



Brothers of the Flame (Ariel Kimber 1)

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Young Adult

Description: Ariel Kimber is a 17-year-old girl who, thanks to her mother, has had a life full of unpleasantness and abuse. And it's about to get a whole lot worse.

After her mother meets a man online, Ariel is forced to move to a different state, leaving all that she has ever known behind. Any teenager's nightmare. But Ariel isn't like most teenagers, she's different, and she has literally nothing to leave behind. No friends, no nothing. They move next door to a house that remains empty all summer long until the day before the first day of school. A school where the other kids treat Ariel like garbage because of who her mother is and the fact that she's different from them, save for a few – her neighbors. Tyson, his mysterious Uncle, Quinton, and twins, Abel and Addison. They quickly become her only friends, but Ariel soon finds out they are hiding things from her, keeping secrets from her. And she wants answers. Surprisingly, they give them to her. What do you do when you find out you're not who you always thought you were and your whole world gets flipped upside down?

Ariel Kimber stumbles into a world she didn't know existed, a world of magic and nothing is as it seems. Thankfully, she has the guys to guide her, to hold her hand along the way and she is going to need a whole lot of hand holding.

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Chapter One

It doesn't matter.

None of it matters.

They don't matter.

To hell with them all.

It's just High School. One more year and then you're free. One more year and then you're free. I repeated it in my head over and over again, like a mantra, my new words to live by. I simply needed to keep my head down, pretend no one else but me existed in this shit hole and I'd surely be just fine. You can do this, Ariel Kimber, I told myself. Three years down and only one more to go. Piece of cake, right?

I walked through the semi crowded hallways with my head down, eyes on the wrinkled piece of paper that I held clutched tightly in my hand, taking my own advice. Or, trying to that is. It was a lot harder to do than I thought it would be to not pay attention to what was taking place around me. The noise and the people were almost too hard to resist. Almost. I desperately wanted to look up but reined in the urge.

This was my first day at a new school. It was also the first day of the school year on the whole. Yesterday had been the last day of summer vacation not just for me but for everyone else, too. Normally, I would love this day. Getting to be somewhere where my mother was not for eight delightful hours or so a day was a blessing in my eyes,

and not a small one either. But this was different. Now, I'm the new kid. A hot commodity in this podunk town, I'd felt the eyes and heard the whispers from the moment I exited my vehicle and made my way from the student parking lot to the building. I'd almost rather spend the day with my mother than be subjected to this. Almost. Not really, though. I could never handle spending any amount of time with my mother. She made me crazy and sad. Two things I'd rather not be if I could avoid it.

You see, two months ago, my mother and I moved to this ridiculously small, backwoods town on one of her many crazy-assed schemes (she'd had a lot of crazy-assed schemes over the years, but this one was a doozy). She hadn't cared that she been uprooting me from all I had ever known, the only place we had ever lived (not that it had been a good place, but still), or, that she had thrust me straight into the unknown. No, she been a selfish cow, like always. She probably always would be one, too. There really was no hope for the woman.

I had loved my old school. It was huge. Mammoth. Four stories tall, complete with a creepy basement that had weirdly housed the gym. The building itself had damn near taken up an entire block. It had been stuffed full with kids and easy to get lost in. I could walk through the hallways with my hood pulled up over my head, entirely unnoticed, like an invisible ghost. Which is exactly what I did, and I had loved it. There were so many people that nobody paid me any mind at all. And that's how I liked it, a nameless nobody with an ordinary face in a sea of faces.

I'm rudely brought out of my thoughts when something, or better yet someone, bumped into my side. Unfortunately, I dropped the piece of paper containing my schedule from my hands and watched with big eyes as it floated through the air before landing face up on the floor. Before I could bend down to pick it up a hand, quick as a flash, reached down and snatched it up.

Please, please just give me my paper and then be on your way, I thought to myself.

Please, don't stop to talk to me.

"Watch where you're walking, new girl," a low, menacing voice rumbled at me from the person who now had a hold of my schedule.

I didn't dare look up into his face. His voice alone gave me chills.

"Whaaa... Whaat?" I stammered out, stunned by the menace in this stranger's voice. This stranger that bumped into me, not the other way around.

"Here," he snarled, shoving the piece of paper into my empty hands. "And for fuck's sake, watch where you're walking. Others won't be as nice as I've been. Remember that, girl."

Nice? Nice? Who was this guy kidding? He was crazy! And mean.

I gripped my paper tight in between my shaking hands, took in a deep breath, and for the first time since leaving the main office, I looked up and around me. Only to be disappointed. He had already turned and was walking away. I caught dark brown, shoulder length hair on a very tall, lean body. That was all I had time to check out before he rounded a corner, out of my sight.

I sighed in relief. Geez, what a dick!

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I reached up, and with shaking fingers, tucked a thick hank of my ash blonde, shoulder length hair behind my heavily pierced ear. Before I could think better of it, I took a look at my surroundings.

Big mistake. Big, big mistake.

People stared. They stared right at me and none of them even attempted to hide the fact that they were staring when I looked their way. Some of them had their mouths hanging open with a look of shock on their upturned faces. Some were pale and looked frightened. Of what, I had no idea, but they were looking right at me and not trying to hide it. A couple of people wore looks of pity on their otherwise curious faces. Pity was the worst. There was a group of very pretty, very well dressed girls that were grouped together and they were openly glaring at me with faces so hostile I had to fight off the urge to take a step back away from them.

What in the world? The pity I kind of understood, I didn't like it, but I could understand it. I was the new girl in a really small, tight knit, probably everybody grew up together since birth, kind of town. They would consider me to be an outsider and some of them were bound to feel sorry for me. But the rest of their looks were really freaking me right the heck out. The glares and the anger, I didn't understand at all.

I bit my bottom lip hard in an attempt to stop myself from crying. Not a very good start to my first day. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Thankfully, the urge to cry didn't stick around for more than a few seconds, the pain in my lip took away the tears. Pain could always be counted on to calm me down.

With nothing for it, I looked down to my schedule which was crumpled up even more

than it already had been, and continued on down the hallway. This was going to be a really long year, I could already tell. Five minutes in and I was dooming the whole entire year.

As I walked past people I caught snippets of their hushed conversations.

“...new girl...”

“...what’s her name...”

“...can’t believe he talked to her, he doesn’t talk to anyone...”

“...I heard she and her mom moved in with Mr. Cole...”

“...neighbors...”

“...sad really. My mom says she’s trash and that I should stay away...”

“...pretty, but still, he won’t even look at...”

“...lucky bitch...”

Thankfully, I rounded the c

orner and heard no more. My class room was the first door on the right. I had my schedule and where all of my classes were memorized but I still liked to have the actual piece of paper to hold on to. It made me feel safe. Orientation was two weeks ago, and I had made pains to remember where everything was so I didn’t look like a total fool wandering around not knowing where in the heck I was going. Also, I didn’t want to have to ask anyone for directions. Which was smart because, apparently, they wouldn’t have been all too keen to help me out if I had asked for

directions. At least I didn't have to worry about the looking like a fool part, not when I'd already successfully accomplished that.

When I entered the class room I took a chance and glanced around quickly. I froze at what I saw and my heart seemed to start beating double time inside my chest.

I knew it was Mr. Menacing Voice. I didn't get the chance to see him from the front but his hair was unmistakable. It also helped that he was now scowling ferociously and looking right at me with the coldest eyes I had ever seen in another person, my mother included. They were such a dark, deep brown they could have passed for black. I shivered as those cold eyes swept me from head to toe. They remained cold and hostile, giving nothing away.

I blinked in shock. Not only from the hostility radiating off of him but because he had to be the most handsome boy I had ever seen, even with the ferocious scowl on his face. Maybe he was even more handsome because of it. What a strange thought. Also, maybe it was me who'd gone crazy now.

"Oh, look. He's staring at her now," one of the Pretty Princesses in expensive clothes from the hallway, this one blonde, murmured to her friend as they walked past me. Once she was in front of me she turned her head to the side, glanced over her shoulder and shot me a glare identical to the one she'd given me in the hallway. "It's like she's an animal at the zoo or something."

She was abnormally beautiful and perfectly proportioned. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a low, sleek pony tail. A gold, glittery headband rested on top of her head. Small, diamond studs shone brightly at each earlobe. She wore a light pink short sleeved t-shirt with a tiny pocket over the left breast and crisp white short shorts. I could tell her clothes and her earrings were expensive, just like I could tell she liked knowing her clothes were of a better quality than most of the other students I'd seen so far. She had really mean eyes for one so pretty.

The corner of her upper lip curled in an ugly sneer as she turned her back on me with a flip of her pony tail. This was not the kind of attention I had wanted to garner on my first day. Or my second day. Or my fifth month. Or ever, for that matter.

“You don’t have anything to worry about,” one of her minions rushed to assure her. This one a brunette, but otherwise she looked almost like a clone of the blonde girl. So much so it was kind of weird and I couldn’t help but wonder if before school they’d called each other and coordinated their outfits so they matched. “It’s not like she’s prettier than you or anything. And, like I’ve told you, like, a million times, he’s probably gay. That’s the only way he wouldn’t want to go out with you. You’ve got the wrong parts. He likes dicks.” She giggled loudly as they rushed to take their seats.

Only one more year, Ariel Kimber, then you’re free, I told myself. To hell with them all.

I quickly scurried to an empty desk on the opposite side of the room from the boy with the cold eyes and menacing voice. I didn’t care about the pretty girl with the mean eyes and ugly sneer. She didn’t scare me, but something about that boy sure did, though. Before I could sit in the empty seat I’d chosen someone else beat me to it.

“Seats already taken, freak show. Find a different one. Now.” A boy with short blonde hair snarled at me. He had sky blue eyes that upon first glance were lovely, but after staring into them for a few seconds I realized they might be pretty to look at but they held no warmth. I took in the rest of him. Pretty boy face. Dark blue jeans. White football t-shirt that had Devils and the number fourteen in large red print on the front, it probably housed his last name and the same number on the back. He looked like he could be twins with the mean girl. Go figure.

The freak show comment really stung. I could only assume it was due to the fact that I had a black hoop through the right side of my lower lip and a whole lot of shiny

studs running up the crest of my ears. I didn't imagine they got a whole lot of people who looked different from the norm around here. Still, people had never been this blatantly rude to me before in my whole life.

I clutched my book bag to my chest with both hands, like a shield, stepped back away from the desk and turned towards the front of the classroom. I made this maneuver without muttering a single word. When I faced the front of the classroom a balding man with thin, wire framed glasses and ill-fitting (ill-fitting because his stomach stuck out like he had a basketball placed under his button up shirt, narrow hips and his shirt was tucked into his trouser pants) clothes stood, arms crossed, glaring disapprovingly at me from half way across the room. He had thick, bushy white eyebrows and a gross wart popped out on the side of his nose. I fancied there were long, pubic like hairs sticking out of that wart.

If I wasn't so upset by my classmate's behavior towards me I would have giggled at the sight of him, him and his basketball shaped baby belly. He looked about ready to either pop or give birth to triplets.

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“Let me guess,” he sneered nastily, “you’re Ariel Kimber.”

Was everyone in this town going to hate me on sight or what? This whole town sucked, and so did all these mean kids.

My face heated and I just knew I was blushing three different shades of red on more than my face. My entire body likely glowed an unattractive shade of red. “Ye... Yes, sir.” I stammered. Because he’d sneered my name, I really didn’t want to have to talk to him at all.

He pursed his, too thin for his fat face lips, and ordered, “Have a seat next to Mr. Tyson.”

Did he honestly expect me to know who Mr. Tyson was? I had no clue. How was I supposed to know who in the heck Mr. Tyson was? I turned around and frantically scanned the room for an open seat. There had to be one since he expected me to sit in it. My eyes grew round in panic. I started to shake my head from side to side but somehow managed to stop myself.

Of course, he was Mr. Tyson.

Of course.

Fuck my life.

I licked my suddenly dry lips and headed towards the back, to where I assumed my seat was because it was the only available desk in the room. Right next to Mr.

Menacing Voice. Or, whom I assumed was this Mr. Tyson.

I didn't make it to my desk right away.

Half way down the aisle, two desks from my empty one, someone stuck out their foot and tripped me.

I went down hard, landing on my knees with my bag still clutched in my hands. The impact jarred me and I bit down on the inside of my cheek, causing my face to sting. Pain always kept the tears at bay. Always.

"Freak show," a deep, unmistakably male voice muttered.

I don't know why but I sought him out with my eyes. It's like they were drawn right to him by some invisible force that I couldn't seem to hide from. His eyes were still cold, but I could swear I saw something uneasy flicker through them before he masked it with indifference.

The room remained utterly silent for a few seconds before it exploded with loud cheering and the laughter of my classmates along with a few shocked gasps and sounds of disgust. Not everybody found my humiliation to be amusing.

"Way to go, Chucky." Someone called out, I think it was the mean girl but couldn't be sure.

I looked to the side of me where the foot would have had to have come from. I found another Devils football t-shirt wearing jock. This one a mammoth brunette with light brown eyes and an adorable dimple. His t-shirt showcased the number eight. He leered down at me with no remorse whatsoever on his face. It really sucked that some people weren't as ugly on the outside as they were on the inside. If that were the case this pretty boy would look like a s

teaming pile of dog poo.

I quickly looked away from him and his adorable dimple and scrambled to my feet. I brushed off the knees of my black leggings and slowly, carefully, walked to my empty seat in silence, showing no reaction other than my initial flinch filled with pain.

I was not going to give these people the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

I sat down in my seat with as much dignity as I could muster. Which, honestly, wasn't much at all, but I still managed it. I stared, unseeing, straight ahead and clutched my bag to my chest.

None of it mattered.

They didn't matter.

To hell with them all.

I kept telling myself that, but this time I feared it was all a false bravado.

Throughout the whole class I felt Tyson's eyes burning into me. I paid him no mind just as I did everyone else.

Chapter Two

"Rough first day? I've never been the new kid before, but I can imagine it's not all that fun."

I was in creative writing, the only class I had looked forward to the entire day. It was the last class of the day, and that question had come from my table mate. I was so out

of it I hadn't even noticed there was someone seated next me at the table.

Rough first day? Was this some kind of joke? More torment for the new girl?

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I kept my head facing forward but my eyes shifted to the side so I could examine the girl who spoke to me. After first hour, no one had spoken directly to me for which I was entirely grateful.

She was a very pretty blonde girl with huge boobs. I hate to say I noticed them, but there was no way I could have not noticed them, they were that huge. Sweet, sky blue eyes hid behind thick, black rimmed glasses. With her hair tucked back behind her ears I noticed rather large plugs in both ear lobes. She was outside of the norm, like me. Her jeans were torn at the knees and her black t-shirt professed her love for some indie band I'd heard of but never actually listened to.

She was very pretty but didn't have the look of one of the Pretty Princesses in expensive designer clothes. Still, she was probably another would be tormentor. In my eyes, they all were.

It was safe to say I had had a rough first day. It was also safe to say this might have been one of the worst days of my whole freaking life. Okay, so maybe not the worst, but it was definitely in the top five and quite possibly the most humiliating.

Thankfully, nobody had sought to physically harm me after the dimpled jock tripped me in first period. Oh no, they'd tried to verbally nail me instead, only not directly to my face. The beautiful, blue eyed, blonde haired, football player had nicknamed me freak show and it made its rounds. Fast. It was whispered behind hands as I walked down the hallways. Some kids pointed at me and laughed when I was in the cafeteria getting lunch, but they hadn't approached me. I grabbed an apple and a pop, paid for it and quickly got the heck out of there. I found empty picnic tables outside and I ate my apple there in silence. Mercifully I was left alone. People did more staring and

whispering after lunch, but thankfully that was all they did.

I'd had two more classes with that Tyson person. Both of which I had taken the empty seat either to the side of him or directly in front of him. And like first hour I felt his eyes boring into me the entire time. He didn't say word one to me but I didn't take offense because he didn't speak to anyone else either. He was beyond weird, but then again, so was everyone else. At least he hadn't been mean after the first encounter.

I ignored the girl sitting next to me. She didn't seem to care because she kept talking to me like she couldn't feel the unfriendly vibes rolling off me that I sent her way. "It's not just because you're new. Mr. Cole is well liked in the community here and people think your mom is a gold digging whore," she informed me on a whisper.

My mother was a gold digging whore. That was part of her crazy-assed scheme. Hook up with some lonely, rich old dude and have him pay our way in the world (mostly her way, but mine until I legally became an adult, then she could wash her hands of me). To be fair to my mother, she met Mr. Cole on the internet and if she hadn't sunk her sharp, greedy claws into him, someone else would have.

His profile on the online dating site had said he was looking for a companion to spend the rest of his days with, and that said companion would be highly compensated and would be expected to perform minimal duties outside of pleasing him. Seriously, she'd shown me his profile and it had indeed said those things. He had four full grown children and his wife had died of a heart attack several years ago. He never stood a chance against my mother, but at the same time he'd kind of been asking for it.

My mother was only good at doing a few things. Like, day time drinking (she seriously rocked day time drinking!), sucking men dry (sometimes literally, yikes), looking pretty, stripping (how we got by the majority of my life), and shoplifting

(something I only knew she was good at because she'd boasted about how good at it she was). That was about it, though. She didn't do manual labor, or any kind of labor. Unless sex counted as labor. Did sex count as labor? I didn't know. She did men, and she did them well. Until they got sick of her, that is. Then they'd move on to the next easy piece and she'd do the same.

My mother had seduced Mr. Cole over the phone, and then we were here. It hadn't hurt that she'd sent him a ton of selfies where she wore the least of amount of clothing she could before it became indecent. It had taken her all of a week. During that week, she had me pack up our belongings because she'd been that confident in her skills and her good looks. He didn't even mind that I was a part of her package. He got exactly what he wanted and gave my mother what she wanted in return. A win/win for the both of them.

Still, I got why they were calling her a money grubbing whore because she was one. His kids had come over for a meet and greet and they had hated my mother right off the bat. Heck, they were probably the people who spread it around about my mother and me. Although, they hadn't really seemed to take issue with me, just my mother.

I didn't deserve to have my mother's behavior taken out on me in any way, and I hated where this conversation had turned to, not that I had even participated in the conversation thus far.

My table mate leaned in closer to me and whispered, "It's more than that, though."

More? There was more?

And why in the heck did we have tables instead of desks? This was creative writing, not chemistry. I wanted a damn desk all to myself.

I turned my head towards her and asked, "What else?" I couldn't help myself. I

should have stopped myself and held onto my silence.

She eagerly shared, “You live next to Tyson.”

Tyson? That wasn’t his last name? And... “No I don’t,” I told her. “The house next to ours is empty. Has been since we moved here.”

“It’s been empty because Tyson’s been gone all summer. He moved here two years ago. Everybody wanted to be his friend and all the girls wanted to date him because he’s so stinkin’ hot. But in all this time he’s never dated anyone and he has zero friends to speak of. He doesn’t seem to want friends. He’s mean to people, like, really, really mean. He’d never stop in the hallway to pick up a paper someone else dropped after he ran into them. Heck, he’s so mean he’d probably spit on the person as they bent over to pick it up.” She shook her head with wide eyes. “He treated you different.”

“Okay. But, who cares if he’s my neighbor? Or that he didn’t spit on me?” I asked her. Thank goodness he hadn’t spit on me. How utterly disgusting.

“The girls are going to hate you,” she gushed, sounding like she found this to be a good thing. “Most of them already do. There are rumors flying around about you. Some say you’re just like your mom and you’re going to try to nail Tyson because he’s rich. Some say you already nailed him this summer and you guys have, like, a secret relationship going on or something. It’s all so exciting. Normally, this place is real boring. You’re not boring.”

Her face was flushed, her eyes bright and animated. She looked like she did indeed find this all to be very exciting. I wanted to smack her upside the head.

“Why are you talking to me?” I rudely asked her.

She pursed her lips and shrugged. “Everybody needs a friend,” she told me.

She was wrong. Not everybody needed a friend. I’d always been fine on my own.

“Don’t you already have friends?”

She looked away from me and bit her bottom lip.

“Are you one of those girls who’s in love with him? You think you can get close to him through me because he and I are neighbors? Look, I don’t know him. We aren’t having a secret relationship. I’ve never even seen him before today and he most certainly wasn’t nice to me in the hallway.”

She released her lip from between her teeth and looked back at me. “I don’t have friends,” she quietly informed me.

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I snorted in disbelief.

She had to be lying. She was trying to play some type of trick on me or something. I turned around in my seat and looked through my classmates. Who I was looking for I had no clue, maybe Chucky or blondie, but they weren't in this class.

“Whatever this is, just leave me alone,” I told her harshly.

Her eyes got big and a look of hurt crossed over her pretty face. “I’m trying to be nice to you,” she told me.

I wasn't so sure about that. Nobody had been nice to me the whole day and I did not trust this girl at all. I had no reason to trust her.

“Right,” I muttered disbelievingly.

“You know, you’re not very nice.”

I wasn't very nice? Who the hell was this girl kidding? Instead of responding I sat facing forward in my seat and ignored her.

When I didn't respond, she huffed out an irritated breath, flipped her blonde locks over her shoulder and started to pay attention to the movie that was playing on the tv the teacher had wheeled into the classroom when we'd first taken o

ur seats. Why we were watching a movie in a creative writing class on the first day of school baffled me, especially when the movie itself had not one thing to do with

writing and everything to do with some famous, dead baseball player, I had no clue.

Her ignoring me suited me just fine. Still, the rest of the hour seemed to drag on forever. The movie turned out to be terrible and I found myself disappointed because I had really been looking forward to the class. The teachers in this school were horrible.

When the bell rang, I had the strap of my bag over my shoulder and I bolted for the door. I was the first person out the door. The hallway quickly filled up as I made my way to the exit. There were more kids in this school than I had originally thought.

Thankfully, I didn't have to take the bus so once I cleared the parking lot I wouldn't have to be subjected to these horrid people until the next morning.

Mr. Cole had given my mother a red, sporty convertible to drive around when we first arrived here. It was a lavish gift and my mother couldn't have been more pleased with him. I don't even want to know what she gifted him with in return. I was thrilled because it meant she gave me her old car. An old, army green Volkswagen Beetle. The Bug was rusted around the bottom and clearly had seen better days. I didn't care about those superficial details. It ran good and gave me a sense of freedom that I desperately craved. I loved it.

As I made it to my car in the parking lot a two-door, black Audi raced by me, Tyson behind the wheel. I fought back the urge to flip him the bird. With all the eyes, I knew were probably on me I didn't dare raise my middle finger in the air. It would just give them another reason to gawk and point their fingers at me.

I got in my own car and quickly, but safely, drove away from what had become my own personal hell.

Chapter Three

“How was your first day at the new school, honey? Did you make any friends yet?” My mother asked me as soon as I walked through the front door. Almost like she’d been sitting there waiting for me. This was for show. She didn’t want the big man of the house to know she could give a shit less about how my first day went. Or how I was. Or anything about me for that matter. He’d care about those things more than she did. She had one thing, and one thing only, that she cared about and that was herself. But hey, if pretending to give a crap about me kept her in fancy clothes, Grey Goose, a sporty, red convertible and she never had to work again ever, then she’d do it with ease.

My mother was a real piece of work and I did not want to have a conversation with her. Not after the horrid day I’d had.

“Fine,” I muttered, but said no more.

“That’s good to hear, dear,” she cheerily called back, making it blatantly obvious she didn’t really care at all. If she had cared she would have been able to tell from my tone that I was devastated and most certainly not fine. Or, if she had bothered to even glance my way she would have seen it on my face.

I looked at my mother. She was seated regally on a lounge chair, back ramrod straight, legs crossed at the ankles. Her ash blonde hair perfectly coiffed, she wore a sun dress that was so far from her usual tight clothes it wasn’t even funny. Even though we were inside she had an expensive looking pair of black heels on her feet. She’d never worn shoes when she was at home before we’d come here, she liked to be barefoot at home. She had a glass of dark, red wine in her right hand. She never drank wine. She hated wine. Always, she drank vodka on the rocks. Until coming here. Briefly, I wondered if she had to choke it down.

I took all this in and I couldn’t help but resent her for the awful day I’d had. There she sat sipping on a glass of wine (at the moment I didn’t care if she hated it) looking

like she'd had a relaxing day filled with lounging around the house in her expensive heels (even when I knew she liked to be barefoot around the house) when I had been through hell. And it was all her fault. Even if it wasn't entirely her fault I planned on blaming her for it all the same.

"How was your day, mother?" I couldn't help but snidely ask. Not that I really cared about how her day had been.

"Lovely, dear." She murmured and took a healthy swig of her wine. "Just lovely. I'm so happy here. I think this is going to work out just swell for us. Don't you think, honey?"

Honey? Dear? She was laying it on a bit thick, if you asked me. She'd never referred to me by those endearments before coming here. Even when she had other men around to suck dry she'd never gone this route before. I'd always been 'girl' to her. She'd spill her drink and snap at me, "Clean this shit up, girl, and when you're done you can make me a new one." Heck, half the time it seemed like she didn't even remember my name, the name she'd given me.

I assumed Mr. Cole had something to do with this change. He seemed to genuinely love his children and they openly returned that love in spades. Which is partially why they hated my money grubbing mother on sight. He treated me with genuine warmth as well. Mommy Dearest wouldn't want him to think badly of her, now would she?

"Yes, mother." I dutifully answered her. "I think we are going to be very happy here." A partial lie because even though I might not find happiness here that wouldn't stop her from finding it.

"Yes, well..." she took a sip of her wine before she continued, "Go and do your homework or something."

I took this as her polite way of saying she'd done her motherly duty for the day, now I needed to get out of her sight and leave her in peace so she could pretend that I didn't exist again.

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I took the hint and headed towards the kitchen. I was starving. That apple at lunch had not cut it for me and I'd been too nervous before school to eat anything for breakfast.

The kitchen was very modern, probably cost a fortune and it was absurdly large. As was the rest of the house. A living room, a formal living room, a formal dining room with a massive table, six bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a media room. There was more but I hadn't explored the whole house yet, and honestly, I had no desire to. I stuck to my bedroom, which was more a suite than a bedroom, and the kitchen. I'd been forced to use the dining room once and that was when we first got here and Mr. Cole's family had showed up to inspect my mother and me. Otherwise, I usually ate by myself standing at the kitchen counter or I brought my food up to my room and ate it there. Either way I always ate by myself. My mother and Mr. Cole went out to dinner every night. I didn't know if this was because he wanted to show her off on his arm as his young and pretty arm candy, or if it was because she couldn't cook and didn't want him to find out that particular tidbit about herself just yet so she convinced him to take her out every night. He'd invited me at first but she shot me warning looks every time that told me she would be pissed if I accepted so I turned him down every time. Eventually, he stopped inviting me. That worked just fine for me. I didn't want him to think I was an ungrateful brat but I'd rather he thought that than have to spend any more time than absolutely necessary with the vile creature that was my mother.

I made myself a turkey and cheese sandwich, grabbed a bag of Doritos along with a can of Coke and headed up to my room. Something as simple as having cupboards and a refrigerator filled with food most people took for granted, but not me. I was used to living off the bare minimum because my mother put things like cigarettes and

vodka ahead of groceries. Before moving here, I could never come home from school hungry and make myself a sandwich, and we certainly hadn't had things like chips and pop. I'd usually go hungry and end up eating Ramen for dinner hours later. A sandwich and a bag of Doritos was like living the high life for me.

As I climbed the stairs to my bedroom I made sure to put up visual blinders. I didn't want to take in the happy family photos that lined the walls at every turn. I had no business intruding on that happy family even in their memories. Frankly, I was surprised my mother hadn't tried to convince Mr. Cole to take the pictures down. It probably wouldn't be long before she had him in the palm of her hand and a decorator at her every whim and mercy.

When I had my door closed shut and locked behind me I unceremoniously dropped my bag to the floor and kicked off my shoes.

My room was spacious. I had a queen size sleigh bed, a huge step up from my twin mattress on the floor that I used to sleep on. My comforter was a really pretty light blue and decorated with large, red rose blossoms. My pillowcases the same. It was very girly and I adored it. The rest of the room was mostly barren. There was a tall dresser across the room from my bed and a window seat covered with decorative toss pillows. That was it for furniture and I had nothing on the walls. I'd shoved my meager belongings in the walk-in closet and that's where they'd stayed. Even the damn dresser was mostly empty. The room was massive, with enough space for a couch and sitting area. I wished I had more furniture to fill it with.

Mr. Cole told me he'd left it empty of furnishings so I could pick out what I liked. He'd also given me a brand new laptop upon arrival as a house warming gift. I loved it. My mother had given me the stink eye when he'd given it to me so I'd immediately tried to return it to him. He wouldn't take it back and I'm almost certain he'd caught my mother's stink eye but couldn't be sure.

I headed straight for the window seat, it was the best part about the whole room. The pillows were all in bright, girly colors and some of them even matched my bedspread. Mr. Cole had gotten them for me. I could sit there for hours and read or just gaze out at the sky and let my mind wander.

I sat the plate with my sandwich on it next to me and ripped open the bag of Doritos with my teeth. Bad habit, I know. I took my first bite out of my sandwich as I gazed out the window.

I almost choked.

Tyson's black Audi was pulling up the driveway of the house next door. The house that had been lacking its occupants since I'd arrived here. Apparently, my creative writing table mate had been telling the truth and he was my neighbor. Huh.

I watched him park his car in front of the closed garage doors, get out and head inside through the front door.

I couldn't help but notice that his house looked almost identical to Mr. Cole's house. The houses weren't right on top of each other but it seemed weird because we were so far outside of town that it felt odd having neighbors at all. I thought that maybe there should have been some trees between the two houses or something. I also couldn't help but wonder which bedroom was Tyson's. A crazy thought I did not need to be thinking about. Especially since he and pretty much everybody else seemed to hate me so much.

Still, I couldn't stop my thoughts from lingering on him. I was so curious about him. Did he live alone? Where had he been for the whole summer? Why didn't he have any friends when people had tried to befriend him? Did he have a girlfriend that no one knew about? And, most importantly, why did I care so much about the answer to that last question?

I knew I was pretty, I didn't flaunt it, but still, I knew it. I'd seen pictures of my mother at my age and I looked a whole lot like her. The only difference was her eyes were blue and mine were green. A trait I must have gotten from my nonexistent father.

I'd gone out on dates before. Boys had noticed my looks and were all too eager to ask me out in the hopes of getting in my pants. I'd never fallen for it, though. I was the girl from the wrong side of the tracks with a stripper for a mother, people had assumed I was easy because of it. I wasn't. I'd gone out on a few dates with a few different boys, fooled around a bit, but I never let it get carried away. The last thing I ever wanted was to be like my mother. Somehow, I'd gotten lucky and the boys I'd fooled around with had never spread rumors about me. Or, maybe they had and the rumors just never made it back to me.

Eventually I might have allowed for things to progress further than making out if I had found the right person to do it with.

As if they were no longer under my control, my eyes drifted over to Tyson's house.

I shouldn't find him attractive, not with his A-hole personality shining bright and clear for all to see. And I certainly shouldn't find myself so profoundly curious about him. I shouldn't... but I did all the same.

I woke with a start and immediately felt a kink in my neck. My forehead was cold and pressed up to the glass window pane. I'd fallen asleep reading in the window seat, and not for the first time. I had an entire box full of books sitting on the floor in my giant closet. With nowhere to put them I left the box unpacked and in my closet. I knew all I had to do was tell Mr. Cole I needed a shelf for my books and he'd get me one. He was waiting on me to tell him what I wanted to do with my bedroom to make

it my own but I couldn't bring myself to ask him for anything.

Since coming here I'd had a whole lot of time on my hands with nothing to do. So I spent a lot of time in the window seat reading or curled up on the comfy swing in the back yard reading. My entire summer had been spent with my nose stuck in a book.

The darkened sky informed me I'd been asleep for a while and night had fallen. The house was silent. They were either out to eat or it was late enough for them to be home and in bed. Of course, no one had come to check on me, to see if I'd done my homework, to see if I'd like something to eat for dinner. Not that I expected such things, but it still hurt to be so thoroughly forgotten, nothing more than my mother's pawn to be taken out and moved about how she saw fit, when she needed me for something.

I was tired of being a pawn in a game I wasn't even playing. And very lonely. No one to care and no friends to my name. Just me, my hateful mother and her rich sugar daddy.

I laughed.

I'd find no friends here. Not now that the jocks had christened me freak show for no apparent reason other than the fact they were A-holes. Not that it mattered. I'd never really had any friends to name and I always did just fine on my own. The loneliness would always be a part of me, an ache I'd never not know. Could be worse. I could be legless and lonely. Although, I bet if I were legless I'd at least have one friend out of pity, no doubt.

I laughed again. Goodness, no wonder I didn't have any damn friends.

Flashing light outside the window caught my attention. Headlights in the driveway next door. Two sets of them for two separate vehicles. No action all summer and an

empty house. He'd been back all but a day and already he had visitors. My nose pressed damn near to the window.

Where were his parents? Did he live alone? He couldn't be living by himself in that big house. I wracked my brain, flittering through all the gossip and whispered words I'd heard about Tyson throughout the day. His name had been whispered almost as much as my own. To my recollection no one had mentioned his parents, or lack thereof. Perhaps he'd like to borrow mine? He could just have my mother. Seriously, he'd be doing me a favor. No. Never mind. She'd try to sleep with him for sure. He drove an Audi and lived in a huge house, of course she'd try to sleep with him. The fact he was attractive and far too young for her wouldn't have meant squat.

My mother disgusted me.

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My A-hole neighbor fascinated me.

There had to be something seriously wrong with me. He'd been nothing but rude and mean to me and yet I found him fascinating. Was I really so lonely I'd be captivated by someone who snarled at me?

How sad.

And pathetic.

And completely absurd.

The vehicles came to a stop, parking in front of the house. Headlights turned off, casting the house and driveway into the dark. Car doors slammed, but it was far too dark and too far away for me to see just whom had stepped out of the vehicles. Unfortunately, there were no lights on on this side of the house to further my spying.

I left the window seat, disappointed and afraid if I stayed longer I might get caught. All it would take is one person glancing up to spot me. Then he'd have a real reason to dislike me. People would find out I spied on my neighbor and they'd call me things far worse than freak show.

I changed into pajama shorts and a tank top and crawled into bed. I shouldn't have been tired after my nap against the window pane, but oddly enough, I was. I think it had something to do with how traumatic things had gone at school for me. Holding my head high and keeping the tears at bay had been exhausting to say the least.

Tomorrow would surely be no better. It might even be worse. I didn't understand it – why they treated me in such a way. I didn't understand it at all and I wasn't sure how long I'd be able to endure it before I broke down and thoroughly humiliated myself. Or maybe I'd snap and tell them all to go straight to hell.

It took longer than I had thought for the tears to come. Once it started it felt like a bottomless well that would never run dry leaked out of the corners of my eyes. As I laid in my bed silent and unmoving, I cried myself to sleep. I figured it would be a regular occurrence for me. Likely, a nightly ritual.

Chapter Four

This couldn't be happening. It had worked just fine yesterday!

I turned the key over in the ignition. Again. And again. Just as I had been doing over and over for the past fifteen minutes or so. I had hoped if I simply kept trying, a miracle would take place and my most beloved possession would come to life for me. Without it I had no way of getting to school. My mother wouldn't be able to take me. She wouldn't be up for hours, needing to sleep off her hangover. She called it beauty rest. I called it sleeping the night before off.

I couldn't ask Mr. Cole to take me. He would insist I call him by his first name, then go on to tell me how wonderful my mother was. I shuddered at the thought of the other students seeing me arrive with him. I'm sure it would have brought me even more negative attention and I couldn't take much more. His kindness would be lost on me. Not to mention if he started to bring me to school my mother wouldn't like it very much. The attention was to never be directed my way, but solely rest upon her. She could get mean and downright nasty when she didn't get her way.

I shuddered involuntarily. My mother was not a very nice person.

Knuckles rapped softly against the front p

assenger window. Mr. Cole stared in at me. Unlike my mother, he didn't need to sleep off the night before. He didn't indulge in alcohol the way she did. He was an attractive man in his mid-to-late fifties. Light brown hair with a sprinkling of salt at his temples. Soft, brown eyes filled with a depth of kindness I was unused to. He had a fit body, despite his age, that was a testament to the fact he worked out religiously and ran several miles a day on the treadmill in the room that housed our gym. I'd never used the gym and hadn't even seen it because I'd never been down in the basement. I only knew of its existence because I'd heard him talk about it.

He dressed nice, too. Like the wealthy business man that he was. Always in a suit and tie. This morning was no exception. I had no idea why he bothered. The man worked from his home office. I wasn't sure if this was a new development due to my mother and I being in his home now, or if it was something he'd always done. Perhaps it had been part of their arrangement. After all, what would the point be in seeking out someone to fill the role of your companion if you were never around to enjoy her.

Sighing deeply, I leaned across the gear shift and the passenger seat to manually roll down the window. Not only would it be rude to ignore him, it wasn't like I had a means of escaping him.

For the eight hundredth time this morning, I desperately wished for my Bug to start. It didn't. It had never done this before.

"Problem?" He asked in his soft, kind voice.

Problem?

Did I have a problem?

Just one?

Was he crazy?

I had problems a plenty. Loads of them, in fact. Like his kindness, for one. Why did he have to be so nice to me? It would be much easier to move on from this place once he'd finished with my mother if I avoided forming attachments of any kind. Surely when he casts my mother out I would be right by her side when she lands on the curb.

"It won't start," I mumbled not looking at him. I couldn't look at him. If he thought he made me uncomfortable the sooner he'd be on his way.

"I will drive you in to school this morning," he offered like I knew he would. "I can pick you up this afternoon as well. Your mother..." he fumbled for words and I had to fight back the bitter laughter that wanted to escape my mouth. My mother indeed. He had no idea.

After clearing his throat, he finally found his words. Words I was not expecting. "While you are at school I will get you a new car. This one might be fixable, but I feel like even so, it is not reliable enough for me to feel comfortable enough with you driving it. I will be far more comfortable with you driving around something I've purchased for you."

This was undeniably kind and outrageously generous of him. I imagined him having done similar things for his own children. But I was not his child and I could not accept such a thing from him. I could not accept gifts of any kind from him. If he gave me a gift, what was to stop him from taking it back when this thing he had with my mother ended? The Bug remained in my mother's name as far as I knew. If he got rid of it and replaced it with a new vehicle, when he kicked us to the curb later on and took the new car back we'd find ourselves homeless and without a vehicle. It would make a bad situation that much worse.

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I needed to get him to fix my Bug. Or not. I could get a job to pay for it. Then I'd simply have to figure out a way to convince him to keep it around. And until it got fixed I would have to suck it up and walk miles to school every day, then do the same thing on the way back.

This situation wasn't looking too hot for me.

Now how did I explain all this to him? Mr. too kind and understanding for his own good yet felt the need to buy himself a companion would certainly argue with me if I were to reject a car, most certainly. How to explain my thoughts to him? He thought he knew just what kind of woman he'd crawled into bed with. He had no clue. If he brought me to school and she found out about it she'd grow jealous and act out, taking it out on me.

"No thanks." I muttered, still not looking at him. I'd meant to say more, to give some form of explanation but I couldn't get the words out.

Sighing heavily, he opened the door and stuck his head inside. I tensed, having not expected this.

"The car would be entirely yours," he rushed to assure me. "No strings attached. If things were to... not work out with your mother, you would keep the car just as she would keep the one I bought for her."

I blinked in shock.

It's like he read my mind.

Still, I didn't like him talking about me like that, lumping me with her like she and I were cut from the same cloth. Is that how he saw me? I didn't like that much at all.

"It's not just that. I mean, that's part of it, but..." Yeah, no way was I explaining the rest of it to him, about why I couldn't be seen with him dropping me off. "Can't we just fix the Bug? I'll get a job even, pay you back every cent."

Please, please, just give me this one thing. I stared him in the eyes, knowing mine were big and full of pleading. I never asked anyone for anything.

Pursing his lips, he looked away from me. I didn't take this to be a good sign, and I was right not to.

"What kind of seventeen-year-old girl turns down a brand new free car?" he asked quietly, almost as if speaking to himself. He looked angry.

The screwed-up kind with a gold digging whore for a mother, that's the kind of seventeen-year-old girl, that's who. "One who's going to be late for the second day of school," I told him. Maybe if I took him up on the ride he'd shut up about buying me a car.

I'd been wrong earlier in thinking I couldn't deal with having him drop me off at school. Just the thought of walking into a classroom late and interrupting had a small tremor running through my body. I had to pick the lesser of evils in this situation.

With a heavy sigh, he reached across the car and gently squeezed my shoulder. I flinched away from the contact knowing full well my mother would be jealous if she were to ever witness such a thing.

"Let's get you to school." His mouth had tightened angrily, but I could tell I wasn't the source of his anger.

Yes, let's get me to school where I can be tormented and treated like the devil's spawn that I kind of sort of am, and could we do it now before someone spots you touching me and tells my mother.

Mumbling to myself I opened my door, not bothering to take my key out of the ignition because it would have to start for someone to steal it. Besides, our only neighbor was Tyson, and what would a guy with an expensive Audi want with my crappy (but beloved!) Bug.

Slipping out of the vehicle, I closed the door quietly behind me. I flinched at the sound of the passenger door slamming shut. In my head, I knew the sound of a car door slamming shut outside of the house would not wake up my mother, especially since their bedroom was at the very back of the house and she slept like the dead. However, knowing it didn't stop me from flinching.

I followed Mr. Cole up the driveway and through the side door to the garage. This house was so over the top and freaking big when it came to everything. The garage was no exception. Four stalls housed my mother's car, a shiny white SUV and a sleek black four door Mercedes CLS63.

I never once parked my Bug in here with these cars. My mother had prohibited me from doing so. I bet Mr. Cole wouldn't have minded. I couldn't believe my mother wanted the thing in the driveway, rust spots and all, for guests and passersby to see.

Mr. Cole headed towards the sleek, black car. The windows were tinted so dark I couldn't see inside the thing. I thought that was illegal? He bleeped the locks as I made it to the front passenger door. I wanted to roll my eyes. Like he needed to lock his doors when he parked inside the garage. Getting in the car proved to be a bit of a challenge seeing as it sat so low to the ground and I couldn't remember the last time I climbed into a vehicle that was lower than the Bug. Thankfully, I made it in the seat without too much incident and he didn't seem to notice my struggle. As soon as my

feet touched down i

n the car he shut the door quietly and rounded the hood.

This was a terrible idea. My heart felt like it wanted to beat right out of my chest just to escape this situation I'd gotten myself into.

If it weren't for the small-town factor making it so everyone would recognize his car I wouldn't have to worry about people seeing who dropped me off at school because the windows were tinted so dark no one would be able to see inside. But they'd know. I imagined that even though we lived on the very outskirts of town and Mr. Cole worked from home, everyone would be able to identify his vehicle. Small towns were notorious for everyone knowing everybody else's business. I was totally screwed.

I wondered why he hadn't offered me the SUV and saved himself the hassle of having to deal with me and having to make the trip himself.

A quiet humming kicked in and one of the garage doors slid up behind us. Mr. Cole put his key in the ignition and the car purred to life. My Bug was so loud my entire body practically rattled every time I fired her up. Not this car, though. This car had a quiet frickin' purr. Nothing dared rattle.

As Mr. Cole smoothly reversed out of the garage and backed down the long driveway I had the insane urge to tell him if he was so hell bent on buying me a brand-new car maybe he could get me one of these sweet rides. I kept my mouth shut. I would never ask him for anything, I wasn't my mother. And besides, my mother would lose her ever lovin' mind if Mr. Cole bought me something so expensive and pretty as his car.

"So," he spoke quietly, cutting into the heavy silence, "how was your first day of school? I would have asked you about it yesterday but you never came out of your room and your mother... Well, she insisted we go out to dinner and she assured me

you wouldn't be interested in joining us.”

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Good God. That dreaded question. How was your first day of school? I didn't have an answer for him, at least not one he'd enjoy hearing.

And my damn mother, everything always came back to her with pretty much everything.

"Ariel?"

Crap.

"Fine," I lied, wincing. I didn't like lying to him. He had my mother for that, he didn't need more lies from me, too. He was a nice person who didn't deserve any of what he was going to get even though he'd kind of asked for it.

"You don't seem fine." His voice was laced with a touch of concern. No one was ever concerned for me.

I hated to do it because he was so damn nice and I knew the only reason he said anything was because he cared about me. It felt really nice having someone care about me for a change. But I had to do it. For his sake and my own.

Eyes aimed straight ahead, not daring to look at him, I huffed. "How would you know?" I asked snottily and then kept right on going just as snottily. "You don't know me. You don't know the first thing about me. Listen, Mr. Cole," he hated that I wouldn't call him by his first name which is why I never used it, "you're not the first man to come into her life and you likely won't be the last. They all want to get to know me," another straight up lie, those losers before him never even looked my

way, “but they never stick around long enough to do so. And, let’s be real here, we aren’t going to be around here long enough for you to get to know me either. So why bother?”

I didn’t want to be a snotty brat to him, but I didn’t think I had much of a choice.

Voice quiet, with a touch of sadness, he said, “You’re right, I don’t know you very well. You haven’t allowed for that. But I’d like the chance to get to know you. I’d very much like the chance to get to know you. But you’re also wrong, you’re not leaving any time soon. And if you want, you don’t ever have to leave at all. No matter what happens between your mother and I, you won’t ever have to leave if you want to stay. I promise.”

I believed him about wanting to get to know me, and in a different lifetime I would have really liked for him to get to know me, too. But we weren’t in a different lifetime, we were in the here and now. And all the rest? About me being able to stay with him even if he and my mother didn’t work out. That was outright laughable. He had to be crazy. If he threw my mother out on her ass there was absolutely no way I’d be able to remain in his home. That was crazy! For one, he’d known me all of two months and we’d just established he didn’t even really know me in the slightest bit. And for two, that crazy woman would get drunk and probably try to burn his house down if he tried to keep me after deciding he didn’t want her. He had no clue who he’d let into his house, into his bed.

But damn, his words felt good. So incredibly good to hear. And because of that I needed to put a stop to this immediately.

I hardened my heart, clenched my jaw and spoke through gritted teeth. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll pass. It’s not like you’re my new Daddy or anything. You’re simply one in a long line of many, even if you think you’ll be the last. You won’t. And then that will be that.”

I regretted them as soon as the words were out of my mouth. I regretted trying to hurt him, and I regretted making my mother sound like an easy whore. If this got back to her I'd never hear the end of it. God help me if he went and repeated this conversation to her.

We rode the rest of the way to school in complete silence. I guess I'd gotten my point across. Now why did that hurt so much?

A block away from the school he surprised me by slowing down and pulling off to the side of the road. What the?

Mr. Cole cleared his throat. "For whatever reason, you didn't want to be seen with me dropping you off at school so I thought it would be best to drop you off here. If you'd like, I could pick you up here as well."

Such a nice thing to do, especially after I'd been so nasty to him. Gah, I couldn't take much more of it. I felt like I owed him an explanation along with a heartfelt apology.

Hey there, Marcus (I figured if it was only a conversation in my head I might as well go ahead and call him by his first name liked he wanted me to. Why not?). I'm super-duper sorry my mother is such a greedy, blood thirsty, soul sucking A-hole. If I were you I'd prepare for the worst because things are only going to go downhill from here. Oh, and also, I'm super-duper sorry about the emotional train wreck of a teenager now living under your roof and the attitude she's been throwing at you. So sorry.

Yeah, no. Apparently, I couldn't come up with an explanation and a heartfelt apology. The poor man.

Without a word in response, I climbed out of the car. I made sure to not slam the door, instead closing it with a soft click. As I walked the block to school I kept glancing over my shoulder. The car didn't move until the school came into view.

Making sure I got to school safe.

My insides warmed as I fought the urge to turn around and run back to the safety of Mr. Cole's car.

I wished things could be different.

But they weren't.

And I had another day in hell to survive. Only the second of many to come.

Chapter Five

Day two of school and a miracle had occurred. A crazy, potentially awesome miracle. I could only hope it lasted. Every single person who'd been a soul crushing A-hole to me only the day before had completely, utterly, entirely forgotten about me today. It's like my existence didn't even register on their radar today.

As I entered the building I did it differently than I had the day before. Today I looked up and around me, refusing to hide my eyes from anyone. My ride to school with Mr. Cole had put me in a weird mood, and for whatever reason, emboldened me. I felt terrible for treating Mr. Cole badly and was feeling the need to lash out at the next person who looked at me funny in order to take my frustration and anger out on them. Which didn't exactly sit well with me seein' as I'm not normally a person prone to acts of violence or giving voice to the slanderous words inside my head.

But no one looked at me funny. Heck, forget them looking at me funny, no one bothered to look at me at all. It was bizarre, I tell you. Totally freaking bizarre. To say the least. I'd think I had walked into an entirely different school or possibly even a different universe if it hadn't been for all the whispering going on behind hands, hearing Tyson's name dropped more than once amongst those whispered words and

the fact that the Pretty Princess Barbie and her twin Ken were still very much in attendance. Perhaps bizarre wasn't even a strong enough word to begin describing just how weird the whole thing was.

I should have rejoiced. Instead I was wary.

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Could this be some sort of trick? Was there a student phone tree I hadn't been informed of yesterday or at orientation that had been activated last night due to my arrival? Had they called each other up late last night to devise a plan where they somehow lured me into a false sense of security so they could corner me in the girl's restroom alone after lunch in an attempt to drown me in one of the toilets?

Death by toilet, not a pretty picture.

Death by fellow crazed students, even less pretty.

Both royally sucked and toilet water would probably do some serious damage to my hair. Goodness, I'd lost my mind.

As I made my way to my first hour I glanced through the lingering students clumped together now more suspiciously than I had been when I first entered the school building. No one paid me any mind. Which made me even more suspicious.

I breezed into the classroom at the very last second and just as the bell rang. The first bell. The second one would ring in exactly sixty seconds and you were expected to have your butt in your seat by then, or so I'd been told at orientation. Breathing a heavy sigh of relief, I realized I'd made it to school just in time to avoid having to rush and possibly making a spectacle of myself. And, bonus, no one watched my awkward climb out of Mr. Cole's sweet ride.

Very carefully, so as not to trip over some A-hole's purposely outstretched foot, I made my way to the desk I had occupied yesterday. The desk right next to Tyson's. The seat was empty and waiting for me. I slid my backpack off my slender shoulder

and gingerly sat down in what I thought of as my seat. I was

far too paranoid to place my backpack down on the floor and out of my sight where people could potentially mess with it, so I laid it upon the top of my desk. If I needed to I'd place it on my lap, but I'd not be putting it on the floor and out of eyesight. Not in any of my classes.

A glance to the side told me Tyson had made it to class before me and had claimed the same seat he had occupied yesterday. I wanted to look at him so badly just so I could study and memorize every aspect of his handsome face. Which was insane, right?

His body shifted slightly as he moved in his seat beside me. I couldn't not look at him. His cold, dark eyes met mine. They were a lot less cold and dark today than they had been yesterday. I didn't know what to think about that, but I wasn't certain sure I liked it. Due to his behavior the day before, this boy was not to be trusted. I shouldn't concern myself with whatever it was that had slightly defrosted his eyes. Nope, definitely not. I shouldn't be interested in this boy at all. I couldn't seem to help myself. If I were honest with myself, I'd admit that even though he'd snarled at me he hadn't lied to me when he said he was being nicer than others would be. That didn't mean he'd been nice, though. I needed to remember this. It was important, first impressions were important.

A shadow fell across my desk. My entire body tensed in anticipation, expecting the worst.

When nothing happened, I made the first of many mistakes to come throughout the day. I looked up and over, meeting the dark, dark entirely defrosted gaze of my next door neighbor who was a dick, according to gossip, had no friends and never talked to anyone at school but had (for some fucked up reason) picked me to snarl at. He had been a dick and now he leaned across the aisle towards me with a non-hostile look on

his face. Non-hostile, but definitely guarded. His eyes didn't move over my face, they didn't roam over my body as most teenage males did in order to seek out any and every inch of skin I had (or in my case didn't have) offered up on display. No, not Tyson. His eyes stayed locked onto mine.

I held his stare, neither of us blinking.

What was this?

A challenge?

The careful guard over his eyes told me he wasn't trying to challenge me, he was simply curious and wary.

Silently, we stared into each other's eyes until the teacher reined in the class and forced our attention to him. I was breathless and trying really, really hard to keep my shaking from becoming obvious and visible.

What the heck had just happened? What did he think he was doing? What the heck was he doing? Not so nice one day, then silently trying to stare me down the next without words and hostility. Did he have multiple personalities and had decided to skip his meds with his breakfast today? I hoped not. Why else would he look at me in such a way? A questioning, probing way?

I was baffled.

And intrigued. God help me, I was intrigued.

The pregnant man in front of the classroom clapped his hands twice, loudly. All eyes were on him, including my own. I didn't like my first hour teacher. He, like the majority of the students, had no problem being an A-hole. To me. He wasn't pretty to

look at but we looked at him all the same because he commanded us to do so with his strong presence and A-hole personality. I'd like to think it had to do with not wanting to be his next victim of the hour and less to do with him being an actual good teacher. The jury was still out on that one.

"If you didn't catch it yesterday," he turned his beady eyes my way and glared at me. What a dick! Granted, I hadn't heard a word he said yesterday after he told me to take my seat next to Mr. Tyson but I had a damn good reason and he knew it. "My name is Mr. Franklin. Today I want you to find a partner. I want you to ask each other questions and get to know one another. Tomorrow I'll expect each of you to hand in a paper telling me what you learned, your first impression of them, what you like or don't like about them. Write it all down. I'll hold onto them until the end of the semester where I'll have you write another paper, but we won't get into that today. Choose wisely because the partner you pick today will remain your partner for the entire semester. And I mean it, so don't even bother to ask me later if you can't get along. Your teenage drama and your ridiculous, superficial problems have no place inside my classroom." Again, he glared at me. Seriously, what had I done to deserve this treatment? "If you cannot pick a partner on your own come and see me and I will help you. Now get to it." He clapped his hands twice, like he had done to get our attention, this time to release us.

Several students groaned. I didn't, but I wanted to. What was this, elementary school? I wanted to restart my day so I could have my Bug not start for me and be smart enough to just get my ass back to bed so I could sleep through this entire shit show of a day. And this was only first hour. I fought the urge to drop my head on top of my desk and start banging it over and over again until I blacked out from the pain.

Nobody would want to be my partner and then I'd have to approach Mr. Franklin about it so he could be a dick to me. Who'd want to get stuck with the girl labeled as the freak show. I hated those stupid jocks more by the second.

A hand smacked the top of my desk. I looked up to see Tyson leaning into me. My mouth dropped open and I stared up at him with wide, startled eyes. What now?

“You and me, girl.” His voice was rough when he wasn’t snarling at me. It washed over my skin, making me shiver. I liked it. “We’re gonna be partners.”

Oh.

Well, shit.

“Uh...” I cleared my throat and blurted the first thing that came to mind. “I don’t particularly want to be your partner.”

I cringed. Now why had I said that out loud? Good grief.

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Slowly, a bright, heart stoppingly beautiful smile spread across his handsome face. He had straight, white, even teeth. He probably had them professionally bleached.

“That’s the first thing I’ll write down about you,” he told me while continuing to blind me with his smile.

And I watched as he did just that. He pulled a notebook and black ink pen out from his backpack, opened the notebook up to a blank page and in bold, angry slashes, he wrote:

Ariel Kimber is my partner for this semester in Mr. Franklin’s class even though she very much wishes not to be partnered with me. I can’t say I blame her because, along with my fellow classmates, I wasn’t very nice to her yesterday.

For a second all I wondered was how he knew my full name, but then I remembered Mr. Franklin calling me by it yesterday.

I was speechless. His written words surprised me.

“I’ll make things easier on you and go first. You don’t even have to ask me any questions if you don’t want to. I’m Tyson Alexander,” he kept smiling at me as he spoke in his sweet but rough voice. “I live in the house right next door to yours with my Uncle Quinton and two of our family friends. I’m seventeen and I spent the entire summer camping and hiking with my Uncle and our friends. We do it every summer and have since we were kids.” His voice trailed off as he tugged at the collar of his plain black t-shirt. When he started he’d sounded so confident. Now, he looked nervous.

This kid was weird. Definitely.

And why did he live with his Uncle? It wouldn't be appropriate for me to ask that question, so I didn't. If he wanted me to know he would have told me.

Still tugging on his shirt collar, he raised an eyebrow at me in a silent question. Shit. I'd been sitting here, stupidly staring at him when I should have been writing down the things he'd told me about himself. I knew I would remember every single word he'd said to me, but he didn't know that. I unzipped my bookbag and pulled out a notebook and a black ink pen. Then I slid my bag off the desk and onto my lap. I flipped the notebook open to a blank page and started to write.

Tyson Alexander is not only my partner but also my next door neighbor. He's seventeen. We're the same age. He lives with his Uncle and they spent the summer camping with their friends (or so he claims. The gossip going around school says that he has no friends

). I believe him to have multiple personalities, and I might be slightly jealous because his hair is prettier than mine. Yesterday I would have said I didn't think much of Tyson except to think of him as an A-hole. Today, however, I'm not sure what to think.

Laughter came from beside me. Tyson had been shamelessly reading over my shoulder as I wrote. I didn't mind, I'd read his too and he hadn't minded or tried to hide it from me.

"Don't hold back on me, girl." He smirked at me. "Let me know how you really feel."

Yes, he definitely had multiple personalities.

“And you’ve got nothing to be jealous about because your hair is way prettier than mine.”

I blushed. Him thinking anything about me was pretty made me warm inside. Should I thank him now for the compliment? That didn’t seem right.

“What’s your favorite color?” he asked me.

“Canary yellow,” I told him. I hoped all of his questions were this easy. He got far more personal with the information he’d given me than I planned to give him. I didn’t know what this project was about but I had no intention of sharing my life story or divulging all my dirty secrets just so I could get an A.

“Bright,” he muttered more to himself than me. “Unexpected.”

I looked at him and thankfully he’d stopped trying to blind me with his handsome smile. He was looking down at his paper, writing. Belatedly, I noticed he was left handed.

“Unexpected? What do you mean by that?” I asked. Please, please don’t let him call me a freak show or turn back to the Dark Side on me. What’s unexpected about me liking a bright color? It seemed completely normal enough to me, but who knew what this weirdo would think.

He looked up at me and blinked slowly. Some of his dark hair fell forward across his left cheek. Absently, like this happened all the time and he didn’t even notice when he did it, he swiped a hand across his cheek, putting the hair back in place behind his ear.

“Girl,” he muttered in his rough voice, “day two and you’ve got nothing but black on again, so I’m thinking it’s your normal. It works for you, but I expected you to say it

was your favorite color. Not something bright and cheery.” He shrugged, looking massively uncomfortable. “Unexpected. But not bad.”

Huh. Well, okay then. Nothing for me to find offensive there. I did wear a lot of black and I wasn’t a bright and cheery person. I was really girly when no one else was around to witness it and only then, but I never wore bright, girly colors. Still... he’d noticed what I wore yesterday? I liked that. I’d have to have more care when getting ready for school tomorrow now that I knew someone would be paying attention. And I wanted to smack myself upside the head for thinking that way.

“Next question,” I demanded in the most serious voice I could muster. These questions were starting to make me slightly uncomfortable.

He said something but it was completely lost to me because I was too busy paying attention to the other students. Desks were pushed together in small groupings, the other kids huddled together, talking quietly amongst themselves. Not a single one of them were turned our way and gawking at us. There were no fingers out, pointed in our direction. There were whispers and animated faces, sure, but I sensed we weren’t at the heart of it.

“I don’t get it,” I blurted out loud. I wanted to stuff the words back in my mouth as soon as they left it. The last thing I needed was to explain that train of thought.

Turned out I didn’t have to, he got me. “Sorry, sweetheart,” he grinned, blinding me once again with that damn smile, “but you’re old news as of today.”

“What do you mean?” I was confused. Great. By the end of the hour he’d think I was a complete moron. And I wouldn’t be able to hold it against him if he did.

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“What I told you earlier? About my Uncle and I now having two of our family friends living with us? Well, that’s a new development. They moved in with us last night, and today is their first official day here. Everybody’s talking about them now. Both the girls and the guys. You’re old news. I’d give it a week, though, before they take notice of you again. You’re too pretty to go unnoticed for too long.”

I hoped they never took notice of me again. I dreaded it, so much so it hurt my stomach just thinking about it. He must have read part of my thoughts on my face because he leaned across the narrow aisle and got close to me again. His mouth got tight and something I didn’t understand (because I didn’t know him well enough to get it) flashed in his dark eyes. “Yesterday I was a dick and I fucked up. I was in a bad mood when I ran into you in the hallway and I took it out on you. Makes me a dick and it’s something I’m not proud of. Then, I just sat here and watched as...” he trailed off and again tugged uncomfortably at the neck of his t-shirt. His poor shirt had grievously suffered over the last hour and was now entirely stretched out at the neck. “I fucked up big time. It won’t happen again, you have my promise on that. Never again.”

I felt my face heat up. I didn’t want him to talk about what had happened yesterday. It’s bad enough he’d been witness to it, I didn’t need him to make it worse by talking about it, too. Would my humiliation never end? Would I never be allowed to put that day behind me and move on from it?

Before I could come up with something to get us off of this wretched topic the bell rang signaling the end of class. Wow, where had the time gone? I barely told him anything about me. His paper was sure to suck.

“I’ll save you a seat in third, girl.” He told me as he stood up and headed up the aisle. He slid the strap of his backpack over his right shoulder as he walked out of the classroom.

I stared after him with my mouth hanging open. Um, say what? He’d save me a seat in third? Like we were friends or something? It took a whole lot more than that to become friends with a person (or so I thought). What in the hell had happened here?

This day just kept getting weirder and weirder by the hour.

I walked through the hallway in a daze, stupidly hoping Tyson would blind me some more with his smile in third period.

Man, I was so totally not right in the head it wasn’t even funny.

Chapter Six

Not even a minute into second hour and I got it. I understood completely how I’d been forgotten about so suddenly, and I got why Tyson had called me old news. He had not been wrong.

They were twins, and they were absolutely lovely. Lovely. Same height, same build, same size. If you disregarded their hair and eye color they looked to be mirror images. But, thanks to their different hair and eye colors, they weren’t mirror images. One had hair so blonde it bordered on being white. His eyes were a pale, light blue. The other one had hair as black as midnight on a moonless night and he had bright, vibrant green eyes. They were tall and big, freaking huge. At least six foot two. At least. Full, wide, muscular shoulders. Wide hips. Thick, tree trunk like thighs. They were thick, but not fat. They were packed with muscle and way too pretty to look at for their own good.

The entire class was enthralled, even the males. Myself included. I sat there with the rest of the class for the entire hour and shamelessly undressed them with my eyes. Hell, I think even the teacher had issues taking her eyes off of them, they were that nice to look at.

I couldn't help but think Tyson had been wrong. It would take far longer than a week for their allure to wear off and people would once again take notice of me. Way longer. Like, twenty-five years longer, and then some. Goodness. Their size alone should have made them intimidating, and I could tell most were intimidated by them, if not downright frightened. I wasn't intimidated. They were, straight up, pure, masculine beauty and I thought the only thing I had to fear from them was possible heartbreak. I didn't want to take my eyes off of them and figured I might fail this class because of it. I'd happily fail if it meant I got to take in all that masculine beauty for an hour a day, five days a week.

Then it hit me. The night before they had moved into the house next to mine, into Tyson's house. It's highly likely I'd see them outside of school. All three of them. Something to look forward to.

Goodness, yes.

And, holy crap, no.

The hour flew by, and when it was over I realized I hadn't heard a single word the teacher said. It didn't matter to me, these teachers seemed to suck anyways, so it's not like I'd learn a great deal if I did pay attention.

I made my way to third hour in an entirely different daze than I had walked with to second hour in. This one was filled with lust and not dedicated to Tyson. Not that he didn't inspire lust, because he absolutely did. I was entirely focused on the salt and pepper twins and their raw, striking beauty.

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. I wasn't comfortable with this intense attraction I had to Tyson and the salt and pepper twins. It wasn't normal to be attracted to so many people at once.

Tyson beat me to class. He was sitting in the same desk he'd been in the day before. His backpack had been placed on the desk in front of him. Yesterday I'd sat to the left of him. When I got close he picked up his bag from in front of him and sat it on the floor beside his desk. I mumbled a quiet thanks and took my seat. I'm sure my face was beet red due to my inappropriate thoughts. His eyes did a quick head to toe scan before he blinded me with his smile. At this rate, I'd need to start wearing sunglasses to class.

The hour flew by uneventful and then we were in the hallway and on our way to the next class that we shared together. I didn't understand what he was playing at here. Did this mean he thought we were friends? Were we friends now? Did I want to be his friend? I wasn't so sure.

"When's your birthday?" he surprised me by asking.

"June twenty-four."

"You're lucky," he told me. "You don't have to go to school on your birthday. Being stuck at school on your birthday totally sucks."

"I believe you." And I did. I loved having a birthday in the summer even though I only ever celebrated it by myself and I didn't get to do anything special on it.

"What's your favorite food to eat?"

Ahh. This must be for his paper about me. I'd hardly told him anything before. I thought about his question, liking that he stuck with easy, non-evasive questions.

“Chicken alfredo. But I actually love most kinds of pasta. If it comes with noodles and a yummy sauce I will eat it.”

“Favorite movie?”

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“Boondock Saints.” That got me wide eyes and a grin before he moved on to the next question. I figured he liked the movie, too.

“Favorite band?”

“Bad Religion.”

“Ooh, punk. Didn’t see that one coming just like with the canary yellow.” I wondered if he liked them since he knew who they were. I wondered and I hoped. If we were going to be friends we needed something more in common than being next door neighbors who were the same age.

He grilled me the entire way to class. In the end, he had way more information than me and it was me who worried my paper would suck due to lack of information but I was too afraid to ask him any questions. And, seriously, how much crap did he need to know about me?

In the next class, he took the seat to my right. All throughout the next hour whenever he could he’d lean across the aisle and whisper questions at me and I’d whisper the answers back to him. He kept them light, sticking with the favorite theme. At the end of the hour I felt naked and exposed, vulnerable. He knew more about me than anyone else ever had. I didn’t know if I should be frightened by this or elated.

We went our separate ways after that class, likely so he could drop his books off in his locker. It was also after he told me he’d see me at my table so we could have lunch together. I doubted it. No one ate outside and the picnic tables weren’t visible from the cafeteria. I dropped my own books off at my locker and headed to my table

outdoors. None of the pod people in the cafeteria looked at me as I breezed through. Today I didn't need to hit the line to get food because I'd packed myself a lunch that morning. It wasn't much. A bottle of water, a zip lock bag stuffed full of chips and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with the crusts cut off. I didn't need anything more and I likely didn't have the time to eat anything more. Well, maybe a candy bar. There'd always be time for chocolate.

I made it outside without incident and came to a halt.

What?

How?

Tyson was sitting at the table I'd used yesterday. How had he known? I almost turned around and headed back in the direction I'd come from. I think I would have if a big, very warm hand hadn't landed on the small of my back and, very gently, pushed me forward half a step. The hand burned through the thin material of my shirt and heated up my skin. I shivered as I turned my head to the side and up to look over my shoulder to see who that hand belonged to. My breath caught in my throat as my mouth dropped open. One of the salt and pepper twins was touching me! The pepper twin. His green eyes pierced me to my spot as his touch burned through me. He'd robbed me of speech.

He was even prettier up close than he'd been from afar. He had high cheekbones with hollow cheeks that were lovely. A firm, strong jawline. Luscious, kissable lips. I wanted to run my tongue along the bottom one. Tearing my eyes off those lips so I could examine the rest of his face was almost painful, but I managed it. He had black scruff along his jawline and beautiful, thick, dark eyelashes that most girls would be jealous of, myself included. And his hand still rested on my lower back. Shouldn't he have removed his hand? It wasn't normal to touch someone you didn't know in such a way for a prolonged amount of time.

“Are you just going to stand here all day, pretty girl, or are you planning on moving out of the doorway sometime soon?” His voice came out deep and rough, like gravel. I bet if I had my hand on his chest it would have rumbled along with his voice.

“Twin, what’s the hold up?” The exact same deep, rough, gravelly voice came from behind the pepper twin. Goodness, their voices were identical. How weird was that? Was that normal for twins? I didn’t think so, but what did I know? I’d never met twins before.

I looked over pepper’s broad shoulder to see the other twin grinning at me mischievously.

“What’s the hold up, pretty girl?” He asked me as his grin grew even bigger. “I’m hungry. My twin is hungry. If you don’t move out of the way so we can sit down and eat we might be forced to eat you.”

The pepper twin laughed at his brother’s words.

If my face was hot before it was on fire now. I could not believe he’d just said that to me, a complete stranger!

“Ariel,” Tyson shouted at me. He must have just then spotted me standing there like a moron. “What are you doing? Come and sit down over here.”

“Yeah, Ariel,” pepper said from behind me in his deep, rough voice. “What are you doing?”

“Yeah, Ariel,” the exact same voice came from behind the pepper twin, this one mocking. “Go and sit down over there.”

Yeah, Ariel. I mocked inside my head. Why don’t you just stand here like a moron

some more with your mouth hanging open! That sounds like an excellent idea.

I was so freaking stupid sometimes. It wasn't bad enough I'd perved on them for an entire hour, which they probably noticed, but now I had to go and act like this? I wanted to smack myself upside the head but feared they'd think me even more of a weirdo if I did it.

Swallowing thickly, I stepped away from that burning hand and the pepper twin the limb was attached to. Very quickly I made my way to the table. I took a seat directly across from Tyson who did not blind me with his smile. Instead, he looked at me with narrow, concerned eyes.

To my absolute surprise and utter horror, the twins sat down at the same table as us. Pepper beside me and salt directly across from him. They both grinned boyishly at me. I wanted to die right then and there. How had I not connected it that they would probably want to sit with Tyson when they lived together after all? Like me, they were new to town and likely didn't know anyone outside of Tyson.

I desperately wanted to get up and run back the way I'd come from so I could escape this crazy shit show.

"So," the salt twin smirked at me with a playful glint in his eyes, "you're the pretty little neighbor girl Tyson told us about yesterday." It wasn't a question but a statement of fact.

I paused while pulling my water bottle out of my bag. His words completely shocked me to my core. Tyson had mentioned me to them? Yesterday? Yesterday had been a bad day and he'd only spoken to me to snarl at me. And I hadn't even known he knew we were neighbors until this morning. My face burned bright as I fought the urge to ask the twins what all Tyson had said about me. I looked to Tyson to see him glaring darkly at the twin who'd spoken. It was so scary it made me happy that look

was not directed at me. It didn't seem to bother either of the twins. They grinned at each other as they pulled their lunches out of their bags. I decided to avoid eye contact and do the same.

“What was wrong with your car this morning?” the pepper twin asked me.

I opened my bag of chips and looked over at him. His green eyes were so bright they practically glowed. “I’ve no idea,” I told him honestly. “It wouldn’t start and it’s never done that before.”

“Would you like a ride home?”

With them? The people who’d replaced me in the dreaded spotlight of this school. I did not think so. I’d take my chances with Mr. Cole before I opened up that particular can of worms.

“No thanks,” I mumbled. Then I stuffed a chip in my mouth. Although it had been nice of him to ask, I very much wanted him to shut up and leave me alone so I could eat my food in peace. I also very much worried people would come out here in search of the pretty new twins and discover us out here in our hidden sanctuary. That would seriously suck and the place would be over run in no time. That would be a tragedy.

“She doesn’t like people taking notice of her, like at all.” Tyson informed them. How would he know? “And being seen with the two of you right now would bring her all kinds of attention. And not the good kind. If you want, Ariel, you can ride home with me.” Like that wouldn’t bring all kinds of negative attention? Yeah, right.

“What are you talking about?” the pepper twin asked.

&nbs

p; This would likely drive me crazy, not knowing their names. So I cut in and asked them.

“Abel,” the pepper twin smirked at me and answered.

“Addison,” the salt twin grinned at me from across the table.

Abel and Addison. I liked their names.

“Ariel?” Tyson had lost the glare and his eyes were back to being concerned as he starred me down from across the table.

It took me a second to figure out what he wanted. “Mr. Cole is picking me up from school, but thank you for offering.”

“No problem,” his voice had gone quiet with a hint of sweet. It was new to me. “You can ride with me tomorrow.”

Oh, geez. I didn’t know about that. On second thought, it would be better to ride with him than having to deal with one of my mother’s jealous fits.

“What were you talking about before?” Abel barked at Tyson, his voice commanding and harsh. “Why would you say that about negative attention coming at her because of us?”

Tyson looked uncomfortable again. The poor neckline on his shirt would likely never return to its normal size. “Yesterday... Shit. Yesterday was Ariel’s first day here and she... didn’t make any friends.”

I let out a semi hysterical giggle. That was one way to look at it. And why were we talking about this again? The limit to my humiliation was endless.

“Yesterday was everyone’s first day,” Addison pointed out and frowned. “Well, except for ours.”

“Who cares if she didn’t make any friends,” Abel put in. “Maybe she’s shy, give the girl a break.”

“Geez, Ty,” Addison shot Tyson a dirty look. “We wouldn’t do anything to cause her any problems, and if she’s in need of friends we’ve got no problem being friends with her. What the fuck?”

Poor Tyson, his face was starting to get red in either anger or frustration. Or, perhaps, a little bit of both. I wanted to let him suffer, because of yesterday I felt like he kind of deserved it. But then I thought about how nice he’d been to me all day and changed my mind. He might just be messing with me by being nice to me today but I wasn’t the kind of person who liked being mean to people even when they did deserve it.

“Yesterday,” I said, cutting into their glaring at each other, “people called me horrible names and someone even tripped me in one of my classes. It wasn’t pretty and it wasn’t fun. People don’t like me because they’re small minded and my mother is a bit of a whore.” I ignored their wide eyes and, unfortunately, kept right on spewing out words. “Well, not a whore so much as a stripper turned companion.” The emphasis I put on the word companion said it all. “Mr. Cole is super sweet and, apparently, well-liked by the community. I get why. He’s awesome. Truly. And I also get why people don’t like my mother, but I do not entirely understand why they hate me so much. I’ve wronged no one.”

They were still staring at me with big eyes as I stood up and stuffed my uneaten lunch back into my bag. For whatever reason, I couldn’t stop talking. “It didn’t help matters any that, even though he was a serious A-hole to me, Tyson still took the time to speak to me. Apparently, he doesn’t talk to anyone and him singling me out for that particular joy made a bad situation a hundred times worse. But, that doesn’t mean any of what happened to me was his fault. It wasn’t because seriously pretty boys are never at fault for anything and small minded people, plus my whore of a mother equals not so good things. It’s all high school drama and stupid if you ask me.” I stupidly waved at them and announced, “I have to go.”

I was breathing heavily as I turned and speed walked the heck out of there. I'd gotten emotional and said too much. Far, far too much. I shouldn't have told them half of that shit. And I seriously should not have placed blame on Tyson and called him a seriously pretty boy. I'd gone too far.

Before the door closed I heard my name shouted, but I didn't stop. In fact, I walked faster. I had to stop myself from running only because I didn't want to think about what it would say about me if I literally ran away from them.

I did what I told myself I wasn't going to since I'd had the crazy thought about being drowned in the toilet earlier. I made my way to the girl's restroom closest to my next class. After checking to make sure I was alone I turned the lock on the door, locking myself inside and everyone else out. I sat my butt on the counter with my back pressed up against the mirror and I scarfed down my lunch in record time. When the first bell rang, I unlocked the door and made my way to class.

The rest of the school day was mildly uneventful. That is, if you didn't count the twins sitting beside me in the next class and after class the both of them trailed behind me all the way to my next class. A class neither of them shared with me. They drew attention I didn't need, but, still no one talked to me. I put up blinders after that just to be safe. If someone dared point their stupid finger in my direction I didn't want to know about it. Day two and I was way over school in every way.

Also, if you didn't count the girl in creative writing sitting somewhere far, far away from me, though, that didn't stop her from glaring at me from across the room. Whatever. Abel and Addison had the class with me and they took advantage of my lack of a tablemate. They both scooted in close on either side of me. It was a tight fit and we were smooshed together because the table was only meant to seat two on each side and they were both really big guys. Their shoulders rubbed against mine. Their thighs rested against mine. It was awkward for me having them touch me like that, but I didn't complain. In fact, I was too embarrassed to speak to either of them. After

they smooshed me in between the both of them they left me be, but I felt their concerned eyes on me the whole time.

I practically ran out of there and flew through the hallways like a mad woman. I hit up my locker to exchange my books for ones I'd need for my homework assignments and then I got the heck out of there as fast as my feet would carry me without looking like a lunatic. Mr. Cole waited for me where he promised he'd be. I got in the passenger seat and we zoomed off. He drove too fast and he didn't say a word to me. After the first tightlipped, forced smile he gave me when I first got into the car he never even looked at me again. It hurt. But, I'd asked for it and I'd gotten exactly what I asked for. It hurt like a mother, though. Deep down, I knew I deserved it because I'd hurt him and he hadn't deserved it.

Chapter Seven

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Mr. Cole morphed into the same sweet man he'd been that morning as soon as we pulled into the driveway at home. He'd been faking it for me, faking being upset with me. His odd behavior was the least weird of things to have happened to me this day, so I let it go. It took me two seconds to notice my Bug missing from the driveway. I wanted to cry. I didn't cry, not when I'd decided the day before it would be my nightly ritual. I'd cry about it later when I was alone and in my bed.

One of the garage doors was sliding open when he spoke. "Your mother asked about your car when the wrecker showed up to take it away. It could not be avoided and she made a big deal out of it and how upset she was for you. I couldn't get out of taking her with me when I went shopping for you. I'm afraid she picked out the color. Still, I hope you like it. And if you don't like it we can take it back and exchange it for whatever your heart desires."

I looked at him like he was crazy and said, rather brilliantly, "Huh?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

He laughed quietly and reached out to gently squeeze my shoulder. "I bought you a new car today like I said I was going to." He hesitated a moment while I gaped at him with my mouth hanging open. Then he spoke so quietly I almost missed what he said. "I hope you like it, sweetheart. I really do."

My heart clenched painfully inside my chest when, for the second time that day, someone called me sweetheart in a way where I knew they didn't mean it to be derogatory or snide or in a false sense of sexiness. It hadn't been a throwaway endearment, but something far sweeter I wished I could hear every single day for the rest of my life.

Then something else he said registered in my brain. He'd... he'd taken my mother with him while he shopped for a new vehicle for me. And she'd allowed him to still pick me up from school.

Oh God.

Oh, dear God.

We were both headed on a journey straight down the shitter and he didn't even know it. He parked right before the open garage door and got out. I had a small panic attack and almost screamed for him to get back in the car so we could make a run for it. His handsome smile with the crinkles around his eyes stopped me. He was happy, genuinely happy, to be giving me something. If I screamed or ran away I'd ruin it for him. I couldn't do it to him. After the past two days I'd had, Mr. Cole's smile and happiness meant something to me that I couldn't deny myself of just then. I'd suffer the consequences later if it meant one of us could be happy now.

I took a deep breath and exited the sleek vehicle. My mother stood inside the garage waiting for us. Her smile was so forced and brittle it looked as if she made one wrong move her whole face would simply crumble.

From the moment I stepped into the garage her eyes immediately locked onto me. They rooted me to my spot. I wanted to fight her look and I hated it. She threatened to swallow me whole with only the venom shooting out of her eyes at me.

"Ariel?" Mr. Cole called out from further inside the garage.

Damn. Had he not seen her or was he simply choosing to ignore her presence like I wished I could?

I followed him further into the garage, deciding to ignore her for now. We'd both pay

for it later, but to hell with her for now. When I got to the last car parked in the garage my steps faltered and I came to an abrupt stop.

Oh no, he did not!

I could not believe my eyes. This had to be some sort of joke.

“You... you...” I sputtered. “You bought me a Range Rover?”

A Range Rover. A freaking black Range Rover. It was so pretty I had to reach out and touch it just to make sure it was real. And it was real. Very, very real. Right then I fell in love with a car and I hadn’t even seen the inside of it yet. Or driven it. Or done anything other than caress it with my hand.

I remembered what he’d said a

bout my mother picking out the color. She’d chosen black? For me? I didn’t understand. I’d expected something bright and shiny that would draw tons of attention and I’d hate it. She’d pick something like that for me and she’d do it knowing I’d hate it. I didn’t understand why she’d pick black, a color I’d actually like.

“It’s... it’s...” I had no words. This seemed to be happening a lot to me today.

“It’s all yours,” Mr. Cole told me in his bright and happy voice. “Come on, let’s take it out for a drive.”

“I’m sorry, Marcus,” My mother cut into the happy moment like I knew she’d been waiting to do. She wouldn’t have liked being ignored when we walked in here. “Ariel probably has homework she needs to do before anything else. She can drive when we all go out to dinner tonight like a real family should.” Her voice had slowly been

deteriorating from suspiciously sweet to sharp and angry. “Ariel, you will be having dinner with us tonight. After he went to the trouble and spent his money on a car you’ve done absolutely nothing to deserve, I think it’s the least you can do.”

“That won’t be necessary, sweetheart.” Mr. Cole told my mother and I noticed something strange when he called her sweetheart. He didn’t call her sweetheart like he meant it as a nice endearment like he had me. “I’m having dinner tonight with a business partner. I forgot to mention it earlier. You two will be on your own for dinner tonight so Ariel and I will be taking that drive now if you don’t mind.”

I visibly cringed. Tonight was not a good night for him to leave me alone with her, not after this charade. He’d also never, not once since we got here, missed sharing a dinner with my mother and now he was running off to have dinner with a business partner. A business partner was likely his cover for seeing another woman. That’s how it usually went.

“Marcus,” my mother whined in an unattractive voice. “I wanted to have a-”

“That’s enough, Vivian,” he snapped back at her. My eyes grew round at his tone. I’d never heard him speak that way to anyone before. “We’ll be back in a little while. I’m sure Ariel will have no problem putting her homework on hold for half an hour.”

“But-”

“Get in the car, Ariel,” he ordered me in that same harsh voice he’d used to snap at my mother.

I didn’t hesitate to obey. My feet carried me around the back of the Range Rover and to the driver’s side door. After opening it I climbed inside. It smelled like leather and new car. I immediately loved it. I ran my hands lovingly over the steering wheel as I looked around me in wonder and awe.

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“Let’s go,” Mr. Cole smiled at me as he buckled his seat belt. I watched him as I did the same. “Start her up.”

Again, I obeyed and did as I was told. I turned the key and she purred to life. It wasn’t as intense or as seductive as the sound of his car but I enjoyed it all the same.

As I backed out of the garage I caught sight of the look on my mother’s face. If looks could kill Mr. Cole and I would be dead and my brand-new car would be nothing more than a pile of ash. That lady ruined everything for me. I had the insane urge to stick up my middle finger high in the air and wave it around in her direction. Childish, I know.

“Sometimes your mother can be a bit... much.” Mr. Cole mumbled to me as I pulled out of the driveway causing a sudden burst of laughter to escape me. He could say that again.

“Where are we going?” I asked him when I stopped laughing. I didn’t really care where we went just so long as it got us away from home for a little while.

As I headed towards town I drove past an enormous black truck. Addison sat behind the wheel with Abel in the passenger seat. It did not surprise me one bit that they had a truck suited for a small giant. Tyson’s Audi was right behind them.

Mr. Cole must have recognized Tyson’s car because as soon as we drove past him Mr. Cole asked me if I’d met the neighbors yet. Seeing as we only had the one neighbor I assumed he meant Tyson. I shrugged in response, not wanting to have that conversation with him.

“Where are we going?” I repeated myself.

“Doesn’t matter, Ariel. Just drive and enjoy your gift.”

As I cruised around town he fiddled with the radio, going from station to station. Every time he stopped on a new station he’d ask me if I liked the song playing. If I did he’d leave it for the duration of the song. If I said no he’d move on to the next station just to do it all over again. I think it was his way of trying to get to know me just a little bit more in any way he could. I didn’t mind.

Exactly half an hour later I pulled into the driveway. He hit a button on the garage door opener clipped to the passenger side visor that I hadn’t noticed before. The farthest garage door to the left slid open.

“You’ll park in the garage from now on. I don’t care if you park in the driveway if you’re planning on leaving again, but if you’re home for the night I want your car in the garage with the rest of them.”

I shrugged and muttered, “Okay.” I could definitely do that for him. Easy. Though, I didn’t know why it mattered to him where I parked.

Right before I pulled into the garage something across the yard and at the tree line caught my eye. There was a man standing there, half in the shadow of the trees. I couldn’t make out his facial features or much of anything for that matter. Save for his eyes. They were as black as night and staring right at me. I shivered in my seat as he fell back and blended in with the rest of the shadows amongst the trees. Why was there a man lurking in the tree line at the end of our yard? Suddenly parking in the garage didn’t seem like such a bad idea to me now. Not with strange men lurking around.

I had my seat belt off and my door halfway open when he spoke again. “You

mentioned getting a job earlier today to pay for things. I didn't like this. I don't mean to overstep my place, but I don't want you getting a job while you're living under my roof. I want you to focus on school and being a teenager. I understand that you'll need money for things so I've had a separate account set up for you." He slid a plastic card and a slip of paper out of his front pants pocket and laid both on the dash. "Money will be deposited at the beginning of each month. Your pin is on the paper. I suggest you memorize it and throw the paper away. It wouldn't do for certain people to find it." He opened his door and climbed out of the Rover. "Thank you for spending time with me, Ariel, it meant a lot to me, you have no idea. And if I get home too late tonight, I will see you in the morning."

Tears hit the backs of my eyes as my throat closed up tight around the ball of emotion suddenly lodged there. Before I could get ahold of myself enough to tell him thank you after I tried to give him back the card he was gone. He didn't even bother to go inside to see my mother. Instead he got in his sleek, black car and backed out of the garage.

I sat there for several minutes gripping the steering wheel tightly in my hands while I deep breathed until the tears were entirely gone. I didn't want to face my mother with tears in my eyes. I slipped the card and the piece of paper into my back pocket, hit the button on the device clipped to the visor that would close the garage door and climbed out of the Rover. I'd keep it as long as I lived here, if that ever changed I'd try to give it back to him.

As I walked through the dark garage I shivered, thinking about the man watching me from the woods. I probably should have mentioned him to Mr. Cole. Maybe he'd know who it was.

This day felt like it would never end.

I picked up my book bag where I'd left it when I got out of Mr. Cole's car and headed

inside. The door to the garage opened up inside the kitchen beside the pantry. If the man at the tree line hadn't been there it's likely I would have tooled around in the garage in an attempt to buy myself time. Instead, I felt the need to hide myself behind as many locked doors as possible.

My mother was waiting for me inside the kitchen like I knew she would be. She stood tall, with her hips resting back against the granite counter top beside the sink. Today she wore a white, sleeveless

dress that barely skimmed her knees. Skin tight, of course, but an appropriate length. The neck line dipped so low her boobs looked in danger of spilling out if she were to bend over. Vivian Kimber would never wear a dress that covered up what she liked to call her magnificent tata's. She'd removed her heels and now stood barefoot. An open bottle of Grey Goose sat on the counter to her left. A glass of ice sat beside the half empty bottle. In the half an hour we'd been gone she'd done a significant amount of damage to that bottle. She poured herself another drink as I came into view.

"You think you're better than me." Her words were surprisingly clear for the amount of alcohol she'd consumed. I wondered how long she'd been repeating that one line in her head to get it to come out without a slur.

My stomach growled in hunger. Instead of answering her I walked to the pantry, opened the door and stepped inside. I searched the shelves looking for something I could take up to my room with me to eat behind my locked door.

"Answer me," she yelled at my back. Ignoring her was always a stupid idea.

"I would if you had asked me a question," I mumbled under my breath. Still, I had no doubt she'd heard me.

“Did you fuck him on your little drive?” she asked nastily. “Is that how you paid for your new car? Did you wrap your teenage mouth and then your teenage twat around his dick to pay for it?” She was screaming at me now. “Answer me!”

I turned to face her and yelled back, “No! I’m not you, mother.” I cringed, knowing I should not have said that to her. I should have ignored her entirely, said to hell with my hunger and ran right up to my room.

Stunned silence filled the room before she let out an animalistic snarl and hurled her glass at me. Pain flared through my head as it struck me in the temple. I blinked owlishly as my feet came out from under me and I crashed to the floor. The expensive (thus heavy) glass hit the floor first and shattered, scattering glass all over the floor. I landed on top of the glass. Blood trickled down my face from the cut at my temple. The glass beneath me bit into my clothes but hadn’t yet sliced into my skin.

“You stupid girl,” she screamed at me. “I finally find a man worth keeping and you think you can take him away from me. We’ll just see about that.”

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Her bare feet shuffled across the floor as she stumbled drunkenly towards me. I had to get out of here before things got even more out of hand. Wiping the blood from out of my eye, and likely smearing it across my face, I frantically searched the room for a means of escape. The backdoor came into view and I wasted no time scrambling to my feet so I could get to it. She was right behind me, all the while swinging her bottle of vodka at my head. She rounded the island, her legs got tangled in a stool and she went down hard. Taking advantage of her fall I bolted towards the backdoor. It was thankfully unlocked. I wrenched it open and flung myself outside.

All the while I heard her screaming curses at me. Clutching my backpack to my chest and not caring in the least that I had blood running down my face, I ran. I dodged the patio furniture as I ran along the length of the house. If I could make it around to the front of the house I could punch in the code to open the side door at the garage, I could get to my Rover and get the heck out of here.

It wouldn't be safe to come back to the house until later when I was sure she'd passed out from too much alcohol. I could use a gas station restroom to clean my face up and maybe I could find a park or something where I could do my homework.

As I rounded the house I flinched at the sound of car doors slamming shut and the murmur of male voices. I couldn't stop or turn back, but I desperately wanted to. Thankfully, my mother's screams had died off. That wasn't something I cared to explain to anyone.

"Ariel?" one of the twins called out cautiously. "What are you doing?"

"Is she bleeding?" asked a voice I'd never heard before. "Man, look at her head.

She's bleeding."

I winced as I looked up while I rounded the corner of the house. Addison stood by the hood of a black SUV with a frown on his face. When he caught sight of the wound on my head he cursed loudly and headed my way.

"It's fine. I'm fine," I told him in a high voice that didn't sound like my own at all. "Don't worry about it."

"What do you mean, you're fine? Your damn head is gushing blood and you should probably get it looked at by a doctor." I looked at the owner of that voice and frowned. I didn't know him and had never seen him before. He looked older than Tyson and the twins by a few years. He had honey blonde hair buzzed close to his scalp. A gold lip ring winked at me in the sunlight. He wore a tight black t-shirt and dark blue jeans. Did he live there too?

"Really, I'm fine," I tried to reassure him. "I'd love to stay and chat, but I really must be going now. Bye." I was such a moron. At least this time I didn't stupidly wave again.

I ran to the door and punched in the code. The little bubble light flashed green and the lock clicked, letting me know it was now unlocked. I had the door shut and heard the lock click back in place just as Addison made it to the door. He rattled the handle, trying to open the door. It didn't budge.

"Ariel, open this door right now." He demanded.

I did not think so. I shook my head at him.

"Ariel, what the fuck?" he growled as he banged his fist on the glass.

He was making things harder for me and now I couldn't leave because I couldn't open the damn garage door without him being able to get inside. I could either stay inside the garage or brave going back into the house.

Tears slid down my face as I slowly backed away from the door. Now the one who'd told me I probably needed to see a doctor stood beside Addison on the other side of the door. They both stared at me with worried faces and Addison's mouth was pinched tight in a frown. I didn't care, I had bigger problems to worry about.

I turned away from them and rushed to the door that lead to the kitchen. I dropped my backpack to the floor and stood at the door with my palms resting lightly against it with my ear pressed up against the smooth wood, listening. After a few very long minutes of hearing nothing I blew out a deep breath and let myself inside. Cautiously, I picked up my bag and stepped into the kitchen.

She wasn't in there. As I made my way through the house on silent feet I looked for her in every room I passed through. She was nowhere to be seen. She'd likely locked herself in her bedroom with her bottle of booze. Hopefully she'd drink herself to sleep before Mr. Cole came home, I didn't want him to suffer the same treatment as I had.

I'd made it halfway up the stairs when someone started pounding on the front door at the same time as the doorbell started going off.

Holy crap! They were unbelievable. My body started to shake uncontrollably as my mother started screaming my name. Did she not remember I'd gone outside to escape her? This was no good. Slowly, I made my way up the stairs walking backwards. I made it to the landing when she stumbled her way into the foyer. I couldn't stick around to watch this. I slipped my shoes off, picked them up, then fled to my room just as she opened the door. I heard a deep, gravelly voice say my name as I shut and locked my bedroom door behind me. My mother's drunk, giddy laughter floated up

the stairs, mocking me.

Good God, I hoped she refrained from hitting on whichever twin had bothered to knock on our front door.

I dropped my bag to the floor and kicked it towards the bed, not caring in the least if I broke something inside. With a toss, I threw my shoes in the direction of my closet, not caring about them either.

I needed to clean up my face and make sure the bleeding had stopped. Heavy footfalls thudded across the carpet outside my room followed by a light knock on my door.

“Ariel?” one of the twins growled through the door. “Open this damn door... Please.”

I desperately wanted to flat out deny him this simple request or ignore him until he went away, but I couldn't bring myself to do either. It felt nice to have another person care about me. Against my better judgement, I opened the door. I stood behind the door as Addison, Tyson and the man who'd been standing by the black SUV stormed into my bedroom. They stood clumped together in the middle of my room not bothering to check it out but instead choosing to stare me down.

“Jesus, your face.” Tyson gaped at me.

“Told you something was seriously wrong with her,” Addison muttered under his breath.

“What happened?” The third one asked me.

I shut the door hoping I had Tylenol somewhere in my bathroom because this whole thing was starting to give me a headache.

“Who are you?” I asked over my shoulder as I made my way to my bathroom.

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“I’m Julian,” he muttered, then added as an afterthought, “nice to meet you.”

I laughed humorlessly. I was so sure.

“Ariel,” Addison gritted out between clenched teeth. I had a feeling he was fed up with asking me what the heck had happened and having me avoid answering him. I couldn’t honestly blame him for feeling this way.

“I need to get this blood off me and see to my wound,” I told him in a quiet voice I barely recognized as my own. He frowned at me.

I moved into the bathroom not bothering to close the door behind me. I stopped short as I caught sight of myself in the mirror. My tan had been bleached out, replaced by a ghostly paleness not suited to my natural complexion. Half my face was coated in my own blood due to the gash at my temple. Thankfully, it had stopped bleeding. I simply needed to clean the blood off, slap on some Neosporin and cover it up with a bandage and I’d be good to go. Or so I hoped.

&

nbsp; I pulled the black t-shirt I had on up and off and threw it to the floor. It had a few small wet spots on it I assumed were blood. It must have dripped onto my shirt when I was running. I had a black tank top on underneath my t-shirt. I normally wasn’t so messy, but I couldn’t seem to bring myself to care about picking up a stupid t-shirt right now. A look in the mirror showed me all three of them watching me from the doorway. Two wore looks of concern, the other simply looked curious. Yes, I definitely had a headache coming on. Ignoring them, I went to the linen closet

and pulled out a washcloth to clean the blood off my face with, peroxide to wash out the gash and the Neosporin. I didn't see any bandages or I would have grabbed one of those for my face as well. I carried it all back to the sink where I unceremoniously dumped it all onto the counter. As I wet the washcloth there was movement behind me so I looked up into the mirror again. My mouth parted in surprise as I noticed Abel had joined the group.

"What're you doing here?" I asked in surprise. Were we having a party in my bedroom I hadn't been informed of?

"What the hell happened to your head?" He barked at me, completely ignoring my question.

"Did she let you in or did you just waltz in here on your own?" I was genuinely curious about his answer, at the same time I dreaded it.

"Is that drunk lady your mother?" He didn't directly answer my question, but he answered it all the same. He'd met her. She'd let him inside. And he could tell she was drunk. Wonderful.

I closed my eyes in shame. Yes, that drunk lady was indeed my mother. It got worse, though, if you could imagine that.

"She patted me on my ass when I walked past her." He told me proudly with a small smile on his face.

Addison snorted. "That's bullshit, twin. I didn't get a pat on my ass when I got here and I'm the better-looking brother. I've always been the better-looking brother."

"The hell you say."

“Guys,” Tyson butted into their bickering, sounding exasperated. “Do you think you might wanna argue about who is the better-looking brother when Ariel isn’t bleeding to death?”

“I’m not bleeding to death,” I told them as I wiped my face with the washcloth. “And I’m sorry my mother copped a feel of your ass. I’m so, so sorry about that. But, uh... if I were you and I planned on coming over again I’d probably try and get used to it happening on a regular basis.”

All three gaped at me.

I didn’t care, nor did I see the point in lying to them about her. The truth would come out eventually, why not now?

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked as I wiped off the last of the blood. The gash didn’t look so bad when it wasn’t gushing blood. It didn’t even look that big. Head wounds tended to bleed more.

“What happened to your head, Ariel?” Tyson asked instead of answering my question.

I sighed as I cleaned my wound and decided to answer them honestly. I don’t know why I did it, maybe because I was tired and over the whole day, maybe my head had been hit harder than I originally thought. Whatever the case, it didn’t matter. I was brutally honest with them just like I had been earlier at lunch. It’s like they brought something unexplainable out in me.

“My mother, for reasons that were entirely her own, decided to throw her glass full of vodka at my head. As you can see, she has excellent aim. She then chased me out of the house while swinging her bottle of Grey Goose at my head. She does this kind of thing from time to time.” I shrugged like it was no big deal to me. And it kind of

wasn't. She'd thrown plenty of things at me before, that's why she had such remarkable aim.

"Why would she do such a horrible thing to her own daughter?" One of the twins asked quietly, I wasn't sure which one.

"She got mad and jealous because Mr. Cole bought me a Range Rover." I shrugged again. "It's just who she is, who she's always been."

"That's..." Tyson sputtered. "That... I don't understand." On some days I didn't really understand either.

"It is what it is." I threw the dirty washcloth down on top of my blood-stained t-shirt. "If you guys came over to make sure I'm alright you can go now. Clearly, I'm going to be just fine. I'm hungry, I'm tired and I have homework to do. I'm not trying to be rude, but you guys need to go. Besides, I don't even know you, any of you, and now you're here standing in my bedroom. It's kind of making me uncomfortable."

"Haven't you ever had friends before?" Julian asked me. "It's normal to have your friends in your bedroom." Considering I'd met him for the first time in my life all of ten minutes ago, I thought he might be full of crap. I didn't have the heart to tell him no, I hadn't had friends before, and I still wasn't sure I had any now.

I picked up everything I'd dumped on the counter and headed towards the linen closet to put it all back away now that I no longer needed it.

"Julian, shut up," Tyson snapped. "You're making her uncomfortable so you need to leave. Go next door. Twins, go downstairs and make her something to eat. Also, make sure her mother stays down there. If you can do that and avoid being molested, great. If not, jokes on you, you deserve it."

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I opened the closet and was putting things away when I heard one of the twins say, “It’s not like it’ll be a hardship. Her mom is hot, like an older version of her.”

I made involuntary gagging noises in my throat. I hoped they didn’t say anything like that in front of my mother, I’d never hear the end of it.

“I don’t know, twin. Being an abusive bitch to Ariel makes her ugly as shit in my eyes.”

“You’re right, twin. I didn’t look at it that way and I should have.”

“What do you want me to tell Quinton?” Julian asked as the twin’s voices faded away. They must be headed down the stairs now.

I closed the closet door as Tyson said, “Tell him I said to fuck off.”

Curious at the change in their conversation, I turned to watch them. Tyson’s body was tense, his hands balled into fists at his sides. Julian looked relaxed with his shoulder leaned against the door jam, his arms crossed loosely over his chest, a smirk on his face.

“Your Uncle is going to be pissed. He wanted to come home sooner, and now with this shit...” Julian shook his head. “He’s likely to kick your ass now for talking the twins into staying for the whole summer.”

I had no clue what they were talking about and my head hurt too bad to try and figure it out. A numbness I hadn’t even been aware of feeling started to fade and emotions

started to fill me up once again. Why were they in my bedroom? I didn't even know anything about this Julian person and here he was in my bedroom, witnessing me far from my best. I didn't appreciate this.

"Yeah, I get it," Tyson bit out. "I fucked up several times. I am aware. It's not like Quint doesn't know what that feels like."

"That's why he's going to kick your ass."

My head started throbbing painfully. I needed them to shut up or get out. No, I just needed them to get out, period. They didn't belong here in my bedroom, not when I didn't really know them. I'd never had anyone outside of my mother this far into my personal space before. I wasn't certain sure I liked it.

"Guys," I grumbled.

Too involved in their own argument, they ignored me entirely. I walked out of the bathroom and made my way over to my bed where I sat down heavily. I needed Tylenol.

"Shut up," Tyson snarled. There he was. With that snarl he was back again. Back to that person I'd first met yesterday. Had it only been yesterday? It seemed like longer. I frowned and placed my head in my hands.

"You're an idiot," Julian shot back.

"Fuck you."

My head felt like it might explode. The more they argued the worse the pain became. I could take no more. Truly. I could not.

I sat back up and looked at them. They looked like they were about ready to throw down right here and start beating the crap out of each other. I w

anted to kill them.

“Get out,” I exploded and yelled at the both of them. They flinched at the sound of my hysterical voice before they turned to me. “Just get out. I can’t deal with this right now and I don’t want either of you here. So just get out.”

“Julian, go,” Tyson snapped.

I was done. I wanted them both to go but I’d settle for just the one if I had to.

After telling me (rather bizarrely, I thought) he’d see me tomorrow and shooting Tyson a nasty look, Julian finally left.

I sighed in relief. Now to get rid of the rest of them.

Chapter Eight

I laid back on my bed and covered my face with my hands. This day was a complete train wreck. I heard rustling in my bathroom. Tyson was digging through my things. Why? The faucet turned on for a second, then off again.

“Ariel,” his voice was back to gentle with a hint of sweet. “Sit up for a second.”

I groaned but obeyed. He handed me a paper cup filled with water and two white pills. Blessed Tylenol. I muttered a thanks before tossing the pills in my mouth and washing them down with water.

“You can lay back down now,” he told me as he gently slipped the cup out of my

hands.

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I laid back down and covered my face in my hands again.

“The twins should be back with something to eat for you soon, then you can go to sleep.”

He was getting annoying. “Stop bossing me around,” I mumbled through my hands. “And go home.”

He laughed at me. He seriously laughed at me. What he didn’t do was get up and leave. He was definitely weird. Why were they all making themselves at home in Mr. Cole’s house?

“I’m not going to leave you here alone like this.”

“I wouldn’t be alone,” I pointed out.

“Your mother doesn’t count,” his voice was back to harsh. “Seeing as she’s a psycho and all.”

I cringed into myself. I didn’t like him knowing that about her. Would he think me a psycho too? There was rustling and then the other side of the bed dipped under his weight. My eyes flew open as I dropped my hands from my face.

He sat there with his back against the headboard with his legs crossed at the ankles as he dug through my bookbag.

I looked at him with wide eyes. “What do you think you’re doing? You can’t come in

here, boss me around, then start looking through my things.”

“Calm down,” he grinned at me. “I’m not snooping through your shit, I’m not like that. I’m getting out that paper you’re supposed to write about me. I’m going to write it for you while you lay there looking pretty.”

My face heated up as I blushed. He thought I was pretty? Did I want him to think me pretty? I closed my eyes as I realized yes, I very much wanted him to think me pretty.

“You’re going to write a paper about yourself?” I asked him.

“Yeah. Do you have any more homework you’d like for me to do for you while I’m at it?”

I laughed as I shook my head. “No, that’s all the homework I have for the day.”

Heavy footfalls came down the hallway, two sets.

“The twins are back,” Tyson informed me. Like I didn’t already know this? I rolled my eyes. I wasn’t deaf.

“We made her BLT’s.”

“You made BLT’s, twin. I entertained the drunk lady.”

“Too true. Thank God her cell rang, I thought we were never going to escape her.”

“She asked me my age then proceeded to tell me I needed to find myself an older, more experienced woman to teach me the ways of the world.”

Good God, the woman had no damn shame.

“Set the plate down and then go home,” Tyson barked at them. “She’s tired and needs rest and peace and quiet. None of which she’ll get with the two of you here bitching at each other.”

“You’re coming too?”

“Later,” Tyson muttered distractedly. “I’m going to write this paper first.”

“Fine.”

A gentle fingertip ran over the top of my right shoulder along the strap of my tank top, causing my eyes to snap open. Addison frowned down at where his fingertip met my skin. “What-” he started to ask.

“For another day,” I whispered as I cut him off. His mouth snapped shut and his blue eyes bore into me, probing for answers to his questions. My skin started to heat up from where he touched me. Why did it feel like my skin was going to burst into flames whenever the twins touched me? And why did I like it so much? “There’s only so much a girl can take in one day.”

Addison nodded in understanding as he pulled away from me.

“Tomorrow, pretty girl,” Abel said over his shoulder as the brothers walked out of my bedroom. The door closed softly behind them. Tomorrow? Did he mean he’d see me tomorrow or that I’d answer their questions tomorrow?

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I sat up, picked up the plate one of the twins had left on the bed beside me and I stuffed my face with the best sandwich I'd ever eaten in my life. Also, the biggest. I could only eat over half of it before collapsing on the bed and curling into my side.

I groaned happily into my pillow. "I'm so tired now."

"Sleep," came Tyson's simple command from beside me.

I closed my eyes and let my body relax as I sank deeper into the bed. Then, like a crazy person, I fell asleep in my bed beside a boy I'd met only the day before while he did my homework for me.

Before sleep entirely consumed me, he whispered, "Ariel? Are those cigarette burns?"

He'd seen my scars.

"Do you smoke?"

"No," I mumbled as I drifted off to sleep.

"Do you feel that, Ariel Kimber?" asked a voice from behind me. A voice I'd never heard before. A deep, distinctly male voice that sent shivers racing down my spine.

I spun around in a circle, frantically searching for the owner of that voice. All I could

see were trees. Trees, trees, and more trees. But no man.

Soft laughter floated around me. “The boys were right about you, Ariel Kimber. You are exceptionally beautiful. I had only seen you from afar until tonight.”

I ignored the compliment because a faceless man calling me exceptionally beautiful kind of freaked me out, especially after he said he’d seen me before. I focused on the first thing he’d said and asked, “Can I feel what? And how do you know my name?”

The laughter came back, only this time it somehow felt closer. My breathing picked up speed as I, once again, spun around in a circle. There was no one there.

“The heat,” his voice slithered across my skin in a smooth, gentle caress.

I didn’t feel any heat, though. In fact, it was kind of cold. I shook my head from side to side in a negative. The only thing I felt was somewhat alarmed by this situation.

“You will when we touch you.” Hot, moist breath landed on the back of my neck, making my entire body shiver in fear. I opened my mouth to scream but no sound came out.

A silky, smooth fingertip trailed down the back of my neck leaving a blazing trail of heat in its wake. Heat I’d felt before, but for the life of me, I couldn’t remember when. My chest heaved up and down with every breath I took as my body shook uncontrollably.

“I can feel it inside of you, just waiting to be set free.” He whispered in my ear as his body drew closer to mine. Heat enveloped me and I fought the urge to close my eyes and sink into it. It felt comforting, warm and snugly. Safe even.

“Feel... feel what inside of me?”

Soft lips traced the crest of my ear. “Magic,” he whispered sinisterly as his tongue gently touched my ear lobe.

“That’s enough,” another male voice shot out of the dark forest surrounding us.

The unknown man behind me chuckled darkly as his heat moved away from me. “I don’t like waiting and I had to meet her for myself. I meant no harm.”

“In a dream, Uncle?” The voice was sharp and angry. I recognized it, but couldn’t for the life of me put a face or a name behind it. “You were practically molesting her. We agreed to wait. At least until she’s met all the others. This didn’t look much like waiting to me.”

“I’ve been waiting since she got here. I told you I could feel-”

“Enough,” the voice I recognized barked. “What’s done is done. Get over it.”

I felt frozen to where I stood, unable to move. I couldn’t even get my fingers to twitch.

“Wake up, Ariel Kimber,” the second voice whispered sweetly as a gentle breeze hit my face. “Wake. Up.”

I sat up in bed with a start. My heart beat wildly inside my chest as I frantically searched the dark corners of my bedroom for something, anything. There was nothing there. Absolutely nothing. I flopped back on my pillows in a huff with my arms spread out wide. The other side of the bed where Tyson had been was still warm. He must have only recently left me. Night had fallen. How long had it taken him to write one paper about himself?

Tyson... something about him nagged at my brain. But what? Something about my

dream. Why did Tyson remind me about my dream?

Holy shit!

I sat up again in a panic. That voice! Tyson's voice. He'd been the second man in my dream. He'd called the other man Uncle. Tyson had an Uncle Quinton. Why would I dream about Tyson and a man I did not now, nor have I ever met? I thought about the things that had been said in my dream, but the more I thought about it the more it slipped through my fingers like quick sand until there was nothing left of it. Damn. I had a feeling it was important, whatever it was.

For as long as I could remember, I'd always had very vivid dreams. And they always meant something. I couldn't explain it, but I always paid serious attention to my dreams and I took each one very seriously. I'd never told anyone about them. Can you imagine what my mother would say if I told her I thought my dreams were important, that they meant something or were trying to show me something? She'd totally lose it. I shuddered at the thought.

Tyson had been in my bedroom. He'd laid on my bed and called me pretty. And the twins made me food while my mother molested one of them. All this after they k

new she had hurt me. This day could not get any weirder.

I got up to use the bathroom and exchange my pants for a pair of short sleep shorts. They were yellow with hot pink hearts on them. Very girly and very cute. I took my bra off but left my tank top on, it would work just fine to sleep in and it was comfortable.

It wasn't until I pulled my comforter back so I could crawl into bed when I saw it.

My bookbag sitting on top of the pillow on the other side of the bed. On top of it sat a piece of paper. I was dying to see what he'd written about himself.

I quickly scooted over and picked it up. Then I laughed. It wasn't my paper. It was a phone number. I dug through the rest of my bag in search of it, but it wasn't there.

I dug my phone out of my bag and added the new number into my New Contacts with Tyson's name.

I opened up a new message and sent him off a text.

Ariel: Am I to assume this means you did not do my homework?

Less than a minute later my phone vibrated and I got excited. I'd only ever had my mother to text with before and I'd never enjoyed that.

Tyson: Am I to assume this is the pretty girl who lives in the big house next door?

I grinned at my phone, loving it when he called me pretty.

Ariel: Only if this is the boy who has multiple personalities and living in the big house next door.

Tyson: Lol. I only have the one personality, it just happens to be a big one.

Ariel: If you say so...

Tyson: I do.

Tyson: And I brought your paper home to finish. You fell asleep and I didn't want to risk waking you.

I hesitated and looked to the empty side of my bed. I'd just woken up not fifteen minutes ago and that side of the bed was still warm. I looked to the time on my phone. 9:47. If what he said was true then he would have left hours ago. That made no damn sense.

My phone vibrated again.

Tyson: Did you sleep okay?

I frowned down at my phone. I had except for that weird dream I couldn't remember but was pretty sure he'd played a major role in it. That wasn't a weird thing to tell someone at all.

Ariel: I had a weird dream, but otherwise I slept great.

I sat my phone down beside me and I got under the covers. My head only had a slight throb to it. I hoped I remembered to take some Tylenol before school in the morning otherwise the day would likely suck.

I snuggled under the comfy blanket and closed my eyes as my phone vibrated again.

Tyson: I'll get you a dreamcatcher. It will filter through your dreams and capture all the bad ones while still sending the good ones through.

Huh. I'd never thought about getting a dreamcatcher before. But did I really want to filter through my dreams? What if I missed something important? I wasn't sure I would use it, but the gesture sure was nice.

Ariel: Thank you. That's very sweet of you, but not necessary. Tomorrow should I expect A-hole Tyson to make another appearance?

Tyson: Lol. Never again. You have my word.

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I snickered. Yeah, right. When it came to being an A-hole I didn't think he could help himself.

I sat my phone aside without saying goodbye, snuggled into my bed and immediately fell back to sleep. I had no idea how I managed it seeing as I had napped for hours, but I pulled it off. It wouldn't be until the next morning when I realized I hadn't cried myself to sleep after all.

Chapter Nine

I was out of time and I'd barely just opened my eyes. Shit. Apparently, I hadn't remembered to set the alarm on my phone. I didn't have time to brush my hair or eat anything for breakfast. I threw the blanket off of me and raced towards my closet. I dressed in matching red panties and a red bra, black leggings, a black t-shirt with white lettering that read: The only Snow I want is Jon Snow, a tight zip up black hoodie and a pair of black flipflops. It was the best I could do on such short notice.

I breezed into the bathroom where I brushed my teeth and pulled my tangled-up mess of hair up into a messy bun on top of my head. I frowned at my reflection in the mirror. Part of my natural coloring had returned which was good. The bruising at my temple that surrounded my wound was not good and I didn't have the time to try and cover it up with makeup. I was a hot mess but was lying, telling myself I rocked it.

I raced through my bedroom, nabbed my phone and my bag and I ran down the stairs. Mr. Cole was in the kitchen pouring coffee into a mug as I made a mad dash to the garage.

“Whoa. Where’s the fire, kiddo?”

“Late,” I called over my shoulder as I raced through the door. “No time. Gotta go.”

The door slammed behind me as I rushed through the garage and straight to my new Rover. I couldn’t even bring myself to flinch at the loud noise. If it woke up my mother she could suck it, I was in no mood for her crap this morning. I should have stolen Mr. Cole’s coffee on my way through the kitchen. My stomach growled and I had a headache, coffee would go a long way towards making my day brighter. Heck, even a can of Coke would do it. Too bad I didn’t have the time.

I climbed into my pretty, shiny new Range Rover. I stuck my key in the ignition, turned her on and hit the right button to open the closest door behind me. I was backing out as I clicked my seat belt in place. I cleared the door when I had to slam on the brakes. If I hadn’t stopped I would have plowed down Tyson. He ran around the Rover and opened up the passenger door. He was grinning at me as he climbed in. As soon as he had the door shut I was cruising back down the driveway.

“Sweet ride.” Sweet, indeed. Just like his tone of voice this morning. I wondered if this was how he sounded every morning.

“Um, not that I mind,” I looked at him to see him grinning at me, “but what’s with you riding with me? Is something wrong with your car?”

“Didn’t you get my texts?”

“No time for texting. I literally woke up less than five minutes ago.”

He laughed quietly. “That must be why your hair is so adorably messy this morning.”

I nodded, not the least bit offended by him calling my hair messy. “No time to brush

it. Or cover up my face. Or eat anything. This day is going to suck so hard,” I whined.

“I have a power bar in my bag if you’d like it,” he offered up sweetly.

“Would I ever.” A wrapper crinkled as he opened the power bar for me and handed it over. I took a grateful bite and chewed as I cruised down the road.

“So, what do you think the third day of school will be like for us?” I asked him after I swallowed my first bite.

“I have no idea,” he told me bluntly. “But whatever happens today we’ll get through it together.”

My heart skipped a beat. My, how a day could change everything.

I had nothing to say in return to that so I ate and drove the rest of the way to school in silence. He didn’t seem to mind. As I pulled into a parking spot the big, black truck that had followed from a distance the entire way to school pulled into the empty parking spot beside me. I rolled my eyes. These boys were sweet but annoying.

I climbed out of the Rover, waited for Tyson to close his door then I hit the button on the key fob, locking the doors. I no longer had to stand around in the cold with shaking hands while I tried to unlock the door with a key. Mr. Cole was the best and had great taste. Just not in women. Don’t tell my mother I said that.

I was grinning from ear to ear when I turned around and smacked right into a huge chest. Vibrant green eyes twinkled down at me.

“Good morning, Abel,” I chirped, no longer caring about waking up late.

“Mornin’, pretty girl,” He grinned down at me. “You’re in a good mood. Are you

usually like this in the morning?”

“No, sir.” I grinned up at him. I shrugged and told him honestly, “I even woke up late this morning and had to deny myself caffeine because of it.”

A dark eyebrow raised high on his forehead. “Then why are you so happy?”

Good question.

“Honestly??

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? I asked. I waited for his nod before continuing. “I think it’s the Rover.” I reached behind me with my hand and smoothed my palm along the driver’s side door. I made a sound deep in my throat, it sounded awfully like a moan. “She’s just so damn pretty,” I purred.

All three guys laughed at me.

“Yeah,” Abel said without taking his eyes off me. “She is.”

My face heated up because I had a feeling he meant me and not the car. All these compliments were bound to give me a big head if they didn’t stop soon.

“Time for class,” I announced loudly.

They followed behind me as I headed towards the school building for another day in paradise. After leaving school yesterday, I’d completely forgotten about the fact that I would have to come back today. In fact, I hadn’t thought about school at all. I’d gone to bed last night without a heavy heart and no tears. The only time I cried yesterday had been because of physical pain.

I felt like dancing until I stepped into the building. It was like the first day of school all over again. Everyone stared. Only difference was they weren’t entirely staring at me, but my companions instead.

“Good grief,” one of the twins muttered under his breath.

“Fucking vultures,” muttered the other twin.

Tyson chuckled as he placed his hand on the small of my back and gently urged me forward. Heat shot up my spine, causing me to shiver. Why did that happen when they touched me? It was so bizarre.

“Too much drama for us, Ariel girl,” Tyson whispered in my ear. “Let’s bail and hope they follow the twins.”

A plan I could definitely get behind.

Tyson and I walked together through the halls, all the while his touch burned the skin at my back. I ignored it, or at least I tried to. A girl could only fake so much, even to herself. I had to stop perving on my new friends, but first, I had to get them to stop touching me. The more they touched me, the more I wanted to touch them back. Tyson’s heat threatened to burn right through me, making my body quiver. Yes, I definitely needed them to stop touching me.

When we walked into first hour my entire body stiffened and I had to bite my lower lip painfully to keep from groaning aloud. Tyson must have felt me stiffen because his hand immediately started rubbing soothing circles into the small of my back. He crowded close to my side as he leaned into whisper at my ear, “Ignore them. Everything’s going to be fine. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Easy for him to say. He didn’t have the Pretty Princesses giving him the stink eye. Which is exactly what they were doing to me. They made no bones about despising me.

Tyson had to shove me all the way down the narrow aisle. Today he pushed me into the very last seat as he took the one in front of me, acting as some sort of human shield. This was new. I blinked at his back as he swiveled in his seat and glared menacingly at any unfortunate person who dared look in my direction.

I burst out laughing. My entire body shook with mirth. Two days ago he'd shot that look at me and now... He looked at me with wide eyes and a stunned look on his face as my laughter died down. His dark eyes heated as they roamed over my face.

"Hey, freak show," Chucky called out loudly as he plopped down into the desk beside mine. I flinched and stared straight ahead, refusing to look at him. The insult stung even worse today. "What happened to your face? Did your boyfriend here beat you up or something?"

I felt him move as he leaned across the aisle towards me. His coffee breath floated across my face, making me crinkle my nose. I made a mental note to not breathe in anyone's face after drinking a cup of coffee because it was a rather unpleasant thing to experience.

The giant brunette beside me either didn't notice my discomfort or he didn't care because he didn't back up and I saw his dimple pop out.

"If you want, I could beat him up for you."

This surprised me so much my lips parted in shock and I stupidly turned to look at him. He grinned at me devilishly.

"Whaa... what?" I sputtered.

"If you go out on a date with me I'll beat the shit out of whoever did that to your face." He placed his right fist in his left hand and cracked his knuckles loudly.

Good lord.

What would he have to say if I told him it was my mother who'd messed up my face? But, no, I'd already told too many people.

And, seriously? “You just called me freak show less than two minutes ago. And now you want to help me?” My voice sounded as baffled as I felt. I looked at Tyson in question but he didn’t notice because his angry eyes were burning at Chucky. He looked about two seconds away from launching out of his chair and tackling the big, dimpled football player.

“You are a freak show around here. You’ve got all those piercings in your ears and the one in your lip.” Chucky shrugged unapologetically. “Not to mention the goth thing.”

“Goth thing?” I asked.

“Black clothes.”

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I shook my head at him, no less baffled than I had been a minute ago.

“You tripped me,” I pointed out.

He shrugged again. “Yeah. I’m a dick, but if you go out on a date with me I promise I won’t be a dick to you anymore. And, as a bonus, I’ll beat up the person who messed up your face.”

In front of me Tyson coughed into his hand in an attempt to cover up his laughter. I didn’t find anything funny about this conversation. The people at this school were insane.

“I’m not going on a date with you,” I told him honestly. Like I’d ever go out on a date with someone who called me terrible names as they humiliated me in a very public way. Please. I had more self-respect than that.

“We’ll see,” Chucky muttered confidently. “Girls love me. Your name’s Ariel, right?”

I nodded as Tyson’s shoulders shook with his hilarity. I wanted to smack him upside the back of his head.

Mr. Franklin strolled into the classroom as the second bell rung.

“You want to be my partner, Ariel?” Chucky asked me quietly.

I shook my head in the negative.

“We’ll see,” he muttered again, also confidently. I ignored him. Even if I did want to partner up with him (which I absolutely did not) Mr. Franklin had made it blatantly obvious there would be no switching of partners.

“Please get out your papers and pass them forward,” Mr. Franklin barked without even so much as a good morning.

I tapped Tyson on the shoulder with my fingertip. He ignored me as he dug through his backpack. When he found what he wanted he passed it forward without so much as even a glance back in my direction.

“Tyson,” I whispered frantically. “What the heck do you think you’re doing? Give me my paper right this instant.”

He did no such thing. “You’ll get it back at the end of the semester.”

He could have written anything and refused to allow me to read it. I hated him.

I sat back in my chair and chucked my pencil at the back of his head. He just laughed quietly at me.

“Ariel, where’s your lunch?” One of the twins asked me.

“She didn’t have time to make a lunch for herself this morning, remember?” Tyson spoke from behind me as he placed a tray of food on the table in front of me.

“What’s this?” I asked in surprise.

“Lunch,” he stated calmly as he sat down next to me at the picnic table. Addison was

seated directly across from me, Abel across from Tyson.

I looked down at the tray in awe and horror. Two water bottles. Two containers of curly fries. Four cheese filled breadsticks with a side of marinara. A medium sized, clear plastic cup that was supposed to be used for condiments but was now filled to the brim with sliced, hamburger dill pickles. Two chicken fillet sandwiches. And a plethora of condiment packets.

My eyes grew wide as I took it all in. Clearly, Tyson wanted me to get fat. What a waste of food and money.

I looked to Tyson and admitted, “I can’t eat all of this. I can’t even eat half.”

He grinned at me and flashed his white teeth, totally blinding me and robbing me of speech. I loved his smile. “It’s not all for you,” he told me after his smile faded away. “I didn’t pack a lunch either. Also, I wasn’t sure if the twins had brought lunches with them today either. This food is for all of us, but you get first pick.”

“I didn’t pack a lunch,” Abel admitted as he ran one big hand through his dark hair. “I waited until the last possible second to get out of bed today. Twin, what about you?”

Addison eyeballed his brother with concern as he pulled a brown paper bag out of his backpack. “Did you not sleep good, twin? I didn’t notice. You should have woken me up.”

Abel sliced his hand through the air, dismissing his brothers’ words. “It’s fine, just feed me.” He pointed at his brothers’ lunch bag. “What do you have in there?”

Addison pulled out an apple and sat it on top of the picnic table. Then a round container with a lid, he placed a white, plastic fork on top of it. Then he pulled out a

yogurt container and a white, plastic spoon. The last thing he placed on the table was an apple flavored Snapple.

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I picked up a chicken fillet sandwich, popped off the top bun and dumped the entire container of pickles on top. Then I plopped it back on the tray and ripped open a packet of mayo. I squeezed the mayo into the now empty pickle cup. I put the cup down and picked up my sandwich again. I dunked it into the mayo and took a huge bite.

“Yummy,” I mumbled through a mouthful of food. And that was no lie. The sandwich was delicious. I redunked into the mayo and was about to take another bite but came up short when I noticed the guys watching me with big eyes and opened mouths. Whatever. I took another bite of deliciousness. It wasn’t that weird.

Abel cleared his throat. “What’s in the container, twin?”

“Meatloaf.”

I wrinkled my nose in disgust. A big glob of meat smothered in Ketchup and stuffed full of tiny pieces of onions, now that was gross. Tyson laughed at my face as he picked up a container of curly fries.

“Ariel, do you care what I eat?” Abel asked me sweetly.

I covered my mouth with my hand as I finished chewing. I swallowed down my food then answered, “I only want one of the breadsticks. And you can have my water. I bought one from a vending machine earlier and it’s still mostly full so I don’t need it. Ask Tyson what he plans on eating.”

“Eat what

ever,” Tyson stuffed a curly fry into his mouth.

“Thanks,” Abel muttered as he picked up the other chicken sandwich. I slid my water bottle across the table towards him.

After another dunk in the mayo I went to take another bite but came up short at the sound of footsteps behind me. Abel and Addison froze and glared over my shoulder. My mouth flopped open as Chucky plopped down on the bench seat to the picnic table beside ours. The Queen of the Pretty Princess’s, her minion and the Queen’s male twin weren’t far behind him.

I hated this stupid school.

After the incident with Chucky in first hour, I’d completely put him out of my mind as I went through classes with Tyson and the twins.

Chucky grinned at me broadly as the two girls put their heads together and started whispering behind their hands. I shook my head and stuffed more of my mayo covered sandwich in my mouth. These people were ruining the only time throughout the day where I got all three of my new friends at the same time. Not to mention the peace and quiet, the only peace and quiet I got throughout the school day.

“Hey, Ariel,” Chucky called cheerfully.

My lips parted for a second before I realized I had a mouthful of food and it was rude to be staring at him openmouthed. So I closed my mouth and gave him a very awkward and very nerdy finger wave. Then I went back to eating while ignoring them. I thought about how I’d treated the girl who tried to be nice to me in creative writing. I had thought she was trying to trick me in some way in order to hurt me. I might have been wrong and misjudged her. She may have had the best of intentions and she may have really wanted to try and be my friend. I didn’t care about that and I

had no intention of going out of my way now to try and befriend her. Not when she had so easily sported a glare and a dirty look just like the rest of them. It was the reason why I had been so cautious that I needed to not forget. I needed to remember it when dealing with Chucky. He had hidden motives and he likely wanted to hurt me. He had hurt me when he tripped me in front of our whole class. I'd never forget that. How stupid did Chucky think I was? How stupid was Chucky? He didn't seem smart enough to maneuver such a play on his own.

These people and my beautiful companions were the reason I couldn't fly under the radar here. Well, that and my whorish psycho of a mother.

None of it, however, had anything to do with me. The whole thing was starting to piss me off. I was used to being angry. Anger and I had always been tight, we had a good, if not a tad unhealthy, relationship. But never, ever had I allowed myself to embrace it. I was always calm and in control of myself, I had to be.

But now...

I felt my control slipping a little. My face heated with my anger, and, strangely, so did the rest of my body. It felt oddly familiar. I wanted to pick up my tray and hurl it over at their table, not caring who it hit just so long as it hit someone.

"Ariel?" Tyson asked quietly. "What's wrong?"

Wasn't that a loaded question if I ever heard one. What's wrong, Ariel Kimber? What is wrong... hmm... Well, let me see here. Let's start with my throbbing headache I had due to my mother's abusive ways. She'd marked me and it made the top part of my face not so pretty to look at. All because I had a sweet new Ranger Rover I was madly in love with that I should probably never drive again because my mother might one day soon strap a pipe bomb underneath the driver's seat and when I turned the key in the ignition it would trigger the bomb and blow my ass into a million little

(very unattractive, mind you) pieces.

So, I had that going for me.

And, now, it seemed I had Chucky. One second he's calling me freak show and in the next breath he's telling me he'll avenge my honor for the small price of a date. A date with Chucky. What would that be like? I had a theory.

Here goes...

Chucky would pick me up at my house because, let's face it, he wouldn't want to miss out on the possibility of getting an eye full of my mother. And could we blame him, here? Then he'd take me to some fast food dive where I'd likely have to buy my own meal. Not that it would really bother me, but it was the principle behind the thing. You ask and you should be willing to pay. Just my personal belief here. The meal would be awkward because I'm betting Chucky hadn't been lying earlier when he called himself a dick. So he'd likely say a bunch of A-hole things I'd find cringe worthy. Then, on the ride home, he'd make a detour where he would pull off and park in some desolate place. Once parked, I'd protest while he tried to feel me up. Then they'd show up. You know who, the people sitting at the table next to me. They'd drag me out of Chucky's vehicle by my hair before they beat the ever-loving crap out of me.

Yeah, sadly, all Chucky would get out of me was the word no.

"Ariel?" Tyson again.

"I'm fine," I muttered as I went back to eating.

I think I might have lied to him.

Chapter Ten

They were having sex. Or, maybe they weren't having sex but they were definitely working their way towards the big, dirty deed.

And they were loud.

No, that's wrong. Only she was being loud. Obnoxiously so. Her moaning resembled the noises a dying animal would probably make. Mr. Cole kept shushing her. She paid him no mind, of course. Honestly, I don't know how he kept his erection through the whole ordeal.

My mother. A serious piece of work. This whole show she was putting on was entirely for me. Mad about the Rover, she'd clearly chosen this as part of my punishment. She'd set the scene and I had waltzed right into it.

I'd gotten home from school the exact same time as I had the last two days so she'd known when to time it right. I walked through the front door and I heard them, I heard her. If I wanted to make it to the stairs so I could go up to my bedroom, I'd have to walk right past them. And that was the whole point. She wanted me to see them having sex. My mother let her bitter jealousy and resentment get the better of her, like usual.

I could either walk past the dining room where they were and risk them seeing me, and I knew they'd see me because she was waiting for it, or I could turn around and walk right back out the front door.

I picked option number two. Not for me, but for Mr. Cole. I'd seen my mother in a serious state of undress (read: naked) before. I'd even seen her in several different sexual positions with several different men. Right out in the open because she'd either forgotten I existed or hadn't cared. This time was different because she hadn't forgotten about me at all, in fact, this was the exact opposite of that.

No, I picked option number two because I didn't want to embarrass Mr. Cole. And if I walked in on him having sex with my mother on his dining room table he would certainly be mortified.

I couldn't do it to him, and I had no intention of giving that woman exactly what she wanted.

I'd always been a pawn in her game, the only serious one she'd ever had. Now she had two to play with. This terrified me. You could cause way more damage with two than just one. Nobody knew me better than my own mother and she'd know that I liked him and wouldn't want to hurt him. She'd find some way to use that to her advantage. And by advantage, I meant some way to use it against me.

Walking out the front door, I couldn't help but despise my mother. She was a terrible person, and the two of us together were likely going to destroy Mr. Cole's life.

I had nowhere to go. What I did have was a pretty, brand spankin' new, Range Rover with a full tank of gas and an ipod with a whole lot of music on it and nothing but time on my hands.

I'd leave without a word and let her think she won this round. It might backfire on me, though. Maybe I should go back inside, make my presence known and get my punishment over with just to be done with it. I should do that. I should, but I wasn't going to. I liked Mr. Cole too much to harm him just to save my own ass.

I was frowning and buried deep in my thoughts as I made my way to the garage. I had parked inside because I hadn't planned on going anywhere and that's

what Mr. Cole had told me to do. My stomach grumbled angrily at me. I had not eaten enough today to satisfy it. School was hard work and I was hungry.

"Ariel, where are you going?" One of the twins asked me. I wasn't really surprised to hear him, they seemed to be everywhere I was.

I looked up to see Addison standing at the edge of Tyson's driveway just before the grass. I guess I should have referred to it as his driveway, too. He stood statue still with his hands stuffed in the pockets of his black cargo pants, his clear blue eyes filled with worry. I didn't understand why he'd worry about me, he barely knew me.

I stopped in my tracks. "I can't be here right now," I told him honestly.

"Why?" he asked gently.

I licked my lips, nervously. I didn't want to tell him. At what point would my mother's stink taint me in his eyes? In the eyes of the others?

"Come here," he rumbled quietly.

I hesitated, not knowing what to do.

He sighed heavily and loudly. "Come on, girl. Let's go into the house. Everyone's already in there waiting for us. Quint even ordered pizza and it should be here soon. You don't want to be late for that. Being late means you don't get to eat. Not with that crowd."

Tempting me with food? I liked him, he was smart.

I smiled sadly at him and headed his way. We walked side by side to Tyson's house. Our arms brushed lightly, sending heat up my arm. This heat was really starting to get to me. Where did it come from and why did it have such a profound effect on me? It was the strangest thing.

“What's wrong at your house that you can't be there?”

Why couldn't he be like a normal person and just let it go when he realized I wasn't comfortable talking about it?

We reached the front door when he rumbled angrily, “Did she hurt you again?”

This conversation was making me miserable. “No,” I grumbled.

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With his hand wrapped around the knob, he hesitated to open the door. His clear blue eyes roamed over my face, searching.

“You wouldn’t be lying to me, now would you?”

My eyebrows rose. Me? Lying? Never. I smirked and shook my head.

“This isn’t funny,” he whispered, his rough voice darker than normal.

“Would you rather I cried?” I shot back. “I wasn’t lying. She didn’t hurt me again. But, right now, at this very second, she’s having sex with Mr. Cole on the dining room table.”

He blinked. He stared at me a beat before his mouth got tight and his cheeks tinted red in anger. “Unbelievable,” he muttered. Then, louder, “Do you always blurt the truth out like that?”

I thought about it and shrugged. I didn’t know, I’d never really had people to talk to before. Maybe this was my norm?

“You do it all the time,” he pointed out with a small smile on his lips. “It’s rather endearing.”

If he liked it then I must be doing something right. Right?

Something he said earlier bothered me. “You acted like I’d be eating pizza with you, like, you were expecting me or something.”

He opened the door and urged me through. “I was actually on my way to get you. My twin and I played rock paper scissors to see which one of us was going to come and get you. I lost. Don’t take it personal. You can feel free to feel me up at any time you please. Your mother on the other hand...” His entire body visibly shuddered.

I threw back my head and burst out laughing. I laughed so hard I had to wrap my arms around my middle. He grinned at me while he watched the show. I shouldn’t be laughing because it wasn’t really funny. My mother was a total Chester the Molester and the twins had fallen victim to her well-manicured hands. It was his disgust and discomfort I found so hilarious. If I had told her someone shuddered in disgust at the thought of her touch she’d call me a damn liar.

My laughter faded to giggles as he stood there, smiling at me.

“What’s so funny?” Abel asked from behind me. I only knew it was Abel because Addison stood before me.

I whirled around to see not only Abel but Tyson and that Julian person from yesterday. All three watching me. My laughter immediately died in my throat. How long had they been standing there, watching me?

“No, no.” Abel held his hands up with his palms facing me. “Keep laughing.” He looked to his brother and demanded, “Twin, make her laugh again.”

“All I did was tell her to feel free to feel me up whenever the mood strikes her.”

Abel smirked at me. “Same goes for me, pretty girl.”

A surprised burst of laughter escaped me. “I’m not going to feel you up,” I told him honestly.

“Why not? Too forward for you?” Abel crossed his thick arms over his chest. “Don’t worry about it, pretty girl, I’ve got no problem making the first move.”

My face heated up in embarrassment as I fought the urge to run screaming in the opposite direction.

“Shut up,” Tyson snapped as he dug his elbow sharply in Abel’s stomach, making him grunt. “Don’t pay any attention to them, Ariel, they’re both idiots.”

Addison crowded me from behind and placed his hand on the small of my back. He leaned down to whisper at my ear, “I’m with my twin on this one. I’ve got no problem making the first move, either.”

“You’re all weird,” I blurted out.

“You have no idea,” Addison continued to whisper at my ear. I shivered as I felt the tip of his nose run up the outside of my ear. This was not friendly behavior, it was more. Was this him making the first move? My eyes darted around the room, but nobody seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary and I sighed in relief.

“Let’s go into the kitchen,” Tyson said as he reached out and grabbed my hand. He left the foyer with my hand clasped tightly in his, me trailing along behind him.

I let out a deep breath and finally took in my surroundings. There was a wide staircase to the right, then we were on the move. We breezed past what looked to be an office. The walls were a deep, dark red and lined with shelves stuffed full with books and picture frames. A massive black desk sat front and center in the room. Weirdly, there was nothing atop the desk and there was no door to the room. If I had an office and I lived with several other people I’d certainly want it to come with a door.

Tyson's hand gave me a squeeze as he dragged me along. The next room we passed was a formal dining room. The table was even larger than the one at Mr. Cole's house. Half the top was covered in books, magazines and what looked like unopened mail. What it didn't look like was a place to sit down and eat a meal at.

We passed by two closed doors on the left before we entered a bright, open space. I hadn't realized how dark the rest of the house had been until we stepped into this room. The room was a huge, open area with white walls. Half the space was filled with a state of the art kitchen. Stainless steel appliances, black marble counter tops and a long, wide island with a sink in the middle of it on one side and a row of gunmetal gray barstools on the other.

The other half of the room was a living room. A huge purple L-shaped sectional couch sat in front of the biggest flat screen television I had ever seen. The white walls were weirdly barren, yet the room felt lived in. In the middle of the room there were two sliding glass doors that were side by side and led out to the backyard. There weren't any curtains either. How weird. Did boys not care about things like curtains, or had those kinds of things been packed away when they left for the summer?

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“Do you want to sit on the couch, or do you want to sit at the island?” Tyson asked me.

How was I supposed to answer that when I didn’t know what we were doing? I shrugged.

“Kitchen,” the twins said in unison from behind us.

Tyson guided me to the right and straight towards the island. He pulled out a stool and I slid onto it. I felt so exposed sitting on a stool in the middle of the room with my back to the entryway.

Tyson stood beside me with his forearms resting on the smooth, marble countertop. Abel and Addison sat down on two of the other stools with Abel claiming the one next to me. Despite there being another empty stool, Julian walked around the island to stand with a hip against the counter beside the sink. Where had he come from?

From their rigid posture, it didn’t look like I was the only tense person in the room. The tension was suffocating. I jumped when the doorbell rang. The twins laughed and Tyson grinned at me.

“Pizza’s here,” a male voice bellowed from somewhere deeper in the house. An oddly familiar voice.

“Got it,” shouted a different male voice.

I leaned forward, closer to Tyson, and asked in a hushed whisper, “Exactly how many

people live here?”

He scooted closer and tilted his head down closer to mine. We were separated by mere inches. “Only four of us live here,” he told me in the same hushed whisper I’d used on him. “It’s my Uncle Quinton and me. I told you Abel and Addison just moved in. Julian and Damien live in a small house together not far from the school. Dash actually lives further outside of town than we do, but only by about ten minutes. We all grew up together, but Julian, Damien and Dash are Uncle Quinton’s best friends.”

That was a lot of people I didn’t really know. My stomach grew queasy. He pulled back slightly so he could look me directly in the eyes. “You’re going to be just fine, I promise.”

He kept saying that to me, telling me I would be just fine, promising me things. I didn’t know why he bothered, or why it seemed to matter so much to him.

“Do you believe me?” He asked, his voice strained. It sounded important to him so I nodded. I might have just lied to him again. Did it count if I knew he believed it? Close enough. “Did you know there’s such a thing as chicken alfredo pizza?” He grinned at

me.

“Really?” I asked in surprise. I’d never heard of such a thing, but now I absolutely had to try it. Chicken and alfredo sauce on a pizza? Yes, please. Even though I already had my mind made up about it, I asked, “Is it any good?”

“We’ll find out.”

He got chicken alfredo pizza for me? They really had expected me to be here to eat

with them. My insides warmed as I smiled brightly at him.

“So pretty,” he whispered as he raised his left hand and ran the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. My lips parted and I stared at him in shock.

“Food’s here,” that oddly familiar voice spoke from behind me. I desperately wanted to turn around so I could put a face to the voice. He’d been in my dreams, for goodness sake, and I had no idea what he looked like.

When he walked around the island and dropped three pizza boxes on the marble countertop I almost fell backwards off my stool. I barely even noticed the other two males who’d walked in behind him. Those dark, dark brown, so dark they were almost black, eyes. They were nearly identical to Tyson’s eyes and I had seen them before. He was the man standing in the shadow of the tree line, watching me. First, he watched me, then he popped up in my dream, now he was inside Tyson’s house. How weird was that?

I could immediately tell he and Tyson were related. They shared the same height and build. Tall with broad shoulders but slim hips. Where Tyson had long, shoulder length hair, Quinton had a buzz cut that matched Julian’s. He wore a black, long sleeved button up with the top three buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up his forearms. Orange and red flames shot up from his wrists. I couldn’t help but wonder how high up his arms that ink went. He had a small silver hoop in each earlobe. He was lovely to look at but the air around him practically vibrated with danger. The way he held himself, the burning in his dark eyes, he was a coiled snake, poised and ready to strike at any given second. Tyson’s Uncle was a dangerous man and one I absolutely did not want to ever mess with.

I swallowed thickly, my throat suddenly dry.

Without taking his eyes off me, Quinton spoke, but not to me. “You didn’t tell me

about the wound on her head. What happened?"

"Not now," Tyson grunted.

"The food's here. Let's eat." One of the new arrivals dropped three more pizza boxes beside Quinton's stack. He had shockingly bright red hair with a matching beard. He had haunted, light gray eyes that told a story I was too frightened to even try to read. This man had demons, and he'd lived through some serious horrors.

My heart clenched painfully inside my chest as I locked eyes with his haunted gray ones. They radiated a depth of pain I was uncomfortable looking into.

"I'm Dash." He frowned at me.

At a loss for words, I simply nodded. I didn't feel the need to introduce myself, the way they talked made me sure they all already knew my name. The stool next to Addison scraped against the floor as it was pulled back before someone sat on it.

"Damien," he grunted without bothering to look at me. He had blonde hair that was long on top but almost shaved at the sides, it hung down to his ears. His face was thin and sharp, angular with hollowed out cheeks. His skin a golden tan I could tell he'd earned by spending a great deal of time outdoors and in the sun. From what I caught of his eyes, they looked to be a light brown. His eyelashes were thick, almost feminine. He looked like he could be a male model. He certainly seemed to have the attitude for it. From the way he dismissed me he either didn't approve of my being here or he could give a crap less.

I liked this about him. Everyone else seemed to like me without even knowing me and I thought it was weird. Damien was different. Either that or he was just a dick.

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A plate was placed in front of me. The pizza on it looked weird with chunks of chicken and white sauce. I thanked Tyson before picking up a piece and taking a bite. It didn't taste like any kind of alfredo I'd eaten before, but I definitely liked it.

I watched as Tyson took a huge bite of his slice and promptly spit it back out on to his plate. He dropped the slice of pizza like it was on fire. I burst out laughing at the look of disgust on his face.

He scowled at me. "That tastes like crap."

I disagreed.

He slid the piece he'd taken a bite out of onto my plate and reached for a different kind. I grinned at him and kept on eating. To each their own. We all ate in relative silence. I kept my eyes on my food or Tyson because I could feel the rest of them staring at me, watching me eat and making me extremely uncomfortable.

I ate two slices of pizza, one of them being Tyson's, and could eat no more. My stomach was in knots, otherwise I might have eaten more. The pizza really was that good.

Under the watchful eyes of every person in the room, I pushed my stool back and stood with every intention of walking my plate to the sink so I could rinse it off. My flipflop snagged on one of the legs of my stool and I stumbled forward. The plate flew from my hands and I watched in wide-eyed horror as the plate hit the floor and shattered.

I might have suffered the same fate as the plate if not for Tyson and the twins. They were up in a heartbeat. The next second all three had ahold of me. I opened my mouth to say thanks when it hit me. Their heat. So intense it threatened to burn me up where I stood. My body shook uncontrollably as my frantic eyes raced around the room looking for help.

“Burns,” I whined in a pitiful high pitched voice.

Immediately they let go of me. I swayed on my feet. Then, for the first time in my seventeen years of existence on this planet, my eyes rolled back in my head and I fainted.

Chapter Eleven

I blinked and rolled over to my side, only to almost fall off the couch and onto my face. I jerked back and looked around me in confusion. Where was I? My t-shirt and hoodie had ridden up in my sleep, exposing my bare stomach. Quickly, I pulled both down and put them back where they belonged.

Voices drifted over to me from the other side of the couch. Male voices. This wasn't Mr. Cole's house. He didn't have a couch like this, this comfortable, in his house unless it was in one of the many rooms I had yet to explore. And Mr. Cole certainly did not have a television that size. Most people didn't have a television that big. Had I hit my head on something?

“Are we sure it's her?” Someone asked. I knew that voice, but not very well.

“Are you kidding me?” Bellowed a different voice. This one Tyson's and he sounded angry, so much so he was back to being Mr. Menacing Voice. I was glad he wasn't using it on me. Why was Tyson always so angry? “We've known it was her since she moved in next door and Uncle Quinton first saw her. Fuck, half our summer was

spent with the two of us fighting over whether or not we should cut our trip short so we could get back here to her.”

“Calm down.” That was Tyson’s Uncle Quinton, I recognized his voice from my dream.

“But how can we be sure?” The first voice insisted.

“Fuck you,” one of the twins snarled. “Did you miss what just happened? She’s one of us and she’s the one we’ve been waiting for, the one we all dreamed about. I can feel it when I’m around her and I can feel her when I touch her. Twin, back me up.”

“I feel it too, twin, you know I do. We’re not leaving her. We know what we are, always have, and we’ve always had each other. Can you imagine not knowing who or what you are and being all alone? Who knows what she’s experienced so far, what kind of magic she’s manifested. All I know is that whatever the case, she’s experienced it all alone. Well, not anymore. And she’s a girl. She’s special.”

“Well said, twin. We aren’t leaving her. No way. She stays with us.”

Were they talking about me? I thought they were. My head throbbed.

“Last time anyone checked, there were only three other females with known magic in existence. And they’ve all been claimed by covens, we know this. Ariel is special and we need to claim her before someone else takes notice of her. Even if it is just for her own safety and nothing mor

e.” I think that one was Julian. He made no damn sense.

“How can we claim her when we can’t even agree on whether or not we all believe she is who we think she is?”

“She’s not going anywhere, Damien,” Quinton snarled.

“I don’t care what you-”

My head throbbed harder with each word until I could take no more. “Shut up,” I muttered rudely. “You’re giving me a headache.”

That wasn’t entirely true. I’d had a headache all damn day, they were just making it worse. I’d never gotten the chance to take any Tylenol throughout the day. I sat up, placed my elbows on my knees and rested my head in my hands. A gentle touch at my thigh had me sitting up straight. Why were they always touching me?

Tyson loomed over me. He held a clear, glass cup filled with water in one hand and two white tablets in the other. I smiled gratefully as I took the pills and swallowed them down with a mouthful of water. Tyson seemed to like taking care of me. Not that I minded, it felt nice.

“Thanks, Tyson,” I mumbled with the glass of water still held between my hands.

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I turned my head in an attempt to see if I could see the others. I didn't make it that far before I caught sight of the sliding glass doors and let out a small, semi-hysterical scream. It was pitch black outside. What time was it, how late? What if my mother had noticed me gone? Would she care? I didn't know, I'd never had friends to hang out with or somewhere to be other than home before. And I'd never been out past dark.

I shot to my feet, mumbling, "I have to go."

Holy crap, I had to go, go, go.

Would she be mad? Angry? I didn't know, but I feared her wrath all the same. Her punishment hadn't born fruit. My mother would be on the war path and I would be her sole target.

I had to go.

I looked into Tyson's beautifully dark eyes and almost melted at what I saw there. Sweet concern. Dark longing. I didn't understand him at all.

"I have to go," I told him, my voice low and full of desperation.

"Why?" He asked me quietly.

Why?

Why?

What a damn good question.

Also, a stupid one with all things considered. Had he not had the pleasure of meeting my mother when the twins were subjected to it? I believed he had.

So, again, why?

I shook my head, but kept my mouth shut. If this was his way of trying to force me to say something I did not want to, he had another thing coming. I'd already told him too much.

"It's late and dark," I pointed out, jerking my hand in the direction of the sliding glass doors. "I need to get home before someone notices I never really made it past the dining room." By someone, I meant my mother.

That's what I told him. Really, I just wanted to escape all the questions. I should have thought about what I was saying because I'd let something slip that I had no intention of sharing with all of them.

"Why didn't you make it past the dining room earlier?"

Why, indeed. Me and my big mouth. I should super glue my lips shut, it would really save me a whole world of trouble.

"Ariel?" Persistent. Tyson wasn't going to let this one go.

Shit. Stalling with silence clearly wasn't the way to go here. I licked my suddenly dry lips. His eyes followed the motion as they heated. He should really stop looking at me like that, it muddled my brain.

"Uhh..." I mumbled under my breath.

Everyone in the kitchen had stopped talking and arguing with one another when I told them to shut up, they hadn't said anything since. I would have forgotten about them being there if I couldn't feel them behind me. My shoulders felt heavy and stiff under the weight of their stares. I felt their eyes crawling over me like a physical touch. Tyson wasn't the only one waiting for my answer. I didn't want to tell them anything.

"I have to go," I repeated my earlier response.

Addison decided to take it out of my hands and spilled the beans. "She walked in on them doing it on the dining room table and didn't want to stick around and watch so she bailed. Can't say I blame her."

I only knew it was Addison and not Abel by who I'd talked to earlier. I hadn't mentioned anything to Abel about my mother and Mr. Cole.

My face heated up as I was embarrassed by his words. My mother and the never-ending humiliation she continued to torture me with. I wanted to strangle her. Her physical abuse was almost easier to deal with than the humiliation of being related to her.

I shoved the glass at Tyson and stood up fast. The room spun a little and I had blink, rapidly, to get it to stand still again. When it stopped moving I made my way around the couch, not looking in the direction of the kitchen. I didn't want to see the looks on their faces after hearing what Addison had just said about my mother.

"Ariel," Tyson called out softly, sweetly. He felt sorry for me, I could hear it in his voice. Somehow, that made it a whole lot worse.

Ignoring him, I flew past the couch and breezed into the hallway, escaping them all. By the time I made it to the front door I was practically jogging. No one followed me, but their voices did.

“Why is she always running away from us?” One of the twins asked.

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“Do you think she’ll be alright there?” That was Tyson’s Uncle Quinton. “Do you think she’ll be safe? I don’t like the look of that mark on her head.”

“Do you think she heard us?” I think that was Dash and he really didn’t sound happy.

I threw the door open and ran outside, not bothering to close it behind me. They could shut their own damn door.

When I reached my driveway, I hesitated. I couldn’t go in through the front door, not after what I had walked in on the last time. Logically, I knew they weren’t still having sex in the dining room. That had been hours ago. Who knew what part of the house they could be in right now? I just... couldn’t.

I took the door to the garage instead. I had to grab my bag and my phone from the Rover before I headed inside anyways. For the first time that day, luck was on my side. The kitchen was empty, the lights dim. The counter was empty save for a plate covered in saran wrap. A sandwich sat on the plate, the crusts were cut off. My mother would never have done something so thoughtful for me. Mr. Cole had noticed I cut the crusts off of my sandwiches. My throat tightened with emotion and my eyes stung. Something so small, so simple and it meant so much to me.

God, he was so stinking nice.

I grabbed the plate even though I didn’t think I could possibly put any more food into my belly. I couldn’t simply leave it sitting on the counter, not when he’d gone through the trouble of making it for me. I would throw it in the garbage in my bathroom if need be.

The rest of the house was quiet and dark as I made my way to my bedroom. I didn't know if I should have been relieved or frightened. Heaven help me if she got creative with her punishments.

I shuddered violently as I climbed the stairs on silent feet.

Heaven help me, indeed.

It wasn't until after I'd tossed my sandwich in the trashcan in my bathroom, changed into comfy pajama shorts and a black tank top, plugged my phone in to charge and crawled under my pretty comforter that I allowed my mind to go over what had happened next door. First off, I'd fainted. I've never fainted before in my life and all of a sudden, BAM, I dropped like a bag of rocks. I bet it had been real pretty to watch, too. And, second, they were all really weird around me, flirty even, and in front of each other. It didn't seem normal to me. And, third, when they hadn't known I was awake and listening, they'd talked about me like they had been expecting me and like I meant something significant to them. The twins were fiercely loyal to me for having only met me the day before. Tyson was defensive on my behalf, called me pretty and, very weirdly, wanted to protect me. And I'd only known him a day longer than the twins. His Uncle Quinton was a scary guy who'd invaded my dreams. Julian seemed okay, but the other two, Dash and Damien, acted almost as if I had intruded upon their lives and it wasn't a good thing. Then, there was the things they'd said. About magic and covens and claiming me. This part baffled me and left me uneasy at the same time. I didn't know what to make of it, but I knew if I kept trying to analyze it, analyze them, I'd never get to sleep and likely drive myself insane. Magic

I clutched a pillow tightly to my chest and closed my eyes. It took me over an hour to clear my head and fall asleep. And when I did sleep, I dreamed of dark eyes hovering above me, watching my every move.

Chapter Twelve

I woke up to shouting, and not my mother's. It was Mr. Cole. And he was yelling at my mother. Good grief. What now? I'd never heard him even raise his voice before and now he was shouting the house down in the middle of the night. Anybody else and I would lock my door and hide out in my room, leaving my mother to it. But it was Mr. Cole and I wasn't afraid of him.

I threw the covers off of me and raced to my door. I unlocked it, ran down the hallway and nearly tumbled head first down the stairs.

They were in the kitchen and my mother was finally starting to raise her voice. She sounded desperate and hysterical. Not a good combination.

"I'm coming with you," my mother whined in a very unattractively high voice.

"You have a daughter, Vivian. Something you seem to constantly forget about." Mr. Cole snapped sharply. "This is her first week of school at a new school and a new year. She needs her mother here with her."

Tears hit the backs of my eyes. I wanted to tell him to not waste his breath on defending me to her, she didn't care and nothing he said would change her feelings towards me. But I couldn't do it. I wished it was the other way around and he was my dad and she was just some woman coasting through our lives. I wanted that very badly.

"She's a teenager," I heard her scoff. "She doesn't need me to hold her hand. I've been a single mother since the day that girl was born, I think I know her better than you do. I raised her right and she can take care of herself."

Raised me right. My ha

nd twitched, reaching for the mark on my head.

“She’s your daughter,” Mr. Cole said softly.

“Yes, I know. You need me more than she does right now and I need to be with you. Not here, coddling my daughter.”

“What I need,” Mr. Cole shouted, “is for you to stop this bullshit so I can pack a bag and make it to the airport in time for my flight.”

I flinched. Now he was yelling and swearing. Something had happened and my mother was delaying him from doing what he needed to do.

He needed my help.

I stepped away from the wall where I’d been hiding in the shadows, straightened my spine and marched into the kitchen. My mother noticed me immediately and glared at me, that look was a dangerous one on her.

My mother’s long ash-blonde hair hung down, loose around her shoulders. Her face was free of makeup, showing dark circles under her eyes. She had on this purple nightgown that looked silky, exposed far too much cleavage and barely covered her butt cheeks. Her hands rested on her hips as she squared off against Mr. Cole. He stood on the other side of the island with his arms crossed over his chest, facing off with her. He had on a tight white t-shirt and solid black, drawstring pajama pants.

Neither looked ready to back down. I wondered how long they’d been arguing before they woke me up.

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“What are you doing?” My mother snapped at me. Without waiting for an answer, she yelled, “Go back to your room and go back to sleep. This doesn’t concern you.”

I looked away from her and directly at Mr. Cole. Be brave, Ariel Kimber. “What’s going on?” I asked in a quiet voice I could hardly hear over my heartbeat. Okay, so I wasn’t all that brave after all.

“My brother has been in a horrible car accident and he’s in really bad shape. I need to be there for his family right now and I need to be with my brother. The next available flight leaves in an hour and I need to be on it.”

My heart clenched painfully for him. How terrible.

“Do you need me to do anything for you?” I offered sincerely. “Do you want me to pack your clothes for you or anything? Are you hungry?”

“Ariel,” my mother gritted out through clenched teeth. “Go back up to your room right this second. I already told you, this does not concern you.”

Her hand twitched and I could tell it was due to repressing the urge to lash out, to strike me down. If he left me alone with her there would be hell to pay for sure.

Mr. Cole ignored my mother entirely and focused solely on me. Not smart, but I appreciated the gesture. “Thank you, Ariel. That’s very kind of you. I can pack my own luggage, but if you would make a pot of coffee it wouldn’t go unappreciated.”

“I can make coffee,” I said as I rushed around the island to get to the coffee pot.

“I’m coming with you,” my mother yelled, ignoring me. I could hear the steely determination in her voice. She wasn’t going down without a fight. I felt bad for thinking it, but I hoped he caved and took her with him. I did not want to be alone here with her.

“Ariel-” Mr. Cole started.

My mother cut him off. “Doesn’t need me. You do.”

I agreed with her wholeheartedly. If only her reasons weren’t selfish ones.

I flipped the lid on the coffee pot and found that I didn’t even have to make coffee because someone had already set it all up, I flipped the switch to on and turned back to the room. My hips rested against the counter as I stared at the floor, not brave enough to look her in the eyes just yet, or even in her direction.

“Fine,” Mr. Cole bit out. “You need to pack light, only one carry-on bag. And we leave in half an hour.”

My head snapped up and my mouth dropped open in shock. He’d given into her, I hadn’t expected this.

Her smile radiated triumph as she purred, “I’ll just go pack my things then.” She turned on her bare feet and strutted out of the room. She shook her hips and ass in a blatantly sexual manner that I found highly embarrassing.

“This is getting old,” Mr. Cole muttered under his breath, likely so I wouldn’t hear him. But I did hear and my stomach dropped at his words. He was going to kick us out on our butts soon, I could feel it.

With a start, I realized I didn’t want to leave. I hadn’t wanted to come and now I

didn't want to leave. I liked my bedroom. It may have had blank walls and a whole lot of empty space, but I had a beautiful new comforter and a kick ass window seat covered with a sea of pretty pillows. I had never had anything like it before and I didn't want to give it up. I liked Marcus Cole a whole lot and I freaking loved the Range Rover he'd so generously given me. I knew, with enough time, I would come to love him as well. I could do without school and the majority of the people there, but I had made friends. Friends I couldn't think of right then.

It would hurt to leave this place.

"You have the number of my cell phone, yes?" Mr. Cole asked.

I nodded. He'd given it to me on my second day here along with the number for the land line when he'd given me my own cell phone.

"I will text when we land on the ground and I promise I will keep in touch, letting you know what's happening. Hopefully, we won't be gone for too long."

That was nice and I appreciated it. I had never met his brother so he really had no reason to update me on his health, but it was nice all the same. Maybe it was really his way of keeping tabs on me, it seemed like something he'd do.

Abruptly, he moved his hip away from the island countertop, straightened and walked out of the kitchen. Had I said something wrong? I didn't think I had.

I stood there numbly, watching the coffee drip until he came back five minutes later. He dropped two black, matching pieces of luggage by the door to the garage. He'd exchanged his pajama pants for dark blue jeans but had kept the white t-shirt. I had never seen him in jeans and a t-shirt before. It was a good look for him, but I liked him in his business suits more.

He walked towards me and gently took hold of my right hand. He pried my fist open and pressed something into my damp palm.

He stared into my eyes intently. Whatever he was going to say, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it.

“You have your debit card I gave you, this is for just in case you need it. Don't tell your mother I gave it to you.” His eyes flashed with something dangerous in them for a brief moment before it disappeared, leaving the intensity behind. My eyes widened in surprise. I kept getting glimpses showing me his true feelings towards my mother and I wasn't certain sure he liked her all that much. “I'm going to text every day and I expect a message back within half an hour or I will assume something is wrong and be on the next available flight back to make sure you're alright. Do you understand me?” I nodded and he continued. “I don't care if you have people over, just no parties. And I mean that, Ariel, no parties. The last thing we need is someone calling the police on you while you're here all by yourself. When you leave and when you're here, I want you to activate the alarm. That's important. Every single time you open a door leading outside of the house, even to the garage, I want you to set the alarm. Do you think you can do that for me?”

He squeezed my hand as he patiently waited for my answer. Could I do that for him? He wasn't asking for much and I knew it was cash he'd pressed into the palm of my hand. He was acting like a caring, loving, concerned parent. I'd never had one of those before.

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Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I took in a shuddering breath. Why did he always make me want to cry?

“Yes,” I croaked out past my emotions. “I can do that for you, all of it.” Easy.

He smiled at me sadly and pulled on my hand, tugging me towards him. I stumbled and crashed into his chest. The hand not holding onto mine wrapped around my shoulders as my forehead came to rest on his collarbone. He kissed the top of my head and whispered, “Christ, you’re such a good kid.” The arm around my shoulder gave me a quick squeeze before he let me go and backed away from me. He gave me another sad smile, and s

aid, “Don’t wreck the Ranger Rover while I’m gone, and if you want to drive the Merc, and, sweetheart, I know you do, I saw your face, the keys are hanging up with the rest of them. Knock yourself out.”

I smiled at him, flat out, not holding anything back. I absolutely loved his sleek, black car that purred every time I got into it. Did I want to drive it? Hell yes. I was so glad he’d noticed my lust for his car and approved of it.

He smiled warmly at me and the lines around his eyes crinkled.

He sobered, the smile slipped, and he asked, “You’ll text back?”

“Yes,” I said while nodding.

“Within a half an hour?”

“Unless it’s during school or while I’m sleeping, yes.”

“And the alarm?”

“I won’t forget to set the alarm,” I promised.

“Good girl,” he whispered.

My mother chose that moment to stroll into the room and dropped her luggage off next to Mr. Cole’s. She no longer looked like she’d just been woken up in the middle of the night due to a phone call relaying a tragic event. She’d put on makeup and heels. Her clothes were toned down and a whole lot less slutty than she normally wore. In fact, they kind of looked like my clothes. Black leggings with a black tank top, cleavage still there for all to see, but a little less than the norm. Her hair still hung down and loose around her shoulders. She wore no jewelry, likely due to her lack of time.

“Are those my pants?” I blurted out.

I should have let it go.

“There’s no time for your nonsense, Ariel.” She snapped at me without answering my question. That was answer enough for me. Yes, she was wearing my leggings which meant she’d been in my bedroom while I was at school.

God, I hated her.

And I really did not like seeing her in my clothes. I didn’t know why, it was irrational, but I wanted to rip the clothes from her body. She had no right to go through my things and take whatever she wanted for herself.

My mother dismissed me with a look and focused on her lover. “I’m ready to go whenever you are, honey.”

I wanted to gag. She was so fake it was disgusting. Honey. Puh-lease.

“I’ll be out in a minute. Why don’t you go wait in the car.”

Mr. Cole had his back to her as he so easily dismissed my mother, the same way she’d so easily dismissed me, which is why he missed her look. And it had been a good one, too. Anger and outrage mixed together, when showed on my mother’s face, did not make for a pretty picture.

She wordlessly picked up her luggage and stormed out of the kitchen and through the door leading to the garage. She was probably pissed she had to carry her own bags.

I fought the urge to giggle hysterically.

Mr. Cole was quickly becoming my most favorite person in the known universe.

His back was turned to me while he poured coffee into a travel mug. He turned around as he screwed the lid on top of the mug. When he had the lid secured he came right at me. When he stood before me he leaned in and kissed me softly on the cheek.

“Call me if you need me and stay safe.”

Then he was gone.

And I wanted to cry. Again.

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He cared so much when my own mother, my own flesh and blood, couldn't care less.

I made a rough sound in the back of my throat as tears finally slid down my cheeks. Leaving him was going to hurt like a mother.

I stood there in the kitchen, unmoving while silent tears streamed down my face. Not because I was sad or upset. Oh no. It was the opposite. I cried because I finally had an adult in my life who gave a shit about me.

How sad was that?

I really hoped Mr. Cole's brother didn't die.

I opened my palm and unfolded the neat, crisp bills he'd placed there. He'd given me seven one hundred dollar bills. It made me curious to know how much money he'd put in the bank account he opened up for me. I'd never had so much money at one time before and all I wanted was to give it back to him.

Chapter Thirteen

I was alone. Completely and utterly alone. In a ginormous house I hadn't even explored half of. I spent the majority of my time alone so I shouldn't have minded it now. But I did.

I sat up in my bed with my back against the headboard, my knees to my chest, my arms wrapped tightly around my knees and I jumped at every tiny noise I heard. Something creaked deep in the house and I let out a small scream. I knew I was being

ridiculous. I had activated the alarm as soon as Mr. Cole had pulled his white SUV out of the garage. There was no one in the house with me, that's what being alone in the house meant. I knew this, all of it. But, still, I jumped at every small noise. Admittedly, the girly scream was embarrassing. The only upside to being alone was there being no one around to hear it.

I crawled out of bed and picked up my phone from where it sat on the window seat. There was an outlet in the wall right beside the window seat that made it the perfect place to charge my phone. I carried it back over to the bed with me and crawled under the covers, this time not placing my back against the headboard but laying down on my side instead.

I didn't want to be alone.

Like, really, really, didn't want to be alone. I thought about texting Tyson to see if he was awake but hesitated. It was after one in the morning and those boys were weird. Yeah, we were becoming friends, but still, they were weird. I wasn't certain sure it was a good idea to invite one of them over in the middle of the night when I was all by myself in the house.

I held my phone close to my face and opened up my messages. There were several unread ones from Tyson.

Tyson: If it's okay with you, I'd like to catch a ride to school with you tomorrow. My Uncle needs my car until he can pick his up from his friend's house. I hope that's okay. If not, I will ride in with the twins. Sweet dreams, sweetheart.

Tyson: Good morning.

Tyson: Come over. I ordered you pizza.

Tyson: Are you okay?

Holy crap. Now that I had more than my mother to text I really needed to pay attention and actually start looking at my phone. Tyson had been texting me and he probably thought I was an A-hole because I never responded to half of his messages.

Not caring about the time, I sent him off a quick text.

Ariel: Sorry. I hadn't looked at my phone since I went to sleep last night. Thanks for asking if I'm alright. I'm going to be just fine.

He texted back not a minute after I hit send. I worried I had woke him up.

Tyson: What are you doing up?

I grinned at my phone.

Ariel: What are YOU doing up?

Tyson: I asked first.

He had and I felt compelled to be honest with him. Though, I didn't know why.

Ariel: Mr. Cole's brother got into a car accident and is in the hospital. It isn't looking good. He and my mother left about half an hour ago for the airport.

Ariel: This house is big. And noisy.

I waited a minute and when there was no response I placed the phone down on the pillow on the empty side of the bed.

I closed my eyes and snuggled into my pillow. Maybe he'd fallen asleep. I couldn't blame him if he did.

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All around me the house made weird noises. I pulled the comforter all the way up to my chin. Why had I not noticed these noises before tonight? I'd grown used to the quiet that comes with living outside of town. When it was only my mother and me and her endless string of men we'd lived in a large city. It was never quiet and the noise of the city never bothered me. Three and a half months of living at Mr. Cole's and I'd been spoiled.

My cell phone vibrated. I eagerly picked it up.

Tyson: I'll be there in a minute. Meet me at the front door.

I stared down at the illuminated screen, unable to comprehend what I'd read. He'd meet me at the front door... To Mr. Cole's house? It was after one in the morning. Why in the world would he be coming over here? I should never have texted him.

I must have stared at nothing for too long because the next thing I knew the doorbell was going off.

I jerked to life and tossed the covers off of me. I left the phone on my bed and made my way towards the front door.

I stood in front of the door with my palms pressed flat against it and my eyes wide open and looking out the peep hole. My right arm slid out to the side as I searched for the porch light. I found it and flicked the light switch up, turning it on.

Tyson stood before me, only a door between us and an empty house surrounding me. His long hair was pulled back into a pony tail at the back of his head. He had on grey

pajama pants and a black V-neck t-shirt. He had his arms crossed over his chest and his feet were bare. And he was at my door. At one in the morning.

Dare I open the door and let him in?

I couldn't not let him in. I unlocked the door and opened it. Immediately the alarm on the wall started beeping at me. Without greeting him, I rushed to the wall and punched in the code to make the beeping stop. The door clicked shut behind me.

"Will you lock it please?" I asked over my shoulder, not wanting to move away from the alarm. The thing freaked me out a little. It was on a timer and if you didn't get the code punched in a very small amount of time the security company called and the police came. I heard the lock click and I re-armed the alarm.

Slowly, I turned around and faced him.

"What are you doing here?" I asked quietly.

"You sounded like you could use the company." He shrugged as he slid his hands in to the front pockets of his pajama pants.

"It's late," I told him like he didn't already know.

"Technically, it's early." He smiled with teeth, blinding me.

"Whatever," I muttered around my own smile. Mr. Cole had not said anything about having boys over late at night, just no parties.

"Do you have Netflix?" He asked.

I nodded. "On my computer. I think the tv's down here probably have all that stuff on

them, but I've never used one of them before."

"Alright," he pulled

his hand free of his pocket and waved towards the stairs. "Lead the way."

Lead the way, he says. Upstairs. Where my computer is. In my bedroom. Suddenly this didn't seem like such a good idea anymore. My stomach knotted painfully and my fingers twitched at my side as I fought the urge to run my hand across the back of my neck in a nervous habit.

I skirted around him and headed up the stairs. He followed closely behind me.

The house was dark and my bedroom was no different.

My laptop sat closed on the window seat. Tyson spotted it and headed right towards it. He sat down on the window seat and scooted over so he was beside the window. He sat forward and stuffed a bunch of my bright, girly pillows behind his back. His long legs stretched out in front of him and were crossed at the ankles. He looked entirely at ease in my bedroom.

He looked up and spotted me hovering in the doorway, uncertain. His face softened as the right corner of his mouth twitched up. He patted the seat beside him, inviting me to come and sit beside him. I licked my dry lips nervously, still hovering in the doorway. I thought about slowly backing away and running off to hide somewhere in the bowels of the house where he wouldn't find me but stopped myself from taking the first step backwards when somewhere downstairs something creaked loudly.

Thankfully I didn't let out any embarrassing noises, but I did practically sprint across my room to the window seat. He eyed me curiously as he sat my laptop down on his lap and lifted the top. While he was opening up Netflix on my computer I got up and

raced back to the door. I shut it and locked it before heading to my bed. I dragged my pretty comforter off and hauled it over to the window seat. I plopped down next to him and dragged the blanket over me. I caught him watching me intently so I lifted up the blanket in a silent question, asking him if he wanted me to cover him up too. He took the corner of the blanket with one hand while lifting my laptop off his lap with the other. He pulled the blanket over him, covering up his lap and his legs. When he had the blanket situated how he wanted it he sat the laptop back on his lap and leaned back against his massive pile of girly pillows. I pulled the blanket up to my chin and curled up on my side, facing him.

He was messing around on my laptop, not looking at me, when he asked, “Why’d you lock your door when we’re the only one’s here?”

“Habit,” I mumbled. A habit born out of necessity. I hoped he left it alone at that because I really didn’t feel like answering his nosy questions at the moment.

Surprisingly, he let it go. “Do you like Friday Night Lights?”

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I had no idea what he was talking about. “What?”

“The tv show, Friday Night Lights. Have you ever watched it before?”

“No.”

“It’s one of my favorite tv shows. I’ll start it from the beginning for you.”

“Okay,” I mumbled. I didn’t really care what we watched so long as I didn’t have to be here all by myself.

Tyson hit play and sank back onto the pillows. Without thinking, I snuggled into his side, laying my head on his ribs. His body went stiff and I realized what I’d done.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered in horror as my face heated. I hardly knew him. What was the matter with me? I moved to pull away from him when the palm of his hand landed gently on the back of my head.

“Stay where you are, Ariel,” He whispered as his fingers threaded through my hair, tangling in the blonde locks. “Lay your head back down on me and put your arm around my stomach. Then either watch the show or try to get some sleep.”

I did as I was told, laying my head back on his ribs and slipping my arm around his hard stomach. My legs brushed up against his. He kept his fingers tangled in my hair and his hand at the back of my head. My entire body was engulfed in his strange heat and I found myself relaxing against his side.

He played with my hair as episode one of Friday Night Lights played then bled into episode two. No words were spoken between us, he simply offered the comfort he knew I needed and I greedily took it.

He was right, it was really good. As his fingers shifted gently through my hair, I fell in love with his favorite tv show and hoped we could watch all of it together.

Episode three had just started when my eyes slid shut and my breathing evened out. For the second time in as many days, I fell asleep next to Tyson. I really needed to stop doing this to him.

Chapter Fourteen

Cool, soft lips brushed against my forehead in a light kiss. “Ariel, wake up,” a deep, rough with sleep voice rumbled at me.

I ignored it and snuggled closer into the immense heat I was wrapped around.

He groaned deep and loud in the back of his throat. The noise rolled through me, making me shiver and, unfortunately, reality set in. My front was flush with his side, my breasts pressed up tight to him. My leg was thrown over his, my crotch against his thigh. The arm that had been loosely wrapped around his stomach when I’d fallen asleep had moved without my brain giving it the okay to do so. My hand had found its way under his t-shirt and was resting low on his stomach, directly above his pajama pants and on top of his happy trail. His hand was no longer tangled in my hair but wrapped around the back of my neck instead.

My phone started vibrating and beeping from across the room where I’d left it on my bed.

“What time is it?” I mumbled while rubbing my forehead into Tyson’s side.

“Six thirty. Your phone’s been going off for about ten minutes now. It woke me up.”

Who would be calling me at six thirty in the morning? I didn’t know anyone and the only people who even had my phone number were Tyson, my psycho mother and Mr. Cole. Mr. Cole... Damn. I’d forgotten about his brother.

“Shit,” I muttered as I threw the blanket off of me and struggled to untangle myself from Tyson. He grunted when I accidentally elbowed him in the stomach. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he grumbled as he rubbed his stomach with his palm. His shirt had slid up, exposing hard abs and a dark trail of hair. If I wasn’t so worried about Mr. Cole I probably would have stood there stupidly while I stared at his deliciously hard stomach and that dark, dark line of hair. I turned my back on him and headed towards the bed before he caught me blatantly staring at his body.

I sat down on the edge of my unmade bed and picked up my cell phone. Shit. I had three missed calls, one voicemail and a text from my mother and one from Mr. Cole. I opened Mr. Cole’s first.

Mr. Cole: Your half an hour starts now.

That was ten minutes ago.

Shit. This having a parental figure who cared could quite possibly drive me crazy.

I opened my mother’s text. I shouldn’t have bothered and should have deleted it without having read it.

Mom: You better be behaving yourself. Your actions reflect on me and you had better remember it.

See? I shouldn't have bothered.

I called Mr. Cole back. He answered on the second ring.

“Did I wake you up?”

Even though I knew he couldn’t see me, I shook my head. Noooo, you didn’t wake me up. The sexy neighbor who spent the night woke me up. Oh, and did I mention my body had been clinging to him with my girl bits pressed right up against him? I didn’t share this with him because I figured Mr. Cole wouldn’t appreciate the honesty.

“Uh,” I cleared my throat and my thoughts. “Yes.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. We just landed and I’m headed straight to the hospital while your mother checks into the hotel. I wanted to touch base with you before I left because my phone will be off while I’m with my brother and his family. The next chance I would have to call you’d be in class.”

I did not mind him calling and waking me up in the least bit. I told him as much. “Don’t worry about waking me up. You can call whenever you need to.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” He murmured softly. “The car just pulled up at the hospital so I’ll have to let you go now. Send me a text when you get out of school and I’ll update you on Kurt’s condition.

Have a good day.”

He hung up without waiting for my response.

I could so fall in love with Mr. Cole. Not in a weird way, but in a ‘will you please be

my dad for forever?’ kind of way.

“Everything okay?” Tyson asked.

I jumped at the sound of his voice. I’d forgotten he was still here.

“Yeah.”

“You want to get some fast food for breakfast before school? And some coffee?”

My stomach rumbled at the thought of food. I was beginning to think my stomach was turning into a bottomless pit.

A little voice in the back of my head tried to tell me to be careful, that I was getting too close, too fast. It told me to remember hearing their crazy talk when they didn’t know I was listening about magic and claiming me. Part of me wondered if it had been real at all. Maybe I had dreamed that part and only thought it was real because it felt real.

“How much time do you need to get ready?” Tyson asked.

“I need to take a shower this morning because I never got around to it last night. So... Twenty to twenty-five minutes.”

“Okay.” He sat the laptop on the empty side of the window seat and climbed out from under the blanket. He stood up and stretched his arms up over his head. His t-shirt rode up and I looked down at my hands in my lap.

He dropped his arms and walked up to the bed. “I’m driving today,” he told me in his still rough with sleep voice.

“Alright,” I quickly agreed. My eyes were still locked on my hands which is why I missed his head descending towards me. Soft lips hit my cheek and I jerked back in shock.

If he was offended by my jerking away from him he didn’t show it. He smirked at me and headed towards the door.

Tyson had kissed me.

I pressed my fingers to my cheek where his warm lips had caressed me. I wanted him to do it again. Then I wanted him to kiss me on the lips. And maybe put his tongue in my mouth.

Insistent beeping drifted up the stairs towards me. The alarm. Crap. I jumped off the bed and flew out of my room. I really did need to get a handle on the whole alarm thing before the cops showed up and I gave Mr. Cole a heart attack.

I knocked lightly on the door. I thought about ringing the doorbell but didn’t because I didn’t want to wake anybody up.

I looked down at my feet as I waited for Tyson to answer the door. Today I had picked black flip flops with red straps that had little black sparkling jewels on them. They were really pretty. I had black skinny jeans on with a red belt that matched the red color on my flip flops. I had a red tank top on underneath a thin black zip up hoodie. I’d left the hoodie unzipped and had the sleeves pushed up my forearms. Since red and black were the theme for the day I had my wet hair pushed back from my forehead with a wide red headband. My makeup was light, I’d stuck with mascara and lip gloss. I hadn’t had time for much else.

The door opened and I was greeted with a rough, “Morning.”

That voice.

Quinton, Tyson’s Uncle had answered the door. God, why couldn’t Tyson have been ready and waiting for me outside?

“Come on in.”

I looked up as I stepped through the door and almost stumbled over nothing. Quinton was shirtless and wearing only silver basketball shorts that rode ridiculously low on his narrow hips. The flames went halfway up his forearms. His arms were thick and corded with muscles, his biceps bulging. His chest and stomach were sculpted to perfection, toned, his washboard abs looked rock hard and I didn't think there was any loose skin on his stomach to pinch. There was a thick, rope of dark hair that traveled down his belly and disappeared into his shorts. He had a light sprinkling of dark hair scattered across his chest. And, most surprising of all, there were silver barbells through each of his nipples.

Very quickly, but probably not quick enough for him to have not noticed my eyes as they perused his body, I looked back at my flip flop covered feet.

“You're here early,” he said as he shut the door. “Not that I mind, of course. I think the twins just now managed to drag their asses out of bed and I haven't seen Ty yet this morning.”

Apparently, Tyson had managed to get back into the house without being noticed this morning. I wondered if Quinton had known Tyson had been at my house for part of the night.

“Hey,” a long, lean fingertip covered in thin white scars appeared in front of my face and dipped under my chin. Very gently, he tipped my face up, forcing me to take my eyes off my feet and meet his dark eyes. “You alright?”

My whole face tingled, radiating warmth from either his touch or his strange heat.

“Yeah,” I croaked out. A total lie.

Thankfully, Tyson appeared at the bottom of the stairs, saving me from having to say anything else. He wore all black the same as he had done all week.

Quinton made me slightly uneasy. And it had nothing to do with his rough exterior and his tattoos or even his damn nipple piercings and the whole bad boy persona he seemed to fit into. It had to do with the dangerous air that hovered around him like a physical thing. It’s like he had his own, personal cloud vibrating with emotion.

My skin burned where he’d touched me.

Tyson frowned at his Uncle who was still touching my chin. I took a step back and Quinton’s scarred finger fell away.

“Where’ve you been?” Quinton growled at his nephew.

“None of your damn business,” Tyson shot back. He grabbed my hand and intertwined our fingers. He held my hand as he dragged me out of the house.

I made the mistake of looking over my shoulder on the way out the door. Quinton’s eyes were locked on my ass. I didn’t bother shutting the door. He could do it himself. I could see the beginning of a habit, me never closing the door after I’d walked out of it and expecting them to do it themselves.

As Tyson dragged me to his car parked in the driveway I asked, “Were you not supposed to come over last night?”

I did not want to be the cause of problems between Tyson and his Uncle.

He opened the passenger side door of his Audi for me and frowned. “What are you talking about? Why wouldn’t I have been able to come over?”

“Your Uncle...”

He laughed harshly. “Is a jealous dick who needs to get over himself.”

“What?” Why did he always say things that confused me?

“Never mind, Ariel girl, just get in the car. I’m hungry.”

I sat my butt in the seat, swung my legs inside and placed my backpack on the floor at my feet. Tyson shut the door and rounded the hood to the driver’s side door. He climbed in and soon we were backed out of the driveway and zooming down the road faster than the legal speed limit.

I put my seatbelt on and relaxed into the leather. I was tired. A night of interrupted sleep, episodes of Friday Night Lights, sleeping next to Tyson for a few hours and waking up early had drained me of energy.

“I don’t want to go to school,” I whined. “I want to go home and go back to bed.”

“I can’t skip school. If I do, Quinton will be all over my ass. He likes having something to bitch at me about.”

I slid my head to the side and watched his profile while he drove. “Do you and your Uncle not get along?”

His hands tightened around the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked him about his Uncle. Too late now.

“We get along just fine. We used to get along better before my parents died and we got stuck with each other.”

I flinched. Someone had mentioned him moving here to live with his Uncle after his parents died but he'd never mentioned it himself. What did one say to something like that? I'm sorry? I'm sorry seemed kind of lame when you think about it.

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I cleared my throat and tried to skirt around the elephant. “How old is he?”

“Twenty-one.”

They were both so young. He must have been nineteen when Tyson’s parents died. I couldn’t imagine being nineteen and having to be the guardian to a fifteen-year-old.

“You’re awfully close in age for him to be your Uncle.”

“My grandpa liked women. Lots and lots of women. Thankfully, he only managed to knock up two of them. Quinton was my dad’s baby brother but my dad treated him more like a son. And my dad was the only real dad Quint ever had. My grandpa never gave a shit about his kids so it hit Quint just as hard as it hit me when my parents died.”

At least they knew who their biological dads were. That was more than I had going for me.

“Where’s your dad?”

Of course he had to ask me that. “I don’t know. I never knew who he was. My mother has been a stripper for as long as I can remember and there have always been a ton of guys around. I asked her once who my dad was, if he was one of the guys who came around on a regular basis. She refused to tell me, then she got angry.”

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he whispered. “Sucks.”

I shrugged. I didn't know if it sucked or not because I had never had a dad to miss so I had never really known what I was missing out on.

The car fell quiet after that and Tyson pulled up to a drive thru. He ordered for us and when I tried to give him money he gave me a dirty look. I let it go. If he wanted to buy me breakfast what did I care.

He got our bag of food and set it aside. He drove to the school and parked in the student parking lot. We ate in the car while we watched the parking lot slowly fill up.

After finishing his last breakfast sandwich, he asked me, "So, Ariel Kimber, what do you think the fourth day of school will bring us?"

It was only the fourth day of school? I groaned. It felt like weeks had already passed us by.

"I don't know," I told him honestly. Then I joked, "Maybe Chucky will realize he's gay and madly in love with both of the twins and will never, ever look my way again."

"The twins aren't gay, Ariel," he chuckled.

"I didn't suggest that they were, Tyson. I just thought it would be fun to watch Chucky try to flirt with them."

He laughed. "It would definitely be fun to watch and they'd deserve it."

What would

be better than watching that would be having Chucky leaving me alone. Tyson made no comment on that.

We were getting out of the car when the twins pulled their abnormally large black truck into the parking spot next to Tyson's Audi.

I hadn't noticed before how similar the twins dressed. Abel had on a tight, long-sleeved grey Henley, dark blue jeans and black boots. Addison wore a tight, black long-sleeved Henley, dark blue jeans and black boots. They both wore matching black belts with silver belt buckles. The only difference in their clothes was the color of their Henley's. I wondered if they shared clothes. They were exactly the same size. Both boys wore black cords around their necks with silver, half-moons dangling from them.

"You ready for this?" Abel asked me in greeting as we headed towards the school building.

I shrugged. "Day four and the possibilities are endless." I smirked at Tyson and winked, thinking about how awesome it would be if Chucky set his sights on the twins instead of me. Tyson laughed quietly from beside me.

"Where were you coming from this morning?" Addison asked Tyson.

"Ariel's," Tyson replied casually, like it wasn't a big deal he'd spent the better part of the night at my house. "Her folks left in the middle of the night because Mr. Cole's brother got into a bad car wreck and she didn't want to be home alone."

I wasn't smirking anymore. I wanted to hit him and I wanted to hit him hard. I hadn't actually come out and said I didn't want to be home alone. He made me sound like a baby. I mean, I didn't want to be alone but still... he didn't need to come out and say it to the others.

"She can stay with us tonight," Abel said, making my mouth drop open. He caught the surprised look on my face and added quickly, "There's plenty of room, pretty girl,

and no one will mind you being there.”

I shook my head and, without a word or a glance back, I headed off to first hour. I hoped day four didn't suck as hard as day one and day three had. Day two hadn't been so bad. I could really use a repeat.

Chapter Fifteen

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During first hour, Chucky had been forced to work with the poor, unfortunate soul who he had picked on the first day of school to be his partner. Then again, his partner was the Pretty Princess's male twin so I didn't really feel sorry for him in the least. I was simply happy to have Chucky away from me. There'd been no absurd proposals to beat up the person who'd messed up my face in exchange for dates. I was grateful. In fact, he didn't talk to me at all.

The first half of my day breezed by and before I knew, it I found myself sitting outside for lunch with Tyson sliding a tray full of cafeteria food in front of me. It was as loaded as it had been the day before. Strangely, I could see this turning into an every day ritual because packing my lunch seemed like a chore I had no intention of doing on the daily. I wanted to offer him money but knew after his reaction this morning when I tried to pay for my own breakfast that he wouldn't enjoy me trying to give him money. I think it went hand in hand with his weird need to try and take care of me. And part of me liked it. If he wanted to pay for my lunch every day what did I care? I didn't, but I'd never forget to thank him because I didn't want him to think I would ever take advantage of him in any way.

I mumbled my thanks as I picked up a container of curly fries. Like the day before, they waited for me to pick out what I wanted to eat first, then Abel and Tyson went for what was left over. Addison pulled a paper bag out of his backpack like he had the day before. Guess he wasn't nearly as lazy as the rest of us. Good for him.

I had a curly fry in my raised hand and half way to my mouth when I heard the door open behind me and female giggles. I visibly cringed as I stuffed the fry in my mouth.

I ignored the Pretty Princess who's name I still did not know, her minion, her male

twin who I was going to start referring to as Ken, Chucky and three other guys as they settled into the table beside ours.

“Hey, Ariel,” Chucky cheerfully called out to me.

I didn’t even bother to look his way.

“I don’t think she likes you,” one of the girls cooed.

“She will,” Chucky said, his voice had lost its cheerful lilt and instead sounded deeper, darker. I did not like his tone one bit.

I looked up from my food and met clear blue eyes. Addison watched me carefully, like he was waiting for me to do something, to react in some way. I had no intention of giving Chucky a reaction. If I could not react when he tripped me on the first day of school this was nothing to me. And to show him how uncomfortable he made me would be to give him power over me and possibly make him feel victorious.

Beside me, Tyson stood in one graceful, fluid movement that surprised me. I looked up at him to find his face dark, his eyes blazing dangerously and back to radiating menace. In that moment, he looked very much like his Uncle Quinton and the Tyson I had met on the first day of school.

I grabbed him by his belt and tried to pull him back down. “Tyson, no. Sit back down, please,” I pleaded quietly. I had a feeling Tyson was as sick of Chucky as I was. Only difference between the two of us was he seemed willing to do something about it. And that scared me. I didn’t mind violence. My mother had conditioned me to accept people’s violent behaviors. But the thought of Tyson possibly getting hurt because of me scared me. What scared me more was the fact he didn’t even seem to think about it, one second he was sitting beside me then the next he was up and ready to take on Chucky.

“Tyson,” I pleaded with my voice. He aimed those dark and dangerous eyes down at me. They roamed over my face before he sat back down stiffly beside me.

“You don’t have to put up with that asshole, Ariel,” he growled at me. “And you don’t have to worry about me, I can take care of myself.”

I nodded and picked up my discarded fries. He was right, of course. I didn’t have to put up with Chucky’s bullshit, but that didn’t mean I needed to feed into it either.

I opened my mouth to tell him as much when loud, wet sounding coughing came from the picnic table beside us. The sound drew my attention and I watched in wide eyed horror as Chucky coughed into his hand and blood spewed out of his mouth. One of the girls screamed.

“What the hell?” Chucky asked as he dropped his hand to wrap both arms around his stomach and he hunched in on himself. Another cough wracked his body and this time blood sprayed out of his mouth as if he were a fountain.

“Help,” someone screamed. “Get help.”

I blinked in shock as I watched Chucky curl into himself, cough loudly and spew blood all over the lap of the Pretty Princess sitting next to him. She screamed high and shrill as she scrambled backwards in an attempt to escape him. She fell off the bench seat and landed with a smack on the cement, right on her ass. The front of her shirt was splattered with dark red spots. The front of her white short shorts had gotten the worst of it. The dark red had seeped into the white fabric. She looked like she’d gotten her period and was simply letting it flow free, like one of those weird hippies I’d seen on tv recently. I am woman, hear me roar. Yikes.

I sat there frozen, as if too afraid to move. It didn’t seem real and I was afraid if I moved it would suddenly be all too real for me.

The blonde Pretty Princess was frantically swiping her hand down the front of her short shorts, trying to wipe the blood away. But it was too late for that. The blood had already soaked into the fabric, staining it. The only thing she succeeded in was further smearing it. She pulled her hands away to stare down at her crimson covered palms and she screamed.

The door opened behind our table and crashed into the brick wall. Help had finally arrived just as my body began to tremble slightly.

Adults rushed forward to help Chucky and, thankfully, they blocked my view of the whole bloody mess. Once I could no longer see him I was finally able to look somewhere else.

Swallowing thickly past the lump in my throat, I took in my new friends. They weren't looking at the table beside us or the bloody mess all around u. T

hey were looking at each other. Both twins stared at Tyson with dark faces and strangely almost glowing eyes. Tyson's eyes kept shifting from one twin to the other.

“Do you think...” Abel started.

Tyson shook his head. “He wouldn't...” He shook his head frantically. “No, he would. I know that, I do. But not without a reason and we've given him no reason. I've tried to be very careful about anything to do with Ariel when he's around.”

I watched them quietly, taking in everything I could. There was something else going on here, I'd always known that. It bothered me that I didn't know what it was, but I hadn't said anything about it yet because I didn't want to be rude. Now I wasn't sure I cared whether or not I came off as rude because whenever they got weird they seemed to be talking about me and if it had to do with me then I had a right to know what the hell was going on. Right? I thought so, too.

Addison and Abel shared a look that spoke louder than actual words ever could.

It was Addison who spoke. “He walked in on us while we were talking about how much we didn’t like Chucky because of the way he treated Ariel. He asked us for specifics and we gave them to him. We didn’t think he’d actually do anything about it. Certainly not,” he waved a hand in the general direction of the chaos beside us, “something like this.”

“What’s going on?” I asked quietly.

“Quinton is very protective of you,” Tyson told me.

I blinked at him. “What are you talking about?” I’d only met his Uncle twice before if you didn’t count my dream and him watching me from the woods, which I was most certainly not. For my own sanity.

Tyson shook his head. “I will explain it to you when we get home.”

Was he trying to say he thought his Uncle Quinton had something to do with what was happening to Chucky? Did Quinton do something to him? How would that even be possible?

More loud, wet coughing dragged my attention back to Chucky’s table. The Pretty Princess had been helped up to her feet and one of the teachers had an arm wrapped around her shoulders protectively. She bent over at the waist and threw up blood all over her feet and the feet of the teacher. The teacher screamed, dropped her arm and stumbled backwards. More people rushed out the door, faculty and students alike. I never understood the need to want to watch someone else at their worst. Like people who stop to gawk at the carnage left in the wake of a horrible, mangled car crash. Maybe normal people with nothing but good in their lives needed something to feel bad about. Not me, I already had enough bad in my life, I needed no more, thank you very much.

“We have to get out of here. Now.” I could never be sure which twin was speaking when I could not see them with my eyes. “It’s spreading. What the fuck? Please,

please, Ty, tell me he did not do this.”

Tyson had his phone out and was talking quietly to someone. Did he really think his Uncle could have caused something like this? And how? Apparently, the twins thought Quinton might have been involved as well.

The onlookers screamed as Chucky threw up more blood. This time it sprayed grotesquely across the food spread out on the table. I wasn't sure how much blood he had left to spew out of him, his clothes were drenched and there was a pool of the red liquid at his feet.

My stomach jumped and rolled at the sight of all that blood and I swallowed in hopes of keeping the nausea at bay. I would not throw up out here in front of all these people. I would not throw up. What if I did and blood came out of my mouth, too?

Oh my god. Yesterday I had worried about death by toilet water at the hands of my fellow classmates. Today I worried about death by blood loss after I spewed it all out of me while I covered not only myself in it but the people around me.

“Tyson,” I muttered frantically. “I need to get out of here.” Oh god, please, please don't let me throw up.

His hand wrapped around mine tightly and heat shot up my arm. I ignored it and clung to his hand with both of mine. I was like a woman lost at sea in the middle of a dark and dangerous storm. He'd appeared out of the dark waves as if summoned by magic to save me and I clung to him. I'd surely drown if he let me go. I'd drift away and sink under the crash of a giant wave. My lungs would fill with water and I'd be lost to the sea. Tyson was my life preserver. I clung to him desperately.

“Everybody get back inside,” One of the teachers yelled. His eyes seemed too wide for his face and he stood further away from the bloody mess than the rest of the

teachers. He wasn't one of my teachers so I didn't know his name. "In the cafeteria, all of you. Now." I wondered if he'd come inside with us because he wasn't brave enough to stay out here.

I wanted to run towards the door and away from all the blood and puking but the mob already fighting over who got inside first almost scared me more than the blood. Sometimes when people were afraid they could become frantic and panic and when that happened they have the potential to become dangerous, trampling everyone in their wake in order to reach safety themselves, not caring who they hurt in the process. I had no desire to be caught in the middle of that tragic shit show.

Tyson held on tight to my hand as we waited. The twins crowded around me. Abel at my side, Addison at my back. They didn't touch me for which I was thankful. I didn't think I could handle all their heat on top of everything else at the moment. Tyson's heat crawling up my arm was more than enough. Any more and maybe I'd embarrass myself again by fainting for the second time in my life.

We waited towards the back of the mob and were last through the door because of it. Two students laid on the ground moaning. They'd been caught in the mob and had gotten hurt. One was the girl who'd tried to befriend me on the first day of school in creative writing. If I was a better person I'd have tried to help her, but Tyson tugged on my hand and I moved with him. The sound of retching echoed off of the walls in the brick corridor all around us. Fear kept me from looking back to see who else was now vomiting up blood. Fear of what was happening and fear of vomiting myself.

I swallowed convulsively. "I don't want to puke," I whispered to no one in particular.

Tyson squeezed my hand almost painfully. "If you vomit it won't be blood, I promise."

I didn't believe him. "You can't know that," I insisted.

“Yeah, I can.”

“Tyson-”

“Later, sweetheart. I promise you I will explain everything later. Right now, we need to focus on getting the hell out of here before it spreads any further.”

I wanted an explanation now, not later. The look on his face stopped me from demanding one. He was angry. So very, very angry. I didn't want him to direct his anger at me so I kept it to myself. He said later, he'd tell me everything later, and I planned on holding him to his promise.

Chapter Sixteen

The cafeteria was abuzz with noise. Girls were crying and huddled together, clutching at one another in a desperate attempt to gain some form of comfort. People were screaming. Teachers and staff had the exits blocked off and students were demanding to be let out. Very few had actually seen what had taken place out in the courtyard but word had spread like wildfire and no one wanted to be forced to stay locked inside the school and especially not in the cafeteria so close to the sick kids. I didn't blame them, I wanted out of here, too.

Tyson dragged me along behind him with the twins glued as close to me as they could get without actually touching me. We moved to an empty space along the wall and Tyson let go of my hand. Immediately I wrapped my arms around my middle and hugged myself. I backed up until my back met the wall then I slid down it. My butt hit the floor and I drew my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them instead of my middle.

Addison crouched down beside me but he didn't speak to me. With Tyson in front of me and Abel on the side Addison wasn't I couldn't see what was going on and maybe

that wasn't such a bad thing.

I concentrated on breathing and not throwing up. I felt guilty about leaving the injured girl from creative writing class outside. I should have tried to help her. What if she was right this second throwing up blood because we'd walked right past her and left her there to her fate instead of trying to help her.

"What's wrong?" Addison asked.

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I looked at him with big eyes. How could he even ask me such a question? “Gee, Addison, I don’t know.” I muttered sarcastically. “One minute we’re outside sitting in the sunshine and enjoying our lunch. Two seconds later that A-hole Chucky is spewing blood all over the place. Then everybody else is raining blood all over each other. It was the stuff of nightmares and you ask me what’s wrong?”

He shook his head as his lips tipped up in the corners, in a tiny smile. I didn’t know what he had to smile about at a time like this. Maybe he was crazy? Maybe they all were crazy?

“That’s not what I meant,” he said. “You looked sad for a second, almost lost. You weren’t thinking about what happened outside. You were thinking about something else.”

It seemed odd that he’d know me so well after only a few days. But... “Actually, I was thinking about what happened outside. Well, part of it. That girl on the ground who’d been trampled trying to get to the door? She’s in my creative writing class and on the first day of school she was the only person who was decent to me. She told me she wanted to be friends but I didn’t believe her. She kept talking about rumors about me and Tyson and she told me she’d heard my mother was a gold digging whore, but claimed to want to be my friend all the same. I don’t know if she meant it or not but I do know I wasn’t very nice to her. I feel bad for just leaving her out there when I maybe could have helped her. What if she’s out there puking up her own blood right now because I didn’t help her get up and get out of there?”

Abel tugged on a lock of my hair, pulling my head back and forcing me to look up at him. He loomed over me. “In case you’re forgetting, my twin and I share that class

with you now. We've seen her and she looks at you with hate and jealousy in her eyes. So fuck her. If she ends up puking her own blood all over herself then it's no less than she deserves. You don't need to be concerned about anyone other than yourself and us. To hell with the rest of those assholes. If it had been you out there in their shoes none of them would have tried to help you. They all would have run away from you as they pointed their fingers at you and maybe even laughed. You don't care about people like that."

He tugged one more time forcibly on my hair before letting go. His eyes scanned the room and it was like I'd been forgotten, like he hadn't spoken to me at all.

"My twin

is right," Addison said.

I nodded and laid my head down on my knees. I hadn't nodded in agreement so much as I didn't want to talk anymore. I'd completely forgotten that they now shared creative writing with me and would have seen the girl. I never seemed to remember her unless she was in my line of sight, then I always ended up wishing I hadn't taken notice of her in the first place. What was it with this damn girl?

Abel was intense. First with the hair pulling, which hadn't hurt but had definitely surprised me. Then he came right out and told me I shouldn't care about anyone besides us. I knew it was painfully obvious I had not made friends with anyone else, but was it really so wrong to care about the other students? To worry about them? I didn't think so.

"The paramedics are here," Tyson said. "Not that it will do anybody any good. You can't fight magic with modern medicine."

Magic...

Magic...

Magic...

Something brushed against the back of my mind.

Magic...

When had someone recently said something to me about magic? The more I thought about it the more my head hurt. A male voice inside my head whispered magic. It was a lovely voice. Masculine, deep and throaty. The kind of voice that raised goose bumps along your skin and made you shiver but never in a bad way. What had he said about magic and when had he said it to me? I couldn't remember but thought it was important. I couldn't remember so I was unfortunately left without an answer. Since Tyson had brought it up, maybe I would be able to ask and get some of my questions answered through him.

"Tyson?" I asked hesitantly. "What do you mean by magic?" And I felt stupid for asking it. Such things as magic weren't real and I needed to stop fixating on the damn word whenever I heard it.

"I'll explain it to you later, Ariel. I promise."

Again, with the promises. He was going to drive me mad with this nonsense.

"Tyson," I said slowly so he wouldn't miss a single word, "you can't keep saying shit like that to me. Eventually you're going to have to give me more than a promise. This is the third time one of you has mentioned magic like it was a real thing and now I want to know what in the hell is going on."

Tyson leaned over me. His dark, dark eyes so serious as they moved over my face.

“Third time? When else have you heard one of us talk about magic?”

“Yesterday at your house and...” I snapped my mouth shut. I would not talk to him about a dream I had about his Uncle before I even met him and it was made worse due to the fact I didn’t even really remember it.

“And,” Tyson prompted.

“And...” Shit. “And, nothing.” Way to go, Ariel Kimber. That was genius.

“What aren’t you telling me?” He asked.

“What aren’t you telling me?” I parroted.

He shook his head, sending his long hair forward, hiding part of his face. He didn’t bother to push it back behind his ear. Instead he used it to shield part of his expression from me, hiding.

“We can’t talk about this here at school in a room full of students. When we get home, I swear to you I will tell you whatever you want to know.”

I wanted to argue with him about so many things but he had a point. Maybe talking about certain things wouldn’t be appropriate at this moment. Not in a room filled with frightened people, not when all it would take is one small thing to set them off and who knew what would happen. The possibilities were endless.

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“They’re letting people out,” Abel informed us. He reached down, grabbed ahold of my hand and dragged me to my feet. His eyes blazed bright green and the look in them told me not to argue with anything he had to say. “If they’re letting people out then we are not hanging around.”

He moved towards the exit, pulling me along behind him. As we moved he laced our fingers together which seemed more intimate to me than our palms pressed together.

People either moved out of his way or he shoved them roughly out of it. If it were me I’d have gotten out of his way. The twins were huge and could likely do some serious damage. I felt like a dwarf standing beside them and I wasn’t exactly short.

The teachers were all yelling their own version of the same thing.

“Remain calm.”

It was a little late for that one, but I guess things could always get worse.

“Leave in an orderly fashion. No pushing or shoving. Let’s try to be civil here people.”

Again, it was a little too late. Where had they been with this sound advice when we’d been out in the courtyard where there had been both pushing and shoving? Huh? I tell you, these people were serious A-holes.

“There will be no school tomorrow. Classes will resume on Monday unless you’re notified otherwise.”

This announcement actually had some people cheering. Let's hear it for a three-day weekend. These people were unbelievable.

"If you feel sick dial 911 or have someone take you to the nearest hospital. Do not attempt to drive yourself. If you drive yourself, you could be putting not only you but everyone else on the road in danger."

This one was my favorite because it sobered everyone who'd just been celebrating the upcoming three-day weekend. Nothing could put a damper on your joy like thinking about turning into a human fountain of blood.

We made it through the door and out of the cafeteria unharmed. As we made our way out of the building more teachers and staff lined the hallway repeating everything the teachers were saying in the cafeteria.

Abel held on tight to my hand as he pulled me along behind him. The hallway was quiet save for the teachers and staff. The students scurried towards the exits and if they spoke they did so in whispers. It was a drastic change from the loud noise in the cafeteria. Two EMT's carrying an empty stretcher between them passed by us just as we made it to the door that would lead us outside. I wondered if there were more EMT's on the way because these two plus the two I'd seen earlier didn't seem sufficient. And, who knew who else had barfed up their own blood in the time since we left.

The bright light of the sun shined down on us as we walked outside. It chased the chill of the last hour away. The parking lot and the front of the school were lit with flashing red and blue lights. There were three ambulances parked right up front. One must have just pulled up because the EMT's were only then climbing out. Two fire trucks were parked on the grass beside the student parking lot. Freaking fire trucks. Police vehicles were parked everywhere. The lawn and sidewalk was scattered with very official looking people in uniforms, most of them some form of police officer.

Holy crap. This seemed excessive.

“You’d think there was something dangerous and life threatening inside the school.”

“Shh,” Tyson leaned into me from beside to whisper in my ear. “Don’t say things like that too loud out here. It could be taken the wrong way and we don’t want that, especially not now with everyone on edge.”

I couldn’t argue with his logic.

We tried to give the officers and fire fighters a wide berth as we made our way to Tyson’s Audi and the twins monster truck but there were so many of them it proved difficult to avoid them. There were simply too many of them.

I didn’t understand why they were all here. Wasn’t there real crime happening somewhere that some of these people should be off solving? Weren’t there criminals to catch? Speeding drivers to ticket? If ever there were a perfect time to commit a crime in this town it would be now. Possibly even the next several towns over.

After I was safely inside Tyson’s Audi he turned and grinned at me, blinding me with his outrageously beautiful smile. “Do you think it’s weird that I’m suddenly starving right now?”

I made an eww face at the thought of eating food after watching so many people spewing blood all over each other. I didn’t think I could stomach eating anything.

Tyson burst out laughing.

Chapter Seventeen

I called Mr. Cole on the ride home. He didn’t ans

wer and I figured that meant he was still at the hospital with his brother's family. I left him a brief message explaining to him why school was let out early and that there'd be no school tomorrow. I left out all the gory details and simply told him there was some seriously contagious flu outbreak that spreads like wildfire. I didn't want him to worry about me, not when he'd already had so much to deal with. I hoped my mother was behaving like a reasonable adult for him.

"Sweetheart," Tyson called gently. "We're home."

Shit.

I'd completely spaced out on him. Had he been trying to talk to me?

"Are you still planning on spending the night at my house tonight?" He asked me.

“What?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

He frowned at me. “Don’t you remember this morning when Abel told you you could sleep over at our place?”

Actually, I had forgotten all about it. Abel had claimed there was plenty of room and no one would mind my staying there. I didn’t think I wanted to spend the night at Tyson’s house. I wouldn’t be comfortable sleeping over there.

“Your Uncle-” I started.

“No, no, no.” He held up his hands, his palms pressed out towards me as if to ward off my words. “Uncle Quint won’t care if you sleep over. In fact, when he finds out you’re going to be in your house all by yourself til God knows when he’ll insist on you staying with us. Hell, I wouldn’t put it past him to call Mr. Cole and tell him you can stay with us. Quint is utterly ruthless and he will do whatever he feels necessary to get what he wants. You shouldn’t waste your breath arguing, you should just pack and come over.”

“I don’t get it,” I told him honestly. “He doesn’t even know me. Why would he care if I was all alone? And, let’s be honest here, I never actually came out and said I didn’t want to be alone. It was you who said it. Not me.”

He gave me a look that this deserved. Alright, so we both knew I didn’t want to be alone. Didn’t mean I’d be admitting it out loud any time soon.

“Quint cares about you, we all do. I told you, he’s protective of you.”

Yeah, I didn't understand this either.

"Why?" I asked bluntly.

"Because you're you."

Ookay.

"Try again," I told him. "And this time give me a real answer. One that's not full of bullshit."

He sighed loudly. "Go home and pack a bag, Ariel. Then come to my house. We'll get you settled in and I'll try to explain everything to you."

"Everything?" I asked. What all did he think needed to be explained?

"Everything," He agreed.

I wanted to know what everything meant. I needed to learn how to quit while I was ahead. Here he was agreeing to give me more than I was asking for and still I wanted to push it.

"Alright, alright," I grumbled. "I'll pack a bag." I hoped I wouldn't end up regretting this decision later.

He grinned at me, not a full, blinding smile, but it was definitely still nice to look at.

I asked a question I was really curious about. "Are the rest of them going to be there?"

"You mean the one's from last night?" He asked. When I nodded, he continued. "I

never know. Those three don't tell me shit and they do whatever Quint tells them to do. But if they do show up and you don't want to be around them we can stick to my room or the twins room."

I studied his serious face and I had more questions than I had a minute before.

"Go pack, sweetheart." He nudged me on the shoulder. "Then head on over to my place."

He could be very bossy at times, I was learning. I was also learning that I didn't entirely mind. I could see it getting on my nerves eventually, but for now I'd let it slide.

"Fine, fine," I grumbled as I opened the car door and climbed out. I hauled my backpack up off the floor and slung it over my shoulder. I heard his car door shut quietly as I walked away.

The stupid alarm beep, beep, beeped at me from its place on the wall as I locked the dead bolt. I punched in the code then rearmed the damn thing.

I dragged my backpack up the stairs behind me. There wasn't anything breakable in there. I couldn't remember if I had learned anything in my classes before lunch but if I had I couldn't remember. Did I have homework? Did I care?

Could I really spend the night at Tyson's house? Would he expect me to sleep in his bed with him? Last night had been the first time I had ever slept beside a boy before. I realized I wanted to do it again.

But I couldn't think on that at the moment, I had more important things to worry about. Like potentially coughing up blood. Magic and being claimed (whatever the fuck that meant). Waking up with my girl bits pressed up tight against Tyson.

Wanting him to put his tongue in my mouth. And, worse, wanting a few other people to maybe put their tongues in my mouth, too. Also, I couldn't help but wonder, would the twins still be built exactly the same if you took all their clothes off?

And on top of all the crazy inside my head I still needed to pack a bag. Did I have cute pajamas to sleep in? This was a bad idea.

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I threw my bookbag at my bed and missed. I overshot and it sailed through the air over the bed and hit the wall with a loud thud. Again, there wasn't anything in there to break so I didn't care.

I walked into my closet and started sliding around coat hangers. My hands were shaking. I stopped sliding around the hangers and stared at my hands. This day wasn't even half way over and already it had been too much. Too much had happened. Too much to deal with. Too much to handle. My brain couldn't comprehend it all. Not on top of everything else and with my lack of sleep last night. I was utterly exhausted and I think I might have been in shock a little bit. Seeing all that blood come out of people today had part of my poor brain trying to shut down on me.

This town sucked and the people in it weren't much better. My first week of school had been a disaster of epic proportions. My mother had done what she always did and she'd hurt me. I'd likely fallen in love with Mr. Cole who'd shown me a great deal of kindness and we weren't even going to get into the Range Rover. The only friends I had made were intense and they were hiding things from me. Tyson promised me answers tonight. Did I want answers? I thought I did, now I wasn't too sure I could handle any more.

I thought about what happened today during lunch and the fact the twins and Tyson had thought Quinton had been responsible in some way. Had he somehow poisoned them with something? Did I really want to spend the night under the same roof as a man whose family thought capable of harming others in such a way? Had he really been responsible for today? And, if so, how? And, would I really care if he had? Chucky had humiliated me and treated me like garbage. Yeah, he'd since changed his tune and now claimed to want to date me but it seemed like a trick. Did he really

deserve my compassion now? I didn't think so and I did not like what that said about me at all.

I didn't want to be a bad person no matter what. It hit too close to home for comfort. My mother being a terrible person and all, I knew exactly what it meant to not be good. If I ended up like her I would hate myself.

Thoughts to examine later. But for now... What to pack.

After standing in my closet and staring at my options for the better part of fifteen minutes I finally said screw it and made my selections. It was just for one night, I could do this.

I grabbed an overnight bag from the floor. It was cute, girly and big. It also reminded me of a beach bag. The bag was wide with thick, short straps and covered in bright white and pink horizontal stripes. I sat it on the bed and dumped my clothes beside it.

I folded them up neatly and placed them in the bag. Black bra with black lacy matching panties. They were cute and I looked damn good in them if I did say so myself. I had looked for something less pleasing to the eye but found I didn't have any ugly under things. Who knew. I decided I didn't care. What did it matter when I wasn't planning on anyone else seeing them? It didn't. So in the bag they went. Next I packed black cotton shorts and a black tank top with thin straps and a skull and cross bones covered in glittering sparkles across the chest. My outfit for tomorrow. I stuffed that in the bag. I'd found I didn't have ugly pajamas either. I packed a thin tank top with matching drawstring shorts to sleep in. They were blood red and covered in little black hearts. They were also super cute. I packed a different pair of flip flops for tomorrow, black with a very pretty red and black Gerber daisy where the straps met. They too were girly. Shit. Last, I packed a red pullover hoody. It had large fangs on the front and big, white words scrolled under the fangs that read: Eat Me. They were vampire fangs and I adored that hoody. My mother hated it.

I went to the bathroom next for my toiletries. I grabbed my bright yellow toothbrush, hairbrush in the same color, deodorant a few hair ties, thick headbands in three different colors; black, red and white. I thought about anything else I might want and shrugged. It's not like I was going to be gone for long or never coming back. If I forgot something I could always run back next door and grab it. I pulled a cute little clear bag with a bright yellow zipper out of the closet and stuffed it all inside. I zipped it up and went back into the bedroom where I tossed it inside my bag. I thought about packing makeup but shrugged it off. I didn't need makeup for this trip.

I grabbed my phone charger from where it was plugged into an outlet in the wall near the window seat and tossed it into the bag as well.

I looked around my room and asked myself if I needed anything else. Socks. I needed a pair of socks. I didn't want to walk around their house in my flip flops

all day and I didn't like to walk around bare foot because my feet tended to freeze. I needed socks. I went to my dresser and pulled open the top drawer. I found a pair of bright, fuzzy yellow socks. Perfect. I tossed those into my bag.

I had everything I thought I needed except for my phone. I dug my phone out of my backpack and stuffed it into the bag too.

I looked around my room one last time. Looking for something, anything. I was stalling for time.

I couldn't do this but I had to do it. My mind was at war with itself. I was nervous and didn't want to go over there. But I didn't want to be alone more than I didn't want to go next door and I really, really wanted answers.

With those thoughts on my mind I grabbed my overnight bag and headed towards the stairs.

I could do this.

Probably.

Maybe.

Shit.

Chapter Eighteen

For the second time today I found myself knocking on this door. If Quinton answered the door half naked with his pierced nipples winking at me again I was going to turn right back around and lock myself in my house until it was time for school on Monday.

The door opened and (thankfully) Addison stood there fully clothed in the black Henley and dark blue jeans he'd worn to school. He'd lost the black boots and if he'd worn socks earlier he'd lost those as well.

"I was starting to think you'd changed your mind and weren't coming over after all. Not that I would blame you, this place is a mad house because Quinton's turning into a tyrant and-"

"Twin," Abel stepped up behind his brother and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Let her in. She doesn't need to hear about Quinton right now. There will be time for that mess later."

"Right, sorry." Addison moved out of the doorway as he raked his hands through his white blonde hair. "Sorry, Ariel, didn't mean to be rude. I'm a little on edge."

"We're all a little on edge, twin," Abel said as he took my bag from off my shoulder,

sliding it down my arm. “No harm done. Come on, pretty girl, let’s drop your bag off upstairs and get you settled in.”

He took my hand in his and pulled me inside. I smiled at him because he looked cute with my giant pink and white striped bag over his shoulder, it looked ridiculous on him. Or maybe he’d just look good in pink. I bet he’d make a pretty drag queen.

“We should put her stuff in our room.” Addison told his brother as Abel pulled me towards the stairs.

“I’m way ahead of you, twin.”

“You two share a room?” I asked. That seemed weird because this house was just as massive as Mr. Cole’s house. There had to be plenty of room and only four people lived here.

“Yeah,” they both said at the same exact time in the same voice.

“Is that a twin thing?” I asked about their shared room. I’d never even met twins before them, maybe it was normal.

“We do everything together,” Abel told me as we started up the stairs.

Addison placed his hand on the small of my back and I found myself engulfed in their strange heat. Thankfully, it wasn’t overwhelming this time, but comforting instead.

“We’ve shared a room since the day we were born,” Addison told me.

“We’ll likely share one until the day we die,” Abel said.

I found myself a little envious of their obvious bond. What would it feel like to have someone to be so close to, someone you could count on, someone who cared so much? I wanted someone like that in my life.

We were halfway up the stairs when the shouting started.

“Shit,” Abel muttered as he picked up his pace, practically jogging up the stairs and

pulling me along behind him. “I thought we’d be long gone before they started yelling at each other.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Tyson shouted.

I realized his voice was coming from the office that had no door I’d passed on the way to the kitchen the other day. Or had it been yesterday? I couldn’t remember anymore, too much had happened.

“What I do isn’t any of your fucking business, nephew.” Quinton snarled back.

Oh boy.

“Hurry,” Addison gave me a gentle push from behind.

“None of my fucking business?” Tyson shouted, sounding more enraged than he had been mere seconds before. “None of my fucking business? Are you kidding me right now? You can’t do shit like that. You’ll expose us all and it’s dangerous. Not to mention you scared the shit out of Ariel and now I have to explain things to her that I thought I would have more time to...” His voice faded as we reached the top of the staircase.

There was a huge open area to the right of the staircase that was completely empty. Weird. Tyson’s house might have looked a lot like Mr. Cole’s house from the outside and I thought they were similar in size but they had entirely different layouts on the inside. A hallway went left and I could see another hallway leading deeper into the house from the weird empty room.

Abel pulled me left down the hallway. We passed by two doors on the left before stopping in front of the only door on the right side of the hallway. It was closed. Abel turned the knob and pushed the door open. Addison pushed me inside.

“Holy crap,” I sputtered as I took in their bedroom. It was at least twice the size of my bedroom at Mr. Cole’s house. It was the largest bedroom I had ever been in before or ever seen for that matter.

To the right, were two king size beds. One up against the left wall, the other up against the right wall. The bed on the left had a black comforter and the bed on the right had a white comforter.

I pointed between the two beds. “Which one’s which?”

If I had to guess I’d say the one with the white comforter belonged to Addison and the black belonged to Abel. I was wrong.

“The black one’s mine,” Addison told me. “The white one’s Abel’s.”

Huh.

I hadn’t seen that one coming.

On the other side of the room sat a black leather couch facing a mammoth flat screen mounted on the wall. There wasn’t much else in the room save for boxes stacked up against the walls. On the wall with the flat screen were two doors. I imagined they lead to a closet and a bathroom.

“It’s... uh... roomy.” I said. It was roomy but it was also weirdly empty like the rest of the house.

They both laughed at me.

“We’ve only been here for a week,” Abel told me. “We haven’t had a whole lot of time to unpack anything yet.”

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“Besides, you’re one to talk,” Addison teased me. “Your room is a blank slate except for your comforter and all those girly pillows covering the window seat.”

I shrugged, he wasn’t wrong.

“How long have you been living with Mr. Cole?” Abel asked me pointedly.

I rolled my eyes. Like he didn’t already know. Please. “You know I’ve been living with him since the beginning of the summer. Why you would pretend different is beyond me.”

“Fair enough.”

“Did you guys stay here a lot before your...” I trailed off as soon as my brain caught up with my mouth. I could not believe I started to ask them about their lives before their parents died when neither of them had said anything ever to me about their parents. I only knew they were dead because Tyson had mentioned it to me.

“I’m sorry, guys.” I quickly tried to apologize for my stupidity.

Abel walked over to the black couch and sat my bag down on it. He plopped down beside my bag and immediately started digging through it.

“Hey,” I cried as I ran to the couch and tried to grab ahold of my bag so I could take it away from him. I had underwear in there!

Abel had ahold of one handle and was pulling it his way as I grabbed hold of the

other handle and tried to pull it in the opposite direction.

“Abel, stop. What are you doing? You’re going to rip my bag.”

“If he rips your bag I’ll buy you a new one.” Addison said from directly behind me. Too close behind me.

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Distracted by his nearness I turned my head to see just how close he really was to me. My hands loosened on the handle when I realized Addison was right there. If he moved forward another inch he’d be touching me.

“What are you doing?” I squeaked.

“Twin?” Addison ignored me to ask his brother.

“Ready,” Abel replied.

As soon as Abel finished speaking he gave a vicious tug on the bag. At the same time, Addison put his hand in between my shoulder blades and shoved me forward. I let out a scream that was not girly in the least but filled with terror as I flew forward.

I let go of my bag as I fell and Abel threw it to the floor. I crashed into him and he grunted at the impact. My forehead caught him on the chin and he let out a pained sound. My entire body draped over his. I dug my elbows into his stomach as I tried (and failed) to sit up and scramble off of him.

He rolled over onto his side, taking me with him. I ended up smushed between Abel and the couch with my hips pressed up against his, my arms stuck in between our bodies and my legs tangled up in his.

Deep, masculine laughter came down from above me. I turned my head to see Addison's face hovering above me, his body shaking with his laughter and his fist pressed tight to his mouth in an attempt to hold in the sound of his hilarity.

"What the hell, guys?" I whined as I struggled against Abel's tight hold on me.

Abel's arms tightened around me as he buried his face in my hair. "You felt bad," he mumbled.

"About Tyson and his Uncle?" I asked in confusion. What was he talking about?

"No, pretty girl," Addison said as he brushed a strand of hair out of my face. I was glad he did it because my hands were currently trapped between me and his brother. "Although, those two together can be a little upsetting for anyone and they're worse today because-"

"Addison," Abel growled. I tensed. I'd never heard either of them call the other by their name. "Stop saying shit to her about Quinton and Ty. We promised."

Addison blew out a deep, heavy breath. "I know, twin, I know. It's just a lot harder than I thought it would be."

"Guys," I squirmed against Abel's big body, hoping he'd let me up. He didn't.

Abel's hands loosened around my back and slid down so he could hold onto my hips. His fingers dug in, likely bruising.

"Ariel, you might want to stop moving your body around when it's pressed up against my dick. It's gonna get hard if you keep doing that and I don't want to freak you out."

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I pressed my burning face into his chest, hiding from both of them. This was a disaster.

“Maybe we could not talk about your dick,” I croaked out.

“I don’t know, I kind of like hearing you talk about my dick,” he teased in his deep voice.

I wanted to crawl in a hole and die.

“I don’t know, twin,” Addison chimed in, “just hearing her talk about your dick is making my dick semi hard.”

“Oh my god,” I whispered in horror.

They both burst out laughing. Addison had his elbows resting on the back of the couch. One big hand cupped my shoulder and the other rested on his brother’s bicep.

Abel let go of my hips. One arm slid up my back where he pressed the palm of his big hand flat against the middle of my back. His other hand cupped the back of my neck and his fingers tangled with my ash-blonde locks. His big body shook against me.

My face was so red it practically burned.

“This isn’t funny,” I hissed.

“It’s hilarious,” Abel said in between laughing.

I sighed. My life was so out of my control it wasn't even funny. And I had no idea how I'd managed to get myself into these weird ass situations over the last week but somehow, I'd managed spectacularly.

Ring came from my bag on the floor, it was my cell phone. Since the only person who would be calling me right now was Mr. Cole, I seriously needed to answer my phone.

"I have to get that," I told the still laughing twins. "I'm serious, guys."

They laughed harder.

God damn it.

"It's probably Mr.-"

And my phone stopped ringing. Wonderful. I had probably frightened the poor man with the message I left earlier.

A shadow moved over me. The shadow of a man. I followed the movement and watched with wide eyes as Quinton knelt down and started rummaging through my bag.

Holy crap! What was it with these people? I had underwear in there, damn it!

"Uh, guys," I tried to warn them of our new arrival but they just laughed over me.

I didn't think this was going to go over well, not with scary guy Mr. Uncle Quinton here.

My phone started to ring again as Quinton pulled it out of my bag.

Oh my god, what did he think he was doing? These people had serious boundary issues. Maybe they just didn't understand that it wasn't cool for a guy to go digging around in a girl's bag. I mean, I've mentioned the underwear twice now but I had a bra in there too, and what if there had been tampons? Yeah, I'm sure they were educated when it came to girl problems but that didn't mean I wanted them to know when I had my period. Not after only meeting them less than a week ago. A few months from now, then we could talk.

"Hello," I heard Quinton say.

Motherfucker.

The twins immediately stopped laughing.

"Hello," Quinton repeated.

Holy shit. Quinton had just answered my phone. A phone he'd dug out of my bag without permission. A phone he'd answered without permission.

He had some serious balls, I'd give him that.

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“Just a second,” Quinton murmured into the phone. He pulled the phone away from his ear and placed the front of my phone against his chest.

“It’s your mother,” Quinton told me.

Of course it was.

And, of course, he had to go and answer my phone when it was my mother on the line instead of Mr. Cole.

I wanted to cry.

My life seemed really unfair at times.

Chapter Nineteen

“Hang up,” I hissed at him. “Seriously, Quinton, hang up the phone.”

He put the phone back to his ear. “She’ll call you back,” he told my mother. My freaking mother! He pulled the phone away from his ear and tapped the screen.

Why would she be calling me? Please, please tell me Mr. Cole wasn’t already sending her home. I wouldn’t blame him if he did but I’d still rather he deal with her crazy than have to be stuck with her myself.

“Abel, please move.” I pushed at his chest as much as I could. He rolled over and climbed to his feet.

Addison cupped my jaw in his big hand and tilted my head to the side. “You’re worried.”

Was I worried? Yeah, I honestly was. Worried and scared.

“You don’t have to be afraid of her anymore,” he told me in a serious voice. “There are things we can do to take care of this for you.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

Quinton started laughing and my cell phone he still held in his hand rang again.

“I get shit on for trying to make one of her problems go away and yet here you are talking about doing the same thing, like it’s acceptable now.” Quinton bitched. “It either is or it isn’t, but if you’re gonna use magic to solve her problems then none of you can bitch at me when I do the same damn thing.”

I gaped at him. “What are you talking about? You keep talking about magic like it’s real. First in my dre-” I snapped my mouth shut. This was the second time I’d almost mentioned my dream. I didn’t want them to know I’d been dreaming about them. No, not them but him.

Quinton tilted his head to the side and studied me. The phone stopped ringing.

“What were you just about to say?” He asked.

“Give me my phone,” I demanded as I sat up on the couch. Addison had pulled his hand away from my face to study Quinton.

“Tell me what you were going to say and I’ll give you your phone back.”

“Just give her her damn phone,” Addison snapped.

“What are you even doing in our room?” Abel demanded to know.

Quinton ignored the both of them to, unfortunately, focus on me. “You were going to say dream, weren’t you?”

I stared him in the eye and thought to hell with it. “Yes, I was going to say dream.”

The room was silent until my phone started ringing again.

“What do you remember from your dream?” He asked.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Abel asked.

“You were in her dreams?” Addison growled.

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“Can I have my phone?” I asked. “She’s just going to keep calling until I answer. The longer you make her wait the crazier she’s going to get. And she’ll take her crazy out on me.”

He handed me my phone and I answered before my mother could hang up and call back. Again.

“Mom?”

“Why was there a man answering your phone?” She snapped at me.

“I’m next door at the neighbor’s house. I was in the bathroom when he answered my phone.”

“You’re not turning into a whore, are you? You better not be because it will make me look bad to Marcus and you better not ruin this for me.”

I sighed. I really hated this woman.

“Why are you calling me, mother?” I asked. My stomach knotted painfully. “Did something happen? Is it Mr. Cole’s brother?”

“You care more about a man you’ve never met before than you do for your own mother.” Her voice had dropped low, turned nasty. This is a voice I normally found extremely frightening. Today I didn’t seem nearly as bothered by it as I should have been. Perhaps it was the distance and knowing she couldn’t, at this very moment, physically harm me.

Whatever the reason, I opened my mouth and said a bunch of things I shouldn't. Maybe I would have learned my lesson if she'd hit me with the bottle of vodka as

well as her glass cup. Maybe. But, then again, maybe I would have ended up in the hospital for an extended stay.

Still... there was no excuse for what came out of my mouth. Sheer madness.

"You are correct in your assumption that I care more for a stranger than I do you, my own mother. I learned the way from you, mother. You, who cares more for everyone in your life than your own daughter." I took in a deep, shuddering breath before continuing. "Now that we've established that, I'd like to know why you are calling. Is Mr. Cole well? Why aren't you with him? I thought you went with him so you could be there for him when he needed you?"

There was a heartbeat of silence down the line before she let out an angry hiss. She sounded like an angry cat who'd just been dropped into a bucket of water.

"You little bitch," she whispered menacingly. "You little bitch. How dare you speak to me in such a way. I'm your mother, you don't talk to me like that."

I sighed and slumped back against the couch. I shouldn't have talked to her in such a way. The distance had given me a false sense of security and made me brave but stupid.

She let out a pathetic sounding sob in my ear, surprising me. She normally didn't go through the trouble of shedding tears unless she had an audience to bear witness to them.

I wondered where Mr. Cole was and hoped he was far, far away from her.

“He dropped me off here like some unwanted piece of luggage while he went off to the hospital to be with his family and he hasn’t been back since.”

It hadn’t even been a whole day yet. I bit my bottom lip in an attempt to contain my smile. I liked Marcus Cole so, so very much and I liked even more how he was starting to handle my mother. My smile slipped. I would like how he handled her until she decided to take it out on me.

“Why would he do that?” She wailed into the phone. “Is he ashamed of me? Does he not want me to meet his family? I cannot see why. Have you seen the photographs of his wife? She was a homely thing. I’m not homely in the least, I’m beautiful. You don’t hide away your beautiful girlfriend, you take her out and show her off on your arm. What’s wrong with him?”

I absolutely did not want to be having this conversation with my mother.

What was I supposed to say to her? Well, mother, firstly, perhaps you shouldn’t call yourself his girlfriend. Don’t you remember you’re a paid companion? He gives you money and nice, fancy things for your time and the use of your body? The lonely man had needs and you enjoy the size of his wallet. Secondly, it wasn’t the time to show off your arm candy, not with your brother lying in a hospital bed fighting for his life.

I didn’t tell her any of that. She was unreasonable and wouldn’t appreciate things like logic and truth.

But I had to tell her something or this nonsense could last for hours and I wanted off the phone with her sooner rather than later if possible.

“He’s not thinking clearly right now, mother,” I told her. “He’s too worried about his brother. He tried to tell you before you left that he wouldn’t have time for you and you insisted on going along anyway. You should take a nap or something while you

wait for him to come back. And he will come back, mother. You just have to wait for him and be patient.”

She was going to suck at this, I just knew it.

“Fine, Ariel, fine.” She said. She’d stopped crying for which I was thankful. “You’re right. You’re always right. Whatever. Now, why aren’t you in school?”

I let out a relieved sigh.

“There’s been some type of flu outbreak,” I said. I thought about leaving out the gory details and just leaving it at that, but then I thought better of it. The gory details just might be what got me off the phone with her. “Lunch had just started when the people seated at the table next to mine simply turned on each other and started vomiting blood everywhere. And it didn’t stop with them, it spread. It was disgusting and horrifying and there was blood everywhere. School’s been called off for tomorrow because of it.”

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“Ariel, that’s insane. What the hell kind of school are you going to? I can’t get sick. What would Marcus think of me if I was to start puking blood? How unattractive.”

My mother. She was a piece of work, that’s for sure.

“I don’t want you going back to that place until we know for sure this nasty business has been taken care of.”

Since I did not enjoy school, I readily agreed.

“Now you’ve taken up enough of my time. I have to prepare myself for Marcus’s return. He’ll likely need me to comfort him.”

She said comfort like it was a dirty word. I didn’t want to hear it.

Before I could reply, not that I had a clue what to say to her after that, but I wasn’t given the chance. She hung up on me.

For once I didn’t mind her rudeness. That is until I slumped back on the couch and finally paid attention to the room around me.

Abel sat before me with his knees to the floor with his ass resting on his heels. His hands, which I hadn’t noticed during my phone call, were placed on the couch on either side of my legs. He watched me with those green, green eyes with a look in them I didn’t quite understand. They were warm, so very warm they were heated and the look was all for me. It was such an intimate look that it made me uncomfortable. So uncomfortable I had to look away from him. Those eyes saw too much of me and

asked for more than they saw in return.

A look over my shoulder told me Addison was still there, leaning over the back of the black leather couch. His hands, much like his brothers, were placed on either side of me. He looked down at me with serious crystal blue eyes. The color burned bright, threatening to drown me in a sea of blue. I didn't want to drown so I looked away.

The twins unnerved me. They were far too bold with their emotions and far too bold with me.

But to not look at the twins left me with Scary Uncle Quinton with his nipple piercings and who had no problem answering my cell phone after he'd dug through my personal belongings.

He didn't look away from my hostile gaze. In fact, he was far bolder than either twin. There wasn't heat in Quinton's eyes, only arrogance and something a whole lot darker. He sat sprawled on the floor, propped up by his forearms resting on the carpet. His legs were spread wide and my disheveled pink and white bag lay on its side between his legs, some of my belongings spilled out of it.

Right there on top for all to see was a pair of my underwear. They were black and lacey. I didn't want Quinton touching my underwear. Or, my anything for that matter.

I opened my mouth to probably yell at him. He must have seen some tell on my face because he spoke before I could get my first word out.

"There was no flu outbreak at your school today," he told me. The arrogance grew from his eyes to his face as he gave us all a haughty look. It wasn't exactly friendly.

I frowned at him. "Since you seem to know so much about what happened today, at a school you do not even attend, I might add, why don't you tell us what happened."

This ought to be good.

I remembered Tyson blaming the bloody incident on his Uncle and his promise to explain everything to me. Where was he now?

“Where’s Tyson?” I asked. Even to myself I sounded angry. The longer I looked at Quinton sitting there with my underwear on the floor between his legs for all to see the angrier I seemed to get.

I didn’t know what was happening to me. I used to be so mild mannered and I never even even thought to raise my voice. It’s like a part of me had been locked away and for whatever reason it had suddenly been released. I didn’t want to be an angry person and I didn’t want to be mean to people. Bad karma and all that. I tried to stuff my anger back inside where it belonged. It was just underwear; did it really matter? It’s not like he’d never seen a pair of girl’s panties before.

“What,” Quinton smirked at me and it was a very unfriendly, predatory look, “are we not good enough for you? You gotta have Tyson? Is he better than the rest of us?”

>

He was no longer smirking and seemed rather angry. I did not enjoy having his anger directed my way.

He and Tyson had a lot more in common than I had originally thought. Like their matching tempers and the fact that they both seemed quick to anger. And those deep, dark, bottomless eyes.

Abel had eyes that penetrated you. A person could drown in Addison’s eyes. Tyson had eyes you could sink into. Like an opening in the earth, rich and brown in color and bottomless to the naked eye. Something you could sink into and never ever wish

to resurface again.

I had just realized Quinton's eyes were Tyson's eyes only set in a different face. They looked like brothers.

"Ariel," Abel said my name as his big hand landed on my thigh. "Are you alright?"

I shook my head. Damn. I'd been staring. And at Quinton of all people. No good.

I cleared my throat and closed my eyes. Best not to look at them, any of them. Why couldn't I have found some girls for friends, or even some ugly people?

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“I asked for Tyson not because I like him better than you, though, to be fair, you weren’t wrong, I do like him more than you. I asked about him because he promised to explain what in the hell’s going on here. He promised me. I trust him not to lie to me so I wanted him here for whatever this is.” I shrugged my shoulders as if that explained it.

I could feel a headache coming on. Come to think of it, I’d had a headache off and on since my mother hurt me.

“It’s simple,” Quinton said. “You don’t need Ty to explain it to you. There was no flu outbreak and those students weren’t poisoned. What happened today happened because I made it happen. And I did it with magic.”

Chapter Twenty

The room had gone as still and quiet as the inside of a tomb. They didn’t even look to be breathing.

“What do you mean by magic?” Ah, my voice was back to sounding angry.

Magic. Magic. Magic.

The word seemed to follow me everywhere I went. There was no escaping it.

I had an image in my head of Quinton standing in the middle of a dimly lit stage wearing a black cape and holding onto a black magician’s wand. Underneath his cape he wore tight, black leather pants and a bright, blood red vest. The vest hung open,

exposing his naked chest. The silver in his nipples shined like a beacon against his skin.

I blinked and the image was gone. I wondered if he had leather pants in his closet. The cape, however, did absolutely nothing for me. The vest I could work with.

Abel's hand on my thigh rubbed up and down in a soothing gesture. "We're witches, Ariel," he told me.

My heart skipped a beat.

Fingers very gently tangled in my hair. My head was pulled backwards and I was suddenly swallowed up by blue, blue water.

"We were born with magic in us," Addison said quietly. Not quite a whisper but his normally deep, rumbling voice had dropped to something gentler. "As were our fathers before us. It's hereditary. You, pretty girl, were born with magic in you, too."

My mouth dropped open. He was crazy. They were all crazy. Then, a thought came to me. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten.

"Where did the heat go?" I asked.

Addison smiled down at me. "You're coming into your magic. I don't know why it's stayed dormant all this time, but it has. Your magic calls to ours and that's where the heat comes from. The more we touch you and the more you use your magic the more the heat will fade. It will still be there under the surface but it won't hurt you anymore to touch us. The pain will turn to pleasure and you'll like it."

There was a lot there to dissect and I had no idea where to begin.

They didn't give me a chance to ask questions. Addison released his hold on my hair. He moved around the couch with a grace not suited to his size. He moved around his brother on the floor to sit beside me on the couch. Abel lifted his hand off the couch and put it on the thigh he wasn't already touching. Addison scooted so close to me that our thighs touched. His arm went behind me to lay across the back of the couch. Abel shuffled closer on his knees while his brother wrapped his arm around my shoulders. Abel moved so close both his knees rubbed up against my feet on either side of me. His hands moved up my thighs the closer he got to me. Finally, when he was as close as he could get,

his hands were damn near in my lap. Way too close to my crotch. His big hands spanned the tops of my thighs, gripping my legs tightly. Those green, green eyes met my own and the look in them plus the vicinity of his hands had my stomach clenching low.

Abel laid his head on his arms and stared up at me from my lap.

"Before the witch trials and the burning there were more female witches than males," he said. "The men hid like cowards while our women were tortured and burned at the stake. Not all of our women died, but a great many of them did. After the witch trials ended females just stopped being born to us. Every so many years a miracle would happen and a girl would be born, but it's rare and few and far between. It's so rare, Ariel, that there are only three known female witches in the U.S. Now with you, there's four. Each one belongs to a coven and there are only seven across the states. Most claim it's a curse. While our women burned, our men hid themselves away in the shadows until they had a chance to run. They did nothing to try and save their wives, mothers, aunts, daughters, sisters. Because of that, most of our people believe we are undeserving of females born of our own kind. It's either a curse or we're being punished today for what our ancestors failed to do years past. Because of this, female witches are coveted and precious. You, Ariel Kimber, are precious."

My stomach clenched a second time for an entirely different reason than it had clenched earlier. He was crazy. They were all crazy. Witches weren't real and magic didn't exist. Were they part of a cult?

I swallowed painfully past the growing lump in my throat. I'd never had real friends before and the thought of losing Tyson and the twins because they were nuts did not make me feel good.

"I'm not a witch," I croaked out past my lump. I felt slightly claustrophobic with the twins clinging to me but I couldn't imagine pushing them away.

"Babe," Quinton spoke from behind Abel. He was closer to us on the couch than he had been before this little chat started. He'd left my bag behind. I let out a breath of relief when I noticed my underwear was no longer out in the open. Then I had a frightening thought. Where had they gone to?

"Babe," he called again. He was even closer than he had been a moment ago. "You're a witch. We're all witches. We're the Brothers of the Flame. I am a witch. My father and my father's father were witches. And it was me who made that asshole give up his blood today. I did it for you and I did it with my magic."

I gaped at him. Oddly enough it was his "I did it for you" that freaked me out the most about his little speech.

I planned to ask him what he meant by that, but what came out of my mouth had nothing to do with that and was completely unexpected.

"My mother is not a witch."

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“No, she’s just a bitch,” Abel muttered from my lap.

“I bet your dad was a witch,” Addison said from his place beside me.

“I don’t know who my dad is.” It had never really bothered me until that moment. Who was my dad? Was he alive? Dead? Did he even know I existed? Had he been more to my mother than a roll in the sack? Had he been a witch?

“That doesn’t make sense,” Quinton said from beside me.

I blinked in surprise at his nearness. He was beside me now, on the opposite side of Addison. He was on his knees with his elbows on the arm of the couch. His head rested on his hands as he stared at me with those serious eyes. When had he moved and how had I not noticed?

“What do you mean?” I asked him.

“If your dad had known about you or even if he just knew there was a chance he’d gotten your mother with child he would have stuck around to see if you held magic. We don’t leave our children, not for anything, not anymore. And the fact that you’re a girl.” He shrugged. “It’s like Abel already told you. Our females are precious to us. Your father wouldn’t have left you with your mother. He’d have taken you with him even if it meant stealing you away from her.”

He talked so casually about stealing children, as if it were an acceptable thing to him. It made me think about those three women they’d mentioned and what kind of life they had lived and were living now.

What did I say to that? I didn't have the right words so I let it go. I wasn't about to get into a conversation about morals with Quinton, not when I didn't think I'd enjoy what he had to say.

"What did you do to Chucky?" I asked a question that would likely drive me insane if I didn't get an answer for it. He'd said he had done it with magic. How do you make someone sick like that with magic? If he'd said he had mixed some Comet in with Chucky's applesauce I would have understood it. But magic? I didn't understand that. Hell, I still wasn't certain sure I believed them that magic was real. I had seen no proof and I needed proof.

"I heard the twins talking about this Chucky person. At first, he just sounded like any old asshole. Then I heard about what he did to you on the first day of school. That should have never been allowed to happen to you, Ariel. It pissed me off and made me angry with Ty. We argued all summer long about you, Tyson and I did. I thought it would be best to stay here for the summer and give you that time to get to know us. He disagreed, saying you could get to know us when school started. He was wrong. And if we would have stayed here this summer what happened to you at school would never have happened. You would have come into your magic already and known how to use it to protect yourself. Not only that but Tyson wouldn't have just sat there and watched it happen. He would have put a stop to it. Instead he was angry with me and took it out on you. I apologize for that."

Both twins went tense and alert. Something Quinton said had startled them.

"Now, about what happened with this Chucky person. I found his picture on the school's website. I printed it out and put together a little spell. I hadn't meant for it to spread to others but," again, he shrugged casually, "shit happens. I think I might have put too much of my own blood in the bowl which made the spell more powerful than I had intended. My bad."

My b

ad?

My bad?

He'd meant to only make one person sick and instead he'd made a handful of people sick, to the point it seemed contagious. They were puking up blood. Blood! And all he had to say was "my bad." Seriously?

I gaped at him with my mouth hanging open and everything.

"What if they don't get better or they make even more people sick?" I asked in horror.

People vomiting up blood, people stealing children – it was all the same to him and it meant nothing.

The corner of his mouth moved up in amusement. I didn't find anything amusing.

"The spell only lasted forty-eight hours, Ariel. Relax."

Relax? He wanted me to relax? My left eyelid twitched. He really was crazy. Someone should tell him now would be a good time to stop talking. Maybe while he slept I could sneak into his room and super glue his lips shut.

"You don't like me, I can see it in your eyes. That's okay. You don't have to like me, and you certainly do not have to like the things I do. That's alright with me. But I would prefer it if you liked me because, babe, I'm pretty sure I'm gonna like you a whole lot. But the things I do, I can't help that. It's my job to take care of us all, and now you're a part of that. Part of my job as the person who takes care of us all is not

allowing some douchebag motherfucker to hurt you in any way. That Chucky kid fucked with you so I fucked with him back.”

He moved away from the couch and gained his feet.

“I’ll not apologize for the things I do, Ariel, so you had better get used to it because you’re stuck with us from here on out.” And with that he turned around and walked out of the twin’s bedroom.

“What just happened?” Addison whispered as the door clicked shut softly behind Quinton.

“I have no idea, twin, but I think maybe Quint’s finally lost his damn mind.”

Their bodies shook against mine and it took me a second to realize they were laughing. I didn’t find anything funny and they refused to tell me why they were laughing.

Whatever, boys were stupid.

Chapter Twenty-One

The twins wanted to cuddle on the couch and watch a movie. I was having none of it. I'd been promised answers and I felt like I got the short end of the stick in the answer department. I wanted answers so I demanded they hand them over to me. They thought my being bossy was cute, I know because they told me so.

When they continued to laugh and tease me I pushed away from them and crawled off the couch. I crawled to my bag on my hands and knees.

I was half way there when a sharp sting hit my right butt cheek. I whirled around ungracefully and landed with my butt on the carpet.

I had no idea which one had smacked my ass because they both sat there like perfect angels with serene looks on their faces, with their hands in their laps.

If I had to guess, my money was on Abel. But, then again, I couldn't discount Addison.

I pointed at them both. "You're both naughty, naughty boys."

They grinned identical grins, unrepentant.

I scooted backwards towards my bag. I bumped into it and without turning around I started digging around inside with my hand.

When I found my cell phone I pulled it out. I unlocked it and clicked on the little icon

that would take me to my text messages. I opened my conversation with Tyson and sent off a quick text.

Ariel: Where are you?

He responded immediately.

Tyson: Kitchen. Where are you?

Ariel: I'm with the twins and I need reinforcements. One of them just smacked my ass and I don't even know which one it was! Help.

"What are you doing?" Addison asked me.

"Sending for reinforcements."

"Who?"

"Who do you think, twin?" Abel cut in. "Out of all of us she's only got Ty's phone number."

"We need to change that."

"I'm with you, twin."

I did not like the sound of that. They had had a similar conversation before I was shoved onto Abel and the couch.

Ariel: Hurry.

I texted Tyson that one word before stuffing the phone back into my bag. It's not that

I minded playing with them but it felt like they were trying to distract me and the only thing I needed to be distracted from at the moment was getting my answers.

This time I did look in my bag when I stuck my phone back in it. My lacey black underwear was nowhere to be seen. They weren't on top. I dug through the bag, frantically searching. Nowhere. They were nowhere. Finally, I dumped my bag upside down and watched as all my things spilled out onto the floor.

"What's going on, pretty girl?" One of the twins asked from right behind me. I had that problem I always had when one of them spoke from behind me. I couldn't tell which one was speaking because their voices were identical.

I dug through my pile of belongings, tossing them every which way. My clear bag with the bright yellow zipper stuffed full of my toiletries got tossed to the side. My fuzzy yellow socks went the other way. The flip flops with the pretty red and black Gerber Daisies got pushed away from the pile. I tossed my red hoodie with the white vampire fangs on the front behind me, over my shoulder. One of the twins made a surprised sound but I did not care. Shorts and tank tops, both red and black, were tossed aside. All that remained of the pile before me was my phone, phone charger and the black bra that matched the missing underwear. And they were missing.

"Son of a bitch," I whispered angrily.

"I don't think I've ever heard her swear before," said a twin.

"Shit just got real," said the other twin.

"Not that we mind, pretty girl, but why is our bedroom now littered with girl clothes and... girl things?"

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“If you don’t like her shit on your floor she’s more than welcome to bring it to my room and leave it wherever she wants.”

Tyson. Tyson was here. I sighed in relief. I wasn’t uncomfortable around the twins but they didn’t make me feel the same level of comfort I got from being around Tyson. I think it stemmed from having met him first and spending the most amount of time with him outside of school. That and falling asleep next to him twice and waking up pressed up against him after sleeping cuddled up beside him.

“We don’t care about her clothes,” the twins said together. “We just don’t know why she threw them all over the place.”

It was weird listening to them speak as if they were the same person, with the same mind, thinking the same thoughts then speaking them out loud at the same time. It was bizarre, I tell you.

“What are you doing?” Tyson asked as he knelt beside me on the carpet.

Hmm... Did I come right out and tell him? Let’s try it on for size. Hey, Ty, I think your Uncle might have stolen my panties. Lord knows what his intentions are towards them, but whatever the case, it can’t be good.

I frowned. Yeah, that didn’t sound good to me, either. They both seemed quick to anger and I really didn’t want more drama heaped on top of the already overflowing pile.

“Ariel?”

I sighed again. This time not in relief. If I wasn't honest with them then I'd likely end up looking like a crazy person and if Quinton really had stolen my underwear I didn't want him to keep them. At the same time, depending on how long he had them, I wasn't sure I really wanted them back.

This day, more than any day before it, was starting to turn into the longest day of my life.

"Ariel?"

Tyson was persistent, I'd give him that much.

"I think Quinton stole my underwear," I told them honestly. When all else fails you, the truth is always the best way to go.

My cheeks burned and I knew they were bright red as I felt the three of them watching me. "You think my Uncle Quinton stole your panties?" Tyson spoke slowly, as if he were speaking to a child.

My face burned hotter. The fact that Quinton was Tyson's Uncle made it sound that much dirtier. I

sucked up my embarrassment and explained to them why I thought Quinton had taken my underthings. When I was done speaking I looked up at all of them and found them all frowning at me.

"Why-" Abel's mouth snapped shut abruptly, his green eyes filled with anger as he looked to his twin brother. "Let's go find Quinton before he gets inspired."

"I hear you, twin," Addison growled low in his throat. "I hear you. Let's go recover our sweet Ariel's panties before Quint can work his magic on them."

I thought about the way Addison phrased his words and frowned. Before, if someone had said something about working their magic on a pair of lady's lacey underthings I would have assumed magic was a polite way of saying masturbation. Now the word magic frightened me. I'd seen what Quinton's magic had done to Chucky, I did not want to find myself subject to it. No thank you.

The twins let me go and climbed to their feet. Without a backwards glance, they left the room. I felt weird about being alone in their bedroom with another guy and them not being here. Frankly, I felt weird about the whole situation. And very, very tired.

"Here," Tyson picked up a flip flop. "Let me help you pick up your stuff. Then we can go and hide out in my room."

I didn't need to see another one of their rooms. What I needed to do was get the hell out of here.

Tyson picked up my bag and stuffed the flip flop inside. Next, he picked up the black bra by one of the straps and quickly stuffed it inside the big empty bag, too. This was beginning to get ridiculous.

Instead of helping him, I laid back on the carpet and spread my arms out wide at my sides. I had no intention of picking up after myself, someone else could do it.

I wanted to know about magic. I wanted to see actual physical proof with my own two eyes. Tyson owed me an explanation.

I made angels in the carpet as I heard him pick up my belongings. He never complained. He never asked me to stop what I was doing so I could rightfully pick up my own things. He simply moved around me quietly as he did it for me.

I liked Tyson. A lot.

“Alright,” he said as his hand appeared in front of my face. “I got all of your stuff picked up. Now let’s get out of here.”

I took his hand and allowed him to pull me to my feet. He had the thick straps of my white and pink bag over his shoulder.

When I got to my feet he didn’t let my hand go. He threaded his fingers through mine and gave my hand a gentle, but firm squeeze.

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“Come on, Ariel,” he said as he pulled me along behind him and out of the twins room. “I have promises to keep, and I know you have lots of questions you’re dying to ask me. When we’re safe behind my locked door, I’m all yours.”

There were parts there I liked. Like finally getting my answers. But I didn’t think I needed to see the inside of another bedroom in this house. What I needed was to extract myself from this situation and eject myself from this damn house. What I didn’t need to do was think about how much I liked the thought of him being all mine.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Tyson and I walked down the hallway hand in hand. We passed the two closed doors and moved through the weirdly empty room at the top of the stairs. We walked towards the other hallway I’d noticed earlier. It was oddly the same as the other hallway, only opposite. Where the hallway that had led to the twin’s room had one door on the right and two doors on the left, this hallway had one door on the left and two doors on the right. All three doors were closed like they had been in the other hallway.

Tyson stopped us in front of the last door on the right. For the twins, it had been the only door on the right. Tyson put his empty hand on the knob, twisted and pushed the door open.

Tyson’s bedroom was what looked to be the exact same size as the twin’s bedroom. I shook my head as I looked around his bedroom. What did one person need with all this space? What did two people need with all this space?

The size, and the doors I presumed lead to the bathroom and the closet were where the similarities of the two rooms ended.

Tyson's bed was a huge, four-poster, gothic monstrosity that pushed up against the wall between the two doors I'd guessed about. The bed frame itself and the posts were wood and stained a deep, dark wine red. Long, gauzy, see-through black curtains hung down on each side of the bed. Each curtain was pushed open so the unmade bed could be seen. Black, shiny sheets beckoned from within those curtains like a silky heaven. A deep burgundy comforter lay in a crumpled heap at the foot of the bed. A massive pile of black and burgundy pillows sat at the head of the bed. The pillows, like the sheet, shined in the light and looked like pure silk. My mother would have approved of Tyson's expensive taste.

Even unmade, Tyson's bed was lush. I wanted a bed just like it. Or, better yet, maybe I could just sleep in here with him every night. Yeah, that'd work just fine for me.

The walls were painted the same deep, rich burgundy as the comforter and half the massive pile of pillows. The plush carpet on the floor was black, looked to be brand new, and felt like walking on foam.

A circular shaped rug lay underneath his massive bed. It was a reddish orange in color, thin and had what looked like words and shapes written in white chalk all over it. The rug appeared worn in places and very old. I liked the color, but the chalk seemed strange to me. An energy seemed to come off of the rug. Not a bad energy, just something otherworldly. Something not entirely natural, something other, different. And I could feel strange heat coming off of it. Almost like the heat I had felt when a Tyson and the twins had touched me. The rug sort of pulsed with its own energy. I didn't want to touch it, but at the same time I knew it wouldn't hurt me if I did. I didn't understand it and I didn't try to.

On either side of the bed between the doors sat a black nightstand. Burgundy candles

sat atop those nightstands with no candleholders to be seen. Wax dripped down the sides, pooling around the candle on the nightstand.

Silver framed pictures graced the tops of those nightstands, intermingling with the candles. I couldn't see the pictures from where I stood, but I wanted to see what they held, desperately so. I wanted that little peek into Tyson's life before I'd come into it.

I would wait until he either turned his back or left the room to get an up close and personal look at his photos. They had to be pictures of people who meant something to him if he cared enough to have them framed and put them on his nightstand, a place where he'd be able to see them before he fell asleep at night and first thing he saw when he opened his eyes in the morning and looked over. That's where I'd put pictures that were special to me if I had any.

A black trunk sat at the foot of his bed. The trunk, like the rug, looked to be very old. It wasn't one of those trunks that had a vintage look to them but was really brand spanking new and only made to look vintage because people thought it looked cool. This was the real deal, something that looked like it had once belonged to some high born noble back in the day.

The top of the trunk was covered with what I thought at first glance to be a furry blanket or rug, but when I moved closer I realized I was wrong. I ran the tips of my fingers over the black fur and turned my head, looking for Tyson. I found him off to the side, watching my every move like a hawk.

He must have seen the question on my face because he said, "Bear," without my having to ask.

Bear.

A goddamn bear. Like the beautiful but sad looking ones at the zoo.

I pulled my hand back immediately. All that luscious black fur was attached to skin, skin that used to cover an animal. An animal I'd once seen at the zoo.

Tyson laughed. "Your face, you look so horrified. I don't understand. I know you're not a vegetarian, I've seen you eat meat. What gives?"

I shook my head, I didn't know how to explain it to him without sounding stupid.

"Ariel," he asked gently as he ran his fingertips down my arm. He'd moved closer without my noticing. "You can tell me anything. I know you don't get it yet, but I'm here for you, for whatever you need, whatever you want. We all are. Even my panty stealing wayward Uncle."

"It's stupid," I said. "My mother has never wanted anything to do with me unless it made her look good, or she got something out of it. But sometimes the men who blew through her life took interest in me. It wasn't always good. In fact, it was mostly awful. But there was this one I remember who was awesome, and I think he stuck around longer than most because of me. At least that's what my mother said when he left and she took it out on me because she had liked him more than she had most of the others."

I had to stop speaking suddenly to swallow down the bitter bile rising in my throat. These weren't things I ever planned on talking about with anyone and now here I was, giving pieces of myself away so freely. It took me longer than I was proud of before I could control my voice enough to speak again without sounding like I was going to burst into heart wrenching, body wracking sobs.

"I was eight and his name was Thomas. She'd always get drunk and call him Tommy Boy in her high, whiny voice and he'd get mad, so mad he'd yell at her not to call him that. She'd laugh and sometimes he'd hit her. No matter how mean he was to her he was never anything but nice to me. She worked nights dancing and would leave

me home by myself. When he knew she wasn't going to be there he would bring me something to eat for dinner, pizza or fast food. If it weren't for him I would have eaten stale crackers and ramen for dinner. He also bought me pretty headbands for my hair once and a pair of new shoes just because. When he left her, my mother made me throw them away and I cried because before then I'd never owned a pair of shoes that hadn't been worn by someone else before me."

He squeezed my hand and I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see pity on his face. It was my life and I'd done the best I could with it. Also, the things I'd gone through had helped shape me into the person I was today and I had no problem with who I was. It could have been a lot worse, that's for sure.

"The day before he left

my mother was one of the best days I can remember from my childhood, but also one of the worst. It was my birthday and she had completely forgotten. Thomas knew because I had told him. He asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I told him. The only thing I wanted was something I had never allowed myself to want until he asked for fear of being disappointed when I didn't get it."

Tyson squeezed my hand almost to the point of pain. "What did you want that badly, sweetheart?" He asked, his voice thick with an emotion I was better off not knowing.

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I should have stopped there but, stupidly, I kept right on speaking.

“The one thing I wanted more than anything in the whole world was to go to the zoo and see the animals. The year before in school there was a field trip to the zoo and I didn’t get to go because she refused to pay for it and wouldn’t sign the permission slip. I’d wanted to go so bad. I told Thomas I wanted to go to the zoo and he took me. We spent hours at the zoo and I had the time of my life. We’d gone late enough in the day so my mother had already gone to work and we certainly weren’t expecting her to be home when we got back. But she was and when Thomas made the mistake of telling her he’d taken me to the zoo for my birthday she got angry. So very, very angry. I don’t think Thomas noticed because her anger first appeared as a dark look on her face. When Thomas asked why she wasn’t at work she lied and told him she’d come home because she wasn’t feeling well. Then she sent him home. I didn’t realize what was coming or I probably would have begged him to take me with him.

“After he left I tried to tell her I was tired and wanted to go to bed, I wanted to go to my room so I could escape her. I never made it to my bedroom and on the night of my ninth birthday, after the best day of my life, she broke my arm, two of my ribs and blackened both my eyes. She didn’t even take me to the hospital. Instead she went out to a bar and didn’t bother coming home until the next day. Thomas found me on the floor in the hallway where she’d left me and he was the one to take me to the hospital. He left me at the emergency room and I never saw him again.” I shrugged off the memory as I pulled my hand free of Tyson’s. “It was the only time I’ve ever seen a bear that wasn’t on tv and I thought it was one of the most beautifully fierce creatures I have ever seen. I wasn’t expecting... I’m sorry, Tyson.”

“Ariel, Ariel,” he whispered. “That’s so fucked up and sad that I don’t even know

what to say.”

I didn’t want him to say anything because he was right, it was fucked up and sad and what were you supposed to say to something like that?

I shrugged like it was no big thing, like I hadn’t just told him some horrible thing from my past. “I’m sorry, Tyson, it just brought up a bad memory is all.”

“I will put it away in the closet,” he whispered as he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and pulled me into his body. I buried my face in his chest as he hugged me tightly against him.

Until that moment, I hadn’t realized how badly I had needed that hug.

“You don’t have to put it in the closet,” I said. “It’s not going to bother me again, I promise. Honestly, I’d forgotten about the zoo until I saw the bear hide.”

His hand cupped the back of my head as his lips brushed against my forehead. “Sweetheart, you don’t simply forget something like that.”

I wanted to ask how the hell he would know, but I didn’t because it didn’t sound very nice. Instead of being a rude A-hole, I wrapped my arms around his middle and clung to him. He smelled nice, like some kind of rich, earthy incense.

His lips moved across my forehead as he spoke. “Let’s go sit down and I’ll show you something cool. You’ll like it, I promise.”

I wished he’d stop promising me things. The more he promised the more I worried the day would come where he’d break those promises.

He moved back and I got to see the rest of his bedroom. It was just as burgundy and

black as the first half of the room I'd seen, but with some other touches of color thrown in.

Unlike the twin's bedroom Tyson didn't have a couch. There was another large, circular rug, this one burgundy and unlike the other one it had no chalk markings on it and it seemed relatively new. There were massive square shaped body pillows in orange and black piled on the rug. It resembled a cozy nest. In front of the rug and up against the wall there was a short, black television stand with a flat screen tv sitting on it. It was about half the size as the tv in the informal living room off of the kitchen.

There were four tall windows along one wall that faced the backyard. They were bare and curtain-less like every other window I'd seen so far in this house. Did these boys not believe in curtains, or what?

The wall behind the tv had four framed posters of what looked like blown up black and white tarot cards. I moved closer to get a better view and, sure enough, I'd been right. They were tarot cards.

The Hanged Man.

The Magician.

The Emperor.

And, The Fool.

I moved even closer to get a better look and realized they weren't mass market posters but were what looked like original black and white ink drawings. The details were impressive, the artwork beautiful.

"Did you do these?" I asked in quiet awe.

“No,” he laughed at me. “I can’t draw a straight line. They’ve belonged to my family for about three hundred years now. Once we owned a full deck, but we lost most of them in a fire years ago. All that’s left now are these four and the four in Quint’s room.”

“What four does he have?” I couldn’t help but ask out of curiosity.

“Death, The Wheel of Fortune, Justice and The moon.”

“Can you read Tarot cards?”

I hoped he said yes because tarot cards fascinated me ever since I’d gone to this carnival last summer on a date with some boy whose name I no longer remembered. There had been a fortune tellers tent that I had to drag my date into with me. He hadn’t wanted to go in, claiming the whole thing to be a hoax.

Inside the tent had looked exactly like what you’d expect some traveling gypsy fortune tellers tent to look like. Scarves tossed all over everything. Candles burning in every corner. A table sat in the center of the tent draped with a gauzy piece of vibrant purple fabric. On top of the table sat a large crystal ball, a white ceramic bowl filled half way with water, and a deck of what had looked like hand painted tarot cards. Trunks covered in bright scarves sat on the floor lined against the walls of the tent. The dirt floor had been covered in bright, eccentric rugs.

I had wanted so badly for that gypsy woman to read her cards for me but never got the chance. It had cost twenty dollars, I’d had no money of my own and my date had flat out refused to pay money for some bogus bullshit.

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That was the one and only date he got out of me. Not because he wouldn't pay for something, but because dates were supposed to be fun and he'd been like a wet blanket, sucking all the fun out of the whole night.

Tyson watched me with a blank face through a curtain of dark hair that had fallen forward to cover part of his face.

I wished I knew what he hid behind that blank mask he wore on his handsome face.

"And if I can?" he asked carefully, even his voice betrayed no emotion.

"Can you?" My voice, however, betrayed everything. Not that I was trying to hide anything. Tyson gave me no reason to hide my emotions.

"Yes," he whispered while still watching me through his hair.

I put my hands together below my chin in a silent prayer, made my eyes as big and wide as they could go and stuck out my lower lip, pouting at him. I was willing to bet I looked ridiculous, but did not care. "Please, please, please."

I wanted him to do a reading for me, but I also wanted him to teach me. If he was willing to teach me then I wanted to learn.

He brushed his long hair back behind his ear with lean, tan fingers. His eyes lit with a happiness I had never seen in them before and he flashed me his beautiful smile, blinding me with his white, tooth paste a

d perfection.

I hadn't realized until that moment that he might have been nervous about my reaction to either his bedroom or the strangeness that was his family.

"Sorry, sweetheart, but not today. Today we have something else to do. But, this weekend if you want we can play with tarot cards. I think I might even be able to scrounge up your own deck for you."

I liked the sound of that so I smiled at him. Not a small smile either, but a full blown one. Tyson always seemed to give me what I wanted, this time I had to wait a few days for it but it was still coming.

His smile faded from his face and he suddenly looked far too serious for me. "You should smile more often, sweetheart; you've got a beautiful smile."

That did it, and my smile melted from my face, the happiness shining bright in my eyes dimmed a bit.

"I've never really had much to smile about," I told him honestly.

"That's going to change. I promise."

Again, here was another promise.

I had to change the subject. "What are we doing today?" I asked him.

He let me change the subject and I found myself liking him even more for it if that was possible.

"You're going to learn some things about magic."

Finally.

Now we were talking.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Tyson moved the huge pillows on the floor around until they formed a circle around the rug. He kept two out of the outer ring. Those he placed beside each other inside the circle, they were closer to the tv than the bed.

He instructed me to sit on one of the big pillows he'd placed inside the circle of pillows. I sat with my back to the tv, facing towards the bed on an orange pillow.

He told me that when he normally did serious ceremonial magic he pulled out the rug from underneath the bed and would put his circle around it because it was old and held a great deal of magic. Whatever that meant. I had asked but was told I wasn't ready for that explanation yet. I left it alone but filed a little note away in my head to look it up on my own when I got a chance. Objects could hold great deals of magic? I had no idea. I knew nothing of magic.

For all I knew this whole thing could be a bust and they all had been messing with me this whole time.

I had to trust Tyson, that he knew what he was doing and he wasn't lying to me. So I kept my mouth shut and let him do his own thing.

But I watched every single move he made. I took note of the questions floating around in my head and mentally filed them away for later. I had some serious research to do when I found myself on my own again.

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Tyson moved the bear skin rug off the trunk and carried it to the closet and put it away. I would have protested if I thought he would have listened to me. I didn't bother wasting the words on him, I knew better by now. Tyson only did what Tyson wanted to do.

He unlocked the trunk with a key he had hanging on a chain he had around his neck that he pulled out of his shirt. I hadn't noticed him wearing it before. He unlocked the trunk, then tucked the key still on its chain back under his shirt.

He lifted the top of the trunk and immediately started digging around inside of it. I wanted to get up so badly and cross the room so I could peek over his shoulder to see what he had tucked away in that trunk. I did what I was told and stayed put. Against my better judgement.

He came back with an armful of things and, suddenly I wanted to be anywhere but here. I could not do this. They all seemed so confident that I had magic. I wasn't so sure. And maybe I didn't want to know. What if they were wrong? What if I wasn't anything special and nothing happened? See, this was my problem. Magic wasn't something normal. Normal people weren't gifted with such things as magic and I was painfully normal.

When he realized how wrong they'd been, would Tyson still want to be friends with me? Would he still come over in the middle of the night to fall asleep curled up together on my window seat watching episodes of Friday Night Lights simply because I didn't want to be alone?

I didn't think so.

Suddenly Tyson was kneeling before me. He cupped my jaw and tilted my face up.

“You’re crying. Why are crying, Ariel?”

I hadn’t realized I was crying. Damn. I was always giving myself away.

Why are you crying, Ariel Kimber? Because I’m stupid, that’s why. If I was smart I never would have come over here in the first damn place and set myself up for a world of disappointment.

“Ariel? Why are you crying, sweetheart? I don’t understand. Did something happen? Is it because of what happened with Quinton earlier, because I promise the twins are going to get back your panties for you. It’s likely he didn’t even have time to do anything with them. The twins won’t do anything funny with them, you know that. And, the shit w-”

I covered his hand on my face with my own. I’d never seen him like this before, rambling. He seemed nervous. Was he nervous because of me? Surely not. I needed to get him to stop talking.

“What happens when you find out I don’t have magic?” I blurted. His mouth snapped shut and he frowned at me. “Are you just going to forget about me? Are we not going to be friends anymore? Will you go back to being mean to me? No more Friday Night Lights? I really, really like Tim Riggins and I want to watch more of it, but I want to watch it with you. I don’t want to watch it by myself. I’m tired of being all by myself all the time and I like you. I like the twins and that Julian seemed nice. The others, not so much. And, umm, Quinton seems to really like me, so there’s that. And-”

Tyson placed the hand not cupping my cheek over my mouth. Now it was me who was rambling. I stuck my tongue out, licking his hand. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

A startled laugh burst out of him.

“Always the unexpected with you,” he muttered when he finally stopped laughing.

I wasn’t laughing and I feared maybe I had said too much again. and I probably shouldn’t have licked him. Or, maybe I should have done it sooner. Much, much sooner.

“You have magic, sweetheart. I’d stake my life on it. You don’t know you have it because no one’s ever shown you how to use it before. Lucky for you, now you’ve got a whole lot of people who are more than willing to teach you and show you the ropes. You’ve got nothing to worry about. Okay?”

I nodded in agreement even though I wasn’t certain sure I wanted to. In reassuring me, he’d never answered my many questions and he’d entirely skipped over the most important one. What happens if we discovered I didn’t have magic? He’d conveniently skipped over answering that one. I feared his lack of an answer was an answer and I did not like it.

They only liked me because they thought I had magic. My stomach clenched painfully and I started to cry again. I hadn’t realized I’d stopped until I started again.

“Ariel, Ariel, why are you crying now? There’s nothing to cry about. We just talked about this.”

There was plenty to cry about. I did not like the thought of them not liking me if I didn’t have magic. They thought I was one of four women in the U.S. who had magic and to them, this made me precious. Whatever. That was absolute bullshit. I was special all on my own and there was plenty to like about me without some magical crap. But they didn’t think so. A-hole’s, all of them.

My emotions were all over the place. I went from crying and feeling down on myself one second to feeling pissed off the next.

My blood boiled.

I wasn't their toy or their plaything or something for them to cherish even. If I had magic or not should not matter. They needed to like me for me, and they needed to treat me like a real-life person.

I didn't want my relationship with Tyson and the rest of them to turn into something similar to what I shared with my mother. I didn't want to be another pawn in someone's game. I deserved more than that. I deserved a whole lot more than that.

After the bloody vomiting, the phone call with my mother, my underwear being stolen and now this disappointment, I had had more than enough.

I'd stopped crying again. Thankfully.

I jerked my head free of his hands.

"You know what, Tyson," I snapped. "You can go fuck yourself. You only want me because you think I have magic. The same goes for the rest of those A-hole's. I am who I am, magic be damned, and I'm worth being friends with without it."

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“Girl,” he muttered. “Do not even bullshit me right now. Your mother seriously fucked you all up. She might not see your value, but I do. We all do.”

Yeah, that was what I was afraid of. Being another pawn. He only saw my value because he thought I was one of four.

My body trembled with a rage I wasn’t used to feeling and my skin began to tingle. I felt like my insides were boiling.

This wasn’t me. I wasn’t like this. I didn’t want to be out of control, but I didn’t know how to stop it.

“Ariel, please calm down and listen to me. If you would just listen and actually hear what I’m saying to you you wouldn’t be acting like this. You’re acting like a damn brat and-”

That did it.

I felt like I was coming out of my skin.

How dare he call me a brat. How dare he!

I stood up, leaned over so I was in his face, and shouted, “Enough!” I poured all of my emotion, everything I was feeling, into that one word.

The room crackled with energy and all the hair on my body rose. My arms were covered in goose bumps. The hair on my head floated around my shoulders, as if it

had a life of its own.

I gasped in shock.

What was happening to me?

“Holy shit,” Tyson whispered from his place on the floor at my feet.

I clenched my fists tightly in an attempt to regain control over my emotions and looked down at him. His eyes shined brightly and he wore a look of awe on his face. His head swiveled from side to side as he looked around his bedroom.

I followed his movements with my own eyes and my mouth dropped open in surprise.

“How?” I asked.

The candles on his nightstands were lit, glowing softly. The candles on the window sills and the tv stand we

re doing the same. The lights on the ceiling were flickering off and on and the gauzy curtain around his bed fluttered to life.

Tyson surprised me by laughing.

“Worried she doesn’t have magic,” he sputtered in between his laughter. “Fucking hilarious.”

I frowned down at him as he lay back, sprawling out over the rug. He clutched his stomach and rolled to his side while laughing hysterically.

I calmed down as he laughed and I felt my hair go back to normal. All the energy

drained out of me, leaving me utterly exhausted.

“What the hell was that?” I asked in a quiet, unsure voice.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” a deep, masculine voice rumbled from the doorway.

Tyson immediately stopped laughing. I turned to find Quinton standing in Tyson’s open doorway with an angry frown on his face and his arms crossed over his chest. He looked like a pissed off parent come to scold his naughty children.

A semi-hysterical giggle escaped me before I could shut it down. I clamped a hand over my mouth and looked down at Tyson with wide eyes.

Were we in trouble?

I spread my fingers wide and whispered loudly to Tyson, “Uncle Quinton looks mad. I think he’s come to spank us and maybe put us in time out.”

Tyson’s mouth fell open before he burst out laughing again.

Goodness, I was out of control.

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I started laughing, I couldn't help myself.

Chapter Twenty-four

The door banged shut loudly, making me jump. My laughter died as abruptly as it had arrived.

"Someone care to tell me what in the fuck is going on here," Quinton growled. It wasn't a suggestion either, more like a demand.

I opened my mouth and promptly snapped it shut. Holy crap, how to explain when I didn't understand myself. There'd been a bit of a drama which I'd created myself. Then I cried because I'd gotten over emotional because of said drama. So, basically, I made myself cry. Damn. And then I yelled at Tyson. Double damn. I seriously owed him an apology.

I ran my fingers over my forehead, smoothing out non-existent wrinkles in a nervous gesture. I wasn't very good with apologies.

"I'm sorry, Tyson," I mumbled while staring at my feet.

"I'm sorry, too," he said. "You know, for calling you a brat and all that."

"You did what?" Quinton barked angrily.

Tyson sighed and climbed to his feet. "Why are you in my bedroom, Uncle?"

I was thinking nobody liked having Quinton barge into their bedroom uninvited. I had a feeling he did it all the time.

“I felt something big coming from your room so I came to make sure you both were alright.”

Well, that was nice of him, but totally unnecessary.

“What you felt was Ariel,” Tyson stated proudly. He gestured around the room with his hand. “She lit this place up.”

Quinton stared at me with one eyebrow raised high up on his forehead. I stared right back, but without the eyebrow raising. I didn’t know how to do that.

“Show me,” he demanded.

“Umm...” I mumbled. “I don’t know how.”

The other eyebrow went up. I think I confused him. I know I confused myself at times.

“Let’s start small,” Tyson said. He sat back down on the oversized cushion and stretched his legs out in front of him. He patted the cushion beside him and grinned at me. “Sit your sweet ass down, girl.”

I did as I was told and sat down beside him. His warm hand landed on my thigh and he gave me a gentle squeeze. My heart skipped a beat as I watched Quinton glare at Tyson’s hand on my leg. He let out a deep sigh, then sat down on the other side of me. Thankfully, he didn’t try to touch me. I had enough weirdness for one day, thank you very much.

Quinton sat on the floor instead of a cushion. He pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapped his arms around his legs and rested his head atop a jean covered knee. He looked completely at ease with himself. I'd never seen him looking so relaxed before. Normally, he seemed so intense and angry. I felt like he was letting me see a different side to himself, one I don't think many people got to see.

He tilted his head to the side and watched me watch him. His eyes had lost their intensity, their darkness. They were thoughtful and kind. So much like Tyson's eyes when he looked at me. I had a strong urge to reach out and touch him. This scary, intense man made someone throw up their own blood simply because they hadn't been nice to me. Admittedly, he didn't seem like a very good person, but I kind of liked him. He intrigued me even though he frightened me.

He smiled at me. The first genuine smile I'd received from him. It might have even been the first time I'd seen him smile, I wasn't sure.

"What?" He asked quietly.

In this moment, he seemed so normal.

"We'll start with candles for today," Tyson said, breaking my moment with Quinton. "Magic takes a toll on your body. You've used it for the first time today and you used more energy than a beginner should. You'll need food soon to refuel. We don't want to wear you out, so candles it is. We already know you can do that. Tomorrow we will work on something else, and I have lots of books for you to read."

I blinked at Quinton. I had missed half of what Tyson had said because I'd been too busy staring at his Uncle.

"Sure," I said, having no idea what I was agreeing to. Had I been asked a question?

Quinton's grin turned into a smile and I found myself blinking at him for an entirely different reason. A hand appeared in front of my face, blocking Quinton from my view. Tyson impatiently snapped his fingers in my face.

"Ariel," he snapped at me.

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Oh geez, he sounded mad.

I leaned forward and playfully nipped at his fingers.

“Stop that,” he laughed at me.

“So tell me what I’m supposed to do with these candles.” I smirked at him, glad he was no longer annoyed with me.

He shook his head at me, muttering something I couldn’t hear under his breath while he dug through the pile of things he’d pulled out of the trunk.

Tyson slapped down three square, silver candlestick holders in front of me. He placed white candlesticks in each holder.

Tyson looked at me, expectantly. “Light them up, Ariel,” he commanded.

I would have, if I had known how. They had never explained it to me. Last time had been entirely based on my emotion.

“I don’t know how,” I told them honestly.

“It comes from within,” Tyson told me. “Think about it. Think about the wick. Think about it lighting. Think about the flame. It’s yours to command. All yours. Own it.”

All mine.

The flame was all mine.

They were the brothers of the flame.

I stared at the candles with my mind blank. I wished them to light. Nothing happened.

Fuck.

I concentrated on those candles and focused. Light. Light. Light.

Like it was going to be that easy. Please. I blew out a frustrated breath and tried to relax my body. I cleared my mind and focused on those three white candles.

That flame was mine, I owned it. After what I did earlier this should have been a cake walk for me. Then again, I was tired. After what had exploded out of me earlier I was left feeling slightly empty on the inside. But I had to do this. I had to. Not because they expected it of me, but because I wanted it for myself. I wanted to have magic and I wanted to be special.

Focus, Ariel Kimber.

I pictured the candles in my mind, all three of them and in my mind's eye I willed them to light.

I opened my eyes, snapped my fingers in their direction and the flames burst to life.

Brothers of the flame, indeed.

Both Tyson and Quinton gasped in shock as all three flames burned brightly.

They were brothers of the flame no more. They had gained a girl. They had gained

me.

Tyson had been right all a

long, I had magic inside me. My lips curled up in a victorious smile. I wasn't scared or frightened about having magic inside of me. I was absolutely thrilled. The possibilities were endless. Finally, things in my life were looking up.

"Babe," Quinton called. I turned my head to see him grinning broadly at me. "You did good. Welcome to the club." He stood in one fluid movement, gracefully. "I'll leave you two to each other's company now and I'll send someone up with a tray of food for you. I know you've got to be starving."

He looked to Tyson and raised an eyebrow arrogantly. "You'll take care of her," he said. Not a question but a statement of fact. Ah, there he was.

Tyson sighed. "I was going to do that anyway. I didn't need to be told, Uncle," he grumbled.

"Just do as you're told, Nephew, or I'll have her stay with me tonight." Quinton snapped as he sauntered out of the room.

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I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me as he walked away. He was out of control, but at least I got to discover how great his ass looked in a pair of jeans as he walked away.

"Stop checking out my Uncle's ass," Tyson said, teasing me.

My mouth dropped open and I turned to him, at a loss for words. I felt my cheeks heat and knew they'd soon be flaming red. He'd just caught me staring at Quinton's ass.

He smiled his bright smile at me, knowingly, and I knew he wasn't mad.

I yawned, unexpectedly. A wave of exhaustion washed over me as my stomach growled.

"Hey," he leaned into me. "How about we call it quits with the magic for today. You don't have to learn everything in one day. There will be plenty of time for learning later. For now, you need food and rest. It's been a long damn day, for all of us. I could use some food and rest, too. How about we pile all of these pillows up into a nice nest, eat whatever Uncle Quinton sends up and watch some more Friday Night Lights. Does that sound alright with you, sweetheart?"

Did that sound alright with me? Was he crazy? Don't answer that, I knew he was. I nodded my head. That sounded like the perfect way to spend our night after the day we'd had.

I helped Tyson make a comfortable pile of his giant pillows. He pulled the shiny

black sheet off of his bed and carefully laid it on top of the pillows. He then brought over his burgundy comforter and spread it out on top of everything. He brought over the pillows from his bed last. Those he piled up at the head of what Tyson had called our nest.

He lifted the corner of his comforter, invitingly.

“Climb in,” he told me. “You settle in while I start up the show.”

I did as he bid and crawled under the blanket. It made me lazy and selfish, but I liked that he always took care of me. No one before him had ever tried.

I propped myself up against the pile of pillows from his bed and settled in under the blanket. The massive pillows were surprisingly comfortable to lay on.

Tyson brought up the show on Netflix and climbed under the blanket with me.

We had settled beside each other comfortably and he was going to hit play when there was a knock on the door Julian entered the room before Tyson could call out a greeting. Julian walked into the room carrying a tray covered in food. My stomach rumbled in appreciation at the sight of the food.

What was Julian, some type of man servant of Quinton’s? As far as I knew, Julian didn’t even live here. Now he was serving us our meals. What the hell?

Tyson patted the comforter over his lap and smiled back at Julian. “You can put it down right here, buddy,” he said. There was nothing but kindness in his voice.

Julian came forward, placed the tray on Tyson’s lap and winked at me.

“Enjoy your food, honey,” he told me with a small smile on his face. “I heard you did

good today and need to keep up your strength.”

I gave him a small smile back in return and he left.

Tyson and I ate the sandwiches and fruit we had been brought while we watched our show.

I fell asleep cradled in his strong arms and that night I dreamed of nothing.

Chapter Twenty-five

“I have a girlfriend,” someone was saying. “She’s pretty, she puts out and she didn’t bitch about me taking off for the summer. It works for me and I’m not ready to give it up for some teenager still in high school. Especially not one I’m going to have to share.”

“And this is my problem now?” I recognized that darkly masculine voice as Quinton’s.

“I agree with Damien.” Said a third male voice. “She’s too young. I’m not ready to give up my social life for a girl I don’t even know and am expected to share.”

“By social life I assume you mean dating and sleeping with random’s you bring home with you?” Julian asked dryly. I easily recognized his voice as well. The fact I didn’t recognize the other two let me know who they were. Damien and Dash.

I knew they were talking about me.

“What? Do you want to tie yourself to a teenage girl you have to share with the rest of us? How’s that fair? Am I just supposed to get in line and wait my turn? She doesn’t even like me.”

“Of course she doesn’t like you, Damien. Maybe you should try something other than being a dick to her.”

“Fuck you, Julian,” Damien growled. I realized Damien had been the first one I heard speaking. The one with a girlfriend.

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Well, he could keep his girlfriend for all I cared. Who did he think he was? I certainly didn't want to date him. And as far as him thinking I didn't like him? I didn't get that because I had never even so much as spoken a single word to him. Hell, as far as I could remember I'd only ever been around him the one time, and I had kind of liked him then because he hadn't been insta friendly towards me, he'd just seemed real. Apparently, he really was a dick. I didn't like him so much anymore. Go figure.

I thought about those thick, feminine like eyelashes that framed those light, light brown eyes. Those hollowed out, haughty cheekbones. His sun kissed, golden skin. He was a dick, for sure, but a really, really pretty one. Damn shame if you asked me.

I thought about what I remembered about the person behind one of those other voices. Dash. I remembered he had bright red hair, a big, full beard and light grey eyes filled with hideous demons. Other than an exchange of our names we'd never even had a conversation.

So why were they all talking about me like this? Like I wanted, or expected them all to date me. Had I given them the impression that I was interested in them all in some sort of romantic way? I didn't think I had. At least not with these four. Tyson and the salt and pepper twins however... Now that was an entirely different story. I had no idea what in the hell I was doing with those three, but they didn't seem to mind the way things were going so I wasn't even going to try and dissect it for fear if I did it might fall apart inside the mess that is my head. I was learning, if it's a good thing to simply leave it be.

But this, what these A-hole's were talking about. I felt like I was missing something here, something important.

I pressed my back against the wall and willed my heart to not beat out of my chest. Eavesdropping wasn't something I would normally take part in, but this was too good for me to walk away from. It hadn't been intentional on my part, honest. I had woken up starving with my stomach making angry noises at me so I'd gone in search of something to appease the hunger. And where does one go to find food? The kitchen, of course. Which happened to be where these fools were gathered, talking about me, no less. And keeping me from finding something to eat.

Trust me when I say I wished I had never heard this particular conversation. Which was the thing about eavesdropping, wasn't it? But for the life of me I couldn't seem to walk away and maybe I would have been able to if they hadn't been talking about me.

"You know," Julian said quietly, "she might be different from the rest and none of this will matter."

"What are you talking about?" Quinton asked. "We know she has magic, she's one of us. She's ours. We've finally all agreed on it. We're keeping her and that's that."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Then what are you talking about?" I heard the anger creeping its way into Quinton's voice and was once again thankful it wasn't aimed in my direction.

The anger in his voice reminded me of Tyson whom I hoped didn't wake up and find me missing then come in search of me. I did not want to get caught listening in on a conversation that had in all likelihood never been intended for me to hear.

"She might not want to be with any of us. Just because that's how it worked out for the rest of the covens who have women does not mean that's how it's going to work out for us. Those other women were raised knowing what they are, and were raised

since birth expected to be with multiple men in their covens. Ariel wasn't raised that way. For all we know she might find the idea of being with more than one person repugnant. What then, Quint? It's not like we can force her to be with us. No. Stop, Quint. I know what you're going to say. I'm not saying she's not staying with us if she wants to. We all shared the same dream right before she showed up here. I know she belongs with us. We all know it, even if some of us are trying to fight it, have been trying to fight it since the dream. All I'm saying is she might not want that for herself and we can't force it on her, and we need to be prepared for it just in case. That's all I'm saying."

There was a long, pregnant pause where I could practically hear them thinking in the other room.

It was Damien who spoke first into the loaded silence. "We can't let that happen."

"So quick to change your tune, my friend," Quinton said smugly.

"There are no guarantees in this life, Quint," Dash said. I thought he sounded bitter. "You of all people should know that. She might even choose another coven."

"Annabell was not my fault," Quinton growled.

Who was thi

s Annabell person, and what the hell did she have to do with me?

A big hand came out of the dark and landed on my shoulder making me jump. Lucky for me I didn't scream.

I looked at Addison with big, frantic eyes. I put my finger to my lips, silently begging him to keep quiet. I pleaded with my eyes as much as I could in the dark hallway.

“Annabell was-“

Addison’s eyes flashed dangerously when this Annabell’s name was said by Julian. His hand moved from my shoulder to my bicep where he squeezed almost painfully. He pulled on my arm, dragging me down the hallway, away from the kitchen and the conversation I wasn’t supposed to be listening to. We cleared the hallway and he kept on moving with me behind him the whole way. Up the stairs we went. He didn’t hesitate at the top of the stairs, going left towards the room he shared with Abel.

I should have protested being manhandled this way by Addison. Tyson could wake up at any second and wonder where I’d gone off too. I didn’t want to worry him needlessly.

Addison pushed me into his room and shut the door quietly behind us.

“What’s going on?” Abel asked sleepily as he sat up in his white bed. “I thought she was sleeping with that prick Tyson tonight.” He flashed me a flirtatious grin that looked more adorable than anything else because his hair was sticking up around his head every which way. “Not that I’m complaining about you being here now. You’re more than welcome to sleep in here with us anytime you want to.”

He flung his white comforter aside and scooted closer to the wall. He patted the bed in invitation. “Come on, pretty girl. Get in here.”

“I found her downstairs, listening in on the guys talking about that bitch, Annabell.”

“Shit,” Abel hissed.

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Now they both looked angry. I wanted to run back to the safety of Tyson's room and hide out.

"What did you hear?" Abel growled at me as Addison put his hand in my lower back and pushed me forward.

I stumbled forward with the force of it and turned to glare at him. He returned the glare, only his was far fiercer than mine, and it looked better on him than I imagined mine looked on me.

"She fucked Ty all up by trying to put him and Quinton against each other and she tried to tear us apart. If not for Quint being the asshole that he is we wouldn't still be together today."

I shook my head. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"So you didn't hear anything about Annabell?" He sounded like he didn't believe me.

"All Quinton said is that Annabell wasn't his fault." I held my hands up as if to ward him off. I did not like him shoving me in his brother's direction. I did not like him shoving me at all. "I went downstairs to get something to eat and the only reason I hid and listened is because they were talking about me and I felt I had a right to know what they were saying. You don't need to be mean to me when I didn't do anything wrong."

Okay, admittedly, eavesdropping is wrong, but I wasn't going to admit it out loud.

“Back off, twin,” Abel said as he moved away from the wall and started to scoot across the bed.

Addison’s fists clenched at his sides and I took an unsteady step back, away from him.

Why, oh why had I not stayed in Tyson’s room where I’d been safe from this madness?

Addison’s chest rose and fell as he blew out a huge breath. He looked down at his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides and frowned.

“I’m sorry, Ariel” he whispered fiercely. “I would never hurt you, I hope you know that.”

I stared at him in silence. I had thought he wasn’t capable of hurting me until he shoved me, now I wasn’t so sure. I had been on the wrong side of someone else’s anger all my life, I didn’t want to take on any more.

I backed up a step, but it did me no good because he stood between me and the door. Backing up put me closer to Abel.

“Now you’ve done it, twin.” Abel told his brother quietly. Then wrapped his arms around me from behind and dragged me back across his soft sheet. The sheet was black and I wondered if Addison’s sheet was white. The salt and pepper twins were a bit of a conundrum, I didn’t think I would ever understand them.

They seemed to like the colors black and white, playing into my nicknames for them. I pictured them sitting in a dark, rustic room at a table before a roaring fire set in a massive fireplace. They sat directly across from each other. Between them was a carefully placed chess board covered in elegant black and white pieces. Addison sat

forward in his chair and moved a black piece. Abel did the same with a white piece. I knew without a doubt the game would last for hours and neither would come out the victor, they'd end in a deadlock.

Abel shook me gently and I blinked, leaving thoughts of chess behind.

“Where did you go just now?” he whispered in my ear.

I shook my head and remained silent. There was no way I'd be telling them about any of the weird thoughts floating around in my head on the daily. Not gonna happen.

“Who is Annabell?” I asked bravely as Abel laid down, taking me with him. His front pressed tightly to my back. One arm moved beneath my head so I rested on it like a pillow. He dragged the white comforter up our bodies until it met my chin. Then he slid his arm beneath the blanket, curved it around my hip. Ever so slowly his hand moved up my stomach. I sucked in a sharp breath as his fingers trailed over my belly button and didn't stop until they made it to my breasts, leaving a trail of heat burning across my middle. The palm of his hand pressed into my skin and he spread his fingers wide, brushing against my breasts.

Addison's face appeared before me, making me flinch in surprise. I'd forgotten all about him, Abel had made me forget all about his twin with a simple touch of his hand.

“No,” Addison whispered vehemently. “You do not get to be afraid of me. You do not get to flinch because of me. I won't allow it. I would never, not ever hurt you. If you're frightened of me then you need to get over it. I can be an ass and I can be harsh, but I'll never harm you physically.”

I thought that last statement interesting. Did that mean he'd likely harm me emotionally? I didn't like the sound of that, not in the least bit.

“You keep shoving me-” I started to say when he cut me off.

“But have I hurt you?” he asked quietly.

I thought about his question, really thought about it and shook my head. No, he had never physically harmed me. Surprised me, yes. Shocked me, yes. And he’d certainly frightened me when he’d shoved me into their room and earlier when he’d shoved me down on top of Abel. But I was more so frightened by his anger with me, I didn’t think he’d actually hurt me. And I was upset because I didn’t want him to be angry with me. He wasn’t like my mother.

“Okay,” I whispered, unsure if I was agreeing with him or lying to him. It had been a long day and I didn’t think I could think straight. “I’m tired,” I told him honestly.

And hungry. I was still very hungry, but I’d have to wait to eat. No way was I going back down to the kitchen.

“Do you still want to hear about Annabell?” Addison whispered gently as he ran the back of his hand across my exposed cheek.

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I nodded. Yes, yes I did. I was too nosy for my own good and wanted to know everything I possibly could about them. Sleep could wait.

“Move over.”

Abel scooted back, taking me with him. Addison lifted the corner of the white blanket and climbed in. I felt panic for a brief moment at the thought of being stuck between the two of them but it didn't last. Probably because Addison didn't try to touch me. He was a lot more reserved with his physical affections than his twin, unless he was shoving me, that is. I appreciated that he withheld his touch, I wasn't ready for a whole lot more at this point.

Abel snuggled into my back as Addison shoved both his hands behind his head. The muscles in Addison's arms bulged beneath his t-shirt and I had to force myself to look away. When I was around them like this it was

easy to forget how big they were. Addison's bulging muscles were a blatant reminder of their sheer size. Abel muttered something under his breath and the lights winked out.

I tensed, finding myself afraid of the dark.

“Look up,” Abel whispered in my ear.

I did and my lips curved up in a small smile. The entire ceiling was covered in the neon light of hundreds of glow in the dark stars. There was no pattern I could make out, no reason to their placement.

“My twin doesn’t like the dark, either,” Addison muttered.

I stiffened and turned my head to glare at him. “I’m not afraid of the dark.”

I so totally was afraid of the dark. Why did they have to keep bringing it up?

“Right,” Abel drawled.

I wanted to smack the both of them.

“Dicks,” I muttered angrily.

Addison coughed hard to cover up his laughter. Abel didn’t bother to hide his.

I sighed heavily and tried to roll away from Abel’s embrace. He squeezed me, not letting me move an inch away from him.

“Sorry, sorry.” Abel said. “We won’t laugh at you anymore, I swear it. And, if you recall, my brother did say I did not care for the dark, either. The stars are up there for me.” I felt him shrug his shoulders. “I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

I rolled my eyes. Good for him. He could admit it all he wanted, he wouldn’t get the same from me.

“Annabell is one of the three. Well, technically it’s four now with you, but no one knows about you besides us so we don’t have to count you in with those other bitches just yet.”

Abel groaned loudly. “Twin.”

“What? They’re bitches and you know it. All three of them are. Annabell is probably

the worst of all of them.”

“Twin, seriously,” Abel butted in, “get on with it.”

“Fine, fine,” Addison grumbled. “Annabell is a stuck up, thinks her shit doesn’t stink, vile bitch. See, the thing is, if you’re born with magic and you have a vagina then you’re raised like a princess and given your every heart’s desire. And you’re told you can pick whatever coven of your choosing to join. Well, anyone can pick their own coven but it’s different with the girls. Years ago, I mean way the fuck back in the day, it was decided that the coven the female chose would share her. That way there would be no inner fighting over who gets the girl. It was also the best way to ensure the safety and the happiness of the thing we covet most in life. Every coven dreams of having their own female, but it’s only a dream and no one expects it to ever become a reality.”

I absolutely did not like the way this conversation was going, but it did explain the conversation I’d listened in on outside of the kitchen. They did expect me to date them all. Well, save for the two who thought I was too young and didn’t seem to like me. I was beginning to think this was all one long dream I didn’t know how to wake up from. Who the hell were these people?

Brothers of the flame.

That’s what crazy Uncle Quinton had called them. What did that even mean?

“We never believed for a second that we would be blessed enough to have a female witch of our own. Quinton is angry, hateful and has always done shit that makes him seem like a stone-cold motherfucker. He’s our leader and I don’t think there’s many people who would see all of that as a potentially good catch. Until you get a good look at his bank account, that is. Quinton is loaded. Ty’s got more money and he used to be a lot less like Quinton. He was once the nicest guy we knew, and he never, not

ever, lost his temper. It wasn't until after Annabell that he became more like his Uncle."

It was hard to imagine the Tyson he was talking about. I couldn't line him up with the Tyson I had met on the first day of school. Even now that we were friends and he treated me with care I could still sense the darkness within him just below the surface. At every moment he could snap, the switch to his temper flipped and then he'd turn into the aggressive asshole I'd first met. He was like a caged animal. With Quinton, he was an animal who'd long since escaped the confines of his cage and he had no leash. I had no problem with believing the things he'd said about Quinton because that was simply the man he was, he didn't try to hide it. I really liked this about Quinton.

"When Annabell turned seventeen she decided to go from coven to coven to see if she could find a place better suited for her than the coven she was born in to. She didn't want to stay where she was. Her father had died when she was just a little girl and her mother had died while giving birth to her. The Elders in her father's coven raised her. Growing up with their children, their sons, she was treated better than the rest of the children and it rotted her on the inside. She's a vicious, spoiled bitch and the men she grew up with knew it. Still, they wanted to keep her for themselves. She, however, wanted more for herself. The only covens she stayed with for any length of time were the ones with the wealthiest people, like Quint and Ty. Not all covens are well off like ours is. She showed up here right after Ty's parents died. He was a vulnerable wreck and Quinton was closed off from the rest of us and angrier than his usual self. She latched on to Ty like a leech and she tried to bleed him dry. She wanted to manipulate him into being her puppet. She used him and tried to turn him against Quinton because she didn't like him. She didn't like most of us. In fact, the only one's she liked were Ty, Julian and Damien.

"She got to Ty because he was drowning in his grief and needed something to focus on. What's better than a pretty girl with magic who sleeps with you and whispers

sweet things in your ear when you're having a bad day. We're taught from birth that there isn't anything better than a girl with magic. Hell, she doesn't even have to be pretty for people to desire her. Lucky for us you're pretty and sweet."

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Abel's body shook with laughter from behind me. I didn't find any of this tale to be amusing, though, I appreciated him calling me pretty. I had a ball of dread sitting like a brick in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't so sure I wanted to know about Annabell anymore, and I certainly wasn't sure I wanted to hear about what she'd done to Tyson and what Quinton had done to her in return.

Abel stopped laughing. He put pressure on the hand splayed between my breasts and pushed me back until there was no longer any space between our bodies.

Addison placed his big hand on top of my head and he absently played with my hair while he continued on with his story.

"She had Tyson, too, she had all of him, heart and soul. He bought her things, expensive purses and jewelry and shoes. Clothes, whatever she wanted he bought for her. We thought we were going to be stuck with her for the long haul and my twin and I were miserable. For a while we thought we were going to have to leave our coven and find another one. I mean, we get the whole sharing thing, we don't even mind it. We always knew we'd share with each other because we share everything, sharing with our brothers isn't such a big deal to us. Not only that, but it's something we are all taught as acceptable so long as she has magic. But the thought of putting that bitch in-between my twin and I turned my stomach. Not even for Ty's happiness could we pull that off. We didn't even try to hide our distaste for the greedy cow. She moved from Ty's bed to Julian's bed to Damien's bed. All the while she whispered in their ears, telling them she loved them one second, and trying to turn them against us in the next. We thought it was weird that she only worked on those three and we brought our concerns to Quinton. Every day we watched in horror as she pulled our brothers further and further away from us. Too lost in his own sorrow, Quinton hadn't

noticed a damn thing until we said something to him. Finally, it was the thing that snapped him out of his grief and he started paying attention again. Quinton checked in with the other covens she'd visited the longest and what they told him... Ariel, it was bad. She'd gone from coven to coven and handpicked the ones she liked. She had planned on splitting us all up and creating her own coven, she wanted to rule us all. And the fucked-up part is she used magic on everyone she slept with, that's how she got them on her side. She broke one of our most sacred laws and because she was female there wasn't shit we could do about it."

"Quinton lost his damn mind," Abel added quietly. "I thought he was going to kill her anyway and damn the consequences. She almost tore our family apart and she did the same thing to three other covens. Some of them still aren't recovered from her. She turned brother against brother. Even if she did use magic to get what she wanted out of them, their betrayal still stung. If it weren't for Quinton our family would likely be in ruin after Annabell."

"Quinton attacked Tyson," Addison said, taking the story over once again. "They beat the shit out of each other, all the while hurling horrible insults at each other. It took four of us to pry them apart. When Quinton told us the truth, that she was stealing members from each coven so she could build her own and she'd used magic to do it, all so she could be some sort of Queen. Well, it's safe to say that didn't go over well amongst us. We finally stopped fighting each other. The other covens she'd played with wanted their pound of flesh from her. The Elders wanted to lock her away for her own safety. What they really wanted to do was protect her from the rest of us all because she had a vagina. And her original coven, well they wanted her back because they loved her and she hadn't even had to use magic on them to gain their love and loyalty. They loved her because she was a beautiful girl with magic."

When Addison paused, Abel picked up the story for him. "We were told by the Council of Elders to send her back to her original coven. To our surprise, Quinton agreed."

“But Quinton is Quinton,” Addison said. “You don’t fuck with his family and simply walk away from it unharmed. He made an example out of Annabell, he wanted the other covens to know just who they were dealing with if they fucked with us. He made something special just for her and he mixed it in with her facewash. It ruined half of her face, Ariel. And I mean ruined. Half her face looks like it was shoved in an open fire pit. Annabell the Beautiful had her beauty stolen from her which is what Quinton had wanted. Without her beauty, she’s forced to rely on her charm. Which is unfortunate for her because she’s rotten to the core.”

“Dash blames Quinton for letting Annabell get so close.”

Ah. Abel’s words explained something I had been curious about having heard outside the kitchen.

“Quinton is scary,” I whispered to the both of them.

“Quinton is scary,” they both agreed in unison.

I shivered, thankful I didn’t have to sleep alone in the dark on this night.

> I understood them better now, if only a little and my heart hurt for Tyson. He was quickly becoming my favorite and the thought of someone purposefully harming him had my chest clenching painfully. I didn’t so much care about Julian or Damien’s broken hearts because they didn’t mean anything to me yet.

It was the yet on the end of that sentence that frightened me. I didn’t think I wanted to care for all of them, but I was certain I didn’t want to have an intimate relationship with all of them.

I thought about their story of Annabell the Beautiful, the treacherous cow, and I knew I was in over my head. I couldn’t have a relationship with simply one of them, they

wouldn't allow it. They were a package deal and it seemed there would come a time when I had to choose; all or nothing.

Even with Addison watching over me and Abel holding on to me tightly my sleep was restless and filled with disturbing things.

I dreamed of a raven-haired beauty. She had the blackest eyes I had ever seen and plump, ruby red lips. She stood before a large, oval shaped mirror, naked. She had small, high breasts with tiny, dark nipples and a narrow waist. I thought she was beautiful in the face, but childlike in body.

She raised her hand and laid her palm flat against the mirror, covering up half her face. Slowly, the visible side of her face melted down to nothing but gruesome burns. Even half her mouth was ruined, forever drooping in a melted frown.

Annabell.

I dreamed of Annabell.

And somehow, I knew that was exactly what she looked like in real life.

Over and over again, she pressed her hand to the mirror, covering half her face. And over and over again, I watched as the other half of her face melted away. It felt like it lasted for hours and when I finally woke up in the morning I felt like I had every tiny detail of her body memorized, even the ruined side of her face.

Yes, Uncle Quinton was definitely a scary dude to have done that to her.

A small part of me, a part I'd never admit to anyone else, felt like my luck might have changed simply by having Quinton in my life.

I spent the weekend going between Tyson's room and the twin's room. They gifted me with books about magic, candles and answered any question I threw their way. They taught me things, incredible things about magic and I learned a lot from them.

I didn't go downstairs again until it was time to get ready for school on Monday morning. I didn't have to see the rest of them the whole weekend. I didn't know if I was excited about this or disappointed.

Chapter Twenty-six

Shit.

He hadn't been there when I'd gone into the bathroom, but he was certainly there now. And with his eyes locked on me I knew he was propped up against the wall waiting for me to leave the bathroom.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I frowned at him. I did not need whatever this was going to be and I certainly did not want to be alone with him. Not ever.

“What do you want, Chuck?”

He frowned at me. “It’s Chucky, not Chuck.”

I almost laughed. Chucky’s the name of a cute little boy with pudgy cheeks and a freckled nose. A little boy with short, messy dark brown hair who wore one of those ugly horizontally striped shirts moms, for whatever reason, always make their little boys wear. That was a Chucky. Chucky was not the name of an almost full grown boy man. At least not a self-respecting one. He should have lost the y after middle school. But, whatever, it wasn’t my name.

“Okay, Chucky, I’ll ask again, what do you want?”

“You don’t have to be a bitch, Ariel.”

He was right, I didn’t have to be a bitch, but he also didn’t deserve kindness from me either. I looked at him and decided to wait him out.

He didn’t make me wait long.

He blew out a deep breath and stared down at his tennis shoes. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, careful.

“While I was in the hospital I had a lot of time on my hands and nothing to do but think. I thought a lot about you. Actually, you’re pretty much the only thing I really think about now.”

He had a lot of time on his hands? To my knowledge, he’d been in the hospital for a whole two days. Two.

He shook his hands out at his sides then balled them into tight fists. He was nervous about something. Being alone with me? Did I make him nervous now? Why did that thought bother me so much?

I had a bad, bad feeling about where this was going.

“On the first day of school, what I did to you,” he shook his head while still looking down at his shoes. “I should never have done that, not to you of all people. And I’m so sorry, Ariel, so very sorry.”

That dreaded day was always coming back to bite me on the ass. I couldn’t escape it. Wait, had he said not to me of all people? Did that mean he’d be cool with treating other people in such a way? He was such an A-hole.

“Listen, Chuck-”

“Chucky.”

“Whatever,” I rolled my eyes. “I need to get back to class so thanks for the apology and I’ll be seeing you.”

I started walking away but stopped short when he did the most unexpected thing. He dropped to his knees in front of me. His hands came up and he placed them together, palm against palm in a prayer position. The look in his eyes confused me; he looked

frantic.

What was going on?

“Uh, Chuck-”

He let that one go. Big of him. “Ariel, please, please, I need you to forgive me.”

I looked at him on his knees before me, begging me to forgive him. There were no dimples out now. He’d never looked this sincere before.

“Why do you care so much, Chuck? Why is this so important to you?”

Why are you on your knees before me? Why do you seem like a different person than you were last week? These were the questions I really wanted answers too but didn’t feel brave enough to ask.

Why? Why? Why?

“It’s important to me.” He shuffled closer to me and I had to fight off the urge to take a step back. This was too close for comfort and he was being a weirdo. “You’re important to me. So very important. They had to sedate me in the ambulance and when I woke up in the hospital you were the only thing I could think about. It’s actually kind of weird. Even though you were a freak with piercings and with the goth thing I still thought you were hot and I wanted to have sex with you but... Now it’s different. It’s so much more. Ever since waking up in the hospital all I can think about is how beautiful you are, how sweet, how perfect you are and how I’d do anything, anything for you. Ariel, I need you to forgive me. Please, please.”

He started to cry. Fat, silent tears slid down his face as he bent forward and wrapped his arms around my thighs. He held on tightly like he never wanted to let me go.

Um... No?

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What did one say in this type of situation? I had no freaking clue.

I patted him on top of his head as if he were a dog. “There, there,” I told him as I gave him one last pat on the head. Lame, Ariel Kimber. I almost shrugged. What could I say, holding hands and soothing hurts wasn’t really my specialty.

“Please,” he whined as he rubbed his face against my thigh, way too close to my crotch for comfort. “Forgive me.”

“Okay, Chuck, I forgive you.” I lied to him.

“Promise?” He whispered.

“Sure,” I lied some more, beyond caring at this point.

He relaxed against my legs and his arms loosened their hold on me. Now how did I scrape him off of me the rest of the way?

“Thank you, thank you,” he chanted over and over again with his face still pressed up against my thigh. He rubbed his nose against my leg getting closer and closer to my crotch.

Alright, this was taking things too far. I’d had more than enough and I’d been nicer than anybody I knew probably would have been to him.

“Chuck, you need to get your face away from my crotch and take your hands off of me,” I said in a quiet, careful voice.

Immediately, he sat back, his arms

loosened and he let me go. He sat back on his heels, blinked and stared up at me with big eyes.

“Whatever you want, Ariel.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

Before I could tell him to get off his feet the bell rang and the hallway flooded with people. Oh, holy shit, I did not need this on top of everything else.

The vomiting up blood incident was all anyone could talk about and I’d been invisible all day because of it. Even the twins and all their masculine beauty was lost to the background of what had happened in the courtyard on Thursday. This was a game changer and would put me back on the high school drama radar.

“Get up,” I hissed. “Right now.”

He didn’t squabble and immediately climbed to his feet. This was not normal behavior, minutes ago he’d been clinging to me and now he was following my every command without even the tiniest of protests. The whole thing was bizarre, I tell you.

He grinned at me and his dimples came out. I frowned at him, not understanding what he had to smile about.

“Whatever you say, Ariel,” he semi repeated.

Whatever you want, Ariel. Whatever you say, Ariel. What did he even mean by that? Who was this person? Had Chucky had a lobotomy while he’d been in the hospital? I had a strong urge to smack him upside his dimpled face.

“Ariel, what are you doing with this prick?” One of the twins asked from directly behind me.

“Yeah, you never came back to class. We were worried about you. Then we come out here and find you with this asshole. What the hell?”

“I can explain,” I told them without bothering to turn around and look at them. I really couldn’t explain this to them.

“Can I walk you to your next class?” Chucky asked with his smile still in place.

I frowned at him. “No.”

“Okay,” he shrugged the rejection off. “I’ll see you at lunch.”

Then he turned and walked off like a normal person, like the last fifteen minutes hadn’t taken place, like he hadn’t just been on his knees before me.

“What just happened?” I asked in shock.

“That’s what I want to know.” Addison ran his fingertips down my arm until he met my hand where he tangled our fingers together.

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I squeezed his hand in gratitude, thankful for the comfort. Abel moved up to my other side.

“He was out here waiting for me when I got out of the bathroom...” I told them everything that happened after I left the bathroom as they walked me to my next class. They listened in silence as we walked. I finished talking when we met Tyson outside of my next class. He gave us a curious look that demanded answers.

“I think Quinton did something to Chucky,” Addison said in a quiet voice.

My eyes widened in shock as I looked around the hallway to see if anyone was listening to our conversation.

Tyson laughed. “You mean besides puking up blood all over himself and his friends and ending up in the hospital?”

I couldn’t believe he thought that was funny. I didn’t find anything amusing in the least, not about this.

The twins repeated what I’d told them on our way over here. He stopped laughing. I felt better when he stopped laughing.

“Shit,” Tyson growled. “What did that asshole do to him now?”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “You can’t be serious?” I said. “After what Quinton’s already done to Chucky, you think he’d do more to him?” I shook my head. “But this wasn’t bad like before. He wasn’t hurt or anything, just acting weird.”

“By weird you mean do anything and everything you tell him to?” Tyson glared at the floor. “This could either be a really good thing or a really bad thing.”

This could either be a really good thing or a really bad thing... Wasn't that the story of my life.

Tyson went to class shortly after with a look on his face that had people scampering to get out of his way.

The twins weren't so easy to get rid of.

“Are you sure you don't want someone to come with you?” Addison asked for the third time.

He was concerned and I really couldn't blame him. Finding out Quinton had taken the liberty to mess with Chucky on my behalf for a second time had really unnerved me. The twins had no idea if it would wear off with time or not, and I hadn't even bothered with asking Tyson if he knew. They had wanted to call Tyson the moment I said I was going home but I had put my foot down and insisted it wasn't anyone's business but my own and it wouldn't really make a difference if Tyson knew or not, I was going. They had finally relented even though I could tell they really hadn't wanted to. I imagined as soon as I had my back turned one or both would have their phones out, furiously texting. First, they'd text the others and tell them how insane Quinton was. Then, they'd text Tyson and tell on me for going home.

I sighed in frustration, praying to what ever god out there who'd listen for patience.

No one answered my prayer.

Figured.

Maybe I should have tried counting to twenty in my head?

Nah. That wouldn't have worked either.

They were driving me crazy. Unless I was in the bathroom I'd had zero time to myself since Thursday afternoon. Today was Monday and I needed time away from them to process things without one of them there to hold my hand and mess with my head with their nearness.

This latest stunt of Quinton's was simply too much and I needed some time away from them, all of them or they'd likely drive me crazy.

"Addison," I said, my voice straining as I strived for patience. "I'm tired and I need to be alone right now, so I'm going home. If the school calls because I'm skipping it won't matter because there's no one there to answer the phone. If my mother finds out I skipped and gets mad, which she won't do because she's never cared before, I'll just tell her someone else got sick. She specifically told me she didn't want me here if there was a chance of me getting sick. It's fine."

I felt a headache coming on. It seemed like an every day occurrence at this point.

Addison pursed his lips and glared at me. "At least let one of us drive you home."

I sighed. Again. How overbearing and utterly ridiculous.

Abel put his big hand on his brother's shoulder. "It's only a few hours," he told his twin. "We'll check on her when we get home."

I fought the urge to sigh again and thankfully I won.

"Fine," Addison snapped angrily as he shrugged off Abel's hand. He glared at me and

ordered, “If you need anything you call. And for fuck’s sake, stay away from Quint. You two shouldn’t be alone right now.”

With that he turned and stormed off.

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Abel watched his brother walk away from us with a haunted look in his eyes. I didn't like it and hoped I wasn't the reason behind it being there in the first place.

I reached out and tentatively touched his arm. He flinched away from me and I quickly dropped my arm.

Ouch.

He must have read the hurt on my face and not liked it because I was immediately in his arms with the side of my face pressed into his chest. He held me tight in his arms. His head tipped down, his lips brushed my ear, and whispered, "He's been more intense ever since mom and dad died. That wound is still fresh. Ty and the guys are all the family we've got left and Addison's holding on tight to them. Now we have you and I think he's afraid you'll disappear on us when we're not looking. I'm sorry, pretty girl, but he's going to be over the top where you're concerned for a while. He's not going to be able to help himself."

I wanted to ask about his parents and how they died but didn't think the timing was right or it wasn't really my place to ask in the first place. There would be another time and I'd get my chance to ask, but not now.

He kissed me on the forehead and let me go.

"Be careful, okay?" he said. "He'll go apeshit if something happens to you. And I think Quint would kill us all. He's got it bad for you and there's really no telling what he'll do next. The guy is crazy when it comes to the rest of us. With you though," he shrugged casually and grinned big at me, "he's totally batshit."

Lovely.

“I’m leaving now before you freak me out anymore.”

“Best you know what you’re getting yourself into ahead of time. I’m simply trying to help you out here.”

I thought it was a little late for the warning but didn’t say so. He was teasing me and I knew it. That still didn’t mean everything he said wasn’t scarily true. I feared it was.

The last bell rang, signaling he was late for class.

“Go,” I ordered. “You’re late, don’t get into more trouble by being any later than you already are.”

“You’re one to talk, you’re skipping.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “Go to class, Abel,” I bossed. “Before Addison comes back and I’m stuck with the both of you.”

I did not want Addison to come back because I feared if he did then I’d never get rid of him. I’d probably end up stuck with the both of them coming home with me.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Fine, fine.” He said.

Without warning, he moved super fast. He leaned in and brushed my lips with his in a gentle kiss. It lasted all of two seconds then he was gone. But it felt like longer.

I stood there watching him walk away from me with my fingertips pressed to my burning lips.

I didn't head towards the parking lot until he'd walked out of sight.

>

My lips burned the whole drive home. Such a simple kiss but so very sweet and unexpected.

My life was out of control and I kind of liked it.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The house was silent save for the annoyingly persistent beeping of the alarm. I quickly punched in the code that re-armed it and all was finally blessedly quiet.

I hadn't realized just how much I had needed some peace and quiet to myself until that moment. I was so used to being on my own most of the time that having spent so much time with the others had exhausted me as well as overwhelmed me.

I'd always been a loner by choice and wasn't used to spending so much time with others. I liked my own company. And, besides, how would I explain my mother's behavior if I had had friends and invited them over. I shuddered at the thought. She'd met the twins once and had molested one of them. That was embarrassing enough, I didn't even want to think about people being around when she got mean or was having sex with whoever she was sleeping with at the time.

I thought about the last conversation I'd had with her on the phone and was glad she was gone. If she never came back I didn't think I would mind. It made me a horrible daughter to think it, but it was the truth. All my life I'd been hiding the things she'd done to me. I'd been lying for her to cover up her horrid actions. I didn't know why I covered for her but a small part of me felt like I did it because I thought things could always be worse. The devil you know is always a safer bet than the one you don't

know. At least with my mother I knew what to expect.

I had no idea when my mother and Mr. Cole were coming home. It had been days and there was no improvement in Mr. Cole's brother's health. He'd been in a coma since the accident and Mr. Cole along with the rest of the family were beginning to lose hope. So much so Mr. Cole's children had flown in just the day before to lend moral support to their father and be close to their beloved Uncle in his time of need. I felt horrible, but there was nothing I could do for Mr. Cole or his brother. I was happy he had people with him who genuinely loved him and would take good care of him. Lord knew my mother wouldn't.

I picked my bag up from the floor where I'd set it when I had punched in the code to the alarm. I walked through the semi dark kitchen, the only light in the room being natural light coming through the windows. I passed through the kitchen, walked the hallway and made my way up the stairs.

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This time being in the house all by myself didn't bother me. Then again, nothing was creaking and it was bright and sunny outside.

I made it to my room and didn't bother with shutting or locking the door like I normally would because I was all alone in the house and psycho killers weren't supposed to hit your house up until after dark, or so the movies always showed.

I stood in the middle of my bedroom and stared at my unmade bed. Leaving the bed unmade wasn't like me. Keeping my limited number of belongings in good condition and looking nice was important to me. My bed had been messy since Thursday morning when I'd unceremoniously dumped my pretty comforter in a heap on top of my tangled sheets. This was not my norm. I took care of all my things because I never knew when I'd get new ones. Ever since I'd been given new bed clothes after we moved here I'd taken pride in making my bed every day because I never took any gift for granted, even something as simple as blankets and sheets. My room looked sloppy, but still barren. My bed looked unappealing and I wasn't about to crawl into the tangled mess of sheets and blankets. In that moment, I realized I wasn't physically tired but emotionally and mentally tired. How to heal those things? I wasn't into meditation. I was into soaking in a bathtub full of hot water and bubbles though. I was a firm believer that bathtubs much like hot tubs held extreme magical rejuvenating abilities and I had a larger than normal bathtub in my bathroom. A soak in the tub might be just what the doctor ordered to sooth the emotional train wreck that was now my life.

As I made my way to the bathroom I stripped off my clothes as I went. I stepped out of my flip flops, pulled my t-shirt up over my head and let it fall to the floor, unhooked my bra and let it slide down my arms. My leggings went next and I had to

hop around awkwardly from foot to foot to get them off my legs and cleared of my feet. I started the bathtub up in nothing but my underwear and didn't take them off until the tub was half way full and I slipped into the water.

The top layer was made of fluffy, white bubbles that reminded me of clouds. I sunk down past the clouds and into the water. It was so very hot it burned. I loved it. My body immediately relaxed into the water. This was exactly what I had needed. Happy, I laid my head back and closed my eyes.

I felt my troubles simply melt away. Quinton kept doing terrible things to people with magic in my name. Not my problem. It's not like I was doing these things to people. What did I care? Most of the guys expected me to date them. Admittedly, this was weird, but it's not like they could force me. If I didn't want to date any of them I simply wouldn't do it and they'd still keep me around no matter what. Problem solved. I had magic which made me special. I was no longer a normal girl and had never really been one in the first place. And nobody could take that away from me. It'd be mine until the day I died.

And that, that right there, made all my problems seem a lot less important to me. Who cared about Chuck, I had magic. Granted, I didn't exactly know how to use it yet, but I had it to use for when I did figure it out.

With my eyes closed and a mind full of magic and all its possibilities I missed it when she came in. I had no idea how long she'd been standing there.

I opened my eyes and screamed. My mother's face hovered less than a foot above mine. I hadn't heard her come into the bathroom or even my bedroom. I had thought I was alone in the house. This would teach me to not lock my bedroom door.

My heart tried to beat out of my chest. Why was she here? Why hadn't she told me she was coming home? How long had she been watching me? I shivered as I realized

the bubbles had all dissolved, leaving my naked body on display. A body her eyes were running over with a cruel sneer on her beautiful face. Her eyes, so much like my own, were filled with a burning hot rage.

“Wha-”

She didn’t let me finish. Her hand appeared and she slapped me across the face. My right cheek stung from the force of the blow. Even kneeling over me she’d still put her weight into it. I wanted to lift my hand to press my palm to my wounded cheek but did not out of fear of drawing more attention to my nude body.

She grabbed a fist full of my hair and yanked my head to the side.

Leaning in closer to my face, she snarled, “You little bitch. Were you hoping I was Marcus? Are you the reason he sent me home? You and your tight, teenage body?”

The fist wrapped around my hair tightened and she shook my head uncontrollably. The back of my head bounced off the bathtub. For a moment, my vision blurred and pain shot through my entire head.

“Answer me,” she screamed in my face.

The look in her eyes was the single most frightening thing I had ever seen in my whole life. Those eyes that had been filled to the brim with a rage so fierce it burned bright for all to see just moments ago now looked dead, vacant. The lights were on but no one was home. She’d never had dead eyes before, there had always been something going on, something visible in her eyes to be seen. She was smart, manipulative, cruel and a whole lot of insane. But never vacant and empty, dead in the eyes. Seeing it now, for the first time ever, it scared the shit out of me.

She was crazy, yes, absolutely, but checking out entirely during one of her insane acts

of violence on my person was an entirely new level of crazy.

I feared for my life, my face throbbed and my poor head could take no more pain, it simply could not.

I had to stop her, or at least try to stop her. The problem was I'd never fought back before. I'd run away from her plenty. I'd even curled up into a little ball and wrapped my arms around my head while I prayed whatever damage she inflicted didn't hurt too badly and

wasn't lasting. But fight back against her? Never.

I didn't know how and I wasn't even sure I had it in me. Even when she hurt me I wasn't sure I had it in me to strike back at her. Or anyone for that matter.

"Answer me right this second," she screamed in my face again. Spittle flew out of her mouth to land on my injured cheek.

I blinked my eyes at her and realized I'd lost time to spacing out. I think my head injury had to be worse than I'd originally thought.

I whimpered in agony as she pulled my head up by my hair again, dragging me closer to her face.

"Ariel," she screamed my name an inch from my face.

I blinked again, slowly. This time opening my eyes in time to see her open hand rushing towards my face. She slapped me, over and over. She hit my cheek, my eye, my nose, my mouth, my ear. After the first one, I raised my arms to ward her off but it did me no good. She released my hair to claw at my arms and hands. She didn't mess around and she had sharp nails. I bled every time she touched me. My hands,

my arms, my nose, my bottom lip. They all bled thanks to her. I begged and pleaded for her to stop but she refused. I cried. I screamed. I even tried to shove her away from me. I asked for help from someone, anyone, and as soon as I did the water began to boil around me. It bubbled and gurgled loudly. It also burned, but oddly, did not hurt me. My mother paused, her hand in midair, ready to rain down another blow to my face.

“What are you doing?” She screeched as her eyes bulged at the sight of the boiling water.

What was I doing? Other than trying to live through this horrible moment in my life I had no clue.

“What... What’s wrong with you?” She screeched. She let my hair go and sat back on her heels. “What’s happening to the water?”

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Wetness slid down my cheeks, blood mixed with my tears. My entire face felt as though it was on fire.

I sat up and tried to scoot to the other side of the bathtub. I tried to get as far away from her as possible in the limited space.

I didn't make it far. She latched onto my hair with both hands and yanked. I flew backwards as the water shot up all around me. My body slid easily through the water as my hands went to the top of my head and I tried to pry her hands out of my hair.

She shoved me down, down, down and under the water I went. Stupidly, I opened my mouth and screamed. All the air left my lungs in a mass of bubbles that burst from my mouth and rose to the surface. I inhaled water and choked. She let go of my hair, leaned forward and wrapped both her hands around my throat. She squeezed and I found myself choking for a different reason, but still choking all the same.

I watched my mother's face from upside down as she tried to choke the life out of me. I kicked out with my legs and bucked my body. I grabbed ahold of the hands wrapped so tightly around my throat and tried to pry them off me. Unbelievably, she squeezed tighter.

The pressure in my chest was so intense I felt like my chest was going to explode. It was hard to lift my hands when they were so heavy, but I managed to touch the sides of her face. She had no free hand to remove my hands from her body.

I sunk my nails into her cheeks and dragged them down her face, leaving angry red lines in their wake. Blood immediately began to run down her face as she screamed

wordlessly in rage. But she did not let go of my throat.

I stared into those eyes, the same eyes I saw staring back at me out of my own face every time I looked in the mirror save for the difference in color. This woman, this cold hearted, evil bitch of a woman, was my mother. She took part in creating me and I'd come into this world by leaving her body. And now she was trying to kill me.

I raked my nails down her throat, ripping the skin open as I went. Still she squeezed my throat.

My lungs burned and my arms dropped as the fight went out of me.

I was going to die, and by my own mother's hands.

I closed my eyes so I didn't have to see her face while my world faded to nothing but darkness.

Suddenly her hands were gone and I was being lifted out of the water. I could breathe again. She'd let me go.

Sound came rushing back to me at the same time as air did. My mother was screeching hysterically and I heard the deep rumbling of a male voice, but the words were too low for me to hear.

I focused on breathing and making sense of my mother's words as hands smoothed my wet hair out of my face. It hurt to breathe through my sore throat and my lungs still burned.

"She's my daughter and I'll do whatever the fuck I want with her. But you, you need to leave. Right the fuck now, or I'll call the cops on you for breaking into my home."

“Lady, we just walked in on you trying to drown your own daughter. Go ahead and call the cops. I want you to. Please, please call the fucking cops. I dare you.”

That quiet, lethal rumble came from Quinton. Quinton was here.

Thank god.

I opened my eyes as my mother screeched, “Get the fuck out of my house.”

Quinton stood with his back to me, in-between me and my mother. This was the first time I’d been happy to see him.

Hands smoothed down my bare arms and I realized I was sitting in someone’s lap.

“It’s okay, Ariel,” Julian whispered in my ear as he wrapped his arms around my chest. It should have been awkward and embarrassing because I was naked and sitting in his lap, but it wasn’t. He’d come with Quinton and they’d saved my life. I could be embarrassed later, for now I just wanted to sit here and breathe. “We got you, you’re safe now. She’s not going to touch you again.”

Julian stood up with me in his arms as if I weighed nothing. He held me in his arms with one around my shoulders and one under my knees.

“Get her out of here,” Quinton growled without turning around to look at us.

“No,” my mother screamed. “Ariel, you’re not going anywhere. You’re my daughter and you’ll damn well do as I say.”

“You’re not getting anywhere near her ever again, you crazy bitch,” Quinton rumbled at her.

Julian walked towards the door, putting his back to them. I looked over his broad shoulder in time to see my mother lunge towards us. Quinton blocked her path and put a hand in her chest and shoved her backwards. She stumbled back, tripped over her own two feet and went down.

I watched in horror as her head hit the corner of the countertop on her way down. There was a sickening thud and then she was sprawled out on the floor. She didn't even put her hands out to try and break her fall. First her head bounced off the corner of the countertop, then it smacked against the tiled floor.

"Julian, stop," I whispered hoarsely.

“Get her out of here,” Quinton ordered.

Julian didn’t listen to me and he kept walking. As he walked out of the bathroom I noticed the blood and screamed. Blood was starting to spread out across the white tiled floor around my mother’s head. From achingly familiar eyes she stared out at nothing. This time her eyes really were vacant and dead.

Chapter Twenty-eight

“Why is she naked? Why are you carrying her around while she’s naked?”

“Where the fuck are her clothes? Put her down and get her some clothes, you fucking pervert.”

“Where are you taking her?”

“Why is she all wet?”

“What... What happened to her face? Who did that to her face? Julian, what the fuck is going on?”

I whimpered and pressed my battered face into Julian’s soft t-shirt. I didn’t want people looking at my battered face.

“Where are you taking her?”

“Where’s my Uncle?”

“Please, please, Julian,” I begged. “Take me back. Bring me back upstairs. I need to see her. I need... I just... I just need to see her.” I needed to see her dead.

“Shh...” he murmured. “Quiet, girl. I promise you, you do not want to go back up there and see that. Quint’s going to take care of everything. We’re going next door and I’m going to get you cleaned up.”

“She’s dead, isn’t she? When she hit her head, it killed her. We need to call the police, it was an accident. He didn’t mean to hurt her, he only wanted to keep her away from me. If not for Quinton, I’d be dead. Dead.”

“You’re not going anywhere with her until you tell me what in the fuck is going on,” Tyson yelled. “And where in the fuck is my Uncle?”

I slowly turned my head until I could see him. Tyson, my friend. I didn’t want him to yell. Thankfully, I’d stopped crying again. I was numb inside.

“My mother is dead,” I said in a quiet voice. I tilted my head back and looked up at Julian. “She is dead, right?”

He stared down at me for a beat while his gentle eyes ran over my messed-up face. Compassion filled his eyes. “Yeah, honey, I think she’s dead.”

Dead. My mother was dead.

I nodded. Okay.

I already knew that, but now I had confirmation.

“Are you saying Quint killed Ariel’s mother?” Tyson shouted. “He wouldn’t do that. I know he does a lot of crazy shit, but he wouldn’t do that. Not to Ariel.”

“It was an accident,” I insisted, “and we need to call the police.”

“We can’t do that, honey,” Julian said in a gentle voice. “Quint’s going to take care of things here. But for now, we have to get you out of here. Someone want to get her a blanket or a towel or something to cover her up with? I don’t want to take her outside like this.”

I didn’t see why it mattered at this point.

I closed my eyes and rested my head back against Julian’s hard chest. They talked around me but I didn’t listen. I was naked in a room full of guys. Even the ones that didn’t seem to like me were here. My mother had tried to kill me and once again, my face was all messed-up. Quinton saved me. He stood between me and my mother and when she went to attack me again he stopped her. No one had ever stood between us before. No one had ever tried to stop the abuse. Quinton saved me. And my mother was dead because of it. My mother was dead and we weren’t calling the police. I didn’t understand why, but I had to trust them.

Something was draped over my body and then we were on the move again. I should have struggled and fought more to stay. I wanted to see my mother one mo

re time and I had an insane urge to hug Quinton and maybe never let him go.

The air changed, growing warmer, and I knew we were outside. I didn’t care. I didn’t care about anything. Having magic, what did it matter? Nothing mattered when my own mother had wanted me dead. What had I done to her to make her treat me in such a way? If my own mother couldn’t find it in her to love me it was highly likely no one else ever would.

“That’s it, honey,” Julian murmured, “you go right ahead and cry. Get it all out.”

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I hadn't realized I was crying again. Why did I keep crying?

"Did her mom do that to her face?"

That was either Dash or Damien, I wasn't sure which and I didn't want to open my eyes and find out. They'd been in my house and they'd seen me naked. Two people I had no intention of ever seeing me naked.

I shoved the thought away. I couldn't think on that right now. I'd think on it later. I'd been doing that with a lot of things.

"Didn't see her mom hit her, but when we showed she was trying to drown Ariel in the bathtub."

The air changed again, growing colder, and I knew we were inside once more. We were in Tyson and Quinton's house. The change in the air had been because of the heat outside and the central air inside.

"Why are we here?" I asked. "I want Tyson. Where's Tyson?"

"He stayed with Quinton, but if you want me to call him and get him over here I can do that. He'll come, but someone else will have to go back over there because Quint shouldn't be alone over there."

It wasn't lost on me that Julian failed to answer my first question.

"You can't bring her down there," One of the twins said. "We agreed she wasn't

ready for that yet.”

Julian shifted my body closer to his as he lifted me higher up on his chest. I opened my eyes to see us descend some black carpeted stairs into a basement I hadn't known existed.

At least they weren't Chucky stairs. You know what I'm talking about, that creepy little red headed doll that's a serial killer who grabs your ankles when you're on your way down some open backed stairs in some creepy, dank basement.

Chucky, now there was another topic for avoidance. I needed to not think about him ever again.

At the bottom of the stairs there was another one of those weirdly empty rooms this house seemed to be full of. Like the top floor, there were two hallways, one on the left and one on the right.

Julian moved towards the right side. What was going on? Did Julian have a room down here in the basement?

“If her mom is really dead, then what are we going to do with the body?” Asked Dash or Damien, making me flinch.

Yes, the body. What were we going to do with my mother's body? Her dead, dead body.

Oh god.

I sucked in a shaky breath and let out a broken sob. I wasn't feeling so numb any more. Orphan, I was an orphan.

“Go ahead and cry, honey,” Julian murmured.

“She doesn’t need to cry over that bitch,” one of the twins snapped. Probably Addison. Abel would have never said something like that, at least not in front of me while I was upset and borderline hysterical. “That lady was an abusive drunk who, if what you just said is true, tried to drown her in the goddamned bathtub after she beat on her face. For fuck’s sake, you don’t cry over people like that.”

“You do when they’re your mother,” said Dash or Damien. I really needed to learn the differences in their voices. I could maybe like this one. Maybe. Probably not.

I couldn’t think straight.

There was only one door at the end of this short hallway. Abel stepped in front of Julian and pushed open the door. We followed on his heels.

I didn’t want to be around this many people, not in my current state. I was fine with the twins who’d clearly followed me home from school with Tyson. And I was fine with Julian. But, the other two needed to go. I didn’t know why they were even here to begin with. Their presence made me uncomfortable.

“Do we all need to be here for whatever this is?” I whispered to Julian. My words were so quiet I wasn’t sure he heard me, but I didn’t want the other two to hear me.

Julian heard. And he knew what I meant because he said, “Hey, Dash, Damien, why don’t the two of you go see if Quint needs any help. The twins and I got Ariel. We’ll let you know if she needs anything you can help with.”

I didn’t like the way he worded that. Why would I ever need anything from those two? I felt like they were only here to gawk at me.

“Fine,” one of them grumbled. “But I want it known that I think this is bullshit.”

“I second that,” said the other one. “Bullshit and unfair.”

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“Unfair,” one of the twins snarled, and from his angry tone I knew him to be Addison, my salt twin. “Unfair? What the fuck do you know about unfair?”

“This isn’t the time, twin,” Abel tried to reason with his brother. “Don’t do this with Ariel here. We have more important shit to deal with right now than being petty. Save it for later.”

Why did none of them seem to care that my mother was dead and Quinton had accidentally killed her? Why didn’t they care? Shouldn’t someone care? Shouldn’t I care? Why didn’t I care?

Julian sat me carefully down on top of a table and I finally got my first look around, taking in the room we were in.

“Umm...” I mumbled, at a loss for words. This room was not a normal room. Or, at least, it didn’t fit in with what I’d seen of the rest of the house. For one, the floor was dirt. Dirt. The walls were painted black. The room itself was very narrow, but long. A tall table ran along the entire length of one long wall. Different plants sat atop the table, covering the surface in a sea of green. Bright lights hung down from the ceiling above the plants. The other side of the room had another tall table that ran the length of the room. Atop this table sat glass beakers, glass vials, and glass jars. Some were full, some half empty, others simply empty. They held a variety of things and liquids that I had no knowledge of. And they were a multitude of different colors.

Towards the other end of the room was a circle on the dirt floor created of tall, fat, white candles. That circle made me nervous for some reason.

The far wall at the end of the long room was made entirely of brick and would have looked out of place if not for the weird white chalk markings that covered it. The chalk reminded me of the rug under Tyson's bed in his room.

I wrapped the towel they'd used to cover my nudity with around my body, not caring that I flashed everyone in the room as I did so. They'd already seen me naked, what was the point in modesty now?

I looked around the room with wide eyes and wondered what secrets the other hallway held.

A glass jar was placed on the table beside my exposed thigh. It thumped loudly against the wooden table, making me jump.

"Easy, honey," Julian said. "You've got nothing to be afraid of here. I promise."

I sighed. Here was another one with promises. I wondered if he'd take it back if I told him how stupid I thought promises to be.

Julian unscrewed the cap of the jar and stuck two fingers inside. He came out with a big drop of some kind of light pink thick cream.

"Tilt your head back and close your eyes for me," he ordered gently.

I thought about asking questions but the look in his eyes told me not to bother. His gentle tone of voice didn't match the hard determination in his eyes.

I tilted my head back and closed my eyes like a good girl.

He smeared the surprisingly warm goop all over my face and neck, having to go back several times to scoop out more of the pink cream. He was careful with his touch and

I knew he was trying to avoid causing me further pain. I appreciated the gesture, but everywhere he touched stung and I fought flinching.

“She really did a number on your pretty face,” he said as his fingers ran across my neck in a soft caress. “There. All done. Your face and your neck should be back to normal in a few hours. Well, except for the mark on your temple. It only works on fresh marks and wounds.”

I opened my eyes and noticed the twins standing behind Julian. Both stood tall, with their arms crossed over their chests, their burning, furious eyes locked on me. I think they were mad at me.

“What-”

I was cut off by the door bursting open and slamming into the wall. I jumped and turned to see what was going on.

My body started to shake uncontrollably as I watched Quinton and Tyson walk through the door with my mother. Tyson came in first with his back to the room. He had ahold of my mother by the legs. Quinton held her by the underarms.

They dropped her prone body unceremoniously on the dirt floor beside the table I sat on. She flopped to the ground, and her eyes stared up at the ceiling, unseeing.

Her hair was wet, covered in blood and clung to half of her face. Her dark, expertly applied eye liner was smudged under her eyes, leaving dark, raccoon like circles. Her bright red lipstick looked like someone had taken the back of their hand to her mouth and wiped it across her cheek, smearing her lipstick and making her look like a clown.

My mother would have been utterly humiliated.

She wore expensive looking black stilettos with a heel so high it was downright scary. The tight dress she wore was on the shorter side of what she'd been wearing since we moved in with Mr. Cole. She was showing more thigh in her dress than I was in my skimpy bath towel. The dress was sleeveless and way too much of her breasts were displayed.

From the way they'd dropped her, her thighs were left wide open, letting us all know she wasn't wearing any underwear.

Wonderful.

Even in death she was still a piece of work.

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Why didn't I feel bad about her being dead now that I was looking down at her dead body?

"What are we going to do with her?" Dash asked harshly, and I realized he was the one who'd been making all the A-hole comments. "I mean, it's not like we can keep her down here like some dead pet or something. Eventually, she'll start to smell. What are we going to do with some dead, smelly bitch we've got stored in the basement? I mean, come on, get real here guys. We should just leave her in the woods somewhere for some random hiker to find." He waved a hand down at my mother's body. "Look at her. She looks exactly like the kind of woman whose dead body you'd find stashed in the woods somewhere after some dude picked her up because he'd mistaken her for a hooker."

"You fucking dick," Tyson snarled. "That's Ariel's mother you're talking about. Show some fucking respect."

"And that's another thing. Ariel, Ariel, Ariel. I'm so sick and tired of hearing about this stupid girl. We've been at each other's throats since that fucking dream, since Quint got a good look at her sweet ass back in June. I was all for keeping her back in June when we had the dream and knew she had magic, but now we're killing people and fighting with each other. We're supposed to fight for each other, together. Not fight against each other, and we're certainly not supposed to kill anyone."

"Else," Quinton barked.

"What?" Several voices said at once.

“You meant to say ‘we’re certainly not supposed to kill anyone else.’”

The air froze in my lungs and my heart skipped a beat. How many other people had they killed?

A hand, burning with heat, landed on my bare back and I let out a small scream and jerked away from it.

Everyone stopped arguing, stopped moving, stopped everything to watch me.

Abel, who had been the one to touch me, wrapped his arms around me from behind in a hug and pulled my body backwards across the table. My bare bottom slid across the smooth, wooden surface of the table until my back was to his front. He rested his head on top of mine, not seeming bothered by my wet hair, or my partial nudity. My legs were out straight in front of me on the table with my feet dangling off the other side.

The room was frozen as all eyes watched me in Abel’s arms.

This time I felt the tears as they slid down my cheeks and I knew I was crying again. I wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or not that I could tell this time that I was crying. I was starting to feel things again.

Julian cleared his throat and, without taking his eyes off of me wrapped up in Abel’s arms, told the room, “I have a solution for getting rid of the body. All this dirt, I say we start digging.”

Oh god.

He was talking about burying my mother in their basement. I made a rude noise in the back of my throat and swallowed down the bile threatening to rise. I could not afford

to be sick right now.

“You can’t be serious,” someone said and I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to risk seeing her on the dirt floor again with her crotch on display for all to see and looking exactly what Dash had accused her of looking like.

“I’m all for dumping her somewhere,” Dash semi repeated his first statement.

“I don’t want Ariel to be put through hell when the body is found,” Tyson said quietly.

“Agreed.” Quinton quickly put in. “I say we bury her.”

“You would, seeing as you’re the one who killed her,” Addison said snidely.

“It was an accident,” Quinton growled.

“I’m good with burying her,” Damien spoke softly.

“So am I,” Abel rumbled from behind me. “Twin?”

“Fine,” Addison agreed reluctantly.

“I’m in,” Tyson said.

“It was my suggestion,” Julian told them.

“One I backed,” this from Quinton.

Dash sighed heavily before saying, “Fine. We bury her.”

And, just like that, they agreed to bury my mother's body in their weird basement room with a dirt floor.

They didn't even bother to ask for my opinion, or ask me if I was okay with it.

I wasn't.

Not at all.

Chapter Twenty-nine

It was Quinton who brought me clothes while Julian and Tyson began to dig a hole in front of the brick wall. I was surprised when Quinton dropped a small pile of my own clothes in my lap.

Before I could utter a thank you, he leaned in and kissed me gently on the forehead. Then he turned to Abel and ordered coldly, "Get her dressed."

I'd stopped crying again. It was as if a switch had been flipped off inside of me and I was left empty again. I knew, soon enough, the switch would be flipped again and I'd feel something I was better off not feeling. There was nothing I could do to stop it.

Abel helped me to my feet and I stood on shaking legs. I let the towel drop to my feet, not caring that I now stood there naked. Addison moved to stand beside his brother. They stood shoulder to shoulder, like a muscular wall before me, blocking me from view of the others. They might have had the decency of blocking me from the others but that didn't mean they didn't take the opportunity to eyeball my body. Because they did. Thoroughly.

I didn't have it in me to care. I stood still and let them look their fill, not even

bothering to try and cover myself.

They both sighed heavily at the same exact time, making the same exact sound.

“You’re too thin, Ariel.” Addison said when he looked me in the eyes again.

“I didn’t notice it until now, but my twin is right. You’re too thin. You don’t notice it until you take your clothes off,” Abel agreed with his brother.

Okay, so maybe they had been checking out my body for reasons other than one’s I’d thought.

“I imagine,” Quinton said from directly behind me, “our Ariel has not had the easiest of lives. Which would likely explain why she’s underweight. Give her time and a healthy environment and she’ll get where she needs to be. Now,” his chest brushed my back as he stepped into me, “let’s get you dressed, baby. I sent Dash and Damien back over to your place to clean up the bathroom. I know you’re uncomfortable around them and have been ever since you spied on us in the kitchen. You might want to have your clothes on before they get back. Then again, maybe not. The view’s great and it might go a long way towards bringing them over to your side.”

His rough, calloused hands traveled lightly down my sides leaving a trail of fire in their wake. My breath caught in my throat at the unexpected touch and I couldn’t help the shiver that ran through my body. My nipples hardened and the twins both made low noises in the back of their throats at the view.

How embarrassing.

Quinton’s hands stopped at my hips. He simply stopped moving and held perfectly still save for his chest. His chest I felt rising and falling from behind me. He buried his face in my neck and inhaled deeply.

“Please, please, get dressed, Ariel.” He groaned. “Now is not the time for any of us to be fighting our dicks getting hard.”

“Because you accidentally killed my mother, or because you’re about to bury her in your basement?” I asked softly.

“It was an accident,” he said, his voice as softly as mine had been. “I would never do anything to intentionally cause you pain, but I told you I’d take care of you in whatever way I saw fit and you wouldn’t always like it. This goes hand in hand with that.”

“I know it was an accident,” I assured him. The rest I was avoiding.

“Please don’t hate me,” he whispered. “I couldn’t bear it if you hated me. I’ve been waiting for you for longer than you can imagine.”

I didn’t know what he meant by that, so I said the only thing I could. I told him the truth.

“I don’t hate you,” I said. “To hate someone, you have to feel something, and right now, I don’t feel anything.”

He let me go abruptly and stepped back. His hands fell away from my hips, leaving me feeling oddly bereft.

“Get dressed,” he ordered me in a husky voice. “We’ll talk more about this later when it’s not so fresh and it’s just you and me.”

That didn’t sound like such a good idea. The talking part. I didn’t much care for him when he opened his mouth. And I didn’t much care for how much I liked it when he touched me and how empty I felt when he let me go. I also didn’t think there should

ever come a time when it was just him and me.

Addison held up a black t-shirt for my inspection. Across the chest there was a white skull wearing an eye patch over its left eye and a pirate hat on top. It could have been a black garbage bag for all I cared, so long as it covered me up it was fine by me. Addison put it over my head as I shoved my arms through the holes. He pulled the shirt down to my waist.

Abel knelt in the dirt in front of me with a pair of red, lacy panties in his hands. He picked up one foot and slipped it through a leg hole. He did the same with the next foot. Then he slid them slowly up my legs. When he had them in place snugly on my hips, he ran the backs of his knuckles down my thighs in a soothing caress.

“I forgot shoes,” Quinton said.

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I looked up and found he'd moved to stand beside Addison. He trailed Abel's movements with his eyes, a thoughtful expression on his face.

He'd forgotten more than shoes. There was no bra either.

Addison handed his brother a pair of black short-shorts and Abel slid those up my legs as well.

"Hole's done," Julian yelled at us.

Abel gained his feet and grabbed ahold of my hand. He twined our fingers together and squeezed. Addison moved in on the other side and mimicked his twin's actions.

Quinton moved up in front of me. He cupped my jaws in his rough, calloused hands, and asked, "Do you love her?"

I flinched and tried to pull my face out of his hands. He didn't let me go. I had a feeling, a thought that drifted through my head, whispering how this did not bode well for my future and that scared me.

"Answer me," he whispered softly. This was a question I did not want to think about, nor did I want to think about the answer to the question. I was in denial about so many things already, did I want another one brought up to the surface to be examined by others? I did not think so. But, mostly, I didn't want to take a closer look at the answer myself.

"You don't, do you? It's okay if you don't. She was a monster and monsters are hard

to love. This I know as fact. No one is going to judge you, babe, not here. But I want an honest answer.”

“Why do you care, Quint?” I whispered. “What does it matter whether or not I love her? She’s dead. Dead people don’t care about things like love. So why do you care? And what the hell do you know about loving monsters?”

The grip on my jaw tightened as he pulled my face so close it was mere inches away from his own. “My father was a far bigger monster than your mother ever dreamed of being. He did things, unimaginable things, unspeakable things, and some of them he did to me.” He let go of one side of my face to run the pad of his thumb across my chest, above my collar bone and over my scars. He’d noticed them and he thought he was making a point, but he didn’t know he was making the wrong one. He’d made assumptions and he’d been wrong. “Answer me, Ariel. Do you love her?”

I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Then I reopened my eyes. I looked deep into those dark, dark eyes and I told him the absolute truth. Even though I think it killed a small piece of my soul to admit the truth out loud.

“No,” I said quietly, but clearly so he wouldn’t miss a single word. “I don’t love her. Any love I had for her died a slow death over year after year of being her one and only whipping boy. You’ve mistaken my tears and my upset for caring and you are very wrong. I’ve never seen someone die before, Quint. And that someone being my only living relative makes it worse. I’m upset because she beat on me and tried to kill me simply because she was crazy and could. I cried because with her dead, I’ll never, not ever, know the love of a mother. And I cried because I didn’t care that she was dead and I felt like I should care. I know that if I died she wouldn’t have cared unless she got something out of my death besides simply being rid of me. The last thing I want in this whole world is to be like the thing I hate the most in it. Is that a good enough answer for you?”

Both Julian and Tyson had moved closer while I was talking. They stood directly behind Quinton and they both wore worried expressions on their faces. They were worried because of me, I knew it. I'd overshared in trying to get my point across. Apparently, listening to me was more important than dumping my mother's body in the grave they'd dug for her.

"Yeah, baby," Quinton said, drawing my attention back to him and away from his two shadows. "That answer is good for me. I hate it, but I thank you for being honest with me all the same. Now, I have another question for you."

I hated him, and I hated his stupid questions.

"Do you really want to be here when we throw dirt on her?"

I blinked.

He'd surprised me. I thought he'd ask me another deep, meaningful question.

I thought about what he'd asked of me. Did I really need to be here for this? Did it matter? Did I want to be here for this? No. No, I absolutely did not want to stand aside and watch my mother's body being tossed into a dirt hole and then covered in said dirt. But, I was going to be here for it because I didn't want to be a coward who hid from all the unpleasant things in my life. That was no way to live my life, I wanted to be stronger than that.

"No, I don't want a front row seat to this shit show. I'd be insane if I did. But I'm going to sit through it anyway."

Quinton stared me down. I wasn't sure if he was trying to intimidate me or see into the depths of my soul. Either way I didn't back down. I held my ground and he was the first to look away. Score one for me.

A muscle in his jaw ticked as he nodded his head. "Alright," he muttered, "have it your way."

I wanted to laugh at him. If I had things my way I never would have set foot in this damn room. I never would have ditched school and came home early. This wasn't about what I wanted and never had been. I had wanted to call the police and they'd refused me, now they were digging holes and burying bodies. This was about not being a coward and seeing things through to the end. Right and wrong had ceased to matter when her head had collided with the corner of the countertop in my bathroom. I had gone along with their brand of crazy, now I'd see this thing through to the end.

In a show of support, both Addison and Abel squeezed my hands gently. I was glad they hadn't backed off when Quinton got in my face. He was too intense for me and he made me feel things I was uncomfortable feeling. Even if the timing had been better I still would have been uncomfortable with him.

Quinton moved away from me, following Tyson and Julian to their freshly dug hole. Addison and Abel dragged me across the dirt until we stood opposite of the other three, with only the grave between us. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Damien and Dash enter the room. They moved on silent feet across the dirt to stand beside a twin each.

I stood unmoving as I stared down into the dark depths of the dirt grave and I felt nothing but emptiness inside. I watched silently as Quinton picked up my mother's body and unceremoniously tossed her into the dirt hole. She hit bottom with a thud and that's what did it for me. That's what broke me.

Jerkily, I wrenched my hands out of Addison and Abel's and stumbled backwards until my back hit the brick wall.

"I'm so sorry," I mumbled, unsure of who I was speaking to. Was I apologizing to

my dead mother, or to the guys for not being able to handle the situation?

I turned on my bare feet and ran, fleeing the strange room.

They let me go.

The sound of dirt being shoveled back into the hole followed me all the way home.

I didn't start dry heaving until I made it to the safety of my bedroom. I forced myself to choke down the bile that threatened to come out because there was no way in hell I could go into the bathroom to vomit. I'd probably never be able to go in there again.

Chapter Thirty

I took a seat on my window seat, surrounded by bright, girly pillows and flicked my wrist casually. My bedroom door slammed shut, making me cringe. I'd done well for a beginner, but I really needed to work on it; I had wanted the door to shut without making noise. I got one but not the other. Progress.

Only days ago, I would have jumped for joy at the progress I had made. Today, not so much.

This was a dark day. For me and Mr. Cole. No, not Mr. Cole, but Marcus. He'd insisted I call him by his first name when he got home. With my mother dead, I had no reason not to honor his request. Add that to the fact his brother had died and I couldn't not give him what he'd wanted. We'd both lost family even though I was the only one aware of it. I felt his pain like a physical thing and it hurt me just to look at him. I imagined he saw something similar on my face, but he was way off on the why.

My mother was dead and Mr. Cole thought she'd gone and left us both willingly for

something else, or, likely, someone else. He didn't seem too broken up about it. In fact, he didn't seem to care that she was gone at all. Such was his grief over the death of his brother that he didn't seem to mind that I'd supposedly been left behind with him, for him to take care of.

He told me we'd deal with her absence after he put his brother in the ground. I'd left it at that. The pain in his eyes when he talked about his brother hurt simply to look at, I did not want to make it worse.

I wanted to ask him questions about my future though because I was worried. With my mother gone he had no real obligation to take care of me. He could send me away tomorrow and there was nothing I could do about it.

Another part of me simply didn't care. I was numb inside and out and quite possibly in shock. Who cared about tomorrow when I felt next to nothing today?

The guys had tried to see me, tried to talk to me. They'd called, texted, and even showed up at the house. Apparently, Tyson had given out my phone number to the rest of them and all but Damien and Dash had made use of it. Even though I did not talk to any of them I was still a little hurt that those two hadn't even sent a text to ask if I was okay. It was stupid because I knew they didn't really like me, but that didn't take the sting out of them making it blatantly obvious. I knew my silence upset Tyson and the twins the most because we had become friends and they didn't understand why I had shut them out. Quinton kept texting me because he was worried I now hated him. I didn't hate him. I hated myself because I didn't care that she was dead. After almost throwing up the one time, I realized I'd only gotten sick because the dead body had freaked me out, as well as what we were doing with it. I didn't care that it had been my mother's body. I was afraid to see Quinton because I didn't know how I'd feel about him or myself when I did. What if I saw him and it made me feel something other than nothing about my mother being dead? I couldn't be around him for a while.

When I refused to see them they stopped coming over, but the text messages and phone calls didn't stop so I turned off my phone.

I'd figure out what I wanted to do with them, just not today. Probably not even tomorrow. Maybe not even next week.

I needed to pack because Mr. Cole and I had a plane to catch, and tomorrow a funeral to attend. He wanted me with him. I didn't understand why when he'd have his own kids there with him. I didn't want to go, not in the least bit. I didn't want to be around his children and I didn't want to meet the rest of his family. And I most certainly didn't want to attend a funeral, not so soon after my mother's death. My mother wouldn't get a funeral because no one knew she was dead and they never would. Instead, she'd simply been tossed into a hole in the dirt.

And I was supposed to go on with my life like nothing happened. I didn't know how to do that, but I knew I had to try. It would likely be the hardest thing I'd yet to do. And there would be harder things to come. Much harder. I just knew it.

The End.