bedroom. Letting go of me, he goes to our closet and pulls out a black duffle bag of his, and throws it on the bed. "Shay, what is going on?"

"You're leaving."

I shake my head, wanting to laugh at him, “What are you talking about?”

“I fucked up... fucked up bad... so bad,” Shay starts to chant over and over again as he rushes from the dresser to scoop up handfuls of my clothes and returns to the bed to shove them into the bag. “He’s coming. He knows. Fucked up. Fucked up!”

“Shay, please just stop for a second and talk to me!”

He leans over the bed, hands gripping the blankets as he buries his face into my clothes. For a minute, he remains that way, looking like he’s being tortured on the inside. I approach him on the other side of the bed, knowing what he needs to come back. I climb up onto the mattress and crawl over to him, reaching out until my fingers slide into his hair. At the touch, Shay shoves my bag aside and lunges for me. One second, I am kneeling over him, combing his dark, wavy locks, and the next, I’m buried beneath him, his body settled between my legs, his head resting on my stomach, arms wrapped around my waist.

“You weren’t supposed to get hurt, Mina...” he whispers.

His words somehow manage to suspend time as they repeat in my head. *I wasn’t supposed to get hurt? I wasn’t supposed to get hurt...* each passing second, I feel my lungs compress, my heart feels like it’s being crushed, and I stare up at the ceiling as he holds me, his words clicking everything into place.

“My leg...” I say softly.

“Your leg,” I feel his lips move against the material of my shirt over my belly.

I swallow hard, feeling like a rock is caught in my throat, choking out, “And mum?” My voice cracks when I mention her.

He goes quiet, and the only sound in the room is my sniffling. I reach up until I feel his head and try to push him off of me, but he won’t let go, refusing to move from the position he’s in. “You did that to her?” Still nothing. “You stabbed her? You mutilated her?” He presses his face harder into my middle, and I shudder beneath him, whimpering as I try not to scream. “You planned it all?” His silence starts to infuriate me, and I reach down and smack him hard on his shoulder. When he doesn’t respond, I hit him again, over and over, pummeling his head, his back, any part I can reach. But the fucking bastard doesn’t move, nor does he say a word.

“All you can say is that I wasn’t supposed to get hurt?” I feel my voice coming back to me as I shove at his shoulders, trying to shimmy out of his grasp. “What the *fuck* is wrong with you? Are you fucking insane?” I scream.

“YES! I am! I’m fucking crazy. I’m out of my mind!” His head snaps up, his eyes wide, his lips quivering, and my voice fails me as I stare into the demon face that is Manic. Insane, out of control, enraged Manic. “You were going to leave me, Mina! You were going away! I had to stop you... I had to!” His wide eyes make him seem crazed, and I can’t bear to look at him now. Though I turn my head to the side, he reaches up and grabs my jaw, forcing me to look at him as he spews his madness. “But I would never hurt *you*. Do you really think when I hired those idiots to help me kidnap some girl and end the woman living with her, that I told them I wanted them to do that to you? Do you think I was going to tell them what you meant to me? How important you were? No! They thought it was just a fucking job. Let me finish the woman, we’ll kidnap the girl, and take her to the exchange point...”

“And then what, you fucking lunatic? Pay them? With drugs? What?”

“I was going to wait and then take them out... make it seem like I found you guys and killed them. I was supposed to save you, Mina! And then you would be too scared and you would never want to leave me! But they fucking hurt you when I took Emily outside. They fucked up. I could have fucking killed them had I known! I was too busy...”

“What, Shay?” I snap, baring my teeth as I stare into the madness of his gaze, “Say it... too busy disposing of my mother?” For the second time that night, I swing my fist, forgetting about how I’d hurt it just half an hour ago. I strike his jaw, not a solid hit like I had James, but enough that I cry out from the pain. Only I don’t stop. I slap him. I scratch at his body and fight to get free.

He doesn’t fight back. He only buries his face below my chest and takes it. He takes every hit, slap, and curse I throw his way until I’m too fucking exhausted to move and I sink back against the pillows, my eyes stinging from all the tears I’ve shed tonight. I feel my t-shirt dampen where his face is hidden, and I realize that he’s crying, too.

“You weren’t supposed to get hurt, Mina,” he sobs, not mentioning the fact that he had been the one to brutally murder my mother. It’s as if it

didn't even matter to him, "And fucking Sheik and the others... it took longer to subdue you and... and..."

"Mum."

"I had to abandon the body. I took off but watched from the woods as the Beasts went in and took the other three out. When an ambulance showed up and you were carried out on the stretcher, bleeding and..." he stops talking, as though the words are too painful to say out loud until he lets out a shuddering gasp, "I almost died."

"My mother did! You fucking killed her! You tortured her and butchered her! How could you, Shay? How fucking could you? I can't believe I went along with all of this. I can't believe I let you tear me apart. That I let you fuck me. I can't believe you did this!"

"You knew, Mina!" He moans into my body, "On some level, you *knew* how far I'd go to keep you!"

"Not that, Shay. I can't believe you would be so fucked to do what you did to me... to mum!"

"She wanted to take you away from me! She wanted us apart! She always hated me. I had no one, *no one*, Mina! Until you. You came and breathed life into my dying lungs. And she was going to take the one person I cared about most in the whole fucking world away!"

I was wailing beneath him, sobbing so hard I didn't think I could stop. "You killed people. You isolated me from anyone and everyone else so I had no one, either, Shay. You stole my dreams away!"

"I just wanted you—"

"Shay, you're fucking killing me!"

He stills, his sobs starting to quiet down at my words. I wait, wondering who I will see looking back at me when he raises his head. But he doesn't. Instead, he presses kiss after kiss to my stomach, up the valley of my breasts then along my collarbone, and whispers, "And I'm going to save you."

"How?" my voice is so small, I'm surprised he hears it at all.

"You're leaving this place..."

"Wh-what?"

"I'm getting you out. The Faceless... they *know* what I did. The three who hurt you? They were Elias' men. I didn't think he'd notice that a couple of street thugs were gone, but he did. And he didn't stop looking into it until he found out that I was the one last seen with those guys when I

hired them. They thought I was speaking on behalf of another biker, a guy from Montreal, but they fucking documented it. They talked. After looking into the fake alias I created and they discovered he wasn't real, it came back on me. Elias is coming after me, Mina, and I won't risk him finding you, too."

"What is he going to do?"

"Mina," He lifts his head, and the silver in his gaze seems to sparkle against the shadows. "It's better that you don't know."



Shay pulls down a rocky drive, but I instantly know where we are. It may be the dead of night, the area void of any streetlamps, but I would know this place anywhere. It was the park where we first met. When Shay pulls into the parking lot, it's completely empty, save for a dark jeep waiting close to the edge. Gavin.

"Shay," I whisper, looking into the backseat at my lonely bag, "Why is Gavin here?"

He doesn't say a word. In fact, he hasn't spoken since he told me that Elias was coming for him. He just rolled off me, shoved a few more things into the bag, scooped me up in his arms, and carried me outside. The last thing he did was wrap his property jacket around my shoulders to ward off the cold, and we were gone. I fired question after question at him, growing furious when he continued to give me the cold shoulder. He didn't say where we were going, or for how long. I asked about James, if I could say goodbye to him, if he was going to meet us. Nothing.

And now, we were here, where we first met, and Gavin steps out of his Jeep, looking like he is already filled in on the plan. Shay parks his truck next to Gavin, killing the engine, reaches back for my bag and steps out. I clamber out of the truck, wearing nothing but the old sweats and t-shirt James gave me and Shay's property jacket. I slip a little on the loose gravel beneath my feet, but I catch myself before I fall, and run around to the other side of the truck to see Gavin packing my bag into the back seat.

"What the hell is going on? Why is Gavin here? Was he involved that night, too?"

The two men glance knowingly at each other, and when I see Gavin step away, leaving me alone with Shay, I get a horrible feeling in my stomach, like I know what is about to happen, but I'm going to try to fight it anyway.

"Shay, come on. Let's go... let's-let's all leave together," I say, stepping up to him. I take his hands in both of mine, holding them to keep the cold away, "You're coming with us, and I know you didn't pack anything, but we can get new stuff, right? We'll hide out somewhere, like BC, or Alberta, someplace quiet in the mountains where no one will ever find us..."

Shay watches me ramble on, not saying a word, his expression void of emotion. It's so ridiculous... what Shay has done to me, to mum, I should be running for the hills. I don't forgive him for what he did. Not at all. How could I? I don't think I ever will. But... I still love him. I can't help it. Call me stupid. Call me naive. I *am*. I'm completely twisted and fucked up, and all I know is that the one person I know I love more than anything has betrayed me in the worst way. But, he's still the one person I care about more than anyone.

"Shay, please... let's go, okay? Let's get out of here." Even as I say it, my voice cracking as I desperately try to convince myself that this is going to work out. "I'm not leaving without you, right?" I struggle for air, sucking it in in quick, little breaths, "You're-you're coming, and we're going t-to be together still, right?"

Shay withdraws his hands from mine, but instead of pulling back like I feared, he reaches out and runs his fingers through my hair until he can twist them into the strands. He buries his face into my neck, his lips at my ear, and whispers, "I've always been selfish with you. I broke you. I never wanted *this*. And now, I'm going to let you go, because it will keep you safe."

"What about you?" I ask, my voice breaking, and a single tear falls into his hair.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be okay."

Lies... he's lying...

"I hope one day, you'll forgive me, Sweetness. I never wanted to hurt you. I just... I-" his breath releases in a shuddering gasp, "I wanted us to be forever..."

Shay pulls away so that he can cup my face, and kisses me sweetly, his lips firmly press to mine, and his hold on me unsteady as he shakes all over. I reach up, my fingers lightly running along the whiskers on his chin, and

kiss him back. It feels like goodbye. I know it's goodbye. I just don't know for how long. So, despite everything he's done, all of it, I kiss him back. Our lips slowly dance together, and I do my best to commit as much of this moment to memory as possible—the familiar smell of his jacket, mixed with leather, and the smell of cedar and smoke. The air is frigid as the breeze cuts through us. I can hear the rumble of Gavin's Jeep as it idles, waiting patiently for us to finish our goodbyes. It's dark, but in the light of the moon, I can see his beautiful face. When our kiss ends, I reach up and lightly brush his hair out of his face.

"I will see you again, right?" I ask him uncertainly.

The corner of his mouth rises slightly, that beautiful non-smile smile that is so Shay. "Of course, Sweetness. Just gotta get you safe first, okay?"

Lying... he's lying to you...

"We gotta get going!" Gavin calls from the other side of the Jeep.

Ugh! I wanna punch him. I look up into Shay's face, and though his mask is in place, I can see the storm brewing in his eyes. He's battling it out in his mind... fighting to control his feelings. I need to go now before Manic decides to burst free.

But Shay decides for me. He grabs my hips, lifts me, and sets me in the back of the Jeep, covering me with a blanket, "Stay down until Gavin says it's safe. You understand?"

"Shay..." I push it off so I can see him, "I—"

"Keep driving. Don't fucking tell anyone you saw me tonight," he says, addressing Gavin, ignoring me.

"Shay!"

He closes his eyes for a moment, his hands braced on the door, looking like he's using all his self-control to remain where he is. He shudders, looking like he might be sick from the battle going on inside his head. When he finally looks up at me, his face strained and tight, I can't help but say, "I love you, Shay."

I see the tears forming in his eyes, how they shine in the moonlight, and his breathing becomes laboured and stressed for just a few seconds until he straightens and yells, "Fucking go, Storm!" and slams the door.

Gavin backs out in a rush and turns us around, looping up the winding drive that leads to the highway. Clutching the blanket around my shoulders, I watch Shay out the rear window. He stands on the edge of the parking lot, arms loose at his sides, watching as we pull farther and farther away from

him. I don't look away. I'm afraid to even blink, because I need to hold this image of him in my mind. Of Shay selflessly letting me go.

As soon as we round the bend, the thick, bare, twisted branches of the woods come into my view. And the long limbs of trees that resemble witches' hands slowly bleed across my vision, until they are blocking him from me forever. And he's gone.

"Get down, Mina. Get under the blanket," Gavin says gently, his calm coming back to him now that we were on the road. I sniffle as I lay on the seat, covering myself in the blanket, glad that he couldn't see how much I was crying. It feels like my chest is being ripped apart.

"Where-where are we going?" I ask through my choking sobs.

"To another exchange point."

I sit up, alarm bells ringing in my head at his words, "What?!"

"It's not what you think, now lie down," he reaches back and moves the blanket, encouraging me to lay back. I do, but I'm even more nervous now. What exchange point? Who was he handing me off to?

"Who?" I ask timidly, bracing myself.

"Dodger."

Dodger... Keenan! "Wh-what?"

"As soon as I got the phone call from Shay, I had to think of where to send you, Mina. I can't risk Lindsey or Jenny. Forgive me, but I can't..." I wait for him to finish, understanding his concern for those two. If Gavin cared for anyone in this world, it was those two girls. "I talked with James. I asked him where I should go... he said he had a contact..."

I'm quiet as I try to think of who the hell... and it hits me. My bag. I'd left it behind, along with the burner cell I'd used to contact him.

"Dodger is going to take you and disappear. At least, until things settle..." But I can hear the uncertainty in his voice. He has no idea how this is all going to pan out. Gavin steps a little harder on the gas and our town disappears behind us.

"How will I contact you guys? How will I reach Shay?" His silence unsettles me, and I can't help but peek out from under the blanket. Gavin's hands tighten on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white. "Gavin?"

"You won't be contacting us, Mina. We'll be contacting you," he says, at last. His voice is gruff and raspy like speaking has become more difficult for him.

I go back under the blanket, my breath coming out in short, shuddering gasps, “When?”

He goes silent again.

“When, Gavin?”

The Jeep took a turn in the road, and I slid along the seat, my feet hitting the door. “Hold on!” He half-shouts and spins us around again before he accelerates.

“What are you doing?” I cry out, holding the blanket tight around me.

“Making sure we aren’t being followed! Now, stay down… gonna make sure this isn’t a tail, and then we’ll meet Dodger at the waypoint. Hold on, okay?” I feel his hand on my shoulder, like he’s trying to reassure me, but all I can think about are the men that have evoked such fear into Shay that he gave me up. If they were following us, what the hell were Gavin and I going to do if they caught us? I cling to the seat, head down, and try not to be sick from the rocking motion of the car, but a sudden wave of vertigo was catching up to me. I hold back the bile in my throat as he makes another insane turn before slamming his foot on the gas and I fly back into the cushioned seat.

“Gavin?” I whisper after several minutes without the erratic driving.

“We’re good. It’s okay, Mina. We’ll be there in two minutes. Stay down.”

The vehicle begins to slow, and he makes a gentler turn, the smooth road of the highway changing to rough, uneven gravel, which has me bouncing where I lay. We swerve again, and Gavin slows us down even more until he finally stops and puts us in park. I peek out from beneath the blanket and he snaps, “Stay down! Need to confirm it’s him.” He waits, staring straight ahead, watching something out of my range of view. I do as he says and hide away again. Seconds later, even through the material of my covering, two bright flashes of light fill the Jeep, followed by the click of the door locks.

“C’mon, let’s go!” he says, opening his door and stepping out. I sit up, rubbing my eyes. I could feel how puffy and sore they are from all the crying I am doing tonight. I still am, the occasional tear leaking from the corner of my eyes, but it’s like I can’t stop myself at this point. I am just a fucking puddle. I peer out the windshield and ahead of us, maybe twenty feet away, is Keenan’s charcoal SUV, lights on and engine idling. He and Gavin, who has my bag slung over his shoulder, are walking towards each

other to meet in the middle. I can't hear a thing in here, so I stiffly open my door and step out. I teeter over to them, feeling like I am in a daze, like I am submerged underwater and can only move in slow motion.

At the sound of my step, the two men look my way. At once, Keenan rushes over, picks me up bridal style, and carries me back to his SUV. I glimpse over his shoulder at Gavin, who follows us with my bag. Key places me carefully in the passenger seat while my stuff is tossed into the backseat. He covers me with another blanket and tilts my seat back after he buckles me in. He rushes around to climb in the driver's seat, but I am watching Gavin, who is leaning over the frame of the open passenger door, his face tight and screwed up in pain.

"Gavin?" I whisper. *How much trouble are the Beasts in? Was it just Shay? Or was he at risk, too?* "It'll be okay, right?"

His throat bobs, and all he does is give me the slightest of nods. Leaning over me, he presses a chaste kiss to my forehead, looks to Keenan, who's waiting patiently, and says, "Go. And don't tell anyone, not even James, where you're taking her."

Key nods, his expression somber and graver than I've ever seen.

At that, Gavin slams the door shut, the locks click into place, and Keenan pulls out, taking us down the long gravel road. But instead of turning off to the highway, he keeps going until we hit a single lane back road. He turns onto this, and turns again, heading west. Only then, does he look over at me and reach for my hand. He intertwines our fingers together, his thumb running back and forth over mine, and murmurs, "Are you alright?"

I'm a lot of things right now... confused, heartbroken, mentally shattered, devastated, and terrified. I think the one thing I am farthest from is, 'okay'. But I know he's not *really* asking me that. He's feeling me out, probably wondering if I'm on the verge of panicking or breaking down. I couldn't give a crap about how I'm feeling because there's someone I care about more, and they are alone right now... alone, and trapped in a dangerous place, and I have no idea what is going to happen to him.

"Will Shay be alright?" I ask as he speeds up, racing down the road, away from Ashland and all the border towns.

"He'll be fine," is all he says, and his words are like swords stabbing my very soul. He's lying, but I choose to believe the lie. I have to, because any other alternative is too much to bear. So, I repeat Keenan's words over

and over again in my head, like I'm hoping beyond hope that by doing this, I can protect him.

He'll be fine... he'll be fine... he'll be fine...

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Chapter eighteen



Shay

AND THERE SHE GOES. Gone. She was gone. It tears at my soul that I will no longer see her face, that I'll never know where... fuck. I can't. I can't handle it. I run my hands through my hair and pull at it as I hunch over where I stand, ignoring the frigid chill in the air.

It's okay. It's okay. Breathe... breathe... I chant to myself, again and again, fighting back that swirling darkness in the back of my mind that loves to torment me. I can feel it seeping over my brain, growing stronger while I become weaker.

I gasp as the sting behind my eyes threatens to make me weak and break down... to fucking bawl my eyes out like I'm some pansy-ass with no dick. But... *she was gone. She doesn't love you... not like how you loved her.*

You see, Manic? The darkness whispers in my ear. *You're so fucked up and twisted that the one good thing in your shitty life doesn't even want you*

back. She's gone. Maybe you could call this off and get her back? You can get her and run. Run... run... run...

NO! Another voice speaks up suddenly, surprising me. I shiver and straighten, wondering where the fuck it had come from. I stare off at the curve in the road, knowing that I wouldn't see her looking back at me. There was nothing there but darkness.

Darkness... Darkness... the taunting chant in my mind speaks again, always present, hard to ignore. Fuck I hated it. I HATED IT!

“SHUT UP!” I scream at the top of my lungs, ripping at my hair, my voice echoing through the empty space. My voice dies and I shudder, my breath clouding in the cold air before my face. Silence. I don’t hear it chiding me, hurling insults and dark promises of failure. It’s gone. Gone.

She's safe, Shay, the other voice whispers instead. Furrowing my brow, I wait for it to say more. I need it to say more. She's safe. You did good. She'll be safe. My hands start to shake and I can feel the cold trail of a tear slide down my face. She does love you, Shay. She does. And you did what you had to, to protect her.

I turn away from the road and slowly scan the park. It's the dead of night, in the winter, in a frosted over and desolate spot. No one was here at this hour, and no fucking chance anyone will be by until morning to cross-country ski the pathways. I am alone. Completely alone. Good.

You know what has to happen... that warmer, consoling voice says to me, silencing the poisonous dark one.

I feel that familiar tear in my chest. *I know. I fucking know.*

Walking aimlessly into the park, I follow the path that loops around the massive green space and field where I would wrestle with my friends as kids. I shove my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket, an odd feeling of numbness washing over me as I wander. As I walk, my mind is in utter chaos.

Elias will look for her. He will look for you. He will try to make you talk, Shay, that new voice, the gentle one, tells me. He will have his men work you over. He'll call Jeremy in to deal with you. Do you think you are strong enough to take him? As much as I fucking hate to say it... no. I'm not. I'm a joke compared to the Nomad biker who works for hire. He'd do anything for a high fucking price, and Elias is loaded, the fucker. He'd pay Jeremy a fortune to keep me on the brink of death, all while forcing me to talk. I grit my teeth at the thought. I can handle a lot of shit. I can take care of myself

in a fight, I know. But this... my betrayal to Elias... sure he'll have me tortured in the most brutal of ways, but he won't want me dead. He'll want me alive to witness the worst things imaginable. He'll find Mina, and he'll destroy her in front of my very eyes, to make me pay.

There's only one thing you can do, Shay. The voice tells me. I know... I fucking know.

As I walk, a familiar song echoes in the back of my mind, like a haunting whisper that I can't shut off...

*I am not the only traveler
Who has not repaid his debt
I've been searching for a trail to follow again
Take me back to the night we met...*

I look up and find myself standing in a place I haven't seen in years. A playground structure stands before me, and my eyes see a ghostly little figure with long, blonde hair wearing a pink sundress, running around the space before disappearing behind the jungle gym.

*And then I can tell myself
What the hell I'm supposed to do
And then I can tell myself
Not to ride along with you...*

I walk around it, seeing ghostly figures that aren't there, kicking at a random stone or two as my inner demons battle with each other. But I can feel what the answer is. There *is* no running from Elias. He'll catch me. He'll find some way to make me talk. To him, it's not enough that I just bleed for him. He wants my mind to fully break down and collapse in on itself. He *knows* that hurting Mina would destroy me.

*I had all and then most of you
Some and now none of you
Take me back to the night we met
I don't know what I'm supposed to do
Haunted by the ghost of you*

Oh, take me back to the night we met...

I see a bench off to the side of the swing set, my mind suddenly exhausted and at a standstill. The numbness I'm feeling has nothing to do with the cold. I sit on the cold metal and stare off at the swings. That same ghostly little figure is on one, kicking her legs forward until she leaps into the sky, and my heart stops.

*When the night was full of terrors
And your eyes were filled with tears
When you had not touched me yet
Oh, take me back to the night we met...*

I lower my head, my elbows resting on my thighs as I hunch over in my seat. The ground is covered in frost. Any sign of life dead and gone. So many years ago, I'd been sitting at this very spot, feeling like I was drowning and the whole world was just passing by. I was always watching, just a thirteen-year-old boy who wished he had something, someone, who cared for him. Just *one* fucking person who *saw* him. And *she* had. That little girl who wandered over, offering a daisy in consolation, hoping to see him smile.

She saw you. Mina saw you, the voice whispers, and I feel that tear in my chest start to close. *She did love you, Shay. But now, you need to do what is right by her. If you want to save her... you know what has to be done...*

*I had all and then most of you
Some and now none of you
Take me back to the night we met...*

My hand goes to the holster strapped to my side beneath my jacket, and I pull out the shiny piece of metal and plastic. It's heavy, but a comfortable weight in my hand. I stare down at it, my hand caressing it almost lovingly, and I can feel the corners of my lips curl up as I stare down at it.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do

*Haunted by the ghost of you
Take me back to the night we met...*

I reach up and tug on the chain around my neck, holding the dog tags before my eyes, so that the full moon illuminates the script engraved upon them. The coordinates that match this place. The name of the only person I ever gave a shit about, the only one I ever loved. My fingers close around her tag and I squeeze.

Take me back to the night we met...

I sit back on the bench, a sense of calm rushing over me. I haven't felt this... *right*... in a long time. For once, I know, with absolute certainty, that what I'm doing is right. And I won't be lost in the darkness anymore...

Take me back to the night we met...

My thumb clicks off the safety in my other hand. Holding the dog tags over my heart, I lift the gun and put it to my mouth, the metal cold on my lips. In front of me, I see her, that beautiful girl, daisy in hand, looking at me like I'm her whole world, and I feel lighter. *For her. This is for her. She'll be safe, and I'll be at peace.*

What more can I do? Dead men can't talk, right?

Take me back to the night we met...

Click.

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Epilogue

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CASEY

WHY DID I do this to myself? Why did I keep coming back here? It took two buses and a long-ass hike up the hill to reach Ashland's cemetery, but I found myself here at least twice a week since it happened. At first, walking through those tall, black, metal gates had been a challenge, and I stood outside them for a good ten minutes before I tentatively moved toward them and pushed them open with a loud creak. I remembered where I was going from the funeral the week before, but it didn't make it easier. As I made my way off the main road and down the footpaths, I made it to the spot I wanted to be most of all, all while wishing it didn't exist in the first place.

Her grave overlooked a pond, where I spotted a few mallards idly swimming along in lazy circles. The trees were old here, tall, their branches reaching towards the sun... earth's skyscrapers. I wandered to the white, marble stone that sat in the middle of a knoll, the sun beaming through the leaves overhead, shining on her spot like a floodlight. I head directly to her, my chest tightening as I fight the urge to break down and cry, while also excited to see her again. Beside her stone is another white one. Matthew. Great guy. I'd loved him, too. He was good to her. And now, they were somewhere together, while I was alone.

I took up my usual spot, sitting between their gravestones, but leaning against hers while I pulled out my sketchpad and doodled.

This graveyard, while its purpose was tragic, I found peace here. I enjoyed the solitude, the quiet from the city. Birds sang overhead, a frog croaked from the pond, and I could sit and be with the two people who loved me most in the world.

But my brief moment of privacy was interrupted much too soon when I heard the sounds of others approaching. I looked up, spying the trio who appeared off the footpath, but thank fuck, they moved away from me. I've never really been a people person... not since I lived in Harley. And when I come to the cemetery, I am *really* not a people person.

I go back to my drawing, working on a sketch I'd started in social studies when I should have been studying current events. It was of my mother's garden, and I wanted to make sure I got the bed of white hellebore just right. They had been her favourite flower, and the section she'd made

for them was beautiful. Complete with large, smooth river rocks lining the edge, a stump with a fairy door attached to the base, and a birdbath for the robins and wrens to enjoy.

I glance up at the sound of a kid shrieking happily, and frown in irritation, spying the trio. They'd moved a little closer, but closer to the edge of the area, by a thick leafy green hedge. There's a lonely grave there, the stone a dark grey, and the newcomers go there. They aren't too far, maybe thirty feet or so, but they haven't noticed me slouched here, silently drawing amongst the dead.

My eyes latch on to the man and my God... my mouth drops a little as I take in the sight of him. He's tall, his muscles clear under his heavily tattooed arms. Any skin that isn't covered in black ink is tanned from a summer outdoors, and his hair is a beautiful gold colour. I instantly check out the girl with him.

She's probably a year or two older than me. Petite, with long, white-blonde hair and a slender body. Damnit! Hot people always seem to find each other, don't they? And as I watch them, I can see how the guy is super into it. He holds her hip, leaning in to whisper into her ear as they slowly approach the gravestone, almost like he's encouraging her, giving her strength. I find myself jealous of her all of a sudden, wishing that I had someone like that to lean on when I came here. But I didn't.

It's then that I notice the kid with them. He looks to be about two or three, and he's running around the graves, giggling as butterflies and crickets scatter out of his warpath. I hear the sound of metal clicking as he runs, like the jingle of keys. He comes a little closer, and as I get a better look at him. I can't help but forget my irritation at being interrupted by their presence, because he's so damned cute.

His hair is a wavy tangle of dark locks, his cheeks chubby and cute. As he gets nearer and he looks up at me, his silver eyes catch me off guard. They're stunning. This kid is gonna drive the girls crazy when he gets older, that's for sure. I catch sight of a pair of silver dog tags around his neck and realize that's what had been making that tinkling noise as he ran, but he's still too far to read the inscriptions. It's an odd choice for a kid so small to wear.

I smile at him, hoping to ease his surprise to find that he is no longer alone here, and I receive a small, shy one in return. I waggle my fingers at him. His smile broadens, and he waves back. I stick out my tongue, and he

lets out a deep, belly laugh that only little ones his age seem to have. I hear a call in the distance, and the boy turns away, forgetting about me completely, and goes running back to the couple. The man scoops him up in his arms, giving his chubby cheek a kiss, and walks with him away, leaving the girl alone at the grave.

For some reason, seeing her sitting on the grass before that lonely stone, I find I can't tear my eyes away. I feel like I'm bearing witness to some consequential moment. Call it a sixth sense, if you will, but I watch her, curious. I could see her mouth moving as she talks to the stone, her eyes downcast, as though she is trying to see whoever is lying there beneath the earth. When she lifts a hand to her face and lightly wipes a tear away, I feel a tug in my heart. I get it. I understand the feeling of coming to this place and bearing your heart and soul to the dead.

The girl reaches into her shoulder bag and withdraws something wrapped in what looks like damp packing paper. What the heck? I lean forward a little trying to see what she's unwrapping. At last, she holds out a flower... a daisy. Just a single daisy. I watch as she places it before the stone, her fingers tenderly stroking the petals. Her mouth moves, and I can't quite tell from here what it is she's saying.

It looks like, "love you," or "forgive you," or even, "vacuum," though I highly doubt it was the last option. Seriously, Casey, not the time for jokes, you twat. I lean back against the headstone and continue to watch as the girl slowly rises to her feet, her hand over her heart as she lingers for a minute there, her eyes reading the name on the tombstone again and again. The man and the boy who had been watching the ducks swim by the pond, make their way back over to her. She reaches out and her son jumps into her arms, the love between them clear by the look they give one another.

The blond-haired man stands back as she turns to the grave one last time, talking softly to it before taking the boy's hand to run it over the smooth surface. As she steps back, her partner catches her and the boy, holding them protectively in his arms as he steers them away, and I feel that ache in my chest again.

They are a beautiful little family. I honestly wish them all the best and that whoever that was she just said goodbye to, can rest peacefully. As they move back up the path, exiting the area, the little boy wiggles out of the man's arms and skips ahead, giggling wildly. He's the happiest kid I've ever seen.

Alone, the man reaches over and his fingers interlock with the woman's, giving it a squeeze. The smile she gives him, it's absolutely breathtaking. There is so much in that single look she gives him that I feel a little envious. It's full of warmth, trust, and love... I wonder if I'll ever look at someone that way, or if they will look at me with such devotion. What kills me is the way he looks back at her, a crooked smile that, even from here, gives me butterflies. When she reaches up on her tip-toes to kiss him, I look away, feeling like a perv for invading their private moment.

Eventually, my curiosity wins over once more, and I take one last, tentative peek in their direction. The family is wandering back up the path, leaving me alone once again, and though I want to wander over to that grave and read the name, I don't. I'm not here for them. I'm here for Matthew... and for her.

I turn to face the stone I've been leaning on and brandish my finished sketch out before the name. "Well, Mom, what do you think? I know you probably are going nuts not being able to see your flowers, so here..." I tear the page free from my sketch pad and fold it up. I find a smooth rock nearby and use it to weigh the drawing down at the base of the shining white marble beneath the epitaph. I press a kiss to my lips and touch her name, then do another for Matthew.

I brush the grass from the seats of my pants after I stand and face my mother and stepdad, wishing things hadn't turned out this way. What had they done to deserve what happened to them? What was I going to do now? I have no one left in this world. The caseworker said I'd have to live with my dad again, hah! Yeah, fucking right. The stupid drunk could barely stand at the funeral. How was he the only fit guardian I had left? How could I leave my neighborhood and return to Harley? What was there for me?

Lee... Shaw... and Vail.

My stomach flip-flops like it does every time I remember my three childhood friends. The three boys I'd grown up with but then left behind. If I went back to Harley, I'd probably see them again, if they were still living there... or even still alive. That place was a cesspool, a pit of despair, poverty, violence, and drugs. Not many people made it out of Harley in one piece. My mother and I were the exceptions. But, apparently now, I was going to go crawling back. I'd survived that place by the skin of my teeth. In Harley, there was no such thing as second chances or nine lives... it was one chance, one life. Good luck. If you make it to twenty-one,

congratulations. You made it to old age for a kid living amongst the gangs and crews of Harley.

And I was being sent back there.

I felt like I was slowly walking the plank, each day that brings September closer is bringing me closer to my end.

I turn my back on the graves and head down the path. I need to be strong. I need to remember why I survived it in the first place. I need to be smart, think ahead as best I can, and not let my guard down.

You had them last time... Shaw and Lee... and Vail...

I did. And I love them for everything they did for me.

But I'm on my own now, and I gotta remember how to throw a good punch.

The End

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A F T E R W O R D

I understand that many will be upset with me over this ending.

Please know that I didn't write it this way because I just wanted to tear out your heartstrings and laugh maniacally in a dark room afterward.

Shay needed redemption. In his final act, he finally did what she needed, and that was to put someone else's needs before his own. He was caught up in all the dark chaos of his life, and in the end, he did find peace. Mina did love him, despite what he did to her mother. She may not have forgiven him in their final moments, but the love was there.

I know there are some questions left unanswered. I know some things I'm sure you wish I'd included in this book. But here's the thing... in life, we don't always get the answers to questions. And as this was all from Mina's perspective, she discovered some truths, while other parts remain a mystery. The same goes for Shay. He never found out it was Keenan that Mina had that secret relationship, and honestly, I'm glad he didn't. It would have utterly broken him, and he was already living in so much darkness to begin with. That betrayal would have shattered him.

Keenan... his affection for Mina began because he saw himself in this little girl. He was forced into a life he didn't want, and if he could, he would save another poor kid from getting sucked into it. Some of us are born into a life we are meant for, while some of us are forced into one we are not meant to be a part of. The latter is Keenan. I am sure Keenan fans are hating my guts right now for not having him in the story as much as the first one, if not, more. But this was never a love triangle story. This was about a troubled relationship between step-siblings, who live in a tough world, and who both have traumas.

Keenan and Shay both have suffered childhood. Even Mina with losing her father, then her mother's attention being taken away by James, the teenage girls in the woods... she suffered, too. And all three of them deal with their issues differently. Because people are different, and that's something we need to understand about each other as humans. We're all so beautifully unique and tragically afflicted by different torments in our lives.

I know there are questions left concerning James and his relationship with Shay. Gavin... Lindsey... I didn't forget about them. But their stories are done for now.

The ending... I wanted to leave a possibility of things... I want my readers to interpret some stuff on their own. I, for one, dislike having everything full out explained to me. I have always loved coming back to a story later, reading it again, and finding little easter eggs that tie it together. Or maybe in a future book, I'll recognize a reference to something from a previous and suddenly, something I thought was missing, or wasn't even aware I needed an answer to, clicks into place. I love that type of storytelling, and I wanted to write something like that for all of you.

Sometimes there is no happily ever after. And sometimes a happily ever after is something less grand and fantastical than we expected. But that's okay. It's just... life. And it doesn't owe you anything. You need to fight and find your happiness. You need to fight for your life and make it what you want. Don't waste it. And remember to always be kind to others. You have no idea the secret battles someone is fighting in their own mind.

Thank you for loving these characters. They are all so near and dear to my heart... especially Shay. So much of this book I've taken from my own self and put into it. Moments from my own childhood and my own personal struggles. Please know you are not alone. Don't let the darkness dictate how you live your life. It is YOURS!

To quote Dawn Serra, "There is no timestamp on trauma. There isn't a formula that you can insert yourself into to get from horror to healed. Be patient. Take up space. Let your journey be the balm."

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

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