



Keeping Promises

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: The shocks just keep coming. It seems that as soon as Ever, her men, and friends get used to one new revelation, another one follows quickly on its heels.

This job is going to be more complicated than usual because of the emotions involved, and that's not even mentioning the hidden complications that none of them could have predicted would happen. If anyone can handle it will be Ever and her men.

Add in personal complications, and this is going to be far from straightforward.

One thing is for certain though, Ever is going to keep her promise to Rylie, she will find her, and she will destroy whoever hurt her.

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Chapter One

“Wait, Rylie, Rylie?” Jynx asks.

“The Rylie that said she couldn’t be friends with you because it was too dangerous for her?” Lyric adds, her tone sharp.

I can’t reply; I’m still staring blankly at the image of Rylie on Peter’s screen. There’s no doubt that it’s her, she’s older obviously, but she looks exactly the same.

“Sweetheart?” Trick says gently, “Are you okay?”

Swallowing thickly, I reply honestly, “I don’t know.”

Jynx stands up and rounds the table, “Let me get a look at this, Rylie. It would be nice to put a face to the name.”

“Yeah, we’ve heard a lot about her,” Mal adds, getting up as well.

As soon as Jynx sees the screen, her eyes go wide with shock and, if I’m not mistaken, recognition as well.

“Fucking hell. I don’t fucking believe it. That’s R.” She exclaims before I can ask her.

“It’s definitely her,” Mason adds, leaning closer to the screen to get a better look, “she looks older, obviously, but then she would. The last time we saw her, she was

only fifteen, maybe sixteen.”

“Who?” Atty asks, confused.

Jynx focuses back on the rest of us as she starts to explain, “When I was kidnapped by Ever’s father, I was held in a human trafficking facility for a bit, and I met R. She always had such fucking fire in her despite the fact that she was stuck there and we clicked immediately.”

“No fucking way,” I gape.

She nods, “That’s not all. Do you remember the first time you met the guys?”

“Yeah, you came to Fresno, and we took out the head of the Ravens,” I reply.

“You what?” Rage asks while sounds of shock go around the room.

“Did she just say she helped take out the head of the Raven crime organisation?” Atlas asks, sounding incredulous.

Rome smirks, “Yep, she and Jynx were fucking spectacular, we were only there as backup, really.” Luc frowns, “I’ve heard of them. Don’t they have some rule about whoever kills the head of the Ravens then has to take over?”

The guys all share a look, and Jynx nods, so Rip says, “You’re right; Jynx took over, hence why we need to stay away from the organisation and Mr R. Even though he is aware.”

The whole room stares at Jynx in shock before devolving into a million questions; Jynx ignores them entirely, “We can get back to that at a later date; it’s not important right now or relevant to what I’m trying to explain.

“She’s right,” I reply, “we can ask about that later, and trust me, I’m going to. What I want to know is what you were going to say about Rylie?”

The guys all stop with the questions, realising that Rylie is the more important issue that we need to be dealing with right now.

“Just say the word, and I’ll fill you in. It’s about time I did anyway. Back to Rylie, though, when we got back after taking him out, we got hired by Mona Romano because someone had been stealing information from her, and then her daughter got kidnapped. I was shocked as shit to realise that the R I’d met over a year before was actually Rylie and the daughter of a prominent crime boss.”

Jensen shakes his head, “It can’t be the same Rylie, though. The Romanos weren’t in our hometown. We would’ve known.”

Rafe nods in agreement, “He’s right; we made sure we knew who the big hitters in town were. The Romano name never even got mentioned.”

Rome replies this time as he explains, “Mona sent Rylie away with her father to keep her safe and at the request of Rylie, who just wanted to be a normal teenager. It was the second time that she had been kidnapped, and Mona didn’t want to risk it happening again.”

“Holy fuck,” I mutter as I blindly sit down, and Rafe catches me before I fall on the floor. Wincing, I add, “She just wanted to be a normal teenager, and then boom, I come along with all my drama and end up dragging her back into a life that she never wanted to be a part of. You know it makes a lot more sense why she wanted to cut communications after the Blake thing.”

“It’s not your fault. Up until that point, she chose to be involved with you. To be your friend, and she was obviously fine with it, up until what happened with Blake; that

obviously pushed her a bit too far,” Riot replies, trying to reassure me and only kind of succeeding.

“Plus, look at her now. She’s a ghost agent in one of the most dangerous and highly skilled agencies in the world; she obviously decided she wanted back in at some point,” Jensen points out.

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I hum in agreement, but my mind is still going a mile a minute.

Jynx looks over to Atlas, “I was the one who told Mona that you and Alaric were moving to the town and that if anything happened, they could contact Alaric. Mona decided that the fewer people who knew about her connection to Rylie, the better and decided only to talk to D and then have Rylie keep up to date with D’s changing code words so that she could use them while talking to Alaric if a problem arose.”

Atlas’s eyes widen slightly, “So that’s why we suddenly moved to the guy’s town? It had nothing to do with my father getting a bit too close to finding where we were?”

Jynx shrugs, “No, you guys were going there anyway. That’s why I thought of the place, and as I said, Alaric didn’t know anything about Rylie and her father being there.”

“Alaric can’t have had any contact with Rylie and known of her origins because I’m sure he would have said something, especially when we rescued her. He wouldn’t have been able to hide that he knew her then.”

I smile at his worried expression, “No, you’re right. It would’ve been obvious.”

“This is a whole heap of crazy,” Jensen points out helpfully.

“I tell you, that woman sure as shit has the propensity to get herself kidnapped; this would make it what? The third time she’s been kidnapped in around six years?” Rome asks.

“Four, she’s been kidnapped four times. Or at least that’s the only other time that I know of, that whole thing I mentioned about Blake a second ago, that was a kidnapping; he took her, but he clearly didn’t know who her mother was, or he would’ve thought better of it.” I mutter, my mind going a mile a fucking minute as I try to make sense of this all.

“That’s almost once a year, like a fucking tradition.” Lyric comments, her eyes wide.

“She definitely doesn’t have luck when it comes to this sort of thing, that’s for sure,” Atlas mutters.

“You know we could always ask Alaric if he had any idea that Rylie in the organisation is Ever’s Rylie?” Jensen suggests.

I start to say that it really isn’t necessary to know, but actually, I think it might be, “You know what, yeah, I need to know because if he did know, I want to know why he didn’t tell me.”

“Well, it could be a couple of reasons, one apart from when you made sure that she was under his protection when we went to the academy a few years ago and when we rescued her. Two, when have you mentioned her to him since then?” Trick points out.

“Okay, that’s a fair point, but he still knew I cared about her, so why wouldn’t he tell me if he did know who she was and where she’s been these last few years?”

“That’s why I think it’s likely to be the other reason. I mean, think about it: Rylie is working for Mr R, Alaric will know that; he most likely wasn’t able to tell you for your safety and hers,” Trick adds. “She’s a ghost agent remember, as few people as possible are supposed to know about her existence.”

I’m not too fond of his explanation. I still would’ve rather have known, but I do know

how Mr R works, and he did say on the phone that she was a Ghost agent, like Trick just reminded me, and that means only he and maybe one or two others know of her existence in the agency and I wouldn't have wanted her to be put in any danger just by speaking to me.

“That, and you didn't really mention her again to him after that; he probably thought you'd either forgotten about her or weren't that bothered. After all, in his eyes, you'd only known her for a couple of months before we had to leave,” Rafe points out.

“I hear you, and that all makes sense. It's just frustrating as hell that he had the answers, and I didn't know,” I reply.

“It's not like he could've told you anyway,” Rip points out this time. “And he might not have had the answers, and you're just assuming that he knew, he may not have because of Rylie's ghost status.”

As always, he has a point.

“And before you accuse me,” Jynx grins at me, knowing that my mind is already spinning in the direction that she's thinking, “I had no idea that the Rylie I knew was the Rylie you knew, I mean one, she could have gone to any of the high schools in the area, and two I had no idea whether she was even still in the town. D does these relocations regularly and always tells people that they need to move on within six months or so. They shouldn't still have been there when you arrived. They definitely should have gone when Alaric left; he was their safety net, even if he didn't know it. Plus, it's been years since I talked to her, not since she was sent away.”

I grin, “I figured it would be something like that. I mean, what are the fucking chances that we're all connected in some way.”

“Like I said, this is fucking crazy,” Jensen chimes in helpfully once again.

“I agree with Jensen. It’s wild how fucking connected you all seem to be,” Jonah says, and I feel really bad because I had kind of forgotten that they were all here listening to this whole thing unfold.

It does make an idea occur to me though, and I ask, “As outsiders to this whole situation, what would you do next?”

“Well, you aren’t going to be able to properly focus on the job until you speak to Alaric and find out what he knows,” Ezra points out.

“That’s where I’d start as well,” Lyric agrees with a frown and then adds, “She’s lived one hell of a life considering she’s only twenty-one.”

“Enough for several lifetimes,” Luc agrees.

“What’s the time?” Cash asks, “Is it too late to ring him now?”

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Pulling out my phone and looking at the time, I reply, "It's only nine-thirty."

"I can try and call him now, but if he's on a last-minute job before he comes up here, he might not be able to answer," Atlas reminds me.

I sigh, knowing the right thing to do would be to wait until he arrives here, but being impatient enough that I don't necessarily want to do it, "We don't want to interrupt him if he's on the job. Just send him a message and ask him to contact us when it's safe to do so and that it's not urgent."

"Are you sure that's how you want to do it?" Peter asks, with a frown, "I know you. I know this is going to drive you mad."

"It is," I agree with a smile, "but I'd never forgive myself if I put Alaric in danger, and besides, we have other things we can focus on first. What else does the file say? What was she working on when she disappeared?"

Peter looks to the others before he answers me, "Are you all staying for this?"

"Hell, yeah. I want to see what sort of shit R got herself into this time," Jynx announces, making me smile.

Lyric's men all look at her, and she smiles softly, "I'd love to stay, but I am absolutely exhausted and will most likely end up falling asleep. Would you mind if we went home, and then you can give us the cliff notes tomorrow?"

"Of course," I smile, standing up and hugging her as we all say goodbye to the others.

“We’re going to head off as well. we’ve got to get ready for that job that we’ve got just after Christmas, and we want to put the work in now so we don’t have to worry about it over Christmas.” Noel reminds us. “But let us know if you need anything. Trick, you’ll know better than us if we can push the job off for a bit.”

Trick nods, “We can’t. That one is relatively time-sensitive, but I think we’ll probably need you for the extraction. We’re so far away from that right now, and we’re going to be doing research for a while, judging from what Mr R said on the phone.” Trick replies to them.

“We’re also going to need your help because we’re down three team members who all need to heal properly before they do anything physical that will most likely involve us fighting or being shot at.” I add firmly, looking at Trick, Jensen, and Cash before I continue, “As much as I want to get Rylie back now, Mr Rising told us that there was going to be a lot of research to do, which is the only reason why he gave it to us, knowing that we’re injured and supposed to be having some significant time off. Rylie is clearly highly trained, and even if we find her location, if you guys are not up to it, then either only some of us go with the support of the other teams, or we hand the job over to one of the teams at headquarters. I will not risk any of you, but there was a reason why Mr. R only told us about it.”

All of my guys nod in agreement, their expressions understanding and then their gazes turning to Trick, Cash, and Jensen.

Atlas says firmly, “And none of this saying you’re fine when you’re actually not shit. Ever’s right; we’re not risking any of you.”

“We got too close to losing you before. We’re not doing it again,” Rage adds firmly.

“I never want to have to fucking resuscitate one of you again.” Luc agrees, shadows in his eyes.

I don't think any of us who witnessed that scene will get over it any time soon. I know I still see it when I close my eyes sometimes.

Jensen nods, his expression serious, "We hear you. Not only will we not put ourselves at risk, but we also won't put you guys at risk by saying we're ready and then not being able to give you the backup that you need."

He reaches out to me, and I walk back over to where he's still sitting, standing next to him as he wraps his good arm around me and holds me close.

"He's right," Trick replies. "We will be honest about whether we can handle it or not."

"No matter how difficult it's going to be to stay behind while the rest of you are in danger," Cash adds honestly.

I look at Noel and the guys as I say, "Sorry guys, we got a bit off subject there. You guys do what you've got to do; like Trick said, it's going to be a while before we've got a lead or have to do the actual extraction."

Marty nods, "Okay, well, if you need us at any point before then, let us know. We're up here for Christmas, and stuff anyway, and our job doesn't start until the twenty-eighth anyway."

"Sounds good. From how Mr R worded it and the urgency in his tone, I'm guessing that we will need all the help we can get as we get further into it. See you later, guys," Riot says as they all get up to leave.

"Bye, guys," Callen replies.

After we hear the front door close, so it's just us, Jynx and her men, and Peter and

Elijah left, Peter turns to the rest of us, “Alright, since everyone wants to see, why don’t we go through to the front room and then I can hook it up to the TV, and everyone can see what I’m doing.”

“Good idea. I have a feeling that you’ll be getting asked every two minutes what you’ve found otherwise,” Elijah agrees with a smile.

“I’m neither denying nor confirming that.” I grin and then add, “Leave the stuff on the table. We can clear it later; I just want to get started and at least get an idea of what’s going on with this case,” I say as they all start to gather plates.

“Sure thing,” Rome replies.

“I’ve sent the message to Alaric; he’ll get back to us when he can,” Atlas adds.

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I nod as I help Jensen stand, which he hates, and then we all make our way into the front room. I reply, “I’ve calmed down a bit now, and I get that it’s not important in the grand scheme of things, but I need to know.”

“I want to know, too,” Jynx replies. “She was so fucking adamant that she wanted her normal, enough that she voluntarily moved hours away from her mother and had minimal contact with her for her safety. And they got on; it wasn’t like Mona was a bitch.”

“Fuck,” Ace suddenly curses, “You need to give Mona a call and let her know what’s going on and that we’ve got it handled.”

“The last thing we need is to end up with conflicting people, getting in each other’s way as they all try to achieve the same goal,” Riot points out.

Jynx nods as she pulls out her phone and adds, “I’m going to have to take the job on pro bono and assure her that we’re personally handling it.”

Trick nods, “I think we should be able to work that out. Mr R wants Rylie found, so although I’ll have to let him know that you’re assisting, I don’t think he’ll make a big fuss. I’ll message now.”

Jynx nods, “That’s fine. At least if we’re involved, we can make anyone who comes from Mona stand down.”

“Is that likely to happen?” Rafe asks with a frown, clearly not liking the idea of having a third party that we need to watch out for.

Rip shakes his head, “No, it’s unlikely. We have a working relationship with Mona and have had it for the past few years. It shouldn’t be a problem, but it’s better to have every eventuality covered.”

Rafe nods in agreement, “Yeah, good point.”

Jynx leaves the room to make a call as Ace offers to help Peter set everything up. When she comes back in, she says, “We’re all good. She was actually about to call to get us on the job anyway. I’ve also called Sawyer, and he’s got everything handled back there for a while.”

“He’s good. Do you think we’ll ever meet him and the others that you’ve mentioned?” I ask, getting distracted but also immensely curious about these other people who are so involved in Jynx’s life.

Jynx shrugs, “I’m sure it will work out one day. It’s a bit more complicated now that everyone has somewhat conflicting vocations.”

“Yeah, I get that. It would just be nice to meet them. They play such a big part in your lives that it feels weird that we haven’t met them.”

“I know,” she replies, her eyebrows furrowing slightly. “We’ll work something out, but it probably won’t be for a while.”

Chapter Two

“Alright, it’s all setup, guys,” Peter announces, interrupting our conversation, and prompting those of us who were still standing to take seats and then look up at the TV.

“Start with the file. We’ve seen the pictures; we know who we’re looking for.” Trick

suggests. “We need to know what she was working on, and then we can start to work out where the fuck she could be and if she’s really missing or has been taken out.”

“Is Mr R worried that this has something to do with the mole? The one that could get hold of that stupidly rare poison?” Jynx asks, wanting clarification as Peter works on bringing up the file.

“Yeah, whoever was using the rogue agents to get the information for them is incredibly well connected and powerful enough that he could easily persuade them.”

“Got it,” Jynx replies.

“Well, the good news is we have a file. The bad news is that there’s not a lot in it,” Peter explains with a frown on his face.

“That actually makes sense,” Atlas says and then explains further, “she’s a ghost agent. She’s not supposed to exist. So, it would make sense that there was only very minimal information on her actual cases. I imagine that when she’s finished a job, the case file is filled in properly and all the details added. But because her cases are even more sensitive than the usual jobs we do, it makes sense that the file is pretty sparse until then.”

“I actually hadn’t thought about it that way,” I admit.

“Alright, what have we got then?” Mason asks, “Hopefully, it will give us at least some kind of a starting point.”

“Right,” Peter says, “let’s see. So she’s been on the job for two months. The original objective was to follow the information, or at least try to. So she was working in the background following the information while we were locating the moles in the agency. Her last check-in was three weeks ago, and she hasn’t been heard from since.

She was supposed to check in every two weeks and was never a day late.”

“That doesn’t exactly point to good news,” Mal mutters.

Jensen shakes his head, “No, it doesn’t. If she’d been late a few days before then, I’d be more inclined to think that she may just be caught up with something, but if she’s consistently been on time and now she’s so late, that would suggest that something has gone wrong.”

“I agree,” Trick replies, and then, looking back at Peter, asks, “What was her location in the last communication with her?”

Peter quickly scans the document and then frowns, “A small town in Vermont, but just from getting a quick glance at the rest of the communications, her investigation hasn’t been limited to just the US. That’s where the majority of her leads seemed to take her, but there were two outside of the US, one in Canada and one in France.”

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“Wow, okay. That’s a pretty big fucking area for us to cover.” I point out completely unnecessarily because, of course, it is.

“So where the hell do we start?” Elijah asks.

Rome is the one to answer this time as he replies, “From the beginning. We find her first location and try to determine what she found there.”

“We’ll need to see the original piece of information that led her there as well. So we at least have some idea of where she would’ve been.” Riot adds.

“This operation is clearly a big one, so wouldn’t it make sense that there would be several people that the information that was stolen would have to go through before they reached the main player pulling the strings and organising all of this?” Luc asks.

“That’s an excellent point; I know I’d work it that way. The more people that it was to go through in several different locations, the more likely it is that anyone who is following the information is going to lose the trail and not be able to pick it back up again,” Cash replies.

“So what are we hoping for by starting right at the beginning?” I ask curiously.

“We want to be able to hopefully find one of these people that the information was handed to, and then we can either bring them in and question them or follow them to see if the mastermind behind this uses the same network of people for all of the information he gathers,” Trick replies.

“What makes you think that he didn’t just target headquarters?” Rip asks curiously.

“Two reasons: one, he had to find out about the organisation in that first place, and that requires some serious digging, and two, people who go to that much trouble for information tend to be gathers of it and are of the mindset that knowledge is power so they try to gain as much as they can,” Trick explains his reasoning.

Rip nods, looking impressed, and then replies, “Of course, there’s a chance that the person could be an ex-employee?”

I feel my eyebrows rise, “You know, up until this whole mole thing where our own agents were willing to kill their own people, I would’ve said that everyone is vetted so well that there’s no chance of that happening. Now, however, I’m not so sure.”

“Me neither,” Rage replies with a frown, “I mean, if it’s happened once, chances are it’s going to happen again or has happened before.”

“So we need to talk to Mr R to see if anyone who worked for the organisation before was let go under fraught circumstances, someone who might have an axe to grind with them,” Cash suggests.

“Knowing Mr Rising, he most likely already has a list of people that could cause problems in the future and has them watched closely to make sure that they don’t,” Luc replies.

“At least if he does, that will mean that we can cross off that line of thinking,” Atlas replies.

“Very true. Is there anything else in there that could help?” Trick asks.

“No, not really. There’s the communications, which consists of locations and if she

needs extraction,” Peter replies.

“I’ll keep going, but there’s not much in here. I think it’s like Atlas said: all the proper information was given at the end of the case.” Peter suggests and then looks at Trick, “So what’s our first move?”

Trick looks at me and says, “We have the parents arriving in three days, the day before Christmas Eve and then Christmas. We know that this is going to take a while to figure out. Peter, could you set a program running in the background to possibly find the locations that Rylie mentioned? Then, we can pinpoint them all on a map and see if there’s some sort of correlation. We can focus on the first point and see if we can find where the information is going. It’s going to take a long time, and we’re going to have to follow each point until we are certain who she was following when she got to the last point. From there, hopefully, we can find her location.”

“I can do that. There’s a lot of information it’s got sift through though, so it’s going to take a few days,” Peter replies.

Trick smiles, “Good. As I said, it’s Christmas in a few days, and we’ve been through a lot recently. We’re going to take it easy until the parents have gone.”

“D and Alaric are coming up too,” I remind him and then smile, “I hear what you’re saying, and it makes sense. I’m not going to insist that we start now. There’s not much that we can do anyway, and family comes first.”

Jynx clears her throat, “Just to throw it in there, before I forget. Ryan is coming with them.”

My eyebrows rise, “Hang on, Ryan, as in Headmaster of Blackbreak, Ryan?”

Almost as one, all the guys realise who Jynx is talking about and then stare at her in

question.

Jynx chuckles, “Yeah, that’s the guy. He is also Alaric and D’s best friend since they were kids, and they are fucking hilarious when they’re all together.”

I grin, “Awesome, I can’t wait. They all know that the parents aren’t in the same line of work as the rest of us and are normal, right?”

Jynx chuckles, “Oh yeah, don’t worry, they’ll behave themselves, although I would suggest checking Ryan for explosives on the way. He loves them as much as Ace does and has been known when he’s drunk to blow shit up.”

“They sound fucking awesome,” Jensen grins excitedly.

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“Well, it’s not going to be boring, at least.” I chuckle. “They’re arriving the same day as the Parents? The day before Christmas Eve?”

Jynx nods, “I think so, although D said that he’d try and get up sooner if he can, I think he’s looking forward to the break.”

“Okay, cool. Did you talk to Lucien to see if there’s a house for them in town? Will they be okay sharing? Do they have any dietary requirements that we need to be aware of? I’ve never cooked for any of them,” as soon as I start asking questions, they just carry on tumbling out of me, and I can’t seem to stop them as I keep thinking of more.

Luc pulls me down onto his lap, which is clever because I have no idea when I stood up in the first place. “Take a breath, Firecracker, one thing at a time. It’s only one extra person, and I’m sure that whatever they decide to throw at you, you will be able to handle it.”

“And remember, you’re not the only one cooking. I am too,” Rafe reminds me, sounding far too calm considering we’ve got so many people to entertain.

I smile, “Let’s be honest, Big Guy, you’re the one that’s going to be doing most of the cooking. I’m just helping you prep.”

“The most important part,” he points out with a smile.

“To answer your questions,” Jynx interrupts with a smile, “they will be absolutely fine sharing. They’ve done missions where they’ve had living quarters that are much

closer than that. They don't have any dietary requirements, so you're good there, and Rafe already asked me that about Alaric and D."

"You did?" I interrupt, looking at Rafe.

He smiles his tiny smile as he nods, "Yeah, Baby, I did."

"So what you're saying is, you've already thought of everything, and I'm freaking out for no reason?" I smirk, realising that it's all been taken care of and there's nothing really for me to be worrying about. In response to my question, though, Rafe just smiles.

"Yeah, Ever, I think that's what he's saying," Jynx smirks, and I stick my tongue out at her.

"Right, there's not much else that can be done today anyway," Trick starts, "so why don't we all head to bed and get some sleep? We've got a busy few days ahead of us anyway, and we can't do anything about the Rylie situation until after Christmas. So, we're going to enjoy the next few days and try to put it out of our minds while Peter's program does its thing and finds the locations where Rylie made her check-ins so that we can check surveillance and see if we can get eyes on her and anyone who she was with."

"Yeah, you're right," Rome agrees as he gets up, "I'm sure we'll see you guys at some point tomorrow."

"Definitely," I reply with a smile as I get up and hug Jynx.

"Call us if you need a hand with setting anything up for Christmas, and any work stuff can wait until after Christmas," Rip says firmly, giving me a look like he knows I'm not going to be able to stick to that request.

“We’ll try and make sure she does.” Rafe smiles, pulling me under his arm.

“See you later, guys,” Mason says as they all head out of the door.

After a quick tidy-up, we all head upstairs, Atlas and Rage helping Trick and Jensen up them, which Jensen absolutely hates, but he doesn’t have much choice. I have to admit that I’m slightly worried about how he’s going to cope if it takes him longer than expected to heal. He’s so used to being active and extremely active at that, and he’s already getting frustrated about how quickly he’s healing despite the fact that he’s healing a lot quicker than they thought he would.

Thankfully, it’s something that I’m aware of, so at the first sign that he’s really starting to struggle, I’ll come up with some way to distract him. Hopefully, he will feel it a lot less because we’ve got Christmas now, which means we’re taking it reasonably slowly anyway, and then afterward, Mr R didn’t mention putting us on any other jobs, so that means that the Rylie job is our top priority and the only thing that we’re working on, and that’s going to be a lot of waiting around and doing research before we do the actual rescuing, and we will fucking rescue her.

By the time that we get to the rescuing, Jensen should hopefully be well enough that he’s going to be able to be involved like he usually would.

“Stay with me tonight?” he asks me as the guys walk him down the hallway to his bedroom.

I smile, “I’d love to. Just let me get some PJs.”

He looks back over his shoulder at me and smirks, Atlas and Rage start to smile clearly, already guessing what Jensen is about to say as he tells me, “What makes you think you’re going to need pyjamas?”

I roll my eyes and raise my eyebrow, “Really? Even if I’m on top and you don’t have to do fuck all, which you will be incapable of doing anyway, it will still hurt you.”

Jensen sticks his tongue out at me, his eyes lighting up with amusement, “Fine, you may have a point. Give me a few days though, and you're mine, Angel.”

“I’m yours regardless, Jensen.” I remind him, and his eyes soften. “I’ll meet you in your room.”

“Come on, you smooth talker, let's get you sorted.” Rage teases.

“Fuck you,” Jensen replies with no real heat.

Once I’ve got my Pj’s, I quickly head to Trick and Cash’s rooms to make sure that they don’t need anything because although their injuries aren’t nearly as severe as Jensen’s, they're most likely going to take longer than him to heal because of where their broken bones are. So, whereas Jensen is worse and needs more help now, they're going to need help for longer. They still need to take it easy, and I want to make sure that they’ve taken their pain meds and are both comfortable.

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After I've given Trick some more painkillers because he supposedly forgot, which really means he just hates taking them, I kiss them both goodnight and make sure that they know that my phone is on loud so if they need me, then they can call and I'll hear it.

"Are Trick and Cash okay?" Jensen asks with a soft smile, pausing the TV and glancing over at me when I walk into the room; the covers down by his waist, exposing his chiselled abs but also giving me a stark reminder of what he's been through and how close to losing him we came, since there's bandages on his torso and the wounds that weren't bad enough for dressings are now healing but are still a reminder.

Meeting his eyes, I get under the covers next to him and reply, "Yeah, Trick's starting to become difficult about taking his pain medication."

Jensen chuckles, "Yeah, that sounds about right." he lifts his arm, gesturing for me, "Come here."

"I don't want to hurt you," I reply, gnawing on my lip.

Jensen laughs quietly, "You say that every time you're in here, and yet as soon as you're asleep, you roll over and end up on my chest anyway. I promise that I'll tell you if you hurt me. Besides, you're on my good side, and I really am doing a lot better than I was."

Smiling because I know he's right, I reply, "Are you sure?"

“Kiss me first, and then come here; I want cuddles.”

I don't waste any time in moving closer to him, and his hand comes up to cradle my face as our lips meet in a slow kiss that has my nerve endings firing, and I firmly tell them to back the hell off; he may be healing really well but he's definitely not up for any naked fun times. With this in mind, I pull back, smile gently, and then carefully settle my head on his chest. I'm not nearly so careful in my sleep, but while awake, I'm terrified of hurting him.

Apparently, having them taken and nearly losing Jensen has made me a bit paranoid, but I think, under the circumstances, that's understandable. I think if I weren't, that would be something to worry about.

Jensen pulls me closer to him, proving that I'm overly cautious as he presses play on the TV, putting on one of our favourite shows, and then kisses the top of my head, making me smile.

“I love you,” I tell him.

“I love you too, Angel.” He replies, happiness evident in his tone.

“As much as I'm looking forward to seeing the parents in a couple of days, I'm really looking forward to seeing D, Alaric, and Ryan. From the way that Jynx was talking about them, they're going to be great fun.”

I grin, not that he can see me, and reply, “Oh yeah, definitely. I have a feeling they might let all of their crazy out when they first arrive since they should be coming in the next two days so that they're here before the parents who are arriving on Christmas Eve, which is in three days.”

“Oh, maybe I'll make some cocktails? Ace mentioned something about wanting to try

a few out, and Ezra had some pretty interesting ideas for some festive ones as well.” Jensen suggests excitedly, ignoring my ramblings.

“Sounds good to me. Just be careful because of your pain meds.”

“Good point,” Jensen agrees, although he sounds no less excited than he did before.

After that, we fall silent, and somehow, the familiar drone of one of our favourite programs manages to cover the sound of my thoughts well enough that I’m able to fall asleep without overthinking.

Chapter Three

Although I managed to get to sleep okay, it's now only five a.m., and I’m wide awake. My mind is spinning with what-ifs as far as Rylie is concerned. I know that we’re doing the right thing by waiting until the parents go home on December twenty-six, and actually, we’re doing all we can by having the search running on Pete’s laptop, but it’s still bugging me that she’s potentially in trouble and might need help.

The only thing that is somewhat soothing my nerves is that she’s one of Mr R’s agents, and that means she’s been put through the best training. She’s got more of a chance than most people at surviving something if she is in trouble. There is always a chance that she isn’t in any kind of danger, and it just wasn’t safe to make the check-in phone call for some reason, and she will do it when she can.

When my mind continues to go around in circles, I sigh heavily and gently extract myself from Jensen. I’m not going to be able to get back to sleep now, and we’ve got enough to do. I don’t want to be distracted by this for the rest of the day and end up not enjoying it. So, I get up, change into some workout gear, and grab my phone and headphones before quietly leaving the room. I’m glad that Jensen is sleeping well

enough that he doesn't even stir when I open the door; it means his pain is under control.

I move silently through the house and make my way to the kitchen first to fill up my water bottle, and so no one panics about where I am. I write a note on the whiteboard we've got stuck to the fridge to let everyone know that I couldn't sleep so I'm working out. Once that's done, I move through the silent house, admiring the twinkling fairy lights that give everything a magical glow and somehow instantly make me feel happier and calmer, not enough to stop me from beating the crap out of a punching bag but enough that it's a less urgent need.

When I get to the gym, I briefly contemplate putting my music through the sound system instead of using my headphones, but I don't trust that this room is as soundproofed as we think it is and don't want to risk waking anyone up, so I stick to my original plan and put my headphones on, turning it up loud and smiling as the beat goes through me.

I go through a quick warm-up before wrapping my hands and then starting in on one of the punching bags that we have set up in here. As I lose myself to my workout, I start to feel the tension from the unknowns surrounding the Rylie situation drain out of me.

I don't know how long I've been down here, but movement from the corner of my eye distracts me and has me stopping, catching the punching bag before it rebounds and smacks me in the face, which has happened and hurts like a bitch, it also damages your pride too. Nothing like being brought back down to earth by an inanimate object.

"The guys told us we'd find you down here," Jynx says when I pull my headphones off.

“Are you okay?” Lyric asks, looking concerned.

I shrug, “I guess so, I’m just frustrated, and my mind wouldn’t stop going around in circles this morning with what-ifs and all that shit, so I came down here to work it out.”

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“Feel better?” Jynx asks me as she starts to wrap her hands, and they both look at me with understanding. That’s why I love these two women like sisters; they get me and understand the more complicated part of myself.

“Yeah, loads,” I reply.

“Good, let’s spar then.” Jynx smirks and then sends a raised eyebrow look to Lyric, who is taping up her hands as well. “You’re on the bag.”

Lyric rolls her eyes, “I know, I’m already fed up with not being able to fight properly, but at least I can still knock around a punching bag.”

“It’s going to be so worth it though,” I tell her, and then add with a huge smile, “I can’t wait for baby cuddles.”

“Neither can I,” Jynx adds, and Lyric’s smile widens.

There’s not much need for talking after that as Lyric starts some music up on the sound system, and Jynx and I get into position. We follow the usual rules, except we add a no face shots rule since it’s Christmas in a couple of days, and the parents are coming up. I know for a fact that they aren’t going to take it very well if we’re covered in bruises with split lips or eyebrows.

We spar until we’re both thoroughly exhausted, and somehow, neither one of us manages to get the upper hand, which rarely happens when we fight. Eventually, we’re both breathing really heavily, with sweat dripping down us, and Lyric calls it for us since she knows that we’re both stubborn enough that we’d most likely fight

until one of us passes out from exhaustion.

“That was a good call stopping us,” Jynx breathes out heavily before she chugs her water.

“You know, I love it when you’re in town; I get a proper workout.” I tell her, and now that I’m feeling a hell of a lot more relaxed, I ask, “Do you know what day D and the others are coming up? You said yesterday that you weren't sure.”

Jynx’s smile grows, “Yeah, they should be here this afternoon actually. That's one of the reasons why I came up now.”

“Good. I’m glad that we’re going to get a few days of unfiltered shenanigans before the parents arrive, and we have to start being careful about what we say.” I reply. It’s not really a big deal; it’s just the nature of our work and how our lives are, but it does mean that we have to be a bit more careful about what we say, especially when we’re all drinking.

Thankfully, the parents are amazing, and even if we do slip up occasionally, they know enough about what we do that they don’t ask any questions, or if they do accidentally ask a question that we can’t answer, they don’t take offense when we tell them that we can’t answer.

“Jensen, Ace, and Ezra are all upstairs trying out different cocktail recipes; that’s actually why we’re up here already, and Ezra assured me that they’re also making some mocktails for me so I don’t feel left out, although Ace renamed them mom-mocktails,” Lyric adds, with a chuckle.

“So they’re going to be wasted way before the others arrive, then?” I ask as I start to gather my stuff so that I can go and shower and get ready for the day.

“I think they’re actually being quite sensible about it. It helps that Jensen can’t actually drink that much because of his meds, so it's slowing the others down too,” Lyric points out.

“Rafe and Riot were making a pretty hearty-looking breakfast when we came down here and muttering about lining their stomachs or something,” Jynx adds, looking amused.

“Well, I’m starving after that workout. I’ll meet you guys up there. I’m assuming you’re using the showers down here?”

“Yep, I feel gross now,” Jynx grimaces.

“And we’re starving,” Lyric adds, smiling as she rubs her stomach.

We split up, and I head upstairs to my room, yelling hello to my guys and Lyric and Jynx’s too, as I move past.

“Breakfast will be ready in five,” Rafe calls after me.

“Got it,” I yell back.

Despite knowing that food is waiting for me and being incredibly hungry, I spend way longer than five minutes in the shower. I can’t help it; my shower is amazing, and I need it after that workout. When I do make it downstairs, everyone is gathered around our newly acquired massive dining table in the extension and are passing each other food down the length of it. The sight of all of my chosen family gathered together, except for Noel’s team, who are missing, fills me with so much happiness and is an obvious sign of how much my life has changed for the better.

On the way to take my seat, I stop next to Rafe and Riot and kiss them both, “Thank

you for making breakfast.”

“I didn’t really do much, but I’ll take the thank you kisses,” Riot replies, his lips tilting up into a smirk.

“You always do more than you give yourself credit for,” Rafe chastises, smiling at him affectionately and kissing his cheek.

“You guys always work well together, and I just wanted you to know that I’m grateful for the meals that you cook us, and I don’t take it for granted,” I tell them both, but Rafe especially, since he has taken over the majority of the cooking duties.

Rafe grins and pulls me down onto his lap, “Thank you. But you know that I love cooking and experimenting. You also know that I would bring it up if I didn’t want to cook for everyone most of the time. That was one of your rules when we first got together, that we communicate and tell each other if we’re struggling with something. None of us have forgotten that, and all of us make sure we stick to it.”

I smile, “I know, but I’m just making sure.”

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“Are you okay?” Riot asks me, his hand moving to grab mine as he threads his fingers through mine, “You were in the gym for a long time this morning, and that’s not including however early it was that you left Jensen earlier.”

“Yeah, I’m okay. My brain was just doing that thing where it wouldn’t shut up, and it was making me antsy, so I decided I’d work it out, literally. It helped, and although I’m still annoyed that we can’t immediately start this case, we’d be in limbo with it regardless of whether it was Christmas or not because of Pete’s computer program needing to find all the locations and how long that’s going to take,” I reply.

“It’s frustrating us too, knowing that she’s potentially in trouble and we’re sitting here enjoying Christmas,” Luc says from beside Riot, having overheard our conversation. Determination fills his eyes as they meet mine, “but we will find her, and she will be okay.”

“I know, we’re damn good at what we do, and we’ve got Jynx and the guys helping us too, so we have some more reach through them into the criminal world since we’re not technically a part of that world anymore,” I reply.

“Exactly,” Luc smiles. “We also can’t do anything with Trick, Jensen, and Cash still healing because something tells me that this job is going to require all hands on deck.”

“Yeah, I think you’re definitely right with that,” Rafe replies and then nudges me to stand up, “I can feel your stomach rumbling, go and eat, we’ve got plenty of time to talk about everything to do with the case.”

“I don’t need to be told twice,” I tell him, kissing him again and then getting up and kissing Luc and Riot too, before going and kissing all of my men because why the hell not?

Before I take my seat between Atty and Trick and opposite Pete and Elijah, I kiss them both too, and the guys on either side of me start to load up my plate for me with all of my favourite foods. I’m still not used to how they care for me, and I should be by now since it’s been long enough. I don’t ever want to take it for granted though.

“Thank you guys,” I tell them both, as Pete gives me a raised eyebrow look from across the table.

“Where are Noel and the guys?” I ask Pete and Elijah.

“They’re doing last-minute shopping, I think,” Elijah tells us, and I smirk as Peter rolls his eyes.

“I told them that they needed to get it done sooner, but none of them listened to me,” he says, his voice full of disapproval, which makes my smile widen even more.

“They’ll listen next time, babe,” Elijah reassures him, making those of us who have overheard the conversation chuckle.

I then become thoroughly focused on my food because I’m damn starving. Eventually, I eat enough that I tune back into the conversation.

“Back with us now?” Peter questions with an amused smirk as he sips his coffee.

I don’t bother replying, but I do flip him the bird because damn him for knowing me so freaking well.

Atlas clears his throat, gaining my attention and stopping me from carrying on, giving Pete an unimpressed look as I turn to look at him instead and smile sweetly, which instantly has his lips twitching and fighting off a smirk.

“You know, you’re just damn cute when you do stuff like that?” Trick says, and I glance at him instead.

I smile angelically and say, “I know, and you’re welcome.”

“I’m welcome?” Trick questions, raising his eyebrow.

“I am aware that didn’t make much sense, but I’m sticking with it,” I reply with all the confidence in the world, making everyone who is sitting close enough to us laugh. Ignoring the laughter, I turn back to face Atty and ask, “Did you want to say something before we got rudely interrupted?”

Trick scoffs behind me as Atty smirks and then says, “Yes, I was going to say that Alaric hasn’t gotten back to me, but since they’re all going to be arriving in a few hours, I’m sure he’ll answer any questions we have about the whole Rylie thing then.”

“Yeah, I was hoping he would.” I reply, “I still can’t get over how connected we all are. I mean, even Jynx knows Rylie and knew her before we did. It’s just odd.”

“It’s fucking wild, but her being Mona’s daughter actually makes a lot of sense. She was skilled, and she wasn’t surprised by most of the shit that she found out about us; in fact, it almost amused her,” Cash says from the other side of Trick.

“Which makes sense because the stuff with Tomlinson would’ve seemed incredibly small compared to the shit that she was used to seeing and dealing with, and she had no idea about some of the other shit we got up to,” Atlas points out.

“It doesn’t explain why she said to me that she didn’t want me to contact her anymore though, if she was just going to ask Alaric for help and shit,” I muse, trying to make sense of it all.

“We won’t know what happened unless we ask her, and we’re not going to be able to ask her until we find her, and we can’t do that until after Christmas,” Cash says.

“I know, it’s just the more I think about it, the more questions that I have,” I reply with a frown as I take another sip of coffee.

“That’s understandable,” Trick replies, “we don’t know what could’ve happened between talking to you and us leaving her and her talking to Alaric.”

“That’s true,” Cash replies.

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“Alright, what’s the plan for today then?” Rome asks the table as a whole and all the individual conversations that were happening stop as everyone tunes in and starts to listen to the plan for today.

“Well, I don’t know about everyone else, but we,” Jensen gestures to Ezra and Ace, who grin, “are mixing up some holiday cocktails in honor of D, Alaric, and Ryan coming up later.”

“I volunteer to be a taste tester,” Lucien and Elijah exclaim at the same time, making us all chuckle.

“I’m in the kitchen for most of the day, cooking and preparing what I can for Christmas day now, and food for later too,” Rafe adds.

“I’ve got to go and check on the horses while the snow has let up a bit. It’s supposed to get bad again later.” Rage adds.

“I’ll come with you and check that Tank is okay,” I tell him.

“I’ve got to wrap some presents,” Luc winces. “I hate wrapping presents.”

“I have to wrap mine as well,” Cash replies, “we can do it together; at least it will be less painful that way.”

“I’ve got to go and make sure the houses that your parents and D, Alaric, and Ryan are staying in are ready for them, and Lyric and Jynx are coming with me so that they can leave welcome baskets or something along those lines,” Jonah says, making me

smile as his eyebrows dip slightly when he says welcome baskets like he's not entirely sure what they have planned but has decided to go with it anyway.

“What about you, Pete?” I ask.

“I’m going to double-check that the program I’ve set up on my laptop to trace the last few locations that Rylie made contact in is working properly, and then I’m helping with the cocktail tasting,” he grins.

Ace tilts his head slightly and offers, “If you need a hand going over it, just give me a shout. I’m happy to help out.”

“Thanks, man, I might take you up on that. I want to make sure that it’s done right and I don’t miss anything,” Peter replies.

“No problem, we can take a look after breakfast,” Ace replies with a smile.

He’s so easygoing and laid back most of the time that I forget that, like Jensen, he has some hidden talents and is actually really smart. Ace is on the same level, if not better, than Peter, and that’s something that I’ve only just become aware of. I always knew he was good with all things computers, but he’s like crazy good. I swear he’s almost on a genius level, and I have no idea how he managed to downplay it for so long. Peter was the one to point out just how good Ace was when he offered advice for one of our other jobs.

“I guess the rest of us are just hanging out or helping out with the others,” Mason says, and we all nod in agreement.

Chapter Four

Once we’ve finished breakfast and everyone has helped to tidy the breakfast things

away, Rage asks me, “Are you ready to get going?”

“Yep, just let me get my boots and jacket, and then we can get going,” I reply.

“Got it, I’ll meet you out back by the four-wheelers,” he smiles, pulling me close and kissing me, making butterflies take flight in my stomach and leaving me with a happy smile.

I love that I get to do this with him, that it's our thing and something that we both find equally enjoyable, and that most of the time, it’s something that we do, just the two of us. The others occasionally come out, but it doesn’t happen very often; they’re not as interested in the horses as we are, preferring wheels over hooves. When I’ve pulled on my boots and jacket, I make my way back through the house and yell a generalized goodbye to anyone who is in hearing distance since everyone has split up to do their own things now. I thought that maybe having so many people around me all the time would get overwhelming at some point, but so far, I just enjoy it.

I like that they all feel comfortable enough to just walk into our house and that we feel comfortable enough to do the same at theirs. It feels like a real family, something that I didn't have for a large portion of my life, and it makes me all warm and mushy.

As soon as I step outside, a shiver runs through me, and I start to worry about the horses even more than I was already. It’s really fucking cold, and judging by the darkening of the sky, the snow is about to start up again soon. We need to be quick to avoid getting stuck out at the barn in a snowstorm, and because we both know that, neither of us does what we usually do and challenges the other one to a race.

“Well, the doors are holding up nicely, at least,” Rage says, concern lacing his tone as we park up and head inside.

“And the generators are still working for the heating,” I reply with a relieved smile as

we open the door, get smacked in the face with heat, and are greeted by happy whinnies from the horses.

“Thank fuck for that,” Rage replies, quickly slamming the door so we don’t let out any more heat.

Tank huffs out a greeting as I take my gloves off and start to stroke him before he gets really fucking loud and indignant because I haven’t done it quickly enough.

We work in silence as we make sure that the horses are okay fed, and we also check the barn to make sure that there are no weak spots or anything that we need to be concerned about. With the weather at this time of year, we need to be extra vigilant just in case we get a really bad snowstorm and can’t get up here safely. Peter did help to install cameras up here as part of our security system update a year or so ago, so if the weather does get really bad, we can still check on them, and if we need to, we will find a way to get up here.

“Everything looks good on your side?” Rage asks me.

I turn around to answer him and then grin when I see that he’s taken his hat off and his curls have become unruly and wild, resembling what they usually look like after I’ve run my hands through it a few times and pulled it too.

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Those thoughts have my mind wandering into places where we are both considerably less clothed, and I glance out of the window to see how imminent the threat of the snowstorm is. It still looks reasonably calm out there, and suddenly, all I can think about is Rage naked.

“If you carry on looking at me like that, Puddin’, I’m going to take you right here, fuck the snowstorm,” Rage practically growls, and the words hit my clit, turning me on more.

Instead of looking away, I allow my lips to tip up into a smirk and then shrug as I reply, “You just talking? Or are you going to prove it?”

Apparently, that’s all the encouragement he needs as he stalks toward me, and I start to back up, taking off my bulky jacket as I go. It’s still far too cold despite the heaters in here to be completely naked, but for what I have in mind, we don’t need to be. I want him now. I just manage to toe my boots off as he reaches me, watching me with heated eyes.

All of my movements stop as he presses his body against mine, forcing my back to hit the wall behind me and my head to crane back so I can see him properly. One of his arms goes above my head, leaning against the wall, and his other grips my neck, his thumb rubbing against my jaw. In my haste to take off as much of my own clothes as possible, I missed him taking off his, and my hands greedily search for the hem of his shirt so that I can run my hands over his toned abs and chest.

When I finally get my hands under his shirt, his muscles jump and tense under my touch, and his mouth slants against mine in a searing kiss that has my clit pulsing and

my nails digging into his abs before I allow them to travel further down, and start to undo his belt, my fingers searching for his hard cock, just behind the layers of material.

I just manage to get his zipper down when he steps back, breaking our kiss and making me pout in frustration. I was so freaking close to what I wanted.

He chuckles at my obvious disapproval before he steps closer again and starts to work my extra thick thermal leggings down my legs; it's not easy; they don't want to go anywhere, which I'm always grateful for when I'm out in the snow but right now I'm just cursing them.

When he's managed to peel them far enough down my legs that he gets to my feet, pausing halfway down to drive me mad and kiss up my thighs, he glances up at me and smirks as he asks, "Are these the ones that are bitch to get off your feet and we always have to help you?"

I pull a face as I smirk and then nod, "Yep, these are the ones."

He rolls his eyes and chuckles before he says, "Lift a leg; you can't sit down in here."

"Yes sir," I reply, and then add, "you only need to get them off one foot; we've got to be reasonably quick anyway."

"Very true," he replies, amusement dancing in his eyes.

"Hey, isn't this super sexy?" I add.

Rage doesn't bother replying to me because he's managed to get one of my feet out and is now kissing up the inside of my leg, thoroughly distracting me as my hands move to his hair and start running through his auburn curls. I love that he's grown it

out just a bit longer for me since he knows that I love the curls so much.

His fingers move my underwear out of the way as he lifts my leg and hooks it over his shoulder, the wall supporting me, as his tongue delves between my folds, circling my clit with just the right amount of pressure. My hands clench in his hair as he runs his other hand up the inside of my thigh before plunging his fingers into my slick heat and making me call out in ecstasy.

His fingers curl up as he sucks my clit, his tongue flicking at the same time and sending me hurtling over the edge and into a blackout orgasm. Once I've come back down to earth, Rage stands back up, a proud smile on his face before he kisses me, his tongue tangling with mine, my taste on his lips. Without breaking the kiss, he lifts me up, my legs wrapping around his waist and using the wall behind me to help support me as he lines himself up at my entrance and slowly lowers me, both of us letting out a harsh breath as the kiss intensifies.

As his speed increases, my walls clenching around him as another orgasm slowly starts to build. I tear my lips away from his, my neck tilting backward as I give myself over to the sensations. This angle means that his dick is hitting just the right spot, and he switches between fast and slow, taking me right to the edge before switching it up again and doing it all over.

My body is shaking with need, and my voice comes out hoarse with warning, "Rage."

He immediately knows that I've had enough, and I want to fly over the edge; his hands grip my ass tighter as his lips once again meet mine. He moves faster, both of us moaning in pleasure before we both fall apart together. When we finally come back down to earth, Rage leans heavily on one of his arms against the wall, both of us breathing heavily before he smiles at me and kisses me.

"Love you," I smile, chuckling when he steps back, and my legs shake slightly.

“I love you too, Puddin’,” he replies as he sorts himself out. “We’d better get back, it started snowing, it’s not too bad at the moment but we don’t want to get stuck up here.”

“Shit, I completely forgot about that. I was too busy thinking about you naked,” I reply and ignore his laughter as I quickly gather my clothes and head to the bathroom at the back of the barn to clean up and get dressed again quickly.

Once I come back out, all put together again, I say a quick goodbye to Tank, promising to come again and hopefully take him out when the weather allows it before I walk toward Rage, who is waiting by the door.

“All set?” he asks me, and I nod. He looks me over and adds, “I meant to talk to you about it at some point anyway; I know you’re feeling thrown about the whole Rylie thing that we will fix, but I want to know how you’re dealing with the kidnapping and the guys being hurt. It wasn’t that long ago that it happened, and they’re still very much dealing with the aftermath of it, and I just want to check that you’re okay?”

My heart clenches at his thoughtfulness as I take a moment to really think about my answer to make sure that I’m answering him as honestly as I can and also because I’m still not good at telling them, or anyone for that matter when I have big feelings which is most likely why he’s asking me.

“It still terrifies me, and I still get flashes every now and then of Jensen on the floor, his heart stopped. My dreams are cruel and show me situations where he doesn’t wake up, but they’re thankfully getting further apart, and with everything that’s going on at the moment, getting ready for Christmas and now the Rylie thing, I’m so exhausted when I do get to bed that I’m either sleeping too deeply to dream or just not remembering them, it’s also keeping me busy during the day.”

“I get the dreams too, and I know the others do; those of us who witnessed it do as

well. I don't think we'll ever get over it entirely; we almost lost a member of our family, and he's going to carry the scars from it for a long time," Rage replies.

"Trick is checking in on him regularly to make sure he's okay, and surprisingly enough, I think he's doing far better than the rest of us," I reply, honestly believing that I'm right.

"Yeah, he seems to be; he's got all of us keeping an eye on him to make sure that he remains okay and isn't masking anything. I think he may be struggling more with the fact that he can't do everything that he wants to do than anything else," Rage replies, thoughtfully having picked up on the same thing that I have.

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“Oh yeah, definitely, but he’s getting better by the day, and we can take him shooting or something when the weather allows us to, and that should help to tame that itch in him. I think he’s got a week or so left before the doctor said he can start doing gentle exercise to build strength up again.”

“We’re just going to have to make sure that he doesn’t try to do too much too quickly and ends up setting himself back,” Rage replies, and then glancing over my shoulder, curses, “shit, the snows got heavier, that’s my fault, but I really wanted to know if you were okay with it all.”

“Thank you,” I reply with gratitude as I pull him closer with a gloved hand and kiss him. “Now, let’s go before we’re stuck up here. The horses may have food, but we don’t, and I’m hungry now.”

“You always get snacky after sex,” Rage chuckles, sounding thoroughly amused before he opens the door to the barn and effectively cuts off my retort as the cold air takes my breath away, and I suddenly feel like I’m not wearing enough layers.

We both rush towards the four-wheelers, which have a light dusting of snow over them now, but the snow is coming down so quickly that if we’d waited any longer, there would’ve been a hell of a lot more.

“Don’t go too fast on the way back. We need to remain cautious,” Rage tells me worriedly, “you go first, and I’ll follow behind just in case something happens. It’s getting even heavier. Hopefully, we can make it back in time without getting stuck.”

“Got it,” I reply, as I grip the handlebars and start it up.

I immediately start to head back down the path to the house. It's not too far away, thankfully, but in this weather, that doesn't really mean much, and in retrospect, maybe we shouldn't have taken the time to have sex in the barn.

Not that I regret it; I don't think anyone could regret sex that good.

I realise that I'm getting distracted again, so I put all thoughts of sex out of my mind and focus. The snow is really starting to come down, and it's getting to the point where I'm going to begin to struggle to see much more than just vague shapes in front of me, and I'm not entirely confident of my ability to navigate our way home if I can't see very well.

My sense of direction is still awful.

But it's a reasonably straight track with only one turning. As we get closer to the house, the trick is going to be not to miss the track because I really haven't explored in the other direction enough to know it in almost whiteout snowfall.

"The turn is in one hundred yards!" Rage's voice sounds over the roar of the engines, and I thank anyone who wants to listen that this man knows me well enough to know that I'm not going to be able to find it in this weather.

"Got it!" I call back, my eyes ahead; now is not the time to do anything but focus on the road ahead.

I manage to make the turning in time thanks to Rage's warning, but less than a minute after I make the turn and start down the last part of the track that will lead us to the backyard and a straight shot to the house, there's an almighty bang that almost sounds like thunder and panic shoots through me.

"Keep going! I'm okay; a branch just broke under the weight of the snow!" Rage

calls out, and instantly, my racing heart calms down as I speed back up again, unsure when I'd actually slowed down.

We're so close that I can almost taste Rafe's hot chocolate. As soon as the house comes into view, I breathe a sigh of relief, and although I desperately just want to drive as close to the doors as possible and abandon the four wheeler's, I know I can't because that would mean leaving them out in the worst of the elements and there's no telling whether they would survive or not, but the chances are that they would have some damage.

So, with this in mind, I reluctantly steer mine toward the lean-to thing that we usually store them in, with Rage on my heels as we quickly park them and then trudge what feels like miles, even though it is only a few feet toward the door on the new extension that's going to let us into the warm relief of the house.

The snow tries to blind me as my feet sink into the snow, and the wind makes my face hurt; Rage's arm wraps around me, tucking me into his side and letting me know that he's here and I haven't somehow lost him. Finally, we reach the door. I dramatically stumble through the doors and lie down on the floor while Rage shuts the door behind us, and we both pant heavily from the excursion and the adrenaline rush.

That was one hell of a workout.

"You guys look cold," Jensen smirks, looking down at me, but concern floods his eyes as he asks, "Are you okay?"

"We were just about to come and find you," Trick adds with a frown, and I tilt my head back, my eyes partially obscured by the fur on my hood, as I point at him from the floor.

“Have you taken your meds?” I ask him firmly, “You’re due.”

Trick frowns, staring down. “Why are you only asking me?”

Chapter Five

I roll my eyes, “Because Cash knows how important it is to take his pain meds, and Jensen is in too much pain not to but you; although you are in pain, you’re fighting it, so have you taken your pain meds?”

Rafe suddenly appears just behind Trick, a handful of meds in one hand and a glass of water in the other as he holds them out to Trick, he says, “I told you she was going to ask.”

I chuckle as I start to push myself up from the floor but end up realising that I am, in fact, stuck because I’m wearing so many freaking layers. “Help?” I plead, and several different chuckles sound around the room as Atlas steps forward to actually help me get up.

“You remind me of a turtle stuck on its back,” he tells me with an amused half-smile as he hauls me to my feet.

I hold up my hand, still encased in its mitten, as I reply, “You can’t see, but I’m flipping you off right now.”

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His eyes spark with amusement as people in the room once again laugh at my expense.

I decide to ignore them all as I turn around to face Trick and raise my eyebrow at him again when I see that he's still holding his pain meds; he rolls his eyes at me and then smirks, shoving them all into his mouth and then taking a massive drink of water.

As everyone goes back to what they were doing, I take my gloves and jacket off and move over to him; he glances down at me with a smile as he wraps his arm around me, "I only insist because I worry about you being in pain and because of how much you're doing that you probably shouldn't be, you broke your leg Trick, a couple of weeks ago, you're not healed. If you really are okay and can handle the pain level even with everything that we're doing, then stop taking them, and I promise I won't give you any shit. I just ask that you take the antibiotic because the last thing we need is for you to be taken down by an infection."

He squeezes me, "I know all that, and that's why I like to give you a hard time about it. If I'm being honest with myself, I was starting to feel it and needed to take my painkiller anyway. I just like it when you get all feisty and bossy with me."

I turn to look up at him incredulously, my lips twitching in amusement, "You little shit."

He shrugs and bends down slightly to kiss me before saying, "Yeah, but you love me."

"Always," I grin. "Right, what needs to be done before Alaric, D, and Ryan get

here?" my eyes widen as thoughts of what we just traveled back from the barn in flashes through my mind, and I add before Trick can reply, "Oh shit, what if they can't get up because of the snow? What if they get stuck?"

Trick pulls me in front of him and puts his hands on my face so that I stop panicking and actually focus. It's impressive because it means that he's effectively balancing, thanks to his broken leg and his crutches hanging off his arm. "It will be fine, and we had the road cleared and salted, remember? It's a hell of a lot safer than how you just traveled. Besides, they're already on their way up with Lyric, Jynx, and the others. They're taking it easy though, and have dropped their stuff at the house they'll be staying in, so they're going to take a bit longer than usual to get here."

I let out a heavy breath as my body relaxes from the tension, "Oh, okay, yeah, that makes more sense, and actually, I had forgotten that we sorted out the road up here."

"That's okay; a lot has been going on recently. Things are bound to slip your mind," he replies, smiling gently.

"That's a really good point," I reply, "now, I'm going to go and get changed quickly; you go and sit with Cash. You really should be resting, and I know for a fact that you're not going to later, so do it now."

Trick steps back with a chuckle and salutes me, "Yes, ma'am."

I roll my eyes and walk past him and around the couch that we've put at this end of the extension to give us even more sitting options. I feel like I haven't seen Cash properly for too long, even though in reality, it probably hasn't been that long at all.

Regardless, I stop off at the table where he's sitting next to Pete and drop a kiss on his head; his arm snaps out and wraps around my waist, pulling me close.

“Il mio cuore,” he smiles.

“Hey, are you okay? How’re you feeling?” I ask him and then add, “By the way, you’re my favourite patient.”

“I am?” he asks, raising his eyebrow and looking amused.

“Yep,” I nod, “you take your meds with no fuss, and you’re not overdoing it like the others too.”

“Well, that’s only because I know that overdoing it now means that it’s going to take me longer to get better and back to where I was before this happened; it’s better and quicker in the long run if I just rest. We may be starting with research after Christmas, which could take a while, but it’s not going to be too long before we find Rylie and have to extract her, and I won’t sit on the sidelines while you’re all in danger.” Cash explains.

“Well shit,” Jensen curses from behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to see him frowning.

“Makes sense, doesn’t it,” I smirk, unable to stop myself.

Jensen nods, “Yeah, actually. I just never thought of it that way, and as frustrated as I am to take it easy and have people do stuff for me, I really do not want to be left behind when we do the extraction. I could not handle knowing that you’re all in danger and a man down, especially since something tells me that we’re going to need all of our skill sets and Jynx’s too, in order to get to Rylie. This isn’t going to be an easy job.”

“No, it’s not,” I agree.

“Alright, I’ll be more like Cash and rest,” Jensen smiles, leaning forward to kiss me quickly before he plops his ass in a seat and looks contemplative for a second before he immediately starts to get up again.

I burst out laughing, “Dude, that lasted like three seconds, seriously?”

“What?” he asks, looking mildly confused before his expression clears, and he grins, “Oh no, I’m still resting. I just remembered that there’s a new book series that I’ve been meaning to start, but I never stay still long enough to do it. Now is the perfect time, and it will give me something else to focus on and hopefully stop me from getting too twitchy.”

I smile, “That’s a great idea. Why don’t you sit back down and let me know where they are, and I’ll go and grab you the first one? Also, a man reading is super freaking sexy.”

He chuckles as his eyes spark with heat, and surprising me, he sits back down, which just goes to show how tired and how much pain he’s in, “Yeah, okay. I’d appreciate that; they’re in the front room on the bookcase. The first book is called Trying to Live with the Dead, and it’s by B.L Brunnemer.”

“Awesome series, you’re going to love it,” Rafe comments as he walks past us, heading toward the kitchen.

“He’s right,” I add, “it’s one of my favourites.”

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“I know, that’s why I want to read it,” Jensen replies like it's not a big deal when, actually, the fact that he wants to read them because I love them so much makes me love him so much more.

I bend down and kiss him, my tongue running across the seam of his lips as he opens for me, and our tongues dance together before I bite his lip just hard enough to make him moan quietly and then say, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He replies, his eyes slightly glazed and making me feel powerful as fuck that I can cause him to have that sort of reaction.

I have to admit that there’s an extra sway in my hips as I walk away from him, aware that not only are his eyes watching my ass, but my other men are as well as I make my way into the front room and over to the massive bookcase that we have in the alcove next to the fireplace. I freaking love this bookcase, it reaches all the way to the ceiling, and our ceilings are pretty fucking high, which means we had to have one of those sliding ladder things they have in libraries so that we can reach the books on the top shelf and I’ve honestly, never been more excited than when it was first finished and I got to start putting books on it.

One of my most favourite things about this bookcase though, is that we all have books that we like on it. It’s a collection of all our different tastes, and we regularly choose books that we wouldn’t necessarily choose to read because one of the others likes it, and I love that.

I also wasn’t lying. There’s just something about walking into the front room and seeing one of my men curled up in the big squishy chair we have here and reading;

it's really attractive and makes me feel happy, no matter what mood I was in when I first walked in there.

I climb up a couple of rungs on the ladders, wondering how on earth Jensen thought that he could reach them by himself. Although that might have been why he agreed to my help so readily, he knew there was no chance that he could get them.

I take the book back to Jensen and hand it over to him, "I might do a reread so I can read along with you. It's been a few months."

Cash chuckles, "I know for a fact that it hasn't been that long since you last read them."

I shrug, "It feels like it has been, and that's what counts."

They both start laughing as Peter says, "I swear you've got an obsession with those books."

I point at him and raise my eyebrow, "Hey now, don't start judging me unless you've read them; I swear you're going to love them."

Rafe once again walks past us, this time going the other way, and pauses, "She's right, man, you'd fucking love them."

Rafe grins and then slaps my ass before he continues past me and to the pantry.

Peter looks contemplative before he says, "Alright, I might read them while Jensen and you are reading them, just to see what all the hype is about. I've got the app on my phone."

"Yes!" I exclaim, far too excited, but I've honestly been trying to get him to read

them since I first found them, so this feels like an epic win.

Peter chuckles, “You know, if you wanted me to read them that bad, you should’ve said, and I would’ve read them.”

“Fuck off.” I reply, “No, you wouldn’t have.”

He tilts his head and shrugs with a smile, “Yeah, you may be right, I’m too stubborn.”

“I know,” I reply with a fond grin, “I’m going to go and tidy up a bit, just to make sure everything looks okay for when they arrive and also because I feel like I need to do something.”

“Okay, Angel.” Jesen grins, although his eyes never move away from the page he’s reading, which makes my smile widen.

“How long has it been since you saw D in person?” Pete asks curiously.

I pause as I think about it, “Probably just after I helped Jynx out with a job in Fresno, my father found out I wasn’t doing what I was supposed to be and sent me to watch over someone and report back their movements, but it was D so we had a bit of fun feeding my father false information for a while.”

Cash bursts into shocked laughter, “That’s brilliant. I bet it really fucked with whatever he had planned.”

“It did, and shockingly, my father never realised that I was in on feeding him the false information; he just figured that they were tricking me somehow.”

“Genius,” Jensen replies.

“I thought so,” I reply and then add, “so it’s been a good few years; any of our communication after that has been done via phone.”

“Wow, okay, so it’ll be good to see him again after so long.” Cash replies.

“Definitely, he’s hilarious, and like Jynx, but more so, you never really know what is going to come out of his mouth next.”

“Well, I’m sure the cocktails that Ace, Ezra, and me made are going to help with that as well, and Jynx warned us what they’re all like together so I can’t wait.” Jensen chimes in and then immediately goes back to reading and pretending that we’re not here.

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I leave them to it; I really want to make sure that everything looks good just for my own peace of mind.

As I expected, everything is pretty much fine, and I'm just fussing more than anything. After the third time of fluffing the pillows, I decide I really am being ridiculous and instead go into the kitchen to see Rafe.

"Hey, Baby, have you had enough of trying to find something that needs tidying?" Rafe greets me as soon as I walk into the room.

I stick my tongue out at him because he's right and say, "Maybe, I don't know why I do this every time. I mean, I know I do this, and I also know that on Christmas Eve morning tomorrow, just before the parents arrive, I'm going to be running around like a mad woman cleaning despite the fact that I will have done it tonight after everyone has left to make sure it was ready."

Rafe smiles at me as he pulls me into his arms, my head falling onto his chest as he kisses the top of my head.

His voice rumbles through his chest as he says, "It's cute, and it's only because you care so much. But, would you like to help me out in here so that you are distracted by doing something that needs to be done and not something that has already been done?"

"This is why I love you," I mumble into his chest before adding, "yes, please."

"Thought so," he chuckles as he steps back.

“So, what are we making?” I ask him, grateful that he understands me so well and that he’s also giving me something else to focus on.

“I’m doing like a picky, buffet kind of thing. That way, we can just leave it out, and people can pick at it through the evening because everyone is going to be drunk, very drunk. I saw some of what those three were putting into the cocktails, and they are crazy strong. I’m actually surprised Ezra isn’t on the floor.”

“Hey, I take offense to that statement. I am an excellent holder of liquor,” Ezra exclaims, seemingly to have appeared out of nowhere.

I chuckle, “I’m sure you are, dude. No one was questioning that.”

He grins, “Good. I just wanted to make that clear. Anyway, I was coming to tell you guys that the beautiful mother of our child just called me and said they’re going to be about thirty minutes. It took a bit longer to drop the stuff at their house because of the traffic, thanks to the snow.”

“Awesome, that gives me just enough time to do what I want to do with food,” Rafe replies.

“I was going to say, dude, it smells freaking amazing in here.” Ezra compliments.

“Thank you. I’m trying to whip up some things that are going to line people’s stomachs but are also easy to eat and pick at.” Rafe explains.

“Good idea. Like you’ve said, we’ve made the cocktails pretty fucking potent.” Ezra grins, not looking repentant in the slightest.

“That’s what I like to hear,” I grin, and then turn back to Rafe, “Right, what do you need me to do?”

“There’s a batch of mini pizzas in the oven; could you get them out and plate them up? There are some salads and other picky things in the fridge in the pantry. Could you please put those on the table as well? And then it’s just a case of getting everything else out and putting it on the table. I’m going to make one of those giant charcuterie boards quickly.”

“Sounds awesome,” I reply, my stomach grumbling at the thought of all the food about to come our way. I smirk at Ezra, “I’ll also put out some bottled water as well. In an attempt to curb some of those hangovers in the older amongst us.”

Ezra puts his hand to his chest and gasps dramatically as he puts on an over-exaggerated Southern voice and says, “Now I just know that you are not referring to me.”

Mason just happens to walk in at that point, and I had no idea that he didn’t go with Jynx, but then again, I’m not entirely sure who’s here and who’s not. We’re spread out everywhere.

“Okay, I have no idea what the hell I just walked into, but why the hell can you do such a good southern accent?” Mason asks, sounding both amused and impressed.

Ezra bows exaggeratedly, “I happen to be from the south. I’ve lost a lot of my accent, but I can put it on when I want to.”

“Do you know, I really don’t know why I’m surprised. I mean, you’re always in cowboy boots and that black cowboy hat of yours; it makes sense.” Mason replies.

Ezra smiles, “That’s me. Anyway, I’m going to go and tell the others that Lyric and all of them will be up soon.”

Once he’s left the kitchen, Mason turns back to us, “I came to see if I can help with

anything. I feel bad that I'm just sitting in there, not doing anything."

Chapter Six

"So you're bored then?" I smirk as I start to put the pizzas on the serving plates that Rafe has already set up.

"Yeah, pretty much," he grins.

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“Well, you can help me. I’ve got to start putting all the food out on the table. They’re going to be here in a minute.” I reply since Rafe is now too busy making more mini pizzas, and it looks like last-minute cookies.

He honestly makes cookies so often that we have a constant supply. I’m guessing that because he’s making more, that means he wants me to put the ones that we have left in the pantry on the table with the rest of the food.

With Mason’s help, it doesn’t take us very long at all to get the food on the table, and Rafe was really underselling what he’d prepared when he said there were just a few salads and then a couple of extra things. In fact, there are already three plates of mini pizzas and some home-seasoned wedges, and I genuinely wish I knew what he put on them because they are fucking delicious. Unfortunately, no amount of me flashing him has convinced him to tell me, but I’ll keep doing it in the hopes that it will, which is probably why he hasn’t told me because he knows that I’ll keep flashing him if he doesn’t.

There was also already garlic bread on the table as well, and when he said buffet-style picky bits, I think what he meant to say was that he’d somehow managed to prepare an entire pizza party with dessert, and it all looks absolutely amazing. Because he’s already put so much out, it doesn’t take Mason and me very long to put the rest of the things on the table. Including some paper plates that we can burn at a later date to save on washing up, which we wouldn’t usually do, but because we’re having a lot of people here the next few days, and we’re doing several meals, lunch, and dinner, it just makes our lives a bit easier and keeps the stress levels down to a manageable level as well.

“Honey, I’m home!” Jynx’s voice sounds throughout the whole house.

Mason grins as he looks at me, “It never ceases to amaze me just how freaking loud she can be.”

I chuckle as I start to head toward the front door so I can greet them all, “Me neither.”

“Ever,” D greets me warmly as soon as he sees me and promptly wraps me up in a tight hug. “Missed you, Kid. It's been far too long since you’ve seen your Uncle D.”

Pretty much ever since I saved Jynx and brought her home, he’s insisted that I call him Uncle D, and I only really do in emotional situations; otherwise, he’s just D. I think he recognized that I needed an adult who I could trust and who I knew I could call on, and he gave me that. We may not have kept in contact over the years due to various reasons; my father destroying the phone that had his and Jynx’s numbers on soon put a stop to me contacting them, especially since I was stupid enough not to write them down anywhere else.

It's also always tugged at my heartstrings that he calls me Kid, which is what he calls Jynx. She knows it makes me feel a bit emotional, which is why she’s currently smirking at me before it turns into a softer smile.

“Hey D,” I reply as I step back, “and it has, but it’s understandable. We’ll need to make sure that we all get together at least once a year from now on.”

D’s icy blue eyes crinkle at the sides, his only sign of age apart from the slight salt and pepper in his dark hair. I suppose some would call him handsome; he’s well built and strong thanks to what he does, and he’s also covered in tattoos, with an olive complexion that makes his blue eyes sparkle. He’s got the incredibly intimidating thing down to a T, greatly helped by the fact that he’s six foot three.

“I am definitely up for that. Some family time without a job that we need to be on immediately sounds good to me,” Alaric grins, and while the others say hello to D, I smile and give Alaric a hug too.

“Hey, Alaric,” I reply with a smile, trying not to think about the Rylie situation.

Of course, he now knows me well enough that he mutters, too quiet for the others to hear, “As soon as everyone has their greetings out of the way, we can talk about the message that Atlas sent me.”

“Thank you,” I reply, meaning it.

Once everyone’s said their greetings, D steps forward and gestures to Ryan, who is the headmaster of Blackbreak. Although we didn’t have anything to do with him while we were there, it probably helps that we weren’t there for very long at all before everything changed. Ryan is smiling at the scene before him.

“I don’t remember you having quite so many piercings,” Peter says as his eyes land on Ryan, and I glance over at him to see him checking Ryan out and Elijah watching him, looking highly amused.

Ryan smirks, his black hair moving across his dark green eyes. Peter’s right; he does have piercings that I definitely would have noticed before. There's one in his eyebrow, nose, and lip, and when he talks, his tongue is clearly pierced. What Peter has missed is the tiny glimpse of tattoos that I can see peeking out of the neckline of his shirt. He’s definitely not what he portrayed at Blackbreak, but then we knew that he is, after all, best friends with D and Alaric, so I’m not too surprised.

“It wouldn’t exactly show the professional I am to all of those rich parents if they saw me like this,” Ryan grins.

“Oh, but could you imagine their faces,” Alaric smirks. “It would be so worth it. As soon as we can work out a way to get you out of that stupid fucking job, that’s how I think you should go out.”

Ryan bursts out laughing, and Peter leans forward to whisper in my ear, “Remember, there was something about him being forced to take the job because of inheritance and something else as well that made it more complicated. He’s trapped in it.”

“Shit, yeah, I forgot about that,” I reply.

Ryan shrugs, “It’s not too bad. I’ve got used to it now.”

“Fuck off, you hate it, and you’d much rather be doing jobs with me or even with D,” Alaric replies.

“Yeah, good point,” he looks around at us all and grins, adding, “Alright, now that I have successfully lowered the mood, I could do with a drink.”

That makes everyone chuckle as Ezra, Jensen, and Ace share a smile, and Ezra says, “Come with us. We’ve got you, Dude.”

“Sounds promising,” Ryan grins, and it makes him look younger, certainly younger than D and Alaric, although not by much, and the fact that he is responsible for such a prestigious academy that houses so many high-profile students has to be so much pressure.

“Hey, don’t leave me. I want alcohol too,” D calls out, rushing after them and looking like an excited kid, which is even more hilarious because of how deadly he is and how serious he usually takes everything else. I love that he feels like he can fully let his guard down and relax around us all.

Arms wrap around me, and I glance up and back to see Atlas smiling down at me. Alaric raised him, well, as much as he could before he managed to keep Atlas away from Liam entirely, and I know that he's happy that his uncle is here and they get to spend some time together.

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Since I'm still smiling up at him, he lowers his head and kisses me gently, making me smile. I love how easily all of my men show me affection; no matter who is around, it makes me feel special and loved.

"Before I join the others in the festivities, I know that Atlas sent me a text and I'd like to talk to you all about it?" Alaric announces.

"Absolutely, why don't we go into the dining room, and we can all sit down then, I know the others don't want to miss this," Trick replies.

Alaric nods, and we all head through the house and the kitchen, picking up the others, who all look like they're somehow on their second cocktails, which I'm going to have to get the guys to explain to me at some point because they all seem to have a different one and they are truly fantastic colours.

Once we're all seated, Alaric says, "First, I want to make it really clear that I had no idea that she'd taken up my offer to have Mr R involved."

"What do you mean?" Jynx asks, just as confused by that sentence as the rest of us.

"I mean, I had no idea that she was working for the organisation. Mr R never told me, and if what you said in your message was right, then I can see why. Only he, and maybe one other person, would know who she was, and that's simply because she is a ghost agent." Alaric explains.

"Okay, so what do you know?" Atlas asks, watching his uncle closely.

“You remember when Blake took her, you left her in my care?” Alaric questions, and those of us who were there nod, “Well, she was really quiet and didn’t really say much, which is understandable. She was clearly extremely upset, but it was more because of what she said to you, not what had just happened.”

“How do you know that?” I ask.

“Because she said so, I said something like I know this has been really difficult, and before I could finish my sentence, she laughed and said that doesn’t bother me as much as it probably should; it’s not like it’s the first time, I’m upset because I’m a coward and just told the best friend I ever had, that I couldn’t be friends with her for a stupid fucking reason.” He replies, and I feel a knot of emotion try to rise.

“Yeah, that sounds more like the Rylie I knew. She was tough as nails, but she desperately wanted to be normal and live a normal life. If I had to guess, I’d assume that was what prompted her to tell you that she couldn’t be friends with you,” Jynx adds to the explanation of what she knew about Rylie.

I nod, “That makes sense.”

“That’s what I got from her as well, although I had no idea what she was capable of or who she was related to.” Alaric adds, “I managed to talk to her when I’d explained everything that had happened to the agents that turned up. It was like those few minutes that I’d been away from her, her whole demeanor had changed. There was a fire in her, a fight that wasn’t there before. She told me that she was done hiding; it wasn’t who she was, and she was done being a victim.” He pauses and frowns as he seems to think back, “She said D’s current safe word and shocked the shit out of me. She explained what she could, although she was very careful not to name any names, so I had no idea she was related to Mona. I didn’t even realise that Jynx knew her. She was angry as hell and said that no matter what she did, this life pulled her in. She was done trying to hide from it.

“She didn’t really know what she wanted, so I made a suggestion. She already had a vague idea of what I did, but I explained a little bit more about it, what I could at least. I explained that it was legal but still used the darker skills that I assumed she’d been trained in; she only gave me a single nod to confirm that I was right, so I continued. By the end, she was intrigued but wasn’t completely sold, which is more than understandable. I mean, I couldn’t exactly tell her much. I double-checked her age, and she’d actually already turned eighteen, which was a shock but meant that I could give her Mr Rising’s card. I told her to think about it and that if she decided that it was something that she wanted more information on, to call that number, and he’d take it from there.”

“Wow, that wasn’t what I was expecting you to say,” Rome replies, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I filled Mr R in on her potential and what she shared with me about her past. I never heard from her again, and Mr R never mentioned anything to me about her. When I checked in at the town, she and her father had already left. I assumed that D had moved them on again because I hadn’t heard anything, which would’ve been the best thing for them both. It would’ve been unsafe for them if I knew where they were or started asking D questions in case someone was looking for them, so I didn’t ask. Trying to make sure that everyone was safe and stayed that way.”

“Why didn’t you say anything about any of this?” I ask him.

“Because she specifically asked me not to say anything to you about any of this, she said it was better this way and that once she knew who the hell she was, she’d get back in contact. I imagine that was made more difficult when she became a ghost agent for him. He would’ve had to have decided that from the very beginning because otherwise, she would’ve gone through training with the others, and that would have defeated the point of her being a ghost because they would’ve known that she existed.” Alaric explains. “I also didn’t say anything because, as far as I was aware,

there wasn't any more information to give you. That conversation was it, and it really wasn't my place to tell you about that, especially since, as far as I was concerned, she was in a kind of witness protection."

I nod, my mind spinning, but finally understanding what happened and where she's been, I also appreciate Alaric's need to keep everybody safe. I would've done the same thing. "I get it. Thank you for telling me now."

"Of course, I wish I had more to tell you, but like I said, for Rylie's safety, very few people will know that she exists, and she will be given the most sensitive of cases, including internal ones. If I were you guys, and handling this job I'd start there, find out what the job was and see where that takes you." Alaric offers his advice.

"Thanks, we're going to, but we aren't doing anything until after Christmas," Trick replies firmly.

Alaric's smile widens as D looks at him with respect and says, "And that right there is how you run a team and a family. Good job."

"Thanks," Trick smiles and then adds, "Well, now that's over with, why don't the three behind the cocktails explain our options?"

"I'd love to," Jensen grins.

"One second," Ace adds, as we all watch curiously as Ezra and him rush into the kitchen.

"You know, for some reason, I am concerned for you all," Lyric says from beside me, and I chuckle.

"Yeah, me too. I've already been warned that they're potent." I reply.

“Don’t worry I’m going to get any antics caught on film, and I’ll rope those of your men that shouldn’t be drinking because of their meds, into my scheming too.”

I burst out laughing, “I don’t know whether to be amused or absolutely terrified about what stories you guys are going to have to tell tomorrow morning. Fortunately, I’m only going to have a couple. It’s Christmas Eve tomorrow, the parents are arriving, and I have so much to do that I absolutely don’t want to risk having a hangover to do any of it.”

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Lyric winces, “Oh yeah, good point. Well, in that case, you can enjoy watching everyone else with me. I’m happy to share my mom-mocktails, as Ezra named them. I have to say, I’ve already seen the banter between D, Alaric, and Ryan, and it’s fucking hilarious. I cannot wait to see what they’re like when they’re drunk.”

“Thank you. Yeah, Jynx warned us.” I reply, smiling as I watch Ezra and Ace start to bring out various liquors and ingredients and put them on the table before heading back into the kitchen.

Lyric nudges me to gain my attention, and I glance over at her to find her face serious, “How are you really, with everything that Alaric said? Are you good?”

I smile, and check in with myself, “Yeah, surprisingly I’m good. I just wanted to fill in that blank, as it were, and his explanation did that as best as he could. It’s stopped the mind-spinning questions for now, at least. Although I’d love to hear what happened after he left her from Rylie herself, I have a feeling that is one good story.”

“We’ll get her back, and then you can ask her,” she reassures me.

“I know. I just hope it doesn’t take too long. I hate the thought of her being in danger.”

“Of course you do, and I know this has been said a lot, but I’m going to say it again: as it currently stands with the information that you have, you are doing everything that you possibly can. Pete has his computer doing its thing, and you can’t do anything else right now,” she tells me firmly.

I smile, “I know, and I’m okay with that for now. Of course, it helps that we’re going to be incredibly busy over the next few days.”

Chapter Seven

Jensen

I place a chocolate and candy cane cocktail in front of Ever proudly, but before I tell her what’s in it, I say, “Ace helped Peter to do something with the program that Peter has running, and it's working even more efficiently now.”

“He’s right,” Peter says from across the table, looking at Ever’s drink suspiciously, which makes me suppress a smile. He doesn’t say anything though, as he continues, “Dude’s a fucking genius; he looked at it for like five minutes, identified an area that could be improved, improved it, and had it running better than I ever could all within that time. I’m in awe of him, seriously.”

“Aw, man, you’re going to make me blush,” Ace teases as he places a drink in front of Jynx, who is sitting next to Pete and Mal.

“Good, honestly, I can’t even wrap my head around what you did and the time that you did it in. I mean, I know that you’ve been trained to do it since you were fucking tiny, but damn, you have a gift.” Peter replies.

“Thank you,” Ace says more sincerely.

“I’m going to stop fangirling now. I promise,” Peter grins and makes everyone who’s listening laugh.

“Alright, to save Pete and Ace from further praise, why don’t you tell us what exactly we have in front of us and why Jynx, Lyric, and I are the only ones who have

cocktails?" Ever asks me, looking up at me curiously and making me want to kiss her.

I can't help myself when she looks like that, so I don't even bother to try and hold back. Instead, I lean forward and press my lips against hers before I inwardly curse because I need to take a seat. Fortunately, the seat next to her is empty, so I sit down.

Ezra starts to explain, "So we made three main cocktails, and the loves of our lives get to try them first, which is why Jynx, Ever, and Lyric all have them. They're all different, and we'll each explain."

"I thought D and Ryan already had one?" Ever asks curiously.

"They had the tester ones before we perfected them," I reply.

Ezra takes over the explanation again, giving Ever a look for interrupting him, which has her smirking and sticking her tongue out at him, which he ignores as he says, "Lyric's is obviously the one that has no alcohol in it; it's a virgin cosmopolitan and has cranberry juice, freshly squeezed lime, and lemonade because I know you don't like sparkling water and fresh orange juice with a sugar and lime rim and because it's your craving I also added some pickled onions, but don't worry unless you request it I won't put them on anyone else's glasses."

I burst out laughing along with the others at the absolutely adoring look that Lyric gives Ezra, "You are so getting lucky tonight."

Those words set everyone off laughing again, and it takes a while to calm down; it always amuses me the stuff that she comes up with, and to be honest, that's one of the reasons Jynx, Ever, and her get on so well, we never know what any of them are going to say next, and it keeps us all on our toes especially when they're together.

“Well, I think it’s safe to say that Lyric’s drink went down well,” Ace chuckles and then turns to Jynx, “your drink is an eggnog martini. It’s got eggnog, obviously, vanilla vodka, amaretto, nutmeg, cinnamon, and is garnished with a silver sugar cinnamon stick.”

I have to admit that out of the three of them, that one is my favourite. It’s fucking delicious and far too easy to drink, which means several of them are going to be absolutely wasted by the end of the evening.

Ace watches Jynx closely as she takes a sip, and her eyes practically roll back in her head, “Oh fuck me, that is absolutely delicious and dangerous as hell. I could be sipping them all night and only realise I’m drunk when I stand up and promptly fall on my ass.”

“I want one of those,” Peter announces loudly, and without prompting, Jynx smirks and hands her drink over to him. He smiles and promptly takes a sip, “Oh, yeah, these are definitely my drink of choice for the next day, hell the whole of Christmas, these are mine.”

“I want to see which one Jensen picked,” Ever replies, smiling over at me. My heart still skips a beat when she looks at me like that; it makes me feel so incredibly loved, and I hope that never changes.

“Why thank you, Angel,” I smirk, and then dramatically clear my throat, which does what I hope and makes Ever’s smile widen, “I have made my beautiful girlfriend an Irish cream mudslide cocktail because I know how much you love Rafe’s hot chocolate with a twist. So, this one has vodka, coffee liquor, Irish cream, and it has chocolate syrup, grated chocolate, and candy canes to make them pretty.”

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Ever smiles and then takes a sip, her eyes lighting up, “Damn, that’s good. I think I may have the same problem as Jynx does; I’d happily drink one after another of these.”

“Good,” I smile and lean forward so I can kiss her because any opportunity to kiss her, and I’m going to take it.

“Alright, everyone, put in your orders, and we’ll get them made,” Ezra announces with a little bounce, which reminds me of myself and my inability to stay still.

“Fair warning though, you only get one fancy one with all the garnishes we’ve made. We’ve made big jugs of the cocktail to top everybody’s drinks up.” Ace adds with a smile.

Trick grins, “That makes sense; otherwise, you guys would spend more time making fancy drinks than spending any time with the rest of us.”

“Exactly,” I reply, standing up.

“Well, I want one of each,” D grins, “to start with. Although, I’ll take Lyric’s one without the pickled onion, please.”

Lyric grins, “You’re missing out.”

“For some reason, I doubt that,” D chuckles.

“You know that the Mom-mocktail doesn’t count as drinking water to combat a

hangover, right?” Jynx asks her uncle with a chuckle.

Instead of D answering her, Ryan does, “It’s got water in it, kind of, and no alcohol, so of course it does.”

I can’t help but agree with his logic. I mean, he’s right; it hasn’t got any alcohol in it, so technically, it can be used in the place of water, maybe. I’m sure we’ll hear about it tomorrow if it hasn’t worked.

I get up to help the guys make them, or at least to help with the pretty decorations since we have several jugs of each of the cocktails made up and ready to go. We’re prepared this time; last time, we got drunker as we continued to make cocktails, and they got more potent, and no one wanted to move the next day, or the day after, for that matter. I’m not keen to relive that experience anytime soon.

As soon as we get back with the glasses and the first batch of jugs for everyone to make their drinks, I hear Ever say firmly, “Cash and Trick, you need to be careful about how much you drink.”

“We know, don’t worry.” Trick replies, smiling at her and easing the tension. She’s so incredibly worried about all of us all of the time, and I get it, trust me, I get it, but we really are okay. I guess it doesn’t really help that we’re all stubborn asses, and we’re not taking it as easy as we should.

However, we know from experience that she is just as bad as we are when she’s injured, so she must understand to a certain extent, or at least if, god forbid, she gets injured and needs to rest again, she’s going to be less stabby about it. That might be a long shot though, and I can’t help but smile to myself with that thought. I love her stubbornness.

When I take a seat next to Ever again, I proudly show her the mom-mocktail and take

a big sip, making her grin as I say, “I’m being good.”

“Thank you,” she replies, and then adds, “I’ve got so much to do tomorrow, so I’m not going to be drinking too much, but I do want to try each one.”

“I had a sip of each one, and they’re honestly delicious. I don’t know which one I prefer.” I say honestly.

“Can we eat yet?” Elijah asks and then shrugs when we all look at him because he’s not usually the one who is impatient for food. He adds, “I’m starving, and I know what Rafe’s pizzas taste like. They’re staring at me and begging to be eaten.”

“I could eat,” Alaric agrees, “Rafe’s pizzas are one of my favourites, and it’s been way too long since I’ve had them.”

Sounds of agreement echo around the table, and I smile in amusement as Rafe’s cheeks tint slightly pink. He’s not very good at accepting compliments; he has never been, but he is getting better because he has no choice. None of us are exactly stingy with our compliments, and certain people, Dominic, are almost constantly requesting his favourite meal from Rafe. In fact, Creed does too, much to the amusement of Lyric.

Looking around at everyone at the table, D says, “Okay, now I’m incredibly intrigued.”

Rafe chuckles, “We can eat now. I’ve got more on the way anyway, so help yourself.”

Those words are like magic, and suddenly, the room is filled with happy chatter, laughter, and reaching hands as everyone starts to pass food around. I can honestly say that it’s one of my favourite sounds, and it makes me feel so grateful for our not

so little family. The only people we're missing are Marty, Noel, and Callan.

My thoughts prompt me to ask Elijah, "Is the rest of your team coming up?"

Elijah nods his mouth full of food before he swallows and then answers with a nod, "Yeah, Noel, just text me. They're all on the phone with their families and managed to arrange it somehow, so it all happened at the same time; they'll be up in an hour or so."

"Remind them to be careful of the road up; it's still snowing, and they've lost light now." Ever replies, and Elijah nods.

I reach over and take her hand in mine, squeezing it gently as I start eating with my other one.

Ever

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I love this, all of us eating together and managing to stay sitting around our table instead of spread out everywhere, but that's why I choose this table, because it has enough space for all of us when we have all the family around, but it can also be made slightly smaller when it's just us. This happens often when we're in work mode because all of the teams are doing their own jobs, and we can go for weeks without actually seeing each other.

Trick tries to coordinate our schedules so that we can get together at least once a month when we're super busy, and for a couple of weeks in the summer, we're all off together. Of course, we don't spend all of that together; people go off to visit family and friends that they don't usually have time to see, or they go on an actual vacation, but we do tend to spend a fair amount of time together, and we try to make sure that we have time for each other because that's the most important thing.

Thinking of friends, I pull out my phone and send a text to Zemi and her guys.

Me: Hey, guys! I just wanted to text you and say Happy Christmas! I'm probably not going to get a chance to say anything tomorrow. I hope you guys have an incredible few days with your families, and we'll see you back at headquarters soon.

I send the message, and it's less than a minute before the guys all text back, saying simple replies of Happy Holidays.

Zemi: Happy Christmas, have a good one! And tell the guys I hope they're feeling better. Oh, and you'd be proud of me; I remembered to pack pants.

I chuckle out loud at her reply.

Me: woohoo, I'm so proud of you! Did you remember everything else?

Zemi: How the hell did you know I forgot something different?

Me: Because I know you, what did you forget?

Zemi: underwear

I burst out laughing again, and when Jensen looks at me curiously, I show him my screen so that he can read the messages, and he's soon laughing along with me.

Me: well, that certainly makes the trip more interesting.

I add a winky face to the end of the message, and all she replies with is a smirking one. We've never properly spoken about it, but it's clear that she likes her men as more than just friends or teammates, and they feel the same way about her. It's just taking a while for them to get used to the idea, although having us as friends probably helps. There's no judgment as far as we're concerned.

I'm about to put my phone away when a text pops up from Raiden.

Raiden: As soon as we get back from the trip, we're jumping straight on Jensen's case. We'll keep you updated the whole time. Mr R is aware and has given us full clearance.

Me: Brilliant. Let me know if you need a hand at any point. But make sure that you're resting too, you and Saint especially. As you know, Jensen is staying out of it, but the rest of us aren't. No more work talk though. Enjoy your holidays.

Raiden: You got it, Ever. We'll talk after the holidays. Hope you have a good Christmas.

I decide not to tell Jensen what Raiden said. It's not important right now, and it's something that we knew was going to happen anyway; I don't want to upset him by making him think about his mom and sister in any way but a good memory over Christmas, and like the Rylie thing it can wait until after Christmas.

It doesn't take long at all until everyone has eaten what they can, and Luc suggests that we dance off some of our food so that we have room for more, which everyone is definitely up for. The group splits up into those who are dancing, a few small groups that are talking, and those who have gone back to eating. There's a real festive spirit in the air, and I love it.

It's such a massive contrast with how my Christmases used to be. I mean, some Christmases, I didn't even realise it was Christmas day until after it had already passed. My favourite Christmas's back then were the ones where I managed to escape my father and his men for a while, and I'd used the small amount of money that I managed to crimp together to go to the local mall, get a hot chocolate, and walk around, enjoying the holiday displays and the happy families trying not to think of my boys that I had to leave behind and trying not to dare hope to see them again one day and have a family of my own.

Now look at me, I have more family than I could have ever hoped or dreamed for, and I thank whoever decided to bless me with them every damn day.

I'm never going to take that for granted.

Thankfully, I'm pulled out of my emotionally charged thoughts when I overhear Alaric say, "That's nothing. Do you remember when D accidentally set off a load of explosives and gave away our position?"

Everyone who's close enough to have heard him talking to Lucian instantly turns their attention to the three best friends, who are all smirking and looking highly

amused. We know there's one hell of a story on the way.

"It looks like we arrived just in time," Callen grins as Marty, Noel, and he all walk into the front room, and we greet them before looking back at Ryan, D, and Alaric.

"Of course, I remember we were found within minutes, and we had to fight for our lives," Ryan replies, taking a sip of his fourth or fifth drink and still looking far more amused than he should be by the words that he's saying.

"You're forgetting the most memorable part," D grins.

"What do you mean other than you blowing up the damn building?" Alaric chuckles, and the rest of us join in. The three of them together are a riot, and you just have to listen to the way they talk to each other for a few minutes to know that they have been friends for decades and have gone through some difficult situations together. The one they're currently describing though, clearly isn't one of the more challenging things they've been through, although I think most normal people would disagree.

D rolls his eyes and downs his drink before filling it again, "No smart ass. The most memorable part was Ryan having to fight naked."

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“What?” Riot exclaims, looking extremely worried for Ryan despite the fact that Ryan is obviously fine because he’s here.

Ryan grins, “It’s not my fault that I sleep naked, and there wasn’t any time to put pants on before bullets started flying.” He shrugs, “Anyway, it worked in our favor.”

“I’ll say,” Alaric chuckles and then looks at the rest of us to explain, “they just stared at this naked man coming at them with a cigar hanging out of his mouth, covered in tattoos and piercings threatening their lives because they’d woken him up, and seemingly unconcerned that he is naked. They were so shocked that he managed to take out five of them before they even knew what was happening.”

Ryan smiles fondly, “Ah, the good old days. I don’t get to do shit like that as often as I’d like to anymore.”

“We’ll figure it out,” D replies, gripping his friend's shoulder.

“I’m pretty good at getting people out of tricky situations. Would you like me to have a look into it?” Peter offers.

Ryan smiles, “I know you are. I know how many guys you helped at that school before these lot came around, but for now, I’m going to decline. It’s messy and complicated and won’t be a quick fix. I’m good where I am for now, but I will keep your offer in mind if that’s okay?”

Peter nods, “Of course, I’m sure all of us will help if you need us to.”

“If I call you in, I’m going to need all of you.”

“Understood,” Trick replies.

Chapter Eight

“Why do I feel like you guys have a lot more war stories that are just as amusing?” I ask, changing the subject and earning a grateful smile from Ryan.

“Oh, we do,” D smiles, “but we don’t want to tell you all in one night. We need you guys to keep wanting us old men around.”

Alaric scoffs, “Hey, leave the old men comment just to describe you. I’m not old.”

Creed chuckles, “Looks like he hit a nerve.”

The rest of us burst into laughter as Alaric narrows his eyes and flicks Creed the finger.

“How long are you guys staying for this time?” Luc asks them.

The three men share a look, and D answers, “We’re going to leave on boxing day, probably fairly early. We’re stopping off to see Maria, and then we’ve all got to get back to our individual jobs.”

Jynx meets my eyes as we share a conspiring smile. She looks over the three of them from standing in Rip’s arms and says, “Maria, huh?”

“I don’t know why you’re saying it like that,” Alaric replies, his eyebrow raised.

“Sure you do, you all do,” I add, laughing when they all glance away.

“Okay, that’s enough of that. Where’s the cocktails?” Ryan adds, trying to change the subject and not very subtly at all.

It always amuses me that these incredibly powerful men turn to absolute mush whenever Maria is mentioned, and it’s damn sweet too. Jynx and Waverly, Maria’s daughter and Jynx’s other best friend, filled me in on their suspicions on one of the phone calls we managed to have when Jynx and I were together. It was actually only the second or third time that Waverly and I had spoken; Jynx introduced us over the phone, though, of course, we’d known about each other for a long time.

None of us really know what’s holding the three of them back, although Waverly is reasonably sure that it’s her mom who’s doing it. Her father did a real number on Maria, and I imagine it would be incredibly hard to trust again after that, even these three men who would clearly put their lives on the line for her.

She’s not ready, and she may never be, but the three of them have never wavered. They’re always there for her, and she is for them as well, just not in the complete way that I know they hope for.

The rest of the night is spent laughing, drinking, dancing, and just generally enjoying each other's company. The drunken antics are kept to a minimum, shockingly, and by the time everyone leaves in the early hours of the morning, the house is looking reasonably okay considering, and that’s why I love my family and friends; they’re always respectful. Of course, there are a few things that will need to be done in the morning, but it’s not a lot, and I was going to do that regardless. Plus, we’re now all so exhausted that no one wants to do anything like load the last of the dishes in the dishwasher or anything like that.

It gives me something to do in the morning, so I’m not just wandering around and doing useless tasks while trying to keep occupied.

The parents should be arriving in an hour, and everyone else is at their own homes getting ready to come up tomorrow, so it's just us and the parents today, or at least it will be when they arrive. For now, we're all up early, although a couple of the guys have headaches and are a bit slower. They're chugging coffee as if their lives depend on it, and I'm trying to be sympathetic, but it's not really happening, and I keep letting a smile slip through and getting narrow-eyed glares from them, which just amuses me more.

I decided to have my coffee in a travel mug so that I could clean the house and still have hot coffee. The only problem with it is that I keep forgetting where I've put it and finding it in odd places, including in the pantry next to the dried pasta, which was an odd one.

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Rafe is in the kitchen with Riot, making a quick lunch for us and preparing what smells like curry for dinner with the parents tonight. It is Rafe though, so he has not done the minimum. I know for a fact that he's made his own samosas and onion bhajis, of course, he's made the naan bread as well and he was really disappointed that he couldn't make the poppadoms because he ran out of time and we're going to have to use the backup ones that we have.

It doesn't stop there; he's also had Riot make a variety of chutneys, and quite honestly, the smells coming out of the kitchen have been making my stomach growl with hunger. I'm using it as a reward for getting everything that I needed to do, done before the parents arrive..

I pause briefly in arranging the Christmas cushions on the couch when my phone vibrates, and I pull it out to look down.

Jynx: Dude, my uncle, and his besties are massive fucking moaners. They're bitching something fucking chronic. Send help.

Me: Haha, nope, no way, dude, that one is all yours. Besides, my advice would be just to carry on drinking. You can't have a hangover if you're still drunk, although the downside to that is that Christmas doesn't last forever, and at some point, they're going to have to sober up and get to real life, and the hangover will be so much worse.

Jynx: Yeah, they can sober up now. They need to be relatively sober for tomorrow; otherwise, fuck knows what they could slip up and say to all the parents. Also, you are rambling even by text; why are you so nervous? It's just the parents; you adore

them, and they adore you.

Before I can reply, a text comes through from Lyric, and I click on it before I respond to Jynx.

Lyric: Breathe, chill out, you will be fine, and you're stressing for nothing. Love ya.

Me: How the hell did you know I was freaking out?

Lyric: Bitch please, I'm your bestie. Now go and kiss one or all of your men and chill out.

Me: Love ya.

Lyric: I know.

Deciding not to reply to that and make her even more cocky than she already is, I switch back over to Jynx's conversation and respond honestly.

Me: I'm freaking out because this is the first time they've come up to our house, and I just want everything to be perfect.

Jynx: They're going to love the house; it always looks amazing, and you and the guys have made it into the perfect home. They're going to be super proud of you. So, grab the man closest to you, make sure that he's yours, and kiss him until you feel all that tension drain out of you. I'd suggest you have a quicky, but I don't think you've got time for that.

I can't help but chuckle out loud at that, and when Atlas, who just happens to walk past me, stops and raises a questioning eyebrow, I simply respond by smirking and running at him. His eyebrows raise, but he easily catches me, well used to me

throwing myself at him with very little warning by now. I do it a lot; that's one thing that definitely hasn't changed over the years.

"Whoa, Princess, are you okay?" he asks, "Do you . . ."

My lips brush against his, shutting him up immediately as he growls, his arms tightening around me. He allows mere seconds of control of the kiss before he takes over, and it's so consuming that everything just fades away. All the worry, the stress, everything, hell, I even forget my own name. All that exists is him and me.

That's it.

The tension from before drains away as another kind of tension starts to build, and my hands grip Atlas's hair tightly. My tongue dances with his as I feel us move, and I don't care enough to find out where he's taking me, I am completely his to do with what he will, at this point. My back presses against the wall as Atlas takes advantage of its extra support to allow one of his hands to wander, caressing up the outside of my thigh before it skims up my side, his thumb flicking over my nipple. I thank my lucky stars that I wore a bralette today and not one of my padded ones.

My back arches, but my mouth stays fused to Atlas's as he nips my lip and then soothes the bite with his tongue. Eventually, the kiss slows down and turns gentle, his lips just brushing against mine in a tender kiss that is entirely different from how our kiss first started. My hands change from tugging on his hair to running through it gently as he pulls back and rests his forehead against mine.

My smile is huge as I say quietly, "Thank you, I needed that. I feel like I haven't seen you properly for a while. We had the job and then the guys, and now Christmas, and I honestly feel like I'm not seeing any of you enough."

"Anytime you need me, you know I'm here, and I know what you mean, but like you

said, it's been incredibly busy. After Christmas, things will get back to normal and slow down a little bit. Probably not by much, but enough that we can all spend some proper time together." He replies.

"I know, but you know me, I always find it difficult when we don't get to spend enough time with each other."

He smiles and kisses me softly again, "And that's why we all love you."

"The parents are here," Jensen says from somewhere behind Atlas, and I shift slightly from where he's got me pressed against the wall and meet the heated eyes of Jensen, who has perched his ass on the back of the couch.

"How long have you been there for?" I ask with a smile.

"Since about halfway through," Atlas replies, and it shocks me that he was even aware that Jensen came in.

"We'll have time to spend some proper time together after Christmas, Angel," Jensen replies, confirming what Atlas said, that he has been there for a while, "even with the research for the Rylie case, we're going to be spending a lot of time going over files and surveillance and all that shit before we can find her, that will give us some time. Plus, you know Trick, he'll ensure that we rest as well, although he's most likely going to split the days off into shifts so that we can still work."

I start nodding in agreement as Atlas lowers me to the floor finally and then turns to face Jensen as well.

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Opening my mouth to reply, my eyes suddenly widen in realisation, “The parents are here?”

Neither of them gets the chance to reply as there’s a knock on the door, and I spin on my heel to go and answer it, nerves flooding my system, which seems absolutely stupid because they’re the parents apart from a few years blip, I’ve known them for my entire life.

Opening the front door, I’m immediately engulfed in tight hugs from Jenny and Kat as the parents all stream through the doors and greet the guys. Lily, Rafe’s mom, waits until they’ve stopped crushing me and then gives me a far calmer hug.

“Your place is absolutely stunning,” she compliments, and my smile widens.

“Thank you.”

“I have to admit we didn’t quite believe you when you said that you’d have plenty of space to feed us all,” Rich comments with a smile.

“We did tell you,” Luc grins and then adds, “would you like a tour?”

Before the parents can begin to reply, Riot asks with a sad smile, “I’m guessing that my aunt couldn’t get out of work again?”

Kat shakes her head sadly, “No, she couldn’t. We tried to convince her to come anyway, but she just wouldn’t.”

“That’s okay, I get it.” Riot replies and Rafe threads his fingers through Riot’s and squeezes gently, offering him the support that he needs at that moment, even if he does say he’s okay.

I love the bond that they have and that their separate relationship is so different from the relationship that I have with them, both individually and together. I also love that all of these different kinds of relationships work just as well as each other.

Since Rafe has Riot and is there for him, as the parents all start to stream past me to have the tour, I grab hold of Luc and pull him off to the side. I always worry about him when we have these family gatherings, and as always, I’m going to check in with him and let him know that I’m here.

He pulls me under his arm with a soft smile and then kisses the top of my head. When I look up at him, his hand comes up to cup my cheek, and he lowers his head, gently pressing his lips against mine as I practically melt against him.

When he pulls back, he says quietly, “I am fine, Firecracker, and I promise if that changes, I will tell you. Remember, my parents weren’t involved in family stuff for a long time before my father was arrested and my mother left the country. I have always preferred these things without them.”

“I know,” I reply, “I just worry. Where is your mom at the moment?”

“When I last asked Pete, he said she was in the Seychelles. He’s keeping an eye on her movements just in case and to see if she has any communication with my father in prison, the same as usual. From what he can tell, she’s still enjoying escaping my father.” He replies.

“Good, so long as she’s not causing any trouble, we’ll keep leaving her alone. The second that changes, and we’ll deal with her.” I reply.

“I know, now enough talk of shitty parents, and let's enjoy Christmas with those parents that we've adopted as our own,” Luc adds.

“Good idea. I saw Rafe go into the kitchen, and I'm going to go and see if he needs any last-minute help. That curry has been calling my name all damn day.” I reply.

“Alright, I'm sure if you ask nicely, he'll give you a taste.” Luc smirks, “I'm going to go and catch up with the house tour. I'm damn proud of the home we've made.”

I smile as I move onto my tip toes and kiss him again, “Me too, have fun. Make sure that Jensen and the other two rest and don't push it too far.”

“Don't worry, I will,” Luc replies as shadows pass over his eye.

“Are you okay? I haven't checked how you're dealing with it? You were the one that resuscitated Jensen, and that was fucking terrifying.”

He looks down at me before his eyes dart away, “I'm okay. I never want to experience something like that again, especially not with one of my family.”

“Of course not. Let me know if you need to talk to someone professional. D knows people who can help and who are on his payroll, so they are used to dealing with more complicated issues.” I pause and frown, “Actually, Mr Rising probably has someone you can talk to as well.”

“I'd much rather talk to one of D's people if I need to. I'm not sure why,” Luc replies.

“Probably for the same reason that I suggested D and didn't even think of Mr R,” I reply, “we weren't always legitimate, and after the whole mole thing and the fact that we still don't know who was controlling them, it feels safer to talk to one of D's

people.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it,” Luc replies.

I squeeze him tightly and add, “Just remember, if it wasn’t for you, Jensen wouldn’t have made it, and we would’ve lost him. You saved his life.”

“She’s right, dude, and I will forever be in your debt for that.” Jensen suddenly says.

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“Dude, you keep popping up everywhere,” I accuse, having once again not heard him approach.

He grins and moves forward so that he can kiss me while I’m still in Luc’s arms, and then says, “I’m practicing moving silently. I figure if I can do it while injured, I’m going to be a force to be reckoned with when I’m all healed.”

Luc chuckles, “Yeah, that sounds like you. Taking a negative thing and spinning it into a positive.”

Jensen grins proudly.

“You’re getting good already,” I add, “I haven’t noticed you either time, but now that I know that you’re doing it, I’m going to make sure I’m even more aware than usual.”

“Challenge accepted,” he replies, leaning in to kiss me before he adds, “I came to tell you that Rafe is looking for you and because I’m being good and I need to sit down for a bit.”

“I’m proud of you,” I reply.

“Me too. I know how hard it is for you to sit still; it won’t be too much longer, and then we can start sparring and building your strength up.” Luc offers.

“Thanks, dude, although I have to warn you that by the time I get the all clear to start sparring again, I’m going to have some serious pent up energy.” Jensen warns, his expression serious.

“We know. That’s why we’ve already come up with a plan. While you’re still getting your strength back, we’ll spar one on one, and then when you’re nearly there, Atlas and Callen will take over and hopefully work out that pent-up energy and anger.”

Jensen smiles gratefully, “Thank you. I’m going to need it.”

Chapter Nine

“Right, you guys chill out in here and continue talking about Jensen’s rehab, and I’m going to go and hope that Rafe wanted me because he needs a taste tester,” I smirk, and they both chuckle before moving into the front room, taking seats on the couch and then putting their heads together as they continue to talk.

It’s at that moment that I realise that Jensen is going to be okay. He’s got all of us rallying around him and giving him the support that he needs, making sure that he has the help to build up his strength again and helping him to put plans in place to ensure that he can reach his goal as quickly and efficiently as possible without damaging himself even more.

My whole body breathes a sigh of relief at the realisation as my steps feel lighter.

“You look more at ease than you have been,” Rafe comments as he watches me walk toward him and then kisses me softly.

“I just realised what an amazing family we have,” I reply.

“It’s taken you this long to figure it out,” he teases, and I flip him off.

“Jensen said that you needed me?” I ask, hopefully making him smile.

He turns back around to the enormous cast iron pots and lifts both lids off, “First, I

need you to taste test.”

“Yes!” I exclaim excitedly, completely unashamed, that I’m showing all of my cards.

He just chuckles as he hands me a spoonful of the first curry to taste, and I barely remember to blow on it before I put it in my mouth.

“Holy crap, that’s fucking good,” I compliment, “it’s going to be difficult to beat this one.”

Rafe doesn’t say anything; he just hands me the next spoonful of the other curry.

“Oh, okay, there’s a chance that I may have been wrong. I don’t know which one I like better.” I muse with a smile.

“This is why you’re my favourite taste tester. You give the best compliments,” Rafe replies.

“And my boobs,” I reply with a teasing smirk.

He tries not to show his amusement as his lips twitch, and he replies seriously, “Oh, yeah. They definitely help my favouritism.”

“Thought so,” I grin, “what else did you need me for?”

“I know you have a plan for the table for tomorrow that you’re setting up with Peter, so I wanted to check if you had something planned for today before I just set it all up?”

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I tilt my head slightly, “You know that hadn’t even crossed my mind. I was too busy focusing on Christmas day. But, you worry about plating up the food, and I’ll get the table and everything done.”

“Deal,” Rafe smiles.

Rage and Atlas happen to walk into the room at that moment, and I turn to them, “Just in time, you two.”

“Why am I nervous?” Rage mutters out of the side of his mouth to Atlas.

“I don’t know, but I am too,” he replies.

I chuckle, “Relax, I just need you to help me lay the table. There’s a lot of us, and it needs to be set up quickly, which will be a lot easier if I have help.”

“Oh yeah, we can do that,” Atlas grins.

“Just tell us what you need and where you want us,” Rage adds with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

I can't help it; he set me up so well, “Well, now that could be taken in an entirely different way, and we don’t have time for that right now.”

“Just say the word, Princess,” Atlas grins as Rage and him share a conspiring look.

I am so freaking tempted, but the sounds of the parent's voices off in the distance

remind me that I need to behave, and instead, I physically shake myself.

“You guys are bad influences,” I tell them, and they both look entirely unrepentant.

With their help, I have the table set up and looking beautiful. It’s a simple setup, but it still looks impressive, and I’m really pleased with it.

“Well done, Tesoro, it looks perfect,” Kat compliments as everyone streams into the extension and takes their seats as they compliment the delicious smells coming off Rafe’s food.

“Thank you. Just wait until you see what Pete and I have planned for tomorrow.” I grin.

“I’m looking forward to it,” she replies.

Once we’re all seated, and everyone is passing the various dishes to each other, Josh looks over at his son, “This looks absolutely amazing, and I have to admit your mom, and I have missed your cooking at home.”

Rafe smiles proudly, “Thanks, dad. Hopefully, this isn’t like the experiments that I tried at home, the ones that failed.”

Lily winces, which I find hilarious, and she says, “Oh yeah, some of those were absolutely terrible, although in your defense, we never got sick from what you made us.”

“Yeah, we just became incredibly wary instead.” Josh chuckles, making everyone else join in.

“I think it’s safe to say that he’s definitely improved since he was a kid. This is the

best curry that I have ever had, and that's saying something because it's one of my favourite meals." Marc compliments.

"Thank you," Rafe replies simply, his cheeks tinting pink.

"Have you already dropped your stuff at the house Jonah found for you?" Trick asks changing the subject because Rafe isn't going to be able to cope with much more attention being on him.

"Yes, we dropped everything off there before we came up here, but we did have to call him to make sure that we were at the right place. It's stunning and huge." Jenny replies and then adds, "Although, after seeing this place, I can understand ours a bit better."

Trick chuckles as he replies, "Jonah is the only person in town who deals with real estate, and he takes over and purchases some of the houses when people want a quick sale. It comes in handy when people need somewhere to stay, especially since there's no hotel or anything like that in town."

"Yeah, we did notice that. It's really quite small, isn't it?" Rob asks.

"It is, but we have all the necessities, and we like it small," Riot replies with a smile.

What he doesn't tell them is that the small size of the town means that we can keep it safe; we know who is coming into town, and we know what they're doing while they're here. The other residents feel safe here because they think that our police force is fantastic, and that's why the crime rate is so low. They're right; Ezra runs a tight ship, but that's also because he has the rest of his family and team standing behind him. He has us standing behind him, Noel's, and even Jynx and her men when they're around. This is the safest town that anyone could possibly be in, and we plan to keep it that way.

“It’s beautiful,” Kat adds. “So, what’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“Well, why don’t you guys come up for about twelve? That will give us enough time to set everything up, and we’ll be eating at around sixish.” Rafe starts, “I’ll have some nibbles set up in case people get hungry before then, but maybe eat a really big breakfast?”

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“Yeah, we can do that. Jenny, Emily, and I were planning to do our usual big Christmas morning breakfast anyway, so from experience, we probably won’t be hungry until the evening anyway.” Kat replies.

“Good,” Rafe sighs in relief, it clearly being something that he’s been worrying about.

“Don’t worry, you’ve got this,” I hear his dad tell him quietly, and I smile.

They may be grown-ass men now, but support from your parents never gets old and never stops reassuring you and making you feel better.

The rest of the evening is spent answering the various questions that the parents ask, which mostly center around whether we’re okay and if the three injured ones are feeling better and healing okay. You’d think that they’d ask about our work or how we’ve managed to afford all of this, considering our ages range from twenty-one to twenty- three, but they instinctively know better. They know that there are things that we can’t answer, and because of that, they also know that if they do ask a question and we say that we can’t answer, instead of it creating more questions, the subject is just dropped.

That’s one of the things that is the absolute best about them, they understand.

Of course, the parents, being who they are, insist on helping to tidy up and clear up before we all sit down in the front room and just catch up.

Rafe

“So, when are you guys heading off?” I ask my Mom and Dad, and then add, “Did you sell the house?”

“Yeah, when we told you, we actually already had an interested buyer, but we didn’t want to risk jinxing it and have them pull out, so we didn’t say anything,” my Mom replies.

She’s always been a bit overly suspicious when it comes to things like that, not in the sense that she believes in anything like ghosts or that sort of thing, but that she’s always very careful about what she puts out into the world, afraid that if she says the wrong thing, it could negatively affect her or something that happens in the world. There’s nothing wrong with that, but she has sometimes taken it a step too far, and that’s when things can get a little bit dicey.

Dad smiles as he wraps an arm around her and gives me a knowing look that has me suppressing my smile, “We’re actually planning to head out as soon as we get back from here. The RV is all packed up and ready to go and currently parked on Rob and Jenny’s driveway.”

“Did you sell everything?” I ask curiously.

“We sold as much as we could, and then anything that we just couldn’t bear ourselves to part with we’ve put into a storage unit in town. Serendipity will always be our home base; it’s where our best friends are, and it’s where we raised you. We’ll most likely settle back there again, but we’ve wanted to road trip the country for decades, and now seems as good a time as any before we get too old.” Dad replies, while my Mom just smiles up at him, looking excited.

“I’m really glad that you guys are doing this; just stay in touch, okay? I will come and look for you if we don’t hear from you for a while,” I warn them because it’s true if we go months without any contact with them, I’m just going to assume something

happened.

What they don't realise is that before I come looking for them, I'll use all of the power and skill at my disposal to find them first, and by that, I mean that Pete will use his extensive skills and knowledge to find them digitally so that we either know they're okay and are just not communicating or we know where their last location was so that we can find them.

Mom smiles, a certain glint of knowledge in her eye as she says, "We know, don't worry, we'll stay in contact."

"If no one has heard from us in three weeks, then you come and find us," my dad adds seriously, and it's one of those times when it becomes evident that they know more about our careers than they let on, just from listening and putting the pieces together themselves.

"You got it," I reply, taking a swig of my beer.

"I'm looking forward to meeting all of these people that we've heard so much about," I hear Marc say, and my parents and I tune in to their conversation.

Atlas smiles, "Yeah, they're all pretty unique."

Ever bursts out laughing, making my heart stutter at how beautiful and carefree she looks in that moment, "That's an understatement."

When the parents start to look a bit wary, Luc chuckles and says, "What she means is that you'll certainly be entertained by them. They've all become our family, and you're going to love them."

"We know, it was pretty clear from the way that you all spoke about them," Kat

smiles softly.

“I’m really glad that you guys have managed to find your chosen family, like we did,” Jenny adds.

I like that, our chosen family. I wouldn’t change our blood family, at least not the ones that are currently in this room. Luc’s parents, Riot’s parents, and actually Riot’s aunt, too, I’d change them. The reason why I include Riot’s aunt in that is that she did the bare minimum when he was a kid, she looked after him, and she did show him love, but not as much as he deserved; he got more from the other parents, and I’m so fucking glad of that.

She’s also checked out now; he’s twenty-two, and she seems to think that means that she doesn’t need to be involved anymore, and that makes me angry. I can see the disappointment on his face every time that she doesn’t show up, and I once again find myself incredibly grateful for the other parents because they don’t let him feel like that for long; they give the same amount of attention and love as they give their own kids and he soon forgets.

The way that his aunt treats him still pisses me off though.

For the rest of the evening, we talk and laugh, but it’s not too long before the parents are saying that they need to get home and that we need to get some rest because we’ve got a big day tomorrow.

It’s such a parent thing to say that we’re left with massive smiles when we say goodbye.

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“I am absolutely exhausted. The parents are right; we’ve got a lot to do tomorrow, and it’s late. Let’s get some sleep,” Ever says as the door shuts behind them, and she hides a yawn.

Trick wraps an arm around her as Cash grabs her hand, and they start to walk toward the stairs, all of us following after them. The house has already been locked up, the lights are off except for the Christmas lights in the rafters, and Runa is most likely hiding in one of our rooms because she’s not too keen on hanging around when there are a lot of people here. I did notice that her food dishes were empty in the kitchen, though, so she came down to eat at some point.

“At least we don’t have to clear anything up in the morning. The parents wouldn’t take no for an answer, and they’ve done everything,” Luc smiles.

“That’s a definite bonus. I’m up early to get the meat in the oven in time anyway, and because they’ve already done that, it means that I can sleep in for just a little bit longer.” I reply, feeling like I’m going to need as much sleep as I can get.

“Remember, you’re not doing all the cooking by yourself. Ever and I are going to be helping you too,” Riot reminds me, and I smile as I reach for his hand.

“I know, and I’m very grateful,” I reply.

Ever says goodnight to everyone on the landing, giving us all kisses. She looks so adorably sleepy, and I know that if she doesn’t get to bed soon, she’s going to lose her brain-to-mouth filter and possibly fall asleep where she is standing. Sharing a look with Riot, we let go of each other, and he wraps an arm around her shoulders,

and I take her hand.

“Stay with us tonight?” Riot asks her. We’re all getting up early together tomorrow anyway, so it does make sense.

“Yes please, I want double snuggles,” she replies sleepily, making us both smile.

One of my favourite things has to be falling asleep with Ever in the middle of us and all of us wrapped around each other. It brings me so much comfort, and I know that Riot feels the same way. We try to get our snuggles whenever we can get away with it, even if it's just for a daytime nap.

“Wait!” she suddenly exclaims, and I’m not convinced that she hadn’t fallen asleep while walking to my room, which is the closest.

“Yes? What’s wrong?” I ask her.

“I need to make sure that Trick, Jensen, and Cash have taken their meds and don’t need anything,” she replies, sounding worried.

“Don’t worry, Sweetheart,” Trick says from the doorway to his room, “we’re all good. I checked on the others, and I promise that I will take my meds.”

“Good,” she replies with a smile and then adds, “I love you.”

“I love you too, Sweetheart. Get some sleep; your eyes are closed.” Trick replies, sounding amused, and I glance at her face and have to suppress my laugh when I realise that he’s right.

“No, they’re not.” She argues, still not opening her eyes, which makes the whole situation even funnier.

“Of course they aren’t, Sunshine,” Riot replies, humoring her. “Come on, let’s go to bed.”

She doesn’t reply. She just nods and trusts us to guide her in the right direction. When we’re in my room, she actually does open her eyes but just long enough to check where we are, make her way over to my dresser, and pull out one of my t-shirts. She then changes, quicker than I thought was possible, and then climbs into bed.

I swear she’s fast asleep before her head even hits the pillow, and Riot and I are tired enough that we waste no time curling up around her and falling asleep ourselves. Both of us are in our happy place, with the love of our lives curled up between us.

Chapter Ten

Ever

It’s been go, go, go all morning, we really haven’t stopped. Riot, Rafe, and I got up super fucking early and prepped everything for the Christmas dinner later, and it’s already smelling good. We then helped him get things ready for the breakfast we had planned. Pete is opening his presents down at his place with Elijah, and then they’re coming straight up here so that we can set up the table, and everyone else is arriving around the same time as the parents.

I’m so incredibly excited to have all of my family meet each other, and I just hope that it’s going to go well and no one, and by that I mean D, gives anything away that’s going to make the parents unable to help themselves and start asking questions if he told them some of the job stories that involve us I know for a fact that Kat and Jenny would have something to say about the danger level of what we do.

Now, though all the prep is done and we’re opening the presents that we got each other, some serious and some silly. By the time we’re done, wrapping paper is all

over the floor and everything else as well, if we're being completely honest. I love this part of Christmas, the chaos, just us as a family, enjoying each other. I also love seeing what the guys get each other; some of the gifts are incredibly thoughtful, and it shows how much they genuinely care about each other.

I love that.

"Fire?" Jensen asks with a smirk.

It's something that one of them asks me every year now, and it's become a tradition since that first year when I got a bit excited by suggesting that we burn all of the rubbish and wrapping paper left over from opening presents.

I chuckle, "Of course, it's a family tradition."

We waste no time in picking it all up and putting some of it in our large fireplace while we put the rest in a basket nearby to put on once the rest of it has burned down enough, while Rage is deemed safer than Jensen to light the fire and keep an eye on it. After that, we all take our gifts up to our rooms, and then while everyone else is doing their own things to get ready for the day, I go back downstairs and start to straighten everything up in the front room before moving on to the extension.

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The table is clear, and the room is ready, so all I really need to do is get the boxes of decorations that we're using for the table out and prepared to go on the table as soon as we've finished breakfast and Peter's turned up.

I had actually forgotten about breakfast despite the fact I helped to prepare everything and that I walked through the kitchen where Rafe and Riot were starting to plate everything up. It's not a big deal; it just means that we've got to clear the table and reset the kitchen again before everyone arrives.

"Breakfast is ready," I hear Rafe call from the kitchen, letting everyone know to come and take their seats.

Leaving the boxes of decorations where they are, I go into the kitchen to help carry plates through, and all of the guys do the same, grabbing their plates before taking their seats and digging in. I smile as I look around at them, all dressed in variations of red and green and all looking incredibly sexy as they dress up for the day. We don't often get the chance to dress up, and although seeing them in their combat stuff and armed to the teeth always makes me hot, there's just something super special about seeing them all dressed smartly.

"So, what's next on the plan?" Riot asks the table as we all sit back and finish our coffees. I'm liking it to, the calm before the storm.

"We need to clear breakfast and sort the kitchen out again, and then I'm in the kitchen for most of the day," Rafe replies.

"I'm going to set up some nibbles on the smaller table in the kitchen for people to

pick on since we've got a good few hours before dinner will be ready," Riot adds.

"I'll help," Luc offers, and Riot smiles gratefully.

"I'm just waiting for Peter to come up to help me do the table, and then we're waiting for everyone else to come up, I think," I add with a slight frown as I try to think of everything.

"I need to go and check on the horses. We haven't had too much snowfall overnight, so it should be easy enough," Rage adds.

"I'll come up with you," Atlas offers.

"I guess the rest of us are just helping out where we can," Cash says.

"Actually, I'd like just to go and double-check the road before we have everyone coming up here, but Elijah is coming up with Peter, so I'll see if he wants to come with me and help since I can't exactly drive with my leg in cast," Trick suggests, always worrying about making sure that everyone is safe.

"Alright man, well, let's clear the table and get going," Jensen grins as he stands up and grabs some of the plates off the table.

I watch him closely, and seeing that he doesn't wince with the movement makes me smile a relieved smile.

Everyone splits up, and true to form, Peter soon turns up dressed to the nines with a red velvet suit, black shirt, and a glittery Christmas tie. I will never get tired of his sense of dress.

I also will never tire of his one-track mind when it comes to decorating and helping

me.

“Right, let me see the inspiration photo again?” he asks, and it's the first thing that he says.

I grin and grab him, pulling him into a tight hug, “Happy Christmas.”

He chuckles as he hugs me tightly and lifts me up off the ground at the same time, “Sorry, Ever, you know me, I get too excited. Happy Christmas, my wonderful bestie.”

“Right, now we can do the table,” I tease as we break apart, and I bring the inspiration picture up on my phone.

He takes my phone and looks over it, zooming in on parts and then looking at the boxes of decorations that I've got set up and ready to go through.

“Okay, I remember now. Are we having help from the guys, or have they been warned away?” Peter asks as he looks up from my phone with a smirk.

“They've been warned away,” I reply.

“Good. We should be able to get this done in no time then.” Peter replies honestly.

The table setup that I've chosen isn't too complicated, and after the guys and I had cleared the table, I asked Atty and Rage if they could put the extensions in it so it's big enough to seat all of us. It does mean that the seating area at the end of the room has to be shifted a bit to make room, but somehow, it still doesn't look squished or cramped.

We start by putting two plain white tablecloths on the table. We tried to find one big

enough to cover the whole thing, but it was impossible, so we gave up. Then, down the middle, the entire length of the table, we put a red velvet table runner that has these tiny gold snowflakes on it that sparkle in the overhead and lights and is going to look absolutely beautiful under candlelight.

We then place candles in these raised glass candle holders strategically along the table before threading a garland of fake pine with snowy tips, pinecones, and tiny red berries through the candles. I then pull out some red and gold baubles and place them along the garland. When I step back, I'm genuinely over the moon at the way it looks. We've had to keep it relatively simple because we're eating family style, so there needs to be enough space for all of the dishes to be laid out.

Peter managed to find some red and green serving dishes that go along with our theme, and it's going to look really good when it's all done. The next thing that we do is set out the plates. We're having starters, so we place the larger plate down and then the starter plate on top. The plates are white with tiny gold snowflakes around the edges and tie in perfectly with the tablecloth and runner; we then lay out the cutlery, which is this burnished gold and almost looks antique-like and tarnished, not bright and gaudy. One of the last touches is the water glass and two wine glasses, all with the same burnished gold edging, and then finally, red cloth napkins that match the table runner with gold snowflakes embroidered on them. We toyed around with having people's names embroidered on them as well but eventually decided against it so that people could just sit wherever they wanted to instead.

Peter stands back with me as we look over our hard work; he throws an arm around my shoulders and squeezes, "We did good; it looks amazing."

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“We did, we make a good team, but then we know that already,” I agree.

“What’s the time?” Peter asks.

Pulling out my phone, I’m shocked as I reply, “It’s twelve already. Everybody should be arriving any minute.”

Sure enough, as soon as I’ve finished speaking, the doorbell echoes throughout the house.

“Jynx, the guys, and the three stooges are here,” Jensen calls out, as he comes back from answering the door and Peter and I head to greet them.

“Three stooges?” D questions, sounding amused.

Jensen shrugs as he grabs me as I walk past and pulls me close, he then replies, “I got bored of listing everyone and I feel like the three stooges suit you, Alaric, and Ryan really well.”

“Well, he’s not really wrong,” Ryan agrees and adds, “Happy Christmas, guys.”

“Where are we putting presents?” Rome asks, struggling with the bags he’s holding, and he’s not the only one holding bags.

It would be easy to assume that because of the amount of bags that they’ve brought, they’ve gone over the top and thoroughly spoilt everyone, but there are twenty-five plus people coming, so realistically, they haven’t.

“Under the tree,” Trick smiles and points to where our presents for everyone are still sitting, ready for everyone to arrive.

I have gone over the top with the presents, but I can’t help it. I love giving things to people and making them smile. I’m also bad at thinking I’ve found the perfect present for someone and then finding something else that is even more perfect, and then I have to even it out so that no one is getting more than anyone else, and it’s just a giant vicious circle.

“Help yourself to drinks. They’re all set up on the table in the kitchen.” Rafe offers, and everyone streams through just as the door opens again, and Lyric, her men and, Noel Callen, and Marty all walk through.

We greet each other warmly, telling them the same things, and the house fills with laughter and chatter as someone turns the Christmas music up a bit louder.

As I’m turning around to grab a drink myself, the doorbell goes again, and I turn around to answer, greeting the parents with a round of hugs and happy Christmas. They place their gifts underneath the tree with everyone else’s, and because of the sheer amount of people, the presents are now spilling out into the front room, and it looks truly magical, especially since the fire is lit and the smells coming from the kitchen are just adding to the atmosphere.

Trick takes over and makes the introductions, and I can’t help but notice Kat and Jenny sharing a look and then staring at Alaric, who starts to look slightly uncomfortable.

“Are you okay, mom?” Trick asks, clearly picking up on the same thing and gaining the attention of everyone.

“I recognize you,” Jenny says, looking directly at Alaric.

Well, shit, Alaric was the one who came to pick us up to take us to Blackbreak Academy. Jenny saw him, and she has clearly used her best friend's link with Kat to tell her about him.

Alaric raises an eyebrow and then glances at us, unsure how we want to proceed with this one.

“If what my best friend is saying is correct, then you are the agent that took our kids to the academy,” Kat adds, giving him a firm look and making me smile in the process. We really should have seen this coming.

Atlas chuckles, “We knew you were too observant not to notice. This is my uncle Alaric, and he’s also an agent.”

Kat and Jenny share a look as Rob asks, “Is this one of those things that you won’t be able to tell us much about?”

Trick nods, “Yeah.”

Kat shrugs, “You clearly kept our kids safe, and we can see how much that you care about them, and they obviously care about you to have you here, so with that in mind, I say we drink up and get this Christmas party started.”

That right there is why we love them so much. They just let it go; Cash wraps his arm around his Mom’s shoulders as he says, “Thanks, Mom.”

The day goes really quickly, but somehow not as well. We may have a lot of people here, but the atmosphere never gets tense, and everyone gets along amazingly. The table set up gets a lot of compliments that have Peter and I beaming with pride. The food gets even more, and Rafe doesn’t stop smiling; he worked damn hard on the whole meal, and although he tries to pass some of the credit onto Riot and me, we

don't let him because when it came down to it, he did all the hard work all we did was cut up what he told us to and did the prep work, that was it.

The gift-giving is so much fun, and everyone ends up with a small pile of presents, including Callen, Marty, and Noel, who look genuinely shocked that they were considered. But then again, they still look shocked when the rest of us get them Christmas or birthday presents, and it's been years now, so really, their shock shouldn't surprise me.

One of the more memorable gifts that was given was a pile of old recipe books from Rafe's grandmother that his parents found in their stuff when they were sorting it and getting it ready for it to either be sold or moved to their storage. It's easy to see how much that they mean to Rafe, and I honestly had no idea that his grandmother was that good of a cook; his dad jokes that it definitely skipped a generation because he can't boil water.

After the initial mild confrontation with Alaric earlier, there has been no more tension, and in fact, I've even overheard Rich and Rob thanking him for keeping an eye on us when we were kids.

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Alaric accepts it gracefully but, at the same time, looks super awkward, and the fact that D and Ryan are in the background trying to hide their laughter at his discomfort makes the whole thing even more amusing.

Everyone ends up leaving super late, stuffed with food and taking leftovers back with them as well. Our goodbyes are drawn out since most of them are leaving early tomorrow, and we won't get the chance to say goodbye before they leave. Everyone offers to help clear up, but it's gone midnight; we're all exhausted and happily stuffed, which is making us more sleepy, so I tell everyone to just leave, and the guys and I will do it tomorrow. All of the food is wrapped or cleared away. It's really just wrapping paper and dishes and that sort of thing that needs to be done.

They all reluctantly agree, I think, only because they're just as exhausted as we are before Lyric and Jynx say that they'll be back at some point tomorrow to help tidy it, but not to expect them too early because they both want lie-ins.

The rest of us can easily agree to that.

Just like last night I find myself zombie walking to my bedroom, and I'm not even sure if I manage to take my clothes off or if anyone is with me when I fall asleep, I am honestly that tired, it's been a manic and busy few days and even before that we were on a job and the guys being injured, we've not stopped, I've not stopped and I'm absolutely shattered because of it.

I wouldn't change it for the world. I have enjoyed the last few days immensely, and I've loved having the family at our house. I also loved that all parts of my family ended up getting on really well, and there wasn't any extra information given that

some people shouldn't have heard, so that was a bonus.

I fall asleep with a giant smile on my face, my heart happy.

We're having a lazy start to the day today after the craziness of the last few days, and none of us get up until well past midday. We've already said goodbye to the parents and to D, Alaric, and Ryan, who all had to take off early this morning due to other commitments, whether that was work or more relatives to see.

I refuse to get dressed today or put on a bra, so leggings, big fluffy socks, and an oversized jumper are my current attire. I'm currently curled up in our library corner, looking out at the gently falling snow and enjoying one of Rafe's famous hot chocolates. It's morning, so it's just a normal one and the most comforting thing ever. Watching the snow and listening to the guy's gentle hum of chatter fills me with a content happiness, and I just enjoy the moment.

Chapter Eleven

Soon enough, Jynx is going to arrive to help with the clear-up from Christmas day, and then it's back to normal and the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives. We'd usually have a few more days off if not a week or two, but thanks to the Rylie situation, we're not going to have that this year. We're going to jump straight into work, and I'm looking forward to it. I need to find Rylie and Pete's program should be done pretty soon so that we can make a proper start.

Until then, though, I'm going to enjoy this little bubble of calm serenity that seems to surround me, and the moment is made even more perfect when Runa decides to come out of hiding and hop up onto my blanket covered lap, purring loudly and kneading her little paws until she decides I'm comfortable enough and lays down.

She always disappears when there are too many people here and then wants extra love when they go. It's one of my favourite things about her. That and she always seems to know when I need her, even if it's for nothing more than a cuddle.

I swear her purrs are magic; they always make me feel better.

“Do you mind if I join you?” Jensen asks me, having successfully managed to sneak up on me silently again.

I smile and then raise my eyebrows as I see the second Veil Diaries book in his hand. Pointing at it, I ask, “How the hell have you managed to get onto the second book already after the few days that we've had?”

He takes a seat opposite me with his own hot chocolate in his hand and places it on the small round table next to his chair; he smiles and replies, “One, I have been taking it a lot easier than the rest of you, because I need to rest so that I can heal quicker and my mind stays occupied for longer if I'm reading. The second reason is that I may or may not have stayed up late last night reading.”

I grin, “I told you that you would love them.”

“I really do, and I love that there's so many in the series. I'm not good with short series.”

“Me neither,” I reply.

As he reads, we lapse into silence again, and I watch the snow falling outside and stroke Runa, who is still purring happily away in my lap. It's these moments that I treasure and look forward to in our hectic lives.

A kiss on the top of my head brings me out of my musings, and I glance up at a

smiling Trick, “Rome just called me. Jynx and the guys are heading up, and Dominic messaged about thirty minutes ago to say that they would be up in an hour or so.”

“I guess that’s my cue to get up then,” I reply with a smile.

“You’re okay for a bit longer,” he smiles. “Oh, Noel called about the job they’re starting tomorrow and to get all of their case details.”

“I forgot about that,” Jensen says, and I had no idea that he was paying attention to what we were saying; I thought he was too engrossed in the book.

“Me too,” I reply, “that means that we won’t see Pete or Elijah today. They’ll be holed up together like they usually are before one of them goes on a job.”

“Good point,” Trick replies, “we haven’t got anything planned for today, have we?”

“No, the girls are just coming up to help sort the mess from yesterday, not that there’s a lot to do, mostly just burning paper and any burnable rubbish from yesterday.”

“Fire,” Jensen says, his eyes still on the page of his book, and when Trick and I just stare at him, waiting for him to finish the sentence, his lips twitch slightly, but he doesn’t say a word.

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“Alrighty then,” Trick chuckles.

“Why don’t we wrap up warm and sit on the deck? We can get the fire pit going and burn the rubbish.” I suggest. One of my favourite things to do is to sit around the fire pit wrapped up with a blanket and Rafe’s hot chocolate while it snows.

“That’s a great idea. We’ve got too much to put into the fire in here anyway,” Trick replies and then adds, “I’ll go and tell the guys.”

Once he's gone, I decide to make a start on gathering all the paper and cardboard, putting it into bags ready to take out to the fire pit area, and then taking them through the kitchen to put by the backdoors in the extension so they’re ready to take out to the fire pit, giving kisses to those of my men who are in here as I walk through.

“We’ve got so much meat left over, as well as the stuff I bought for the buffet, so I’m going to set it all up on the table, and people can just help themselves throughout the day,” Rafe says as I make another trip through the kitchen.

“Good idea, there’s no point cooking anything when we’ve got so much food left over. Besides, I love a good Boxing Day feast.” I reply.

“I know,” Rafe chuckles before going back to setting up what looks like a cheese board.

By the time I’m done bagging up the burnable trash from around the house, Jynx and the guys arrive, with Lyric and her men not far behind. With me gathering up the trash and the guys doing the kitchen, there’s actually not much to do, and they’re all

more than happy to go along with my plan.

It's not long before we're all sitting around the huge fire pit, hot chocolates in hand while conversations are going on around us, and Jensen's head is still buried in the book. It kind of surprises me when Ezra and Ace take an interest in what he's reading and then, thanks to Jensen's epic description of the series, decide to start reading it as well. Out of all of the members of our family, those three are the three that get on the best, and when we're not working, you quite often find them hanging out together.

We've gotten through a vast majority of the trash before Jensen suddenly sits up straight and stares at Jynx.

"Dude, are you okay?" she questions, looking amused.

"No." he replies bluntly, and when we all look at him in confusion, he adds, "With everything going on for Christmas, I completely forgot that you are the head of the Ravens. I'm going to need some more information like right now."

Atlas sits forward in his seat, "Fuck, I'd forgotten about that. Spill the beans, Jynx."

All of us watch her intently as Jynx's men all chuckle.

Grinning, she says, "Alright, well, I guess I'll start from the beginning, and I'll keep it as short as I can. The Raven's killed my mom to try and get me to comply and give them back an heirloom that my grandmother had stolen from them."

Luc interrupts, "Your grandmother?"

"Oh yeah, she's a badass. Jynx's skills are inherited, but that's a completely different story," Rome grins, looking proud.

“Fair enough,” Luc replies, looking intrigued.

“Obviously, I wasn’t going to let that stand, and I definitely wasn’t going to give them what they wanted. So we took the head of the Ravens out to send our own message.” Jynx explains.

“Fucking hell.” Rage exclaims and then adds, “Did you guys know what would happen if you killed the head of the Ravens?”

Jynx shakes her head, “Nope, I had no idea until we got back home and found Sawyer being held in my library with a shotgun trained on him.”

“Wow, so you’re the head of the Ravens,” Jonah mutters.

Jynx grins, looking proud, “Yep.”

“I’m assuming that’s how you know Mona?” I ask her, trying to put some of the pieces together.

I mean, we’ve all always known that there is more to Jynx and the guys and that there’s a reason that they cannot be employed by Mr R; we have never known the real reason, and we haven’t needed to. There are a lot of things about our lives and what we do that we can’t share with them, and we all know that which is why it’s never an issue when things or situations don’t get explained because we know that there’s a damn good reason for it and if we could know then we would.

“Yes. She was actually our first official job, although she hired the Ravens because Jynx was in charge and already had a reputation with her,” Rip explains.

“You’re fucking impressive, you know that?” Lyric smiles.

“And don’t you forget it,” Jynx adds.

“I don’t think we could ever even dream of forgetting it.” Trick answers honestly, making us chuckle.

“It does mean that I can call in even more backup on the case with Rylie if I need to,” Jynx points out.

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“That reminds me, I think we should give Mr R a call and see if he can give us any more insight into what she was doing, and also to make sure that he’s aware that Jynx and her team are involved, and they are being granted full immunity while they’re working for us.” Trick suggests, already pulling out his phone.

“Dude, he might be with family. It’s Boxing Day, after all,” Cash points out with a frown.

“Text first, or better yet, just use the secure line to email him what we want to know and what he wants to know, and then he can let us know when he’s not busy anymore,” Atlas suggests.

“Good idea. I don’t think he’s got family, but I imagine he’s spending it with his team,” I add thoughtfully.

“I’m not sure we’d know even if he did have family. I mean, we all keep our private lives pretty tightly under wraps at headquarters to ensure that our loved ones stay safe. He could have a wife and kids for all we know.” Ezra adds.

“That’s a good point. I mean, we’re really close with Zemi and her team, yet we’re still cautious about how much we tell them, and they’re the same with telling us things. It’s just inbuilt in us to be more cautious.” I reply thoughtfully.

“Exactly,” Atlas adds, “that’s why an email would be better, just in case.”

“I’ve just sent it, so we’ll see when he replies,” Trick replies, and then adds, “we aren’t going to get any communication from Peter today since Elijah is heading out

with his team tomorrow.”

“His program should be finished pulling and mapping the locations that Rylie called from late tonight, early tomorrow, so we can hit the ground running and at least get some research started,” Ace explains to us since he was the one that helped Pete set it all up before Christmas.

“Great, well, in that case, everyone can meet up here bright and early then,” Trick replies. “It will just be research for a while, I imagine.” He then looks at Lyric and her team, “How involved do you guys want to be?”

“We’re still involved. I’ve got a few months yet before I’m out of commission. I just need to be more careful about the combat side of things, and if I do start to feel the strain, then I’ll step back.” Lyric replies, although her men still look slightly nervous at the prospect of her being in the field, which I can understand.

“Okay, so you will be taking more of a role in the surveillance and research side and take a step back on the actual rescue?” Trick asks to clarify.

“Yes,” Lyric nods with a smile.

“The rest of us will still be there if you need us to be, but at least one of us will be staying with Lyric,” Dominic adds.

“Got it,” Trick agrees, “we’ll try and keep you guys out of the more dangerous side of things. We’ve got Jynx and her guys; that should be enough for us to go and get Rylie out, but it all depends on exactly what the situation is.”

“Understood and appreciated,” Creed replies with a smile.

“Is anyone else hungry?” Jensen suddenly asks.

“Me,” Ezra replies like he’s been desperate for someone to ask that question.

Ace nods rapidly, “I’m starving.”

“Well, the fire is starting to go out since we’ve burnt through everything, and Rafe set up a buffet,” I reply, and before I’ve even finished my sentence, they’re gone and striding back inside.

“I guess they were hungry,” Jynx chuckles.

“Are any of us really surprised?” Rome chuckles.

“Nope, those three are so similar, and yet they get on so freaking well,” Lyric chuckles as we all get up and head inside to eat too.

Somehow, the food that Rafe set out earlier is delicious, and I love how he has managed to make something as simple as a buffet into something extraordinary.

Everyone is sitting down and eating, Jensen with three different plates in front of him, when Trick checks his phone again.

“Mr R has replied. He said that Rylie was tasked with finding the person who was controlling our moles, and she was one of the first people he put on the case, so while we were finding the internal ones amongst us, she was trying to locate the leader,” Trick explains to us, and then frowns slightly.

“It would’ve been nice to know that there was more to it than just the ones that we were chasing,” Rage points out, voicing what everyone else is thinking.

“If he’d told you that though, he would have had to tell you that someone else is taking care of it, and that could have piqued your curiosity or prompted you to ask

questions, which could have compromised Rylie,” Malachi points out.

“He’s got a point,” Lucien agrees, “he couldn’t risk Rylie and her ghost status. That’s the whole point of her being a ghost.”

“Good point,” Trick replies, “anyway, he’s also said that’s all he was aware of; she was gathering information and making her check-ins, but it was too risky to try and get the information to him regularly, so they decided to leave it until she had a good chunk of information before she attempted it, she was supposed to hand the information over on her next check-in, which she didn’t make.”

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“So, there’s a chance that she was caught trying to get information out. How was she getting the information out?” Jonah asks curiously.

“Erm, one second,” Trick replies as he quickly scans the email. “Ah, okay, she was making the drop, and Mr R himself was going to pick it up, but when he arrived, nothing was there.”

“Right, okay, well at least we know that we don’t have to look into anyone else at headquarters to see if they were involved,” Jonah replies.

“But I think it is pretty safe to assume that she didn’t make the last check-in because she got caught.” Luc points out.

“Yeah, I think that’s the most likely scenario,” I reply. “Can you ask him if we still have that guy that we caught, the only mole that didn’t die? I know he was supposed to be moved; it would help if we could talk to him and see what else he knows.”

“Good idea,” Trick replies with a smile, “he did, after all, give you the name of the man in charge, Erebus Hunt.”

“Which hopefully means that he knows more than he’s let on so far. I assume that if he had said something important, Mr R would’ve let you know,” Jynx points out.

“Yeah, he should have, but it depends on the circumstances and whether he thought it was relevant or not.” Lyric adds.

“See, this is one of the reasons why I wouldn’t do well not being in charge,” Jynx

replies.

“One of the many,” Ace teases and earns the middle finger from Jynx, making me smile.

“It’s not so bad,” I reply, “he’s pretty decent as far as bosses go and gives us a lot of free reign. We’ve just got to report back to him and accept that we don’t know everything that goes on.”

Jynx thinks about it, “It doesn’t sound too bad, but it also doesn’t sound like something that I could handle.”

“That’s because you’re so used to being in charge.” Lyric points out with a smile.

“Alright, Mr R said that because of the Holidays, they haven’t actually moved him yet, and she’s still being held at headquarters. He hasn’t said a word since Ever and Jynx left, no matter what they’ve tried to get him to talk. He said that we’re welcome to try to get some more information out of him though, if we want to,” Trick explains as he interrupts our other conversation.

I share a look with Jynx and reply, “So long as Jynx is happy to go back to headquarters again, then I’m happy to go back and talk to him and see if we can get anything else out of him.”

“I’ll go too,” Atlas offers, and I smile.

“Sounds good, Jynx?” Trick questions.

“Oh, I’m always up for a little bit of torture,” Jynx grins.

“You’re a little bit scary,” Dominic tells her and makes her smile widen even more.

“Why thank you,” she replies, and then adds, “when do you want to go?”

“Tomorrow afternoon?” I suggest, “That way, we can see if Peter’s program has picked up anything that we can use in the interrogation.”

“Good idea. I’ll message him now to let him know to come up early tomorrow so that you guys have enough time to get to headquarters and interrogate the guy,” Trick replies, already typing out a message.

While he’s doing that, Luc’s phone starts to ring, and he smiles down at the screen as he gets up to answer it, gesturing for me to follow him.

Chapter Twelve

“Hey, sis,” Luc grins, answering the video call when we get into the front room and holding it up so that we can both see.

“Hey, little brother. Hello, my favourite sister-in-law,” she greets us happily.

I chuckle as happiness fills me, “I’m your only sister-in-law, and technically, I’m not your sister-in-law.”

She grins, “Not yet; it’s only a matter of time.”

“How are my nieces?” I grin, changing the subject before she starts asking me things like what theme I want for the wedding.

“Girls, come and talk to your aunty Ever,” Elena yells, and the girls suddenly appear on screen.

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“Aunty Ev,” they say together, their speech coming along even more now, but they still insist on calling me Aunty Ev. It’s adorable, and I hope they never stop.

I only get the chance to say hello back before they’re both telling me all about their Christmas and the presents they got.

They’re still talking away, with Elena looking highly amused in the background as Blade encourages them and prompts them every now and then when they forget something they got or someone they saw.

Luc chuckles quietly as he mutters, “I love how they completely ignore me and just focus on you.”

“I’m their favourite,” I whisper back, still umming and ahing in what I’m hoping is the right places as their three-year-old speech deteriorates the faster they talk, and they become more challenging to understand.

Eventually, they tire themselves out, and Elena comes back on the phone. We all catch up for a while, talking to each of her men as well, as they tell us how the security system is doing and give us updates on some of the members.

“So, when do you think you guys will be able to come for a visit?” Elena asks.

“We’re actually pretty booked up for a while now, but as soon as we’ve sorted the case that we’re on, then we’ll come out to see you,” Luc replies.

Although they don’t live that far away from us, whenever we visit them, we like to

stay for at least a week so that we get to see them all properly and do lots of fun stuff with the girls as well. That means that we need to go when we have a week off rather than if we're still trying to do a case at the same time.

"Sounds good," Dom replies in the background.

"Just let us know when you guys think you'll make it so we don't plan a run or anything like that," Inferno adds.

"No problem," I reply. "Hopefully, it won't be too far away. I've got all of your Christmas gifts here."

"We've got yours as well, but that's okay; the girls will be super excited to have a second Christmas." Elena smiles.

After that, we say goodbye, and Elena promises to text me later.

"I always miss them all more when we've spoken to them," Luc says, wrapping an arm around me as we walk back through to the extension.

"Me too," I agree. "In a perfect world, we would all live closer together, but it shouldn't be too much longer until we can see them."

Trick looks up from his laptop with a smile as we walk back in and see that everyone has split up into little groups doing various different things.

"Are Elena and the others all okay?" Trick asks.

"Yeah, they're all good. The twin's speech is even better than it was." Luc tells him, smiling proudly.

“We also told them that when we’re finished with this case, we’d go and see them for at least a week and exchange our Christmas gifts as well,” I add.

“Good, it's been far too long, and I miss them,” Trick replies.

“Me too,” I reply, and then, taking a seat next to him, I ask, “What are you up to?”

“I’m just going through some of the cases that we had coming up. Obviously, we aren’t going to be doing them now because all of our focus is going to be on Rylie and finding her. I’m trying to determine if the jobs can be given to Noel’s team and Lyric’s or if I should just give them back to Mr R and tell him that we can’t do them and he needs to reassign them to the other teams.” Trick explains.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I completely forgot we had other jobs we were supposed to be starting.” Luc replies.

“So did I,” I agree, “but then again, there’s been so much going on.”

“True.” Trick replies.

“So, what do you think we’re going to need to do?” Luc asks curiously, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“The Rico job can be given to Lyric’s team. I’ve just asked them, and they’re fine to take that one over; it’s not too far away or complicated and only requires two or three of them to go. Since they’ve all got jobs that they have to do within the town as well, I’ve left it up to them to decide who goes and all of that,” Trick starts to explain, flicking through files on his laptop. “The other two jobs are similar in nature and can be given to Elijah’s team. They aren’t going to need to be done for a while, so they can wait until after they’ve done their current job and had their rest days.”

“Good idea. So, we’re all good to go ahead with Rylie’s case without needing to worry about any of the others, then?” I ask.

It wouldn’t be a big deal if we did need to, but it would take some of our time and resources away from Rylie, which I wouldn’t be happy with. Not to mention that although they both seem to be straightforward cases that should be dealt with fairly quickly, that’s never the case, and experience has taught me that the cases that seem to be the most straightforward never are and end up throwing us the most curveballs. Fortunately, Lyric and Elijah’s teams are more than capable of handling anything that the cases can throw at them, and if they aren’t, they have us to step in.

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“Yes, we’re all good. Unless they end up needing our help, our full focus can be on finding Rylie and bringing her home,” Trick reassures me.

“Great, thank you. I hadn’t even thought about trying to reassign all of our other cases, and as I said, I didn’t even remember we had other cases.” I reply with a slight wince. I mean, that’s not something that I should forget about, but then again, finding out Rylie was a part of the same organisation as us and was in trouble was quite a shock.

“A lot has happened recently,” Trick replies.

“I’m looking forward to slowly easing ourselves into a case,” Luc mutters, and when we both look at him curiously, he adds, “After the last case, not only do some of us need to rest still, but I think the rest of us also need to take it easy because of the emotional trauma, we nearly lost Jensen and the other two weren’t in great shape. I think there might need to be an adjustment period for the rest of us as well.”

“That’s an excellent point,” Trick agrees. “Easing ourselves into it after everything that happened is a good idea. It was definitely one of our worst cases, for many reasons, and was the worst for people getting hurt.”

“Exactly,” Luc agrees.

For the rest of the day, we just hang out and try to give Jynx and the guys a rundown of how we work cases since it’s going to be a lot different than how they deal with issues, and although we do have a lot of freedom, there are a couple of things that we have to make sure that we do. If anything, they seem to be excited about trying it this

way, and it makes me wonder if Jynx wasn't the head of the Ravens if they would be more inclined to accept the offer of being employed by Mr R and under Trick's instruction, like Lyric's team and Elijah's too.

By the time I make it to bed, I'm exhausted but feeling a lot better about the plan we have in place for Rylie. It's only a start, but it's better than nothing.

Atty is curled up around me, his breathing soft, and I know that he's nearly asleep. However, my mind has quickly turned to what else we could be doing with this in mind, and the fact that I only have on underwear and one of his large shirts, I turn over, waking him up as I push him gently onto his back and straddle him which effectively wakes him, and every part of him.

His expression becomes heated as his hands grip my hips, and I strip out of my shirt. While it's halfway over my head, Atty takes advantage of the situation and sits up, his dick moving against my clit deliciously as his mouth wraps around my nipple. I quickly discard my shirt and then weave my hands through his hair, pulling tightly and making him bite my nipple as he growls in pleasure. My hips buck from the wave of pleasure that goes through me.

His mouth moves away from my nipple as he kisses up my neck and then takes my mouth in a passionate kiss, his hands running up and down my back, pulling me closer against him, my nipples rubbing against his taut chest and driving my need for him higher.

As our tongues tangle, his hands move down my back and around my hips before he deftly rips my underwear off and throws them off to the side. I follow him down as he lies down and lifts my hips so that he can work his own underwear down. My nails dig into his pecs as he lines himself up, and I torture us both by slowly lowering myself and making us both groan in ecstasy as I rock my hips. Our lips meet again as his hand grips my ass, and his hips lift to meet mine as he guides my movements.

He lets me stay in control for a brief moment before he flips me over, increasing his speed as I lift my hips to meet his and my back arches with pleasure as he reaches out and wraps one of his tattooed hands around my neck with just the right amount of pressure.

He changes the angle slightly, hitting me in just the right direction and sending an orgasm roaring through me, the strength of it triggering Atty's orgasm as he roars out his release.

I fall onto his chest, my breathing coming out in pants as Atty runs his hand up and down my back soothingly as he catches his own breath.

After cleaning up, we both curl around each other again and fall into a deep and satisfied sleep.

I'm up bright and early the next morning, eager to get started on the Rylie case and hopefully get some sort of answers. No one else is up yet. In fact, the sun is only just beginning to peek over the tops of the surrounding trees, and I take my coffee out to sit on the couches in the extension so that I can watch the snow, which is slowly starting to fall.

As I sip my drink, my mind drifts. I know that this is going to take a while; it just is. We have to put together all of the tiny clues that have been left behind or given by her locations in order even to get a vague idea of where she is and, therefore, be able to find out whether she needs to be rescued in the first place or if she just wasn't able to communicate because it was too risky. If it's the second reason, then while we're looking for her, she should be able to send a communication, and we'll know that we don't need to carry on searching.

“Good morning, il Mio Cuore,” Cash’s gentle voice startles me slightly as he comes into my sight line and bends down to kiss me before taking a seat next to me.

“Good morning,” I smile and then ask as I look down at his arm in the cast. “How are you feeling?”

“Itchy,” he grins, and then answers more seriously, “it still fucking hurts, but then that’s to be expected since it only happened a couple of weeks ago. I’m really worried that I’m not going to be healed enough by the time that we have to go and get Rylie, or the guys for that matter. Trick and my casts don’t come off for another six weeks, Jensen is dealing with a massive operation and the fact that he’s got a broken collar bone and fingers. Although, he’d argue that he’s still got one good hand, so he can still shoot and throw knives.”

I smile at the last comment because it’s so true and definitely something that Jensen would do before I become serious again, “If we end up finding Rylie’s location and have to extract her before you three are ready to go in, then you’re going to have to take a back seat, an observational or last resort role. It will be okay because we have Jynx and her team, who are all extremely well trained and capable in these types of situations. If it turns out that not having you three will push it and stretch us too thin, then we’ll call in Elijah’s team or some of Lyric’s. It will all work out.”

Cash sighs as he wraps his unbroken arm around my shoulders, and I settle my head on his chest.

“I know all that, I just, it’s going to be really hard not to be there fighting alongside you guys and Trick and Jensen are going to find it even harder than me,” Cash replies.

I hum in agreement as I hear the others start to filter into the kitchen, grabbing coffees, making food, and grunting at each other in greeting. “We’ll get through it

together like we do everything. It will help the other two that you'll all be in the same boat if that does happen."

"Yeah, you're right," Cash adds, kissing the top of my head and then changing the subject. He adds, "The snow really is pretty."

"I absolutely love this kind of weather. I'm definitely one of those people who would rather be too cold than too hot. At least with being too cold, you can put fluffy socks on and cozy sweaters, not to mention blankets and hot chocolates." I reply with a smile.

"I'm the same," Cash grins, "you forget snuggles. Snuggling under blankets while watching a movie is the best."

"Oh, I forgot about that!"

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“Do you two want a breakfast sandwich?” Rafe suddenly asks, and I tilt my head up so that I can see him. He moves into my sightline and kisses me upside down, making my toes curl as he takes his time.

Cash chuckles when Rafe steps back, and I remain staring up at him, looking dazed, and answers for the both of us, “Yes, we would both like breakfast sandwiches, please.”

Thankfully, my phone chooses that moment to buzz and snap me out of my lovestruck staring, which has the both of them chuckling quietly.

Deciding to ignore them both, I read the message from Peter and then grin, “Pete says he wants some of whatever Rafe is making for breakfast. He’s on his way up.”

Rafe chuckles, “I’m already making him his usual order; I figured he’d want something since he never misses breakfast.”

“Especially if you’re cooking,” Cash points out with a smile.

“I think he may be your biggest supporter. I have to fight him to be a taster whenever you cook something new.” I agree.

“Why don’t you just stop telling him that Rafe needs taste testers?” Cash asks, his eyebrows dipping slightly in the middle with his confusion.

“Because I did that once, and he was mad as a box of frogs. It’s just not worth it,” I reply with a wince.

“Fair enough. I’m going to go and finish everyone’s food,” Rafe tells me with a smile and a kiss.

Breakfast is delicious, of course, which is unsurprising since it was made by Rafe and it’s one of everyone’s favourites. It’s not long until Peter arrives, half asleep, and heads straight for the food before he wakes up enough to greet the rest of us.

“Alright, so what’s the plan for today?” he asks, sipping his coffee.

“You’re almost as bad as Ever is when she needs coffee,” Riot chuckles, earning himself one of Peter’s famous glares in the process.

“We’re going to see if your program has picked up anything, and then Jynx and I are going to talk to the guy who didn’t die when we rescued the guys,” I explain.

“Poor fucker,” Pete grins, not seeming to have any real feelings of sympathy for him.

“Did Elijah go off okay?” Trick asks.

“Yeah, they were all fine. Excited to get back to work. We’ve had a while off since the last job.” Pete replies and then suddenly sits up, looking excited, “Oh shit, I forgot to tell you. My fathers have asked if we all want to go to theirs for their annual New Year's Eve party in a few days?”

“I’m up for that. It’s been a while since we saw them, and their parties are always good fun.” Rage replies, the rest of us nodding in agreement.

“What did they say when you told them about the engagement?” I ask excitedly.

“We didn’t tell them. I want to tell them in person,” Peter replies with a smile and practically bouncing in his seat.

“That’s a great idea, and then I can see how over-the-top excited they get too,” I reply.

“Exactly,” Pete replies.

“I don’t see any reason why we can’t head over.” Trick starts, his eyebrows furrowed as he thinks, “We’d probably have to keep it short because of the Rylie case, but we can leave early New Year’s Eve, so we’re there for the party. Does that work?”

Pete nods, looking happy. “Yeah, that works. I already told them that we had a case on, so if we do make it, we won’t be able to stay for very long.”

“Great, that’s settled then.” Trick says, looking around at the rest of us to make sure that we’re all in agreement.

Peter stands up, “Has everyone finished?” when we all nod that we have, he adds, “Great, I’ll set up in the front room so that everyone can see. I had a quick look before I came over here, and the program has finished doing its thing, so I can just bring up the map on the TV and show you her last locations, according to her check-ins.”

“Great work, man, let’s do this,” Atlas says, sounding more than ready to get to it. I think we all are.

Peter wastes no time in getting everything hooked up and put up on the TV, and it’s not long until I’m staring at a map with around five red dots on it.

“Okay, they’re more spread out than I thought they would be,” Atlas says, leaning forward slightly in his chair.

“That suggests to me that she’s either following someone or following a lead,” I

reply.

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“What order are they in, Pete?” Jensen asks.

“So they start with this one, that’s the first check-in, and then it goes like this,” Peter explains as he points out the locations in order.

“I think we should focus on the last two,” Rage suggests. “There won’t be much point looking at the ones before that, and we definitely need to look at the last one, so looking at the one before that as well will mean that we can see what her usual behavior, the way she gave her check-ins and all of that sort of stuff is like and see if she behaved differently at the last one.”

“Good idea,” Trick replies. “Have you got the recordings of the phone calls from when she checked in?”

It’s standard practice to record check-ins so it’s easier to remember the information and just in case they need to be listened to again. Because it’s the norm, Peter’s reply shocks me.

“No, they weren’t recorded. Apparently, that’s standard practice for Ghost agents.” Pete replies.

“Fantastic, this case really isn’t going to be straightforward, is it?” I grumble.

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“Probably not, but we knew that,” Cash reminds me gently.

“I know,” I reply, still frowning slightly.

“What about surveillance cameras?” Luc asks, “Are her locations pinpointed enough that we can get the general area?”

Pete nods, “Yeah, I can do that. I can actually run her through facial recognition through their cameras, and we can see her movements and maybe even see what she was doing.”

“That’s a great idea,” Trick compliments.

“Can you run the program on both towns simultaneously, or do you need to do it one at a time?” Riot asks curiously.

“I can do it on both locations, but I have to warn you guys, this isn’t going to be a quick thing. I’m not going to have answers for you by tonight. Like finding the check-in locations, it’s going to take me a few days at least.”

“We always knew that this was going to be a marathon and not a sprint. At the moment, we’re just trying to work out if there is, in fact, an issue. For all we know, she might have just missed a check-in and will make the next one,” Atlas points out.

He’s right; we’re all assuming that she’s in trouble, and she could be, but until she misses the second check-in as well, we’re not going to know for certain.

“That’s very true,” Luc replies, and then asks Pete, “do we know when she’s due to make her next check-in?”

“Erm, yes, hang on,” Pete says, clicking some keys as he brings up the very scant file that Mr R sent us and scans through until he says, “Found it. She was supposed to do it every two weeks, so it should be around the second of January.”

“Okay, so we work like we always do, and we check out the surveillance and see what we can find out if anything. Jynx, Ever, and Atlas will also go and talk to the guy at headquarters and see if we can get any more information from him. Mr R didn’t seem to think that it was likely, but if anyone can, it will be you three.” Trick starts to summarise.

“I’ll have the software set up and running in no time,” Peter adds. “Hopefully, we’ll find something worth looking into.”

“She’s almost too good at her job,” I say, unable to hide the proud tone in my voice.

“She is definitely good at her job, but so are we, and we’ll find her,” Trick reassures me.

I just have this feeling that it’s not going to be as easy as we think, and in all honesty, we didn’t think it was going to be easy in the first place.

“It would only be easy if she wants to be found,” Cash points out.

“Well, yeah, I have a feeling that if she doesn’t want to be found, then she won’t be.” Riot replies and then adds carefully, “That’s another angle that we haven’t considered. The guy behind this, whatever the fuck his name is, is obviously very powerful and well-connected. He managed to convince several of the best agents in the country to turn against their own people. There’s a chance that he’s managed to do it with Rylie too.”

“You make a good point, but if that were the case, it would make more sense for them to keep her in contact with us and feed us false information, not drop off the face of the planet and make us aware of something that isn’t quite right,” Atlas replies thoughtfully.

Riot nods in agreement.

“I do agree with Riot that it is something that we need to consider though,” Jensen adds, “a lot has changed over the years since we last saw her, and she’s clearly been through a lot as well, and that's just assuming from what we know, and there's a hell of a lot that we don't know about. The sort of things that she’s been through changes a person. She may not be who we all remember.”

“I hear you,” I reply honestly because it’s me who he’s looking at while he says this. “I do; just look at how much we’ve all changed and what we’ve been through. I was fortunate enough that I had you guys, and our family after some of the more traumatic things that I’ve been through. It looks like Rylie is still all alone, and I know for a fact that I wouldn’t have survived the things that I have without you guys. It would’ve warped me.”

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An array of emotions ranging from sorrow to pride to anger cross all of their faces at my words.

“On the other hand,” Trick starts, “from what Jynx was saying and how we now know she was brought up, which was thoroughly ensconced in this world, she is stronger than most people, and we don’t know for certain that she doesn’t have someone who can pull her out of the darkness, so there’s still every chance that she’s not been turned against us.”

I smile, “Honestly, I think that she’s far too stubborn to be turned against us, and if someone tried, I think it would push her even more on our side.

The guys all chuckle as Rafe replies, “Yeah, that sounds about right. She never had any problem telling any of us off, and looking back; we should’ve known then that she was more than she appeared to be.”

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Peter grins, “she sounds like she’s going to be my fourth bestie.”

I chuckle. “You’re going to love her. You know you’re so much a part of my life, and it feels like you always have been. Sometimes, I forget that you never met Rylie.”

“I know. I feel like I know her though. You’ve told me so much about her.”

“I’m not surprised,” I reply honestly. “We’ll just do what we usually do, take one day at a time, and be aware that she could have switched sides even though we think it’s unlikely.”

“Sounds good to me,” Rage replies with a smile and then looks down at his watch, “Atlas and you had better start getting ready to go to headquarters. You’re supposed to be picking Jynx up soon.”

“I had no idea that it was that time already,” Atlas says, standing up.

“I shouldn’t be too long, and I’ll meet you down by the front door,” I reply as Atlas nods, and I start to turn around to head up the stairs to grab a couple of my favourite weapons. Before I get far though, a thought occurs to me, and I add, “I feel really bad, but has anyone heard from the parents to say that they got back okay?”

Trick smiles reassuringly in response to my question and replies, “Yeah, Mom messaged and said that they all got home safe and that Rafe’s parents had set off already and were more excited to start this new adventure than she had seen them in years.”

“I’m not surprised; they’ve always talked about traveling the country, and I’m just really glad that they’ve managed to do it,” Rafe says with a fond smile.

“Good, I’m glad they’re all okay and got back alright,” I reply.

“Mom also said don’t work too hard,” Trick adds with a chuckle.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Pete grins, still typing away on his laptop. I’m assuming he’s setting the programs running to see if we can find out what Rylie was doing in the last two towns where she made her check-ins.

I leave them all to it as I take the stairs two at a time and head for my bedside table, where I keep my knives that Atlas gave me at the first Christmas we spent together. They’re my absolute favourites, but I’m very careful about when I take them out. I’m also glad that they are part of a set, so if I do lose one, I have more, not that I

wouldn't be heartbroken if I lost one of them, regardless of whether I have more or not.

As always, I'm excited to go to work. I love what we do, and I also love the part of the job that's putting the clues together and trying to find the answers. I always get a thrill when I find the right answer, and because of that one answer, several other things that we were unsure about fall into place.

I love it.

"Are you ready?" Atty asks me as I reach the bottom of the stairs and find him waiting by the door for me, holding my jacket out to me.

Turning around so that he can help me into it, I reply, "Yep, I've got one of my favourites with me."

He chuckles and then spins me around, ducking slightly so that he can kiss me thoroughly before he steps back, his thumb gently rubbing across my cheekbone. "I love that you love the weapons I got you. I was so nervous to give them to you."

"I love them," I reply, and then turn around and yell, "we're off! Love you!"

"Love you too," is the chorus of replies that I get, and it makes me beam with happiness.

The drive to Jynx's house, and it is her house now that she's brought it, is a lot slower than it usually is simply because of the ice and snow on the roads. The roads are going to be like this for the next couple of weeks at least before things start to thaw a bit and the snow turns to rain, which can be far more challenging to deal with if you have to work out in it, but is just as cozy if you don't have to leave the house. I am definitely more of a fall and winter kind of person; I get a bit cranky in the heat, I'm

not made for it.

“Hey, what did Pete say? Did we find out anything interesting?” Jynx asks as soon as we’re on our way.

“Not really. He’s going to set up facial recognition in the towns at the last two check-ins she made, and we’ll see if we can try to make sense of her movements.” I explain.

Atlas then goes on to explain everything in more detail, including bringing up the fact that she could have switched sides, especially with what we know about this Erebus Hunt and the power that he wields. Like me, although she doesn’t like the idea and thinks that Rylie wouldn’t be able to be swayed like that, she also knows that it is possible because anything is possible and that we need to be aware of it.

Headquarters is still reasonably quiet since it's only a couple of days after Christmas, but it is busier than I imagine that most places are this soon after Christmas.

“Do you know if Raiden and the guys are going to be here today?” Atlas asks me. There’s no doubt that after the last job, we’re all even closer than we were before; there’s an even greater level of trust between us.

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“I hope not,” I reply, “as much as I want to see them. Saint and Raiden were also seriously injured, and they need rest.”

“Yeah, I just want to check in on them,” Atlas replies, “we could’ve lost a lot more people if it weren’t for them.”

“I want to meet them too. They sound like they’d be fun to hang out with, and I want to see if you’re right about the way they feel about each other,” Jynx adds from the back seat.

“Zemi is definitely our kind of person,” I tell her.

“Well, even though they shouldn’t be here today, with me working this case with you, I’m sure that I’ll be back here at some point, and I’ll get to meet them properly.” She replies.

“That’s true.”

It doesn’t take us any longer than usual to get to headquarters once we’ve gotten away from our small town, and the roads are more well traveled and taken care of. The only snow that can be found is at the edges and on the buildings; the roads themselves are completely clear.

Walking through the door, I smile. I’m glad that we took a chance and decided to work for Mr R. It’s made our lives so much better and also given us the freedom to be ourselves, which would have been very difficult to find anywhere else.

“Do we have time to get coffee?” I practically plead, “They’ve still got the Christmas menu up, and they won’t for much longer.”

“I imagine that he’s not going anywhere,” Atlas replies, “we’ve got time to grab a cup to take down with us.”

“Thank fuck for that,” Jynx says, real relief in her tone as she’s already on her way into the practically empty coffee shop.

“I guess Jynx needed coffee,” Atlas chuckles.

“Doesn’t she always,” I reply as we follow her.

Once we’ve got our drink orders, we head down to Mr R’s office to let him know that we’re here and find out exactly where the guy is being held so that we can talk to him.

“Hey guys, how was your Christmas?” Mr R asks as soon as I let myself into his office, clearly knowing it’s me since I’m the only one brave or stupid enough to barge into his office without knocking.

“It was great, busy,” Atlas replies with a smile and then puts a coffee that I hadn’t realised he was carrying or had even brought on the desk in front of Mr R.

He smiles gratefully, “Thank you.”

“How was your Christmas?” I ask him as Jynx hangs back slightly and just observes while she sips her coffee.

“It was good, decidedly less busy than I imagine yours was,” he replies and then changes the subject, “I just wanted you to know that I wasn’t made aware of the

connection between Rylie and you. I know that she was from the same hometown that you and the guys were from, so I assumed that you might recognise her or know of her, but I didn't realise that you were so close. If I had, then I would have approached telling you that she was missing with more tact. I still wouldn't have been able to tell you that she was in the agency to protect her ghost status."

The explanation is a surprising one. I honestly didn't expect to get one from him because, at the end of the day, he doesn't owe me one. He has an entire agency to run, and he's reporting to the higher-ups of this whole country. He's got far more significant things to be worried about than my feelings or any connection that Rylie and I may have had unless it was a threat.

But that's why he's such a great boss; he genuinely cares.

"Thanks, Boss," I reply with a smirk, "I'm aware that even if you did know, you wouldn't have been able to tell me. I understand that."

"Good," he smiles and sips his coffee as he then frowns slightly and adds, "I know it's early days yet, but have you managed to figure out anything to do with the Rylie case?"

Atlas shakes his head as he answers, "No, we've just been trying to pinpoint her check-in locations, and Peter has set up facial recognition now to see if he can find any useful information about what she was doing, who she was following, that sort of thing. As expected, it's going to take a while to get any solid leads, but hopefully, it will give us something that we can follow to try and find out where she is and if she needs help."

Mr R nods thoughtfully and replies, "Excellent work. I would be very surprised if she just couldn't make the check-in though. She would have made contact by now. She was very particular about that sort of thing."

“That makes sense. We’re just making sure that we’re looking at it from every angle,” I reply.

“As you should,” Mr R replies.

“And we’re hoping to get some more information from the guy Ever, and I tortured,” Jynx speaks for the first time.

Mr R smiles and then adds more seriously, “We’ve tried to get more information out of him since he mentioned Erberus Hunt’s name, but he’s stayed extremely tight-lipped, not willing to tell us anything of any importance. If anyone can get him to talk though, I imagine that it will be one of you three.”

“We’re certainly going to give it a good go. We need some information out of him; otherwise, our investigation is going to stall before it really gets started,” Atlas replies.

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“Rylie was very good at what she did and being a ghost. That much is clear,” I add, a proud smile gracing my features.

“She’s my best,” Mr R replies. “It helps that she had the upbringing that she did. It prepared her for situations that we couldn’t have provided training for and real-life experience that has proved to be invaluable to her and her success.”

“I’m not surprised in the slightest,” Jynx grins, “she was incredibly well trained when I knew her and strong enough to do whatever she put her mind to.”

“That sounds like Rylie,” Mr R agrees, not questioning Jynx about exactly how she knows Rylie and just leaving it alone as he stands and grabs his coffee. “If you follow me, I’ll show you where we’re keeping Mr Gauld. Like with the interrogation rooms, there is an observation room, where whoever isn’t talking to him can wait it out.”

“That’s great. Thank you,” I reply as we all follow him out of his office and through the practically empty room that’s usually full of agents and their teams.

We head down several corridors, deeper into the bowels of the building, which makes sense because you wouldn’t want to give your prisoners an easy chance of escape if they do manage to get out of their cells.

Not that there’s a very good chance of them escaping, this place has some of the best security in the world, which is why the mole was such a surprise and such a massive threat as well.

Finally, after more walking than I honestly thought I'd be doing today, Mr R leads us through yet another five-inch thick, steel-reinforced door with a manual locking system, as well as a fingerprint and keycode system. I'm sure there is a more complex process to it as well, but it's way out of my knowledge.

He stops between two doors that are made out of the same material as the security door that granted us access to this part of the compound. "The viewing room is on the left. I'll leave you to it. Let me know if he needs medical attention after you're done and, of course, if you find anything interesting. You should know that he's being transferred to one of our secure prisons off-site as soon as you're done with him. There's no point keeping him here. So, if after today you need to talk to him again, you're going to have to go through the proper channels to see him at the prison."

"We will let you know, of course, and we understand. Hopefully, we will get everything that we need from this meeting with him." I reply, and he nods before he turns around and walks back down the corridor.

It would seem to the outside observer that he has quite a blasé attitude and that considering the amount of security that we had to go through in order to get here, just leaving us to our own devices is very much a security risk. They'd be right if it weren't for the fact that there are cameras everywhere, with microphones that can pick up the quietest of sounds. There are no blind spots down here, and I'm absolutely confident in saying that because Peter was asked to double-check.

"I know you two are especially good at this, but would you mind if I spoke with him first?" Atlas asks us, a glint in his eye.

"Absolutely, have at it," Jynx agrees readily and then adds, "I haven't finished my coffee anyway."

"Plus, he might have some extreme feelings about seeing us again after the last time,

and we want him to talk, not be scared out of his mind. So maybe it's better that you talk to him anyway," I add with a smile.

"Thanks, guys," he grins, handing me his coffee, giving me a kiss on the cheek, and then walking through the door that leads to Mr Gauld's room.

His entire demeanor changes as he places his thumb on the scanner to gain access to the room. His presence becomes darker, if that's possible. He becomes more intimidating, harsh, and someone that I wouldn't want to mess with.

"It's always fascinated me how easily he can switch between friend and foe," Jynx comments as we let ourselves into the other room and through the one-way glass into the small and sparsely furnished other room.

We clearly did a number on him because he's propped up in bed with various casts and bandages adorning him. I mean, it makes sense. It wasn't that long ago at all that I gave him every single injury that was given to the guys when they were taken and tortured.

Looking at him now, I think it's a really good job that Atlas has gone in there and not Jynx or me. We really did a number on him.

Atlas

I am reasonably confident that I can get this guy to talk. When we decided we'd be coming here to talk to him, I asked Trick if he could get his file emailed to me so that I could go over it. Most of it was redacted, which is to be expected, especially since I needed it at such short notice. I did manage to get a couple of interesting things out of it though, and I've been through the interrogation training, as we all have, but I also got training from my uncle and from my father too, both of which had vastly different techniques.

This means that I have quite a wide range of skills that I can call on in order to get him talking.

If he's as difficult as Mr R said though, then I guess that we're going to have to rotate through the three of us until we wear him down enough to get him talking. The only issue with that is I have a feeling that he's not going to take seeing Ever and Jynx very well at all. Rage told us all about what they did to get him to talk, and we were all exceptionally proud, as well as wishing we'd been there ourselves.

Seeing the aftermath for myself now, as I look at Mr Gauld, I have to admit that the women scare me just a bit, and I'm incredibly glad that they're on our side. I'm also pleased that I came in first because I think he'd be screaming in fear if it was one of them, and understandably so.

I stay silent as he glances at me. He visibly gulps, but his mouth stays closed as he looks resigned to his fate. I pull up a chair close enough to his bedside that I can see his facial expression well enough to pick up any micro expressions that could give his true intentions away, but far enough away that he can't strike out and potentially hurt me.

Not that I think he's in any condition to move faster than a snail.

Is it wrong that seeing the results of Ever's brutality turns me on? Especially since it was in retaliation for what was done to our family, I don't think I give a fuck if it is.

I stay silent, watching him closely, seeing how he reacts to me being in his space. He stays strong for a short amount of time, resolutely staring at the wall instead of staring at me, but the longer I stay silently staring at him, the more he starts to fidget as his eyes begin to dart in my direction every few seconds, waiting for me to say something. I don't though. This method is making him twitchy and is putting him on edge, and that means that he's more likely to make a mistake and tell us something

that we need to know.

We sit there in silence for twenty minutes. I've perfected just staring silently at someone; I've found that you find out a lot about someone that way, and I'm pretty comfortable doing it.

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He, however, is clearly not used to it because he suddenly turns to face me entirely as I keep my expression blank, and he says, “I won’t tell you anything.”

“You will,” I reply, my words confident. Now that I’ve got him talking and he spoke first, I’m going to ask questions and watch him closely to see if any of them provoke a reaction in him and, therefore, a weak point that I can use to get him to talk to me and tell us what we need to know. The best way I have found to do this is to rapid-fire questions at someone so they don’t really have that long to think about their answers or how to reply.

Gauld scoffs, “No one else has been able to.”

“Now, that’s not strictly true, is it?” I reply, reminding him of the women and what they’re capable of as I watch shadows cross his eyes. Now that he’s feeling vulnerable again, I start my rapid-fire questions, “How did you first get in contact with Erebus? Did he contact you, or did you contact him? Were you all brought in individually or as a team? Did it make you feel good to betray the people who have done so much for you?”

That last question has him twitching ever so slightly, so I press a bit harder, “Everyone knows that the organisation does so much for its agents, and you’ve been with them for longer than most, and yet it was so easy for you to betray everyone. Put everyone’s lives at risk, friends as well. I know you have friends here, all of whom are feeling incredibly betrayed by you right now, and for what? What could you have possibly gained that was worth risking it all? It’s not like any of us are left wanting where money is concerned, so what was it?”

“Some things are worth more than money,” he replies quietly, although the hand that he can move is balled into a fist, showing his anger and frustration.

His reply surprises me. I honestly didn’t think I’d get him to reply already, but it’s good progress, and I’m pleased.

“I’ve got to say I agree with you there, which is why I don’t understand why you’d risk it all. I mean, your teammates are dead, and you’re never going to see your family again,” he starts shaking, and I continue, “It’s your family who I feel for; they’ll never truly know what happened to you, but I think I can ensure that they know you were disgraced. Your teammates deserved to die for the lives that they have put in danger, innocent lives. Yeah, they definitely deserved everything that happened to them and their names forever being muttered with disgust.”

“My family are dead.” He replies, his voice flat as he stares me dead in the eye, “So my actions have no effect on them whatsoever.”

I tilt my head as my eyes narrow. He really believes that, and if that’s true, then this just got tragic, “I wouldn’t call being on an all-expenses paid holiday for the last two months dead. As far as I know, they got back just before Christmas. We had agents check in on them to make sure that they knew nothing of your betrayal.”

“You’re lying,” he replies, his eyes wide with fear and his voice trembling.

“I’m not. What benefit would it have for me to lie to you?” I ask him.

“They’re alive?” he mutters.

“Yes.”

“No, no. He had them. He told all of us that those closest to us were now being held

by him and that if we didn't do what he wanted us to do, then they would die. When we failed to get the information to him, we knew that they were dead. He doesn't do second chances."

"He lied to you. They're safe; they all are. They were all sent on various different kinds of out-of-town holidays, and somehow all communications back and forth were blocked." I reply, having read it in his file. It had been tacked on the end as something to bring up at a later date, and from his reaction, I can assume that no one had. I knew that about his family. However, I made up that all of their families were okay. I don't know, but I am assuming that if he was lied to, they were as well, in order to guarantee their cooperation.

I would also be willing to bet that fake text messages and possibly even calls had been sent to his wife so that she didn't think anything was amiss. She could possibly even have been under the impression that he was out of town on a job and couldn't communicate. It's something that someone else needs to look into, and I'm hoping Jynx and Ever have that handled.

"We had no choice, we thought he had our families, and he has so much power and reach, he proved that so often that our hands were tied. He knew things about our pasts that he shouldn't have." He speaks seemingly to himself as the implications of what he's done begin to settle in.

I watch him, listening intently but staying silent, not wanting to spook him.

"Emma had a choice, she was just bitter though, wanted to do anything she could to hurt the organisation, and now she had been given the perfect opportunity." He pauses and then looks at me, looking truly haunted, "I went to a warehouse once. I had to drop off the flash drive, and for some reason, he didn't want it dropped at the usual inconspicuous locations that we usually dropped them at. Walking through the dimly lit corridor behind him, I could hear screams of pain, and when I couldn't keep

the shock off my face, he told me that he trained the best of the best to work for him and get him the information that he wanted. He trained spies and soldiers, all broken enough by him to remain loyal. It was disturbing.”

That sort of sounds like what Blake was trying to do with Ever, but on a larger scale, he wanted Ever as his weapon, Erberus seems to want an entire army at his disposal from what I understand.

“They’re there willingly?” I ask.

Surprising me further, he answers, “They may have been at one point, but I caught a glimpse at some of the security cameras, and there is no way that someone would be willing to put themselves through that torture.”

This is slightly more complicated than I thought. If he’s right, then there’s a real chance that there are more people there that need to be rescued and safely detained while their trauma is worked out. Fuck knows what they’ve been threatened with or told.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone? Get them some help. That’s what we do. That is exactly the sort of situation that we help with.”

“Fear,” he replies bluntly, “he can get to you wherever you are. He’d know, and I thought he had my family.”

“Where did you see them?” I ask, not bothering to focus on the other line of questioning.

“I can’t.”

“But you do know,” I reply, leaning forward slightly in my chair. “Where?”

“He’ll know I told you,” Gauld replies, the panic heavy in his tone.

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“It’s the only way that you could possibly begin to redeem yourself after everything that you and your team have done,” I reply bluntly.

He’s silent for a while as he thinks, and I let him. I let him truly think about what he’s done, the amount of people he’s put in danger, the fact that his family was never in any danger and that if he’d made one single different choice and told Mr R everything, as soon as he was aware, then this could’ve gone entirely different.

Finally, sounding defeated, he gives me two locations.

“The first one is where I remember the warehouse being. I would be very surprised if he’s still there. He moves around a lot, and after what happened at the retreat, he would’ve moved everything to a new location. The second is somewhere that I heard mentioned when I was in the warehouse, and Mr Hunt was not happy at all that I heard it.” He explains.

I nod, seeing that he shuts down completely, and I’m not going to get anything else out of him. That’s okay though. I’ve got more than enough, including two locations that we can now investigate and which will hopefully give us even more clues on the whereabouts of Rylie and help us to take down Erebus.

There’s no doubt that he needs to be taken out for once and for all. He’s too dangerous and too powerful.

Walking out of the room, I close the door behind me, making sure that it locks securely.

“Well, that was interesting,” Jynx says as she and Ever walk out of the door next to the room I just came out of.

“Tell me about it. He told me plenty of information to help us though,” I reply.

“You were impressive.” Ever compliments me, making me smile.

“Thank you, Princess. What he said about the families concerns me. I read in his file about his family, but I have no idea if any of his other team member's families are okay.” I explain.

“When did you read his file?” Ever asks curiously as we start the long journey back to Mr R’s office.

“Last night, I had Trick get it for me before bed.”

“Good thinking, dude,” Jynx comments with a smile.

“Yeah, that was a brilliant idea.” She then continues, “We spoke to Mr R, and he’s looking into it now. He’s also looking into the other team member's families and trying to see if they’re all safe like Gauld’s seem to be or if we need to rescue more people,” Ever tells me, a frown on her face.

“Good. Hopefully, it will be a similar situation to Gauld’s, and everyone is safe,” I reply with a frown, not liking the idea of civilians being involved. “Did you fill him in on the rest of the information we found too?”

Jynx nods, “Yeah, we told him that we’ll be looking into the two locations he gave us to see if there is any information there for us and if there’s any link to Rylie, too. So, we don't need to stop by his office before we leave.”

“Good. Alright, let's get home and fill the others in on what we found out. We need to work out where we go from here.” I reply thoughtfully.

“My men are already at your place; they said something about being bored at home,” Jynx replies, rolling her eyes.

“Sounds about right,” I chuckle.

Once we're in the car and driving away from headquarters, Ever pulls out her phone, and I look at her curiously.

“It's Raiden.” She tells me, without me having to ask her.

Ever

“Is everything okay?” I ask, without saying hello and putting it on speaker so that the others can hear what's being said, just in case it's an emergency because it will save time if I don't have to explain it again.

“Whoa, okay, Ever you need to calm down just a little bit,” Zemi's slightly amused voice comes over the phone. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry, yeah, I'm okay. How are you guys doing? How's Raiden and Saint?”

“We're fine,” Raiden's grumbling voice comes over the phone, sounding thoroughly fed up.

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“You sound about as fed up as Jensen is,” Atlas points out with an amused smile.

“Don’t, man, I’m going out of my fucking mind and everyone’s fussing,” Raiden replies with a huff.

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“Oh, boohoo, you’ve got people who love and care about you enough to look after you even when you're being a grumpy shit,” Atlas replies, his eyebrow raised and a smile playing around the edge of his lips.

There’s silence for a brief moment before loud laughter sounds from the other end of the phone.

“Yeah, okay, I hear you,” Raiden replies, with knowing amusement in his tone, “I’ll stop bitching quite as much as I have been.”

“Yeah fucking right,” Wilder scoffs.

“I’m doing great, and I’m being good,” Saint’s voice comes through the phone, sounding proud that he’s being good.

“You are being the perfect patient,” Zemi replies.

“And that’s why he is,” Zep chuckles as the others make sounds of agreement.

“Damn, I should’ve thought of that,” Raiden’s voice says quietly.

Jynx, Atty, and I share a look. We can’t see what’s going on, but it’s obvious that Raiden has just realised that he’ll get more of Zemi’s attention if he’s a good patient and stops trying to fight her.

“We tried telling you, man,” Wilder mutters.

“Anyway, I hate to interrupt whatever realisation that you lot have just come to, but did you call for another reason or just to check in?” I ask them, getting them all back on track.

“Oh shit, yeah. Sorry, I got distracted,” Zemi replies, which is hardly surprising because it’s her go-to.

“That’s alright, Zem,” I reply as Jynx grins and mouths I like her.

I knew she would, and I hope they get to meet properly soon.

Raiden takes over then, his voice back into business mode, “We were actually calling to let you know that we’ve had a development in Jensen’s case. As you know, we’re mostly doing background and research at the moment because we want to know as much as possible before we bring him in because the team is going to be down two members since Saint and I can’t do anything but be lookouts.”

“You’ll be back to it in no time, man,” Atlas interrupts, sensing the frustration in Raiden’s tone, “Trick especially is struggling with it.”

“I know, we’ve been messaging,” Raiden replies, and that makes me smile. “Anyway, as I was saying. It turns out that Jensen’s mom and sister aren’t his only victims. He has them spread across the United States over a decade, all with the same type of killing and no apparent previous knowledge of the victims. For some reason, because his killings are so widespread and mostly in small towns that police themselves, a link wasn’t found until we started looking into it.”

“Fucking hell,” I reply, “if you guys need any help bringing him in, especially since you are going to be two team members down, let me know.”

“We will. We’re getting close to locating him now and narrowing it down, and it

shouldn't take us too much longer. As soon as we know for certain, we will let you know and also let you know if we need any help." Raiden replies.

"I think we'll most likely take you up on that offer though," Zep adds, "none of us want this guy to escape, and I have a feeling that we're only going to get one shot at capturing him if we fuck it up I doubt that we'll be able to find him again. He's managed to escape notice and capture for nearly a decade."

"Yeah, he's right," Zemi adds, "we'll call you in as soon as we have the location."

"Great." I reply, "Keep in touch anyway. I'll let you know when we're at headquarters next and can train again, Zemi."

"Oh, yes, please. I've been practicing, and I think I've improved." She says excitedly.

"Bye guys," Zep chuckles as Zemi starts rambling.

"See you later," Atty grins as I hang up the phone.

"Are you going to tell Jensen?" Jynx asks from the back seat.

"Definitely, he needs to know, and he would never forgive us if we didn't tell him. Plus, the whole reason why they have taken on the case is because he understands that he couldn't handle it, so I don't think there will be a problem where that's concerned, even if a few of our team have to go and help out," I reply.

"I thought so, but I just wanted to check," she replies, and then her tone brightens as she adds, "I really like the sound of Zemi and her men. You're right; they're definitely her men, but even I can tell they are deeply in denial."

I grin, "I know, it's amusing; they just need a little push in the right direction.

They're all thinking it, they just aren't communicating and voicing how they feel with."

"Are you going to play matchmaker?" Atlas asks with his eyebrow raised again.

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I shrug and try to repress a smile as I reply, “I’m just going to give them a little nudge in the right direction.”

“And I’m going to help her while I’m around,” Jynx adds.

“Yes,” I say excitedly, “I was hoping you were going to say that.”

“Of course, I’m helping. It’s obvious enough from the phone call, and I love happy endings,” Jynx replies.

Atty can’t help but chuckle, “I agree that they need a little nudge. Just be careful though; they need to go at their own pace, or it won’t last.”

“Look at you being all smart and sensitive and shit,” Jynx muses, a teasing note in her voice.

“Don’t tell anyone. It’ll ruin my reputation,” he retorts with a smile.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she giggles, setting me off in the process.

The drive back home is full of banter and laughter. There isn’t any point in discussing what happened at headquarters because we need to talk it over with everyone, or we’ll just end up repeating ourselves.

“So, how did it go?” Trick asks as soon as we walk through the front door.

Before any of us can answer though, Rafe interrupts, “Food is on the table; we can

talk and eat.”

“I can definitely cope with that,” I agree, dumping my jacket and boots near the front door as we follow Rafe through to the dining room and greet everyone else.

Once Jynx and I are finished giving out kisses, we take our seats, our plates piled high with some kind of pasta dish that smells absolutely amazing; Trick looks at us to start explaining.

Since my mouth is full of food, Atlas takes over the explanation. He tells them everything that Gauld told him and about the two locations that he mentioned.

“Well, I know for certain that the second one you mentioned is actually in the same area as one of the locations that Rylie made a check-in from. One of the last of her check-in points, actually.” Peter says.

“Are you sure?” Jynx asks.

Pete nods, “I’m pretty sure, but I can double-check after we’ve eaten.”

“Good idea,” Trick replies. “So there’s potentially more innocents that need to be rescued?”

“There might be. Mr R has got people double-checking that the families of the other members of Gauld’s team are safe and that none of them are missing. He should know for sure by tomorrow afternoon,” I reply.

“Hopefully, they’re all fine. As bad as it sounds, Rylie is highly trained and will be able to cope with whatever this psycho can throw at her. Innocents won’t,” Jensen says, and there are sounds of agreement from everyone sitting at the table.

“If there is a link with one of the locations and Rylie, then we need to go and check it out. Gauld was pretty adamant that everything would have been closed down and moved, but we still need to go and make sure we can’t leave anything to chance,” Atlas adds.

“I agree. We’re working with so little information already that if we can find even a small piece of something to help us, then we need to take that chance, despite how slim a chance it is,” Rage adds, his eyebrows dipping slightly.

I don’t think any of us appreciate the lack of information that we’re working with on this case, especially since it’s personal.

“I think we need to check out both locations. Any information that we can find about Hunt is going to help us in finding Rylie and potentially any others that have been taken as well,” Rome suggests.

“Yes, we do. Let’s finish dinner and then find out where these locations are, and then we can go from there,” Trick suggests.

Dinner is rushed through after that, but I make a whispered promise to the leftover pasta that I will be coming back for it later. Of course, I’m not as quiet as I think I am, and Rafe ends up overhearing me and thinking it’s hilarious.

Pete manages to find the information that we’re all after quicker than I would’ve thought possible, and he brings the map up on the screen so he can point it out.

“So, the first location, which is the warehouse, is here,” Peter explains, pointing to the map and then adding, “It’s only about a forty-minute drive from one of Rylie’s check-in points, so we definitely need to look into that one as soon as possible.”

“Okay, what about the second location that he gave us?” Trick asks.

“That one I’m having trouble locating, and it’s going to take me a little bit longer,”
Pete tells us, tapping away on his keyboard and frowning.

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“That’s okay, man. No pressure. We’ve got a starting point, and that’s more than we had this morning,” Cash reminds him, making him smile in response, although he doesn’t look up from what he’s doing, and Ace moves from where he’s snuggling Jynx to look over his shoulder.

It doesn’t take very much time at all before they’re both thoroughly absorbed in what they’re doing and have lost the rest of us entirely.

Clearly deciding to leave him to it, Riot sits forward in his seat and says to the rest of us, “So, when are we going to check out the warehouse?”

“We’re going to Pete’s parents’ place for New Year’s Eve in four days,” Trick reminds us all, “so really, we need to go tomorrow.”

“It’s an eight-hour drive,” Luc tells us, his phone in his hand and having clearly looked up the location. “That’s roughly where it is. We’re going to have to find the exact location when we get there. It looks pretty isolated from what I can tell on the map, so it has probably been made to look abandoned or something like that.”

“That’s a good point.” Trick agrees.

“We can’t go tomorrow. We’re going to have to do it the day after,” Jensen suddenly interrupts.

“Why?” Cash asks, sounding confused.

“The three of us have our checkups tomorrow to see how we’re progressing and how

much longer you two are going to be in casts, and I'm going to have to wait to work out and build my strength again," Jensen explains.

"Oh shit, I completely forgot about that," I reply, chastising myself internally.

"You guys actually have to go back to the hospital for this appointment, don't you?" Riot asks.

"Yeah," Trick replies.

"It might be pushing it slightly, but we can go the day after tomorrow. It won't make too much difference," Mason points out.

"Someone should probably contact Lyric and the guys and see if they want to make the trip, too. They did say they wanted to stay in the loop," Riot adds.

Trick shakes his head, "Jonah, Dominic, and Ezra are all leaving tomorrow to go on one of the cases that we couldn't do. I know that the others would rather stay closer to home, even though they'll only be gone for a couple of days. I will send them a quick message to let them know what is going on just in case."

"Good idea, but you're right. The others won't want to go anywhere while they're split up. Lyric especially will want to stay close to home at the moment in case they need her." Jynx replies, sharing a look with me.

Lyric has shared with us both that her anxiety is pretty fucking bad at the moment, and all those worst-case scenario thoughts are gaining a little bit more traction than they usually would. Fortunately, her men are aware of it, and they're all working together to try and lessen her anxiety and help her as much as possible.

"Okay, so it's settled then. The three of us will go to our doctor appointments

tomorrow and, hopefully, return home with good news, and then we can go and check out the warehouse the day after.” Trick says and then looks over at Jynx and her men, “Does that work for you guys?”

Rip nods, “Yeah, that sounds good to us. It will actually give Jynx the chance to do something about the giant hole in the wall of the house that we just brought.”

Jynx narrows her eyes at him, “We don’t want that wall there anymore.”

Mal chuckles, “No, we don’t, but we were going to get it professionally taken down.”

Jynx scoffs, “Where’s the fun in that?”

“She has a point,” I agree with a smirk.

“Of course, you’d agree, Squirt,” Rome grins, calling me by my nickname that they gave me so long ago.

Before I can retort with my usual fuck off, Ace suddenly tunes in and says, “We aren’t going to be able to find the second location today. I’m going to hack into a few things, and Pete’s going to do the same, and hopefully, between the two of us, we’re going to be able to find it.”

Trick jumps straight back into work mode as he repeats himself, knowing that they both would have been too focused on what they were doing and the complexities of it to have been listening to our conversation, “That’s fine. We’re going to the first location the day after tomorrow now because of doctor appointments. So, you guys have an entire day to carry on working on it without interruption. Not only that but as we said before, there’s no rush. We’ve got at least one lead to focus on at the moment.”

“Great,” Ace says, and then turns back to Pete, “Do you want to come over to ours tomorrow, and we’ll try and see if we can work this out?”

Pete nods, “Yeah, that sounds good to me. Just text me and let me know when.”

“Will do,” Ace replies, still frowning at the screen.

“Alright, why don’t we call it a night,” Trick starts and then frowns as his phone starts ringing, interrupting him. He pulls out his phone, and his expression becomes even more severe as he puts it on speakerphone so that we can all hear and says, “Mr R, is everything okay?”

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“No, in a word. We’ve had a complication.”

“Another one?” Luc asks what we’re all thinking.

“Yes. As Atlas, Ever, and Jynx know, after they spoke to Gauld earlier today, he was being transported to one of our secure prisons, and if you needed any more information out of him, you’d have to question him from there.”

“Yes,” Atlas replies, suspicion already in his tone. We all know that this isn’t about to go anywhere good. Something has happened.

“Well, the transport van made it only a mile down the road before it was ambushed, and Gauld was taken out. He’s dead, and so are the agents that were traveling with him.”

“Fuck,” Rome hisses.

“How?” Rage demands.

“We don’t know. The only people that knew about the plan for him to leave today were your team, the agents traveling with him, and me,” Mr R’s reply is tight with tension.

“So, either the mole still has access to our organisation, or he had people lying in wait, which was incredibly risky.” Atlas points out.

“He’s already proven that he’s ballsy enough to pull something like that off, so it

would surprise me if he had people watching the place to see when Gauld came out. He clearly couldn't risk Gauld giving us any information, and I hope that the information he was worried about we already have," Trick adds.

"I've got agents scouring the area around headquarters up to two miles out," Mr R replies.

"Good, we can't risk it. He's already got more information than he should have." Riot replies.

"Gauld said that if he told us anything, Hunt would know, and he'd lose his life. He knew this was going to happen. Has his body been recovered?" Jynx asks, and I have no idea where she's going with it.

"Yes," Mr R replies, curiosity in his tone as he too senses that Jynx is going somewhere with her line of questioning.

"I assumed he just meant that Hunt would know because he'd just assume that he'd talk, but now, looking back, it was more sure than that, and once he told you he was fully resigned to his fate, not just fearful of it," Jynx starts to explain.

"You think he had a bug planted on him?" Ace asks, catching on before any of the rest of us can.

Jynx nods, "Is that possible? It would've had to have gone through pretty severe security measures."

Everyone is silent as Ace thinks the question over and then looks at Pete.

Pete shrugs, "What if it was activated by word and laid dormant until then? I've heard of a couple of prototypes, but nothing actually in production."

“That’s what I was thinking. Gauld told you Hunt’s name, right?” Ace asks Jynx and me.

I nod, “Yes, are you thinking that could’ve been the word that triggered it to activate?”

“He was already in the building then and had the majority of the security checks already performed,” Jensen points out.

Chapter Sixteen

“Exactly, so it could have gone undetected,” Ace replies.

“It’s an interesting theory for sure,” Riot replies, a deep frown on his face, “how are we going to know for certain that he was bugged?”

“A very thorough autopsy, which is why I asked if the body was recovered,” Jynx replies.

“Yes, it would also explain why they were still hanging around and hadn’t cleared off as soon as Gauld was dead. They wanted the body, but we arrived too quickly,” Mr Rising replies.

“It would add credibility to the theory,” Mason agrees.

“It also presents another security breach,” Trick points out grimly.

“Fortunately, even with it activated, he would have heard very little that could be a threat to anyone except that he gave information to us about Hunt’s locations.” Mr R reassures everyone.

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“Why didn’t he mention it?” Atlas asks, “He already told us the locations he knew, and he was being listened to. Why didn’t he carry it on and save himself?”

“It could have been for a number of reasons. He’d just learned his family was safe, and always had been, but that he was never going to see any of them again, that he’d betrayed his country and everyone at the agency for nothing. Maybe he felt he deserved his fate,” Rafe replies.

“That’s very true. We also don’t know whether it had any contingency in place for if it was triggered, that would have been worse than the quick death that he got,” Luc adds.

“I will get him to the autopsy as soon as possible, and I will let you know as soon as we find anything,” Mr R replies firmly, his voice full of determination.

“If you can recover the bug, or as much of it as possible, and get it to the tech team, then they should be able to develop something that will detect them, even while dormant, so they aren’t a threat in the future. I am happy to help with that.” Peter explains, and his knowledge and skill in this area always surprises me.

“They’re going to need your help. If you weren’t so adamant about staying where you are, and I didn’t think Ever would kill me, I would have had you working with the tech team from when you first arrived. I assume you know that we were watching you before Alaric and Atlas and all of that?”

Even though Mr R can't see, Peter nods and replies, “Yes, I was made aware of that, Sir.”

“That’s where we were going to put you. We were simply waiting for you to finish school, and if we hadn’t, who knows what would have happened.”

“Well, no offense, but I’m incredibly glad it worked out how it did. I found my family and was reunited with the love of my life, not to mention that I’ve gained some skills that I would never have if I were in the tech room permanently.”

Peter’s response makes me incredibly proud, and I blow him a kiss.

“Oh, I have no doubt that you are exactly where you belong, Pete,” Mr R replies fondly and then switches back to work mode, “so far, all of Gauld’s teammates’ families are safe. I’m just waiting for one more, and I imagine that it will be the same. I will keep you updated on everything, and I trust that you will do the same.”

“We will, Sir,” Trick replies and then promptly hangs up.

“I like him,” Rip says.

“He’s a good man and good to work for,” I reply with a smile.

“This bug possibility complicates things a little bit more,” Riot says, what we’re all thinking.

“Yes, but it might also give us more answers; only three or four people are making these kinds of prototypes, so if we can identify who made it, we can get one step closer to finding Hunt,” Ace explains.

“He is so insanely well connected,” Jynx mutters, “first with the poison, and now with this rare tech, he’s got more money than fucking god. None of these things are cheap, and these are just the things that we know about. Fuck knows what else he could have up his sleeves. It makes him incredibly dangerous on so many levels.”

“You’re right. We need to approach this with so much caution. I will not lose anyone to this man, and he needs to be taken down so that he is no longer able to hurt or manipulate anyone else.” Rage replies.

“The thing is, the organisation is top secret. Only a few high-ups in the government know that it exists, so there is a chance that he’s manipulated someone incredibly high up to spill secrets, which means there is a lot more at risk than just the organisation and its members.” Rome gives us another view of the situation.

“Fucking hell,” I curse as the severity of the potential situation starts to unravel.

“We need to take this fucker out as quickly and efficiently as possible. I think that needs to become our number one priority,” Atlas says, his eyes on me, watching how I’ll react.

“I agree, but we still do everything in our power to save Rylie and bring her home in one piece,” I reply firmly.

“Of course,” Trick replies while everyone else nods.

We’re all silent for a moment before springing back into action.

“Right, I’m going to head home and see if I can work on this,” Peter says, standing up.

“Yeah, I want to get home and get started as well. The sooner we can find that second location, the better.” Ace adds.

“I guess that’s our cue to get going,” Jynx smiles, coming over to me as I stand up and giving me a tight hug.

“Let us know how it goes tomorrow and when we plan to leave the next day,” Rome says.

“We will. Thanks, guys,” Trick replies as we say goodbye to them. "Jonah got back to me, and as we thought, they're going to sit this one out."

Jynx nods, not looking surprised at all as she replies, "Thought so, see you guys."

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Once they're all gone, I turn to the others, "Now that I've been reminded, I remember that your appointments were quite early tomorrow because you all wanted to get them over and done with. So, everyone needs an early night tonight, and I'll drive you."

"Sounds good to me," Trick replies without a fight and kisses me gently.

After a quick tidy-up, we all head up to bed, and as Luc walks past me, I grab him and pull him toward my room instead. I want cuddles—specifically, Luc cuddles and naked time, always naked time.

"Stay with me tonight?" I ask him as we step into my room.

"You don't need to ask me twice," he grins, "I thought that I'd come with you tomorrow if that's okay? It's an organisation hospital, so I should be able to check out their updated files if the guys are okay with it, so we know for sure how they're healing."

I nod as I start to head toward the bathroom, stripping my clothes as I go, "I thought you were anyway." When he doesn't reply, I look over my shoulder to him and find him staring at my now naked ass, his shirt already in a puddle on the floor, and his eyes heated, "Want to join me?"

He doesn't even bother replying to me and simply follows me to the bathroom. While I'm turning on the water and stepping underneath the spray, he finishes stripping out of his jeans and steps in behind me. His arms immediately wrap around me, his hard dick pressing against my ass as his lips press kisses from my shoulder all the way up my neck as I tip my head to the side to give him better access.

One of his hands moves up my side, leaving goosebumps in its wake despite the heat of the water pounding down on the both of us. His fingers strum my nipple, causing me to gasp as I push my ass back, grinding against his dick as he growls and nips my neck, his other hand moving across my stomach and parting my folds, his fingers instinctively finding my clit, he knows my body as well as he knows his own by this point. Reaching behind me, I let my nails drag down his stomach, causing his hips to thrust before I wrap my hand around his dick and move it up and down, changing the pressure as I do, knowing that he likes it.

My whole body is tight with need, and I want him inside me now. Bending forward, I let go of his dick and push my ass back, and he gets the hint, his fingers still expertly playing my clit, pushing me closer and closer to the edge. Lining himself up at my entrance, he painstakingly slowly moves inside me, his hands moving to my hips as he holds me in place, preventing me from speeding up. Once he's fully settled inside me, my walls clenching around him in anticipation, he leans forward, kissing my back.

"I love you, Ever," his husky voice growls out, sending another wave of pleasure through me.

His fingers move back to my clit as his other hand grips my hip and finally moves, pulling almost all the way out before he slams back inside me, his fingers picking up speed as he moves. The combination of sensations has my orgasm tearing through me with such delicious force that I call out Luc's name. His thrusts increase, dragging out my orgasm as I impossibly feel another one start to build as Luc changes his angle, his hands gripping my hips with almost bruising pressure, which is just adding to my building orgasm. It only takes a few more thrusts before I'm flying over the edge again, and his groans of pleasure mix with mine as he quickly follows, his thrusts slowing.

My whole body feels like jelly, and I'm glad I have my hands pressing against the

shower wall because I have no idea if I would still be standing if they weren't. Luc chuckles huskily, already guessing my predicament as he helps me stand. Once upright, I turn around and smile up at him.

"I love you too," I say, replying to what he said earlier.

He grins and then sweeps some wet hair off my cheek, "Let's finish showering quickly so we can go and snuggle in bed. I'm tired."

"Me too," I agree.

We make quick work of washing and then drying off, although neither one of us bother to put any pyjamas or even underwear on, choosing to just get under the covers. We instantly gravitate toward each other as I lay my head on Luc's chest, and he wraps his arm around me, his other hand holding my hand on his chest.

It takes very little time before I'm drifting off into blissful sleep, the events of the day not even trying to ruin the peace.

Trick

Ever ensured that we left with plenty of time to get to the hospital for our checkups today, and somehow, without me even telling her, she seemed to know that I was nervous. I don't like hospitals; I never have, but I've seen far too many of my family members hooked up to machines, and I just don't like it. There was a very real possibility that the last time that we were in that hospital when we walked out, we'd be walking out without Jensen. I honestly think that it's just out of pure stubbornness that he's still alive and healing as quickly as he is.

“Are you okay?” Ever asks me, her hand threading through mine. She already knows I’m not just because of how well she knows me.

“It’s going back to the hospital, isn’t it?” Luc asks, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

I nod and then explain, as I thought everyone in the car agrees with me and says that they’re feeling the same.

“Just remember, we will all be walking back out of those doors. None of you have had any complications. All of you are healing incredibly well.” Ever reminds us with a smile.

Somehow, her simple reassurance works to ease some of my tension, and I pull her closer to me. As she looks up at me with a soft and understanding smile, I lower my head and brush my lips against hers.

“I love you,” I tell her quietly.

Her smile is radiant as it always is when one of us tells us we love her, like she can’t quite believe that we love her, even after all this time.

“I love you too,” she replies and then turns to look at the others as we pull into a parking space at the hospital. “Come on, let’s get this over with, and then we can head home.”

“Good idea,” Cash replies from the other side of Ever as he pulls the handle and gets out.

I gather my crutches, which I am truly beginning to hate, but they are a necessary evil, so it's tough, really.

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Heading inside, we're instantly directed to our various appointments since this is an organisation hospital, and there are no long waits or anything else.

"I'm going to head with Jensen and Ever to make sure that he's healing as he should, and then, if it's okay with you guys I want to check your files, too?" Luc says as we make our way down the sterile hallway to the rooms we've been told to go to.

"Yeah, that's good with me." Cash replies with a shrug, really not that bothered by it.

"I'd actually feel better if you looked over it, so go for it," I add.

After that, Ever makes sure that Cash and I are both okay and that we don't need her to come with us, and then once we've reassured her, she leaves with Jensen.

Cash is in the room next to mine, and I greet the doctor warmly when I walk into my room, recognising him from when we were, "Hey Doc, how're you?"

"Isn't that supposed to be my line," he chuckles, and I shrug with a grin as I take a seat, "I'm good. What we're going to do today is give you another x-ray to ensure that your leg is healing how it should be. It is a fairly simple break, so I don't see any reason why it shouldn't be. Then, we'll talk about your pain management and make sure that your other injuries are all healing how they should. Does that sound okay?"

I nod, "Yep. Sounds good to me. Let's get this done."

Thankfully, the doctor works quickly, and I have to admit that I find the whole situation a lot easier than I thought I would. Before long, I'm sitting in the waiting

room where I told the others I'd meet them, feeling optimistic. Thanks to how well it's healing, I should only need to keep the cast on for four more weeks, and then it will just be a case of building up strength in it again.

I can deal with that.

“Hey, what did the doctor say?” Cash asks as he walks into the room with a smile.

“Four more weeks, and then I can get it off,” I grin.

“Me too,” Cash replies with a giant smile. He hates it as much as I do. None of us were made to take it easy and sit idly.

“Thank fuck.” I reply and then add, “You know we probably won’t be able to help with extracting Rylie. Even if it takes that long to find her, we will have only just gotten out of casts.”

“I know, man,” Cash replies, “it sucks, but it is what it is. They will have plenty of backup, and we can stay in contact with them the whole time.”

“I just hate it,” I reply, knowing that he’s right.

“Me too,” he adds.

Thankfully, our conversation is interrupted as a grinning Jensen practically bounds into the room, looking far more energetic than I have seen him since he got injured.

“I take it it’s good news then?” I ask him with a smirk as I stand up and grab my crutches. I am thoroughly ready to get out of here. It may not have been as bad as I thought it was going to be, but I still don’t want to hang around. The others must feel the same because they all follow me down the hallway, Ever and Luc already waiting

outside of the door.

“Yep,” Jensen’s smile is infectious, “Doc said I can start working out.”

Luc rolls his eyes, “And that’s why I went with you. He did not say that you could start working out. He said that you could start walking and then slowly build up to running when you feel ready, but absolutely no sparring.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” Jensen retorts, his lips twitching as we all get back into the car.

“What about you two?” Ever asks us as we start to head back home.

“Didn’t Luc look in our files?” I ask her with a slight frown.

“He did, but you guys didn’t give me permission, so I wanted to wait until you told me,” she explains.

“We honestly don’t mind; he could’ve told you,” Cash tells her with a soft smile, echoing what I was going to say.

“I know, but just in case, I wanted to wait for you guys to tell me, and besides, when Luc is in the zone, he tends to start talking in all this medical jargon that I can’t understand anyway.” She replies.

“Hey, I do not,” Luc exclaims from the driving seat.

“You totally do, man,” Jensen chuckles.

“Don’t worry, I find it super sexy. I just don’t understand it,” Ever reassures him, making him smile, and the rest of us burst out laughing.

Chapter Seventeen

Trick

Once we've stopped laughing, Cash and I quickly fill her in on what the doctor said to each of us, and she smiles happily.

"I'm so glad it's not for too much longer," she replies, and then her face becomes stern, "just remember, you need to take it easy still. You're healing, and if you push it too much now, they might decide that you can't have your casts off in four weeks, and then you'll have to keep them on for longer."

"Why are you mostly only looking at me?" I ask her, knowing full well that out of the three of us, I've been the most difficult when it comes to resting and healing.

She raises an eyebrow and gives a look that says, 'Are you fucking kidding me?' before she replies, "You know exactly why. Cash is a good patient; even Jensen has been better behaved than you, and he can't sit still in any situation."

I try to hold back my smile as I reply, "I know. I promise I will be good. There is no way that I want to risk not having the cast off in four weeks and instead having to wait longer."

"Good," she smiles. Becoming serious again, she turns her attention to Jensen, whose smirk instantly falls as he anticipates what she's going to say, "The doctor said that you can start walking, but it's snowing still, so please for the love of everything, use the treadmill in the gym, if we have to come to rescue your ass because you've gotten

stuck in the snow, I will be so mad.”

Jensen pouts momentarily but then grins, “You got it, Angel. I’m just happy that I don’t have to stay as still anymore.”

After that, the conversation switches gears, and we just chat for the rest of the journey. We all received good news today and although we know we’re most likely going to have to take a step back with the actual extraction of Rylie, we can still be there and we can support our family in other ways. It does make me feel better that we have Jynx and her men with us on this one. They’re the perfect backup and family, so they’ll protect each other.

Everyone at home is happy for us, and we spend the rest of the day making plans for what’s going to happen tomorrow and making sure that everyone is on the same page. Ace and Pete have been working all day on the second location, and although they think they’re closer, they still don’t know where it is. I have every faith that they’re going to figure it out though. Between them, their experience and knowledge is astronomical.

We’ve just finished filling all of the others in on what the doctors said, and Rafe is dishing up dinner while Jensen has disappeared, no doubt to start working out already when my phone goes off, and I glance down at the screen and see an update message from Mr R.

"Guy's Mr R just messaged," I announce, and when I'm sure I've got all their attention, I continue, "he said that the other family was safe as expected and that after an extremely thorough autopsy, they did find a small chip in Gauld. The tech team has deactivated it, and they're now trying to work on a way to block the signal and detect them in the future. They want Pete as soon as he's available."

"That's not surprising," Ever says, pulling out her phone, "I'll send him a message

now and get him to tell Jynx and the others too, then I'll go down and tell Jensen."

"Good idea," I reply with a smile.

"Dinner will be ready in ten," Rafe announces, effectively ending the conversation as everyone starts to help lay the table.

"Hey, Sweetheart," I greet Ever as she lets herself into my room and effectively distracts me from my thoughts.

My eyes drag over her body; she's only wearing a tiny pair of lace underwear; she puts her hands on her hips and gazes at me as she nibbles her lip and drives me fucking mad.

"I really miss you." She says, and I know she doesn't mean that she hasn't seen me, she has a look in her eyes.

"Fuck I've missed you too," I reply, not even trying to hide my desire for her as I move the covers and add, "Come here?"

She takes a step and then pauses, her face becoming stern, which honestly just turns me on more, "If I come over there, I'm on top. You need to be careful of your leg, and if it hurts at any point, we stop, got it?"

I nod, looking like a damn bobblehead in my enthusiasm, "I promise, now get your sexy fucking ass over here."

"Yes sir," she replies, her voice husky as she saunters over to me, taking her time and slipping her fingers into the sides of her underwear as she works them down her hips

until she's standing at the edge of the bed, and gazing down at me, looking stunning and beautiful, just fucking perfect.

Fortunately, I sleep naked, so there's no awkward undressing trying to free my dick, which would be awkward because of the cast.

I reach for her, and she swings her leg over me so that she's straddling me, her hands on my chest, her nails making small half-moon indents that make me shudder. She keeps her hips raised, as my hands run over her ass, and up her back, one of them threading into her hair, and I use the grip to pull her face down to mine, my tongue immediately demands access, and she easily allows it.

I can't really move, which is going to be complicated. I don't particularly like staying in one position, but with my leg how it is, I don't really have much choice. My hands work, though. As her lips mold against mine and she lowers her hips grinding against my already hard as steel dick and making me groan with pleasure, I allow one of my hands to brush against her boob before I move my fingers to roll and pinch her nipple. I know the pressure she likes; I know how far to take that pain pleasure, and her hips buck against mine as I pluck and pinch her nipple.

"Now, Trick," she murmurs huskily against my lips.

I'd typically insist on playing for just a bit longer, making her fall apart at least once before I feel her walls clench around my dick, but if she wants me inside her now, then that's what she'll get.

She lifts her hips as I line myself up, and then she pulls away from my lips, her eyes on mine as she slowly lowers herself. I start to raise my hips to meet her, and she stops moving entirely.

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“Don’t move, Trick,” she demands. “Understood?”

My desire shoots through the roof as I nod and stop moving. Usually, it's me giving the orders, and I'm surprised to find that I like this dynamic.

She smiles seductively as she continues to lower herself until I'm fully sheathed inside her. Her walls clench, and I groan. My hands gripping her ass as she leans forward and kisses me, slowly starting to rock her hips. It feels fucking fantastic, and I use my grip on her ass to speed her up, wondering if she's going to stop me again, and getting a thrill run through me when I think she might.

She pulls back and arches an eyebrow at me, and I can't help but smirk as she sits up, giving me a perfect view of her boobs, before she lifts herself almost completely off me and then slams back down, rocking her hips twice and then repeating the motion.

She's driving me fucking wild.

Her eyes close as she picks up the pace, and I feel my orgasm build as she alternates between rocking her and lifting so that my dick almost springs free before she takes me again. It's so fucking hard to stay still, but I'm so close and I know she is, I don't want to do anything that could risk making her stop.

One of my hands travels up her side, brushes her breast, and then rolls her nipple, making her hips grind against me and her pussy clench. Reaching down between us, I part her folds and strum her clit.

She immediately falls apart, her nails digging into my chest as she cries out her

release, she looks so fucking beautiful right now, and I explode, my orgasm quickly following hers as we both ride out the aftershocks before she collapses on top of me. I run my hand up and down her back as my other one sweeps the hair off her forehead, and I kiss her head, making her smile as she tilts her head up so I can kiss her.

“Are you okay?” she asks me.

I nod, “More than okay.”

“You know what I mean,” she replies, as she sits up and climbs off me, lying down next to me instead as she props herself up on one elbow and raises her eyebrow, looking at me expectantly.

I answer her honestly because she knows me well enough to know if I’m not being completely honest with her, “My leg twinges a bit, but it’s not bad, nothing I can’t handle, and it's well fucking worth it.”

She frowns slightly but replies, “Good, I’m glad. I really fucking missed you.”

“I missed you too,” I reply, and then add, “come here, I want cuddles now.”

She smiles as she settles back down on my chest, and her fingers start to draw patterns. It’s soothing. I find my eyes feeling heavy before I drift off into the best sleep I’ve had since I was injured.

Ever

We got up stupidly fucking early this morning in order to make it to the warehouse, which is the first location that Gauld gave us. My men know me extremely well

though, because they not only had a coffee ready and waiting for me when I finally peeled myself out of Trick's bed, but they also had one in a travel mug ready for the journey.

It made me feel a bit better about my silent grumpy self when the guys called Rome to check that they had left and Jynx was grumbling in the background about the time and that it was an ungodly hour. At least it's not just me who struggles with the early mornings.

We're pretty far into our journey before I wake up enough to ask, "So, what exactly is the plan?"

"And she's awake," Jensen jokes, prompting me to stick my middle finger up at him, which only makes his smile widen as he blows me a kiss.

"Well, on the off chance that there are people there, those that are able will head in and clear the building, and then, if it's all clear, they will call the others in. We'll try and find anything that could help us, find Hunt, and find Rylie." Trick replies, although a smile plays around the edge of his lips thanks to Jensen's comment.

"Sounds good to me," I reply. I am pleased that Trick is being smart about the situation despite how difficult I know it is for him to send us into danger and not be there with us.

We travel for a while longer, driving through a large town before I'm surprised to see that we start to head down quieter roads. There are barns and workshops here and there, but they're spread pretty far apart. Eventually, Atlas pulls over, Rome pulling their car up behind us, and we all start to get out.

"The warehouse is just around this corner, I am reasonably sure that it's empty. Ace and I had a brief look over the site using a couple of satellites yesterday, but we can't

be entirely sure, hence why we thought it would be safer for us to park here and go on foot.” Peter explains as we all gather around our vehicles, making sure that we’re all suitably armed.

I share a grin with Jynx, I love this part of the job, the unknown and the rush of danger. We could be walking into anything, there could be a whole building of highly trained people ready to take us out, waiting for us just around the corner, and call me crazy, but I fucking love that.

“We’ll wait here. If you need backup, call us in; we aren’t completely useless,” Jensen practically orders, his face serious for a change, and he’s bouncing on his toes, clearly struggling with being left behind.

“Don’t worry, dude, we will,” Ace tells him, for once not teasing since he knows how hard this is for him. Ace’s eyes suddenly light up, “Why don’t we have you connected on the phone? That way, you can listen to everything that’s happening. Unless someone remembered to bring earpieces.”

“No, it was on my list, but I completely forgot. I guess we’re going to have to do this the old-school way,” Rafe replies, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I’ll ring Trick,” Atlas offers, pulling out his phone, dialing, and then putting it back in his pocket when Trick picks up.

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“We’ll let you know when it’s safe to drive around,” Rome tells Cash, Trick, and Jensen, who all nod, their faces grim.

“Let’s go,” Rage orders, and we all head off in the direction that Peter points.

Fortunately, it really isn’t that far, but as soon as the building comes into sight, we all pull our weapons, readying them just in case we need them. It quickly becomes apparent that we’re not going to though.

It looks like no one has been here for years. There are weeds growing everywhere brambles climbing up the cracking walls of the building. The windows are filthy and, in most cases, broken. The roof is even sagging dangerously in one corner.

“I don’t think we’re going to need our guns,” Jynx comments, and then looks at Ace and Pete, “are you guys sure this is the right place? It looks abandoned.”

Ace frowns but replies, “It’s where that Gauld guy said it would be, so yeah I’m sure. Let’s check the inside out.”

“Keep your weapons drawn; we already know that Hunt likes to pull tricks, and he was here, so there’s a chance that he’s got someone still here guarding it,” Atlas warns, and we all nod in agreement as we head toward the only door that is visible on this side of the building.

“It’s not even padlocked,” Luc frowns as Malachi checks the handle, and it easily opens.

We all share a look as Mal pulls the door open, and Rome and Atlas rush in with their weapons drawn as they check the inside, the rest of us following behind him.

The place is empty; that much is obvious, but that's not what has us all gaping in shock.

"Well, I didn't fucking expect that," Pete mutters, looking around with wide eyes.

It's fucking spotless, and I don't just mean it's been swept clean, which in itself would be a direct contrast to the practically derelict exterior. I mean, the entire space, walls, ceiling, floor, everything is painted white and so freaking clean that I'd be challenged to find even a speck of dirt. At the very end of the room, there is a painted white staircase leading toward a second level that I'm assuming holds an office, there are windows lining the walls and it seems reasonably big, but we can't see anything from here. It is the only other door in the place apart from the one that we walked through.

"Well, I doubt that we're going to find anything in here, but it's still a big space, so everyone split up and see what you can find," Atlas orders everyone, and then pulls out his phone, adding, "if you aren't already, you guys can make your way here it's safe."

"Thanks, dude," Jensen says as he walks through the door with a smile, answering what Atlas has said on the phone.

I roll my eyes as I look at the three of them, "Seriously? You couldn't even wait until we had officially given you the all-clear?"

"Of course, they couldn't," Mason smirks.

Cash just shrugs and gives me one of his most charming smiles while the other two

stand there looking innocent.

“I’m going to check out the second floor,” I say.

“I’ll come too,” Peter adds, “I’m hoping there will be something in there that could help us because I really don’t think we’re going to find anything down here.”

“I’m just nosey. I want to come,” Jynx adds, “and I agree. I don’t think there’s anything here, but good luck, guys!”

The guys all grumble as they split up to look around thoroughly too, even pushing on the walls in case there are any pressure-point doors like the ones we have at home. We leave them to it as we head up the stairs, and I note that whoever used this place must have had those sterile boot things to go over their shoes because there isn’t even any dirt on the stairs, and you’d expect there to be a small amount at least.

I mean, what the fuck were they doing in here, that meant that they had to have this level of clean?

“Hey guys!” Riot calls from below just as we reach the top, and I look over the railing. “There are some security cameras dotted around the room; they’re small and painted white, so they aren’t obvious at first.”

“They’re on a closed circuit, so there should be a control room somewhere,” Ace points out from where he’s standing with the others and glances at the door behind us.

“Got it,” Peter replies.

Nodding, I follow Pete up the rest of the stairs and through the door that is also unlocked, which doesn’t bode well for our hope that we’ll find something to help us in here.

“Oh, this is the control room for the cameras,” Pete exclaims, sounding surprised, which I have to admit I am too.

“It’s concerning me that there is no security in this place even though it's obvious that something is going on purely from the fact that the inside is painted white,” Jynx adds, looking around the room with a concerned frown.

“Yeah, I’m getting a weird feeling,” I agree, and then add, “Pete, do you think you can find anything out from the cameras?”

“I’ll be surprised if they haven’t wiped the entire system, but I’ll give it a go.” He pulls out a USB stick that he always seems to carry on him and then sits down in front of the screens as he boots it up and then sticks the USB in the right slot, pressing a few buttons and tapping away before he does anything else.

Chapter Eighteen

“What are you doing?” Jynx asks curiously.

“I’m copying the entire computer system onto my USB stick so that we have it, just in case there’s a failsafe in place and the system deletes anything that might have been useful on it,” Pete explains as he then carries on typing.

“Smart,” Jynx replies.

“Huh,” Peter exclaims as he clicks on a few more things.

“Did you guys find anything?” Rip asks from behind us, and I turn to see a few of the others coming into the room.

“I think so,” Pete says, “the whole system is completely cleared. There’s nothing on it, not even any of the preloaded programs that all computers come with, apart from this one file.”

“It could be a virus, or trigger some sort of security measures?” Ace suggests as Jynx, and I move out of the way to allow Ace to get closer to the computer.

Atlas turns to Jensen, “Tell Trick to make his way out of here, just in case the place gets locked down or something.”

Jensen turns to leave the room, but before he does, I ask Peter, “Wait, didn’t you copy the entire thing onto your USB?”

“Yeah,” Pete replies.

“Smart move man,” Ace compliments, “that means that we don’t need to risk triggering any security measures and can just do it at home, on one of our secured laptops. Even if there’s a tracker that’s somehow been transferred, our secured laptops will be safe.”

“Thank fuck for that,” Riot comments from behind, “I really thought we were going to have to evacuate the building or some shit.”

“Erm, guys,” Trick calls up, trying to sound calm, but the edge of panic in his voice instantly has us alert and moving toward the door as Pete stands up, too. “We need to get out of here now.”

“Why?” Atlas questions as we start moving down the stairs and can’t see anything different.

Well, at least I can’t.

Rome’s in front of me and suddenly whistles, “Oh okay, yeah, we need to get out of here. Come on, guys, let’s move.”

It’s not until we get to the bottom of the stairs that I can see the open panel close to the floor, next to where Trick is standing. What’s inside the tiny space is what has me concerned; there’s no doubt in my mind that it’s a bomb, and the little teal blue numbers counting down are also a dead giveaway.

And even if we didn’t know already, Ace’s exclamation of, “Ooo, now that’s a fucking fancy bomb.”

“Can you disable it?” Jynx asks him seriously.

We all watch as he bends down and pulls a little tool set out of his pocket; before he can even touch it though, the numbers suddenly drop, so when we had five minutes before, it's now dropped to two. That can't be good.

“Out now,” Ace exclaims, and that’s enough for the rest of us as we all rush for the door. We keep running, Trick keeping up surprisingly fucking well as we duck behind the SUV that the guys parked far enough away that we deem it a safe space.

My heart is pounding as we all crouch behind it, but nothing happens; we share a look and then start to stand up, looking back at the building.

Ace shrugs and grins, “Sorry, guys, I might have . . .”

Boom!

We’re thrown to the floor as the heat of the explosion hits us, the car rocking as the ground shakes, and my hearing goes momentarily thanks to the loud and unexpected sound. As soon as everything stills, I look around at the others, doing a headcount and checking that they’re all okay. I’m immediately filled with relief when everyone seems to be okay, and I release another breath when I realise that Trick hadn’t bothered to get up from the first time, which means he wasn’t thrown to the floor and didn’t potentially damage himself further.

“Is everyone okay?” he demands.

Everyone sounds off that they’re good as we all slowly start to stand, and Atlas and Rage help Trick up.

“What the fuck,” Riot questions staring at the smoldering mess in front of us. The explosion was massive but it was clearly intended to burn quickly before burning out completely.

“We were being watched,” Ace’s words send a shiver of apprehension down my spine.

“How do you know?” Rage asks.

“The numbers didn’t drop down until I pulled out my kit and approached it. I wouldn’t be surprised if we tripped a silent alarm of some sort when we entered the building, which started the countdown on the bomb. I must have been wrong about the cameras being on a closed circuit.” Ace exclaims.

“But why let us walk out? If he could make the bomb go off at any time, then why not just let you try and mess with it and then set it off, getting rid of us?” Rafe asks.

“Dramatic effect? Maybe arrogance, just because he can and he wants us to know that he can?” Ace suggests.

“He’s playing with us,” Rip frowns, crossing his tattooed arms over his chest.

“Yes, he is,” Ace agrees.

“Fuck,” I reply eloquently. I really don’t like how smart this guy appears to be.

“Can you tell us anything about the bomb?” Trick asks, “I know you didn’t see it for very long or even much of it, but anything will help at the moment.”

“I can, but I suggest we get out of here now and I’ll call you from the car, that was a big fucking explosion and the emergency services are going to be here any fucking minute,” Ace says, urgency running through his tone.

“Fuck, yeah, okay. Is the car alright to drive?” Cash asks suddenly, and we all move

to the other side of the car to check it out.

“Well, it will drive, but we may never get the paintwork back to what it was,” Jensen grimaces slightly.

“Everyone get in. Rome, call me from the car, I want to know you're back safe and that you aren't being followed,” Trick orders as everyone does what they're told, urgency riding us hard now.

It's a tense few minutes while we drive away from the smouldering building in the opposite direction of the town that we originally came through. We're going to have to go around it so that we don't draw any extra attention to ourselves.

We can't risk going through the town, with our car damaged, it would throw far too much suspicion our way and although Mr R will deal with it and we wouldn't actually be held regardless of how much evidence they have against us, it's not something that we want to deal with now and more than that it will create a delay that we can't afford right now.

While driving, I take a minute to look over everyone, making sure they're all okay, and I pay particular attention to Cash, Trick, and Jensen.

“Is everyone okay?” I ask, just to make sure.

“Yeah, I think so,” Atlas replies, doing the same as me and looking everyone over.

Luc narrows his eyes on the already injured three, “What about you three?”

“I'm good. I was still down when it went off,” Trick replies.

“Me too,” Cash replies.

“My hand is a bit painful,” Jensen replies, “but I don’t think I did any more damage; I just knocked it.”

Luc nods, “I’ll have a proper look when we get home.”

“Thanks, man,” Jensen smiles.

It takes a further five minutes, and a long five minutes at that, before we all start to relax slightly, and Rome calls us from the other car.

“Are you guys safe?” He asks immediately.

“Yeah, we’re all good, are you guys?” Trick asks although it seems to be a moot point since they’re calling us and asking if we’re okay in the first place.

“We’re good, I don’t think we’re that far behind you,” Rip replies.

“Good, I really don’t want to be dealing with normal law enforcement and their egos when they realise we’ve got higher clearance than they do. They never take it very well,” Atlas replies.

“Also, we haven’t technically got clearance,” Jynx points out.

“Or fancy badges that we can flash,” Ace adds. “Although, if I got a good enough look at yours, I probably could replicate them well enough.”

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“No,” Rome replies sternly before anyone else can tell Ace not to, “we’re not putting Ever and the guys at risk because everyone will know that’s where we got access to the original badge.”

“I know,” Ace replies, sounding somewhat offended, “I wouldn’t really, I was merely pointing out that I could.”

“Back to your original point, though, if that situation ever arises, we can vouch for you. Not only that, but Mr R will make sure that you don’t actually get charged since you’re working with us,” Riot tells them.

“That’s definitely good to know,” Malachi replies, sounding slightly relieved, “I don’t know what I thought would happen in that situation or even if it crossed my mind to be worried about it, but it’s definitely good to know.”

“We probably should’ve mentioned it before,” Cash replies.

“Sorry to interrupt, guys, but I just wanted to make sure that you were all okay with me checking out what’s on this USB stick now?” Pete asks, and then adds, “We’ve got a long drive ahead of us, and the sooner I can find out what’s on it, the better.”

“Have you got a properly secured laptop with you?” Ace asks before any of us can say anything.

“Yes, I always bring one with me on jobs just in case, you never know when you might need one.”

“Too true, dude,” Ace replies, sounding impressed, and I actually love the friendship that they have.

Peter looks at Trick, waiting for him to answer, and Trick smiles, “I don’t see why not. Have at it.”

“Call us if you find anything. I want to listen to my road trip tunes,” Jynx suddenly says from the other car, and we all burst into laughter as we hear her guys groan as she hangs up the phone.

The drive home is a bit more relaxed than the drive here was and we stop a few times for food, road trip snacks, coffee, and then consequently bathroom breaks when the amount of coffee we drink makes us need to pee, the upside of stopping so often is that we get to switch drivers reasonably regularly, so no one gets overly tired or grumpy.

We’re nearly home when Pete suddenly sits up straight and exclaims excitedly, which, to be honest, makes those of us who are sleeping or almost asleep jump out of our skin.

Pete winces as he looks around the car and then says, “I’m into the file.”

“Nice work, man, I’ll call the other car,” Trick replies.

Once we’re connected, Peter starts talking, “Okay, so you know there was only one file?”

“Yeah,” Rage replies curiously.

“Well, it wasn’t as straightforward as I originally thought it would be, and there were a few security measures that I had to break through to get in, pretty sophisticated stuff

that I won't bore you with explaining now," he explains.

"Fill me in later?" Ace asks.

"Of course." Pete replies and then carries on, "So, I got in, and we were right before when we walked in. It triggered something that obviously started the countdown on the bomb but also kick-started the cameras as well."

"So we were being watched like we thought?" Mason asks over the phone.

"Yes, I think I can pretty much guarantee that," Peter replies.

"So, Hunt now knows that we are the ones looking for him," Trick adds, not sounding very happy about it at all.

"Not necessarily, for all he knows we could just be tying up loose ends or something," I say somewhat hopefully.

"We could, but he's clearly not stupid, so he's going to know that Gauld talked," Atty reminds me.

"Good point. I was just trying to put a positive spin on it," I say with a smile.

"We need to be extra careful now that he knows that we were there," Rafe adds, sounding worried, and to be honest, I really can't blame him. It is concerning.

"It could create several issues, but we're aware of it which he most likely assumed that we wouldn't be, so we have the advantage here," Peter adds. "I'm not too concerned, we'd be careful anyway and I don't think we need to change our approach."

“Okay, if you’re sure?” Trick asks.

“I am, and I’ll let you know if that changes,” Peter replies.

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Trick nods, trusting Pete's judgment as always.

"Not to question you, but are you sure that it's been seen by anyone else?" Ace asks.

Peter frowns as he replies, "What do you mean?"

"Well, there is a chance that it was simply made to look like we were being watched. The trigger was automatic, and we said that the cameras were on a closed circuit and not sending a signal elsewhere. So it is possible that the bomb was set to get a shorter time frame on it suddenly, and it's pure coincidence that it happened when it did. I mean, for all we know, it could have been randomly losing time anyway."

"I hear you, and it's certainly interesting," Pete replies with a heavy frown.

"So, there may be a chance that Hunt doesn't know that we were there and will just know that the building exploded because someone triggered it?" Luc asks.

"Potentially, yes, he's certainly smart enough to do something like that, and he likes to play games as well that would mess with any intruder's heads and make them think that there was a threat to them that there potentially isn't. that can make people fuck up," Ace explains.

"I have no idea how to check that though, and see if anyone could see the footage of us?" Peter admits, looking frustrated and momentarily dashing our hope of staying off Hunt's radar for a bit longer.

"I can have a look at it when we get back and see what I can do?" Ace offers.

“Yeah, that would be great thanks, Ace,” Trick replies.

“Can you show me how to do it?” Peter asks Ace.

“Of course, man,” Ace replies and then asks, “Did you find anything else? The footage starts from when we walk in?”

“Actually, no, that was the thing. So, I dug into the footage and took it further back. At first, it seemed like it couldn’t go back any further, but something wasn’t sitting right with me, so I kept trying. That’s when I found this. It’s literally the only thing that’s on there other than us walking in.” Peter explains as he turns the laptop around for us to see.

I simply stare, unable to fully compute what the fuck it is I’m watching.

“What the fuck?” Jensen exclaims, sounding as confused as the rest of us.

“Someone, please, for the love of fuck, put us out of our misery. What the fuck are you seeing?” Jynx questions, and I love how she phrases things.

“Is it really horrifying? Are you guys okay?” Rome asks, his voice sharper.

“Erm, sorry guys, it’s just not what I was expecting,” Riot is the first one to reply, as he then puts them out of their misery and says, “It’s playing a scene from the Looney Tunes.”

“The cartoon?” Mason asks incredulously.

“Yep, on repeat, until it flicks to where we walk in,” Peter confirms. “It goes pretty far back, and it’s a digital file, so it’s not like it’s been recorded over or something like that.”

“Huh, well, that’s definitely not what I was expecting you to say,” Rome says after a beat of silence.

“I’m going to go over it some more when we get home. There might be some data embedded in it that I’m not seeing right now.” Peter replies, thoughtfully and then adds with a frown, “Although I think that’s pretty unlikely.”

“So, he’s playing with us?” Riot asks, his expression darkening.

“Not us specifically, or at least hopefully not if Ace’s theory is correct, but he anticipated someone finding the warehouse, and most likely, whatever that thing on the security system triggered that meant it wasn’t safe to open there, probably would have made the bomb, go off sooner, and the last thing the intruders would have seen would have been the looney tunes. Pretty fucked up thing to do.” Peter replies.

“Yeah, that is fucked up,” Rafe growls.

“Okay, so our next steps are to see if there’s anything embedded in the footage. Check to see if the facial recognition software has found anything yet and see if we can find the second location that Gauld mentioned. Does that sound about right?” Trick asks as we pull into our town.

Everyone hums in agreement as I reply, “Yeah, I think those are our next steps. We’re just looking for the next clue to get us just that little bit further with our progress in finding Rylie.”

“She’s too fucking good at her job, which would usually be a good thing, but right now, we need her to be just a little bit sloppy,” Jynx adds.

“Tell me about it,” I reply, sounding frustrated.

Before anyone else can chime in, my phone starts to go off, and I glance down to see Lyric calling me. Smiling, I answer, “Hey, my preggy bestie.”

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“Tell Lyric I said hi!” Jynx calls over the phone from the other car.

Lyric giggles, “I heard her. I was calling to see how it went?”

“It’s a long story,” I say and then check the time, noticing that it’s around dinner, “do you want to come up to ours to eat, and we’ll fill you in?”

Chapter Nineteen

“Definitely,” she replies. “I know that this is the best decision, sticking close to home, but I want to work a case with my besties.”

“I know, but I have to admit, I’m really glad you weren’t there today, and Dominic and the guys are going to feel the same way,” I reply.

“Oh, now I’m really intrigued,” she replies, sounding curiously happy and not worried like a normal person would be. “Are you guys back?”

“No, nearly though. About twenty minutes,” I reply.

“Great, we’ll meet you up at yours. My men just got back from their job; it was simpler than they thought, and they’ve already sent the reports to Trick,” she replies.

"Great, thanks. I'll look over them later," Trick replies.

"Okay," she replies and then promptly hangs up.

“Is she okay?” Jynx asks from the other car. We’re both a bit more worried about her than we’d typically be now that she’s pregnant.

“Yeah, she’s meeting us at ours for dinner and debriefing. Are you guys coming?” I reply.

“Yep, and I’m hanging up now. Love ya,” she says and then promptly does just that.

“I hope she never changes,” Rage chuckles.

“I highly doubt that she will. She hasn’t since we were kids,” Atlas replies with a fond smile.

“That’s true.” Rage grins.

“Can you drop me off at mine?” Pete asks as we approach our road.

“Sure, are you not coming to dinner?” Cash asks from the driving seat.

“I am, but I’ve left Shadow at home for too long, and I know I had Ezra stop by and let her out a couple of times, but I still feel really bad, and I want to grab her and bring her up if that’s okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” Trick replies for all of us.

“Great,” Pete grins as he hops out of the car and grabs his stuff before shutting the door behind him and moving towards his car to put his laptop and stuff in before he rushes to his house.

Once we get home, Rafe immediately disappears into the pantry to find something to make for dinner, even though I suggest that we get takeaway and have an easy night.

He refuses to do that on the simple principle that we've been eating gas station snacks and drive-thru food today, and we don't need any more junk, his words, not mine.

"He insisted on cooking then?" Lyric asks as she walks through the door and inhales deeply.

I chuckle, turning around on the couch so I can see her properly, "Of course he did. We've already had drive-thru food today."

"It smells fucking awesome," Creed grins, "what's he making?"

"We have no idea," Jynx answers this time, "he was in the zone, so none of us wanted to interrupt him and risk being yelled at."

"Gotcha," Dominic chuckles.

Creed, however, is clearly feeling brave as he says, "I'm too curious. I'm going to have to go and see what he's making."

"On your head be it," I chuckle, and although it makes him pause, it doesn't deter him enough to stop him.

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“Alright, so what happened?” Jonah asks.

“Did you find anything useful?” Lucien adds, still in his suit from his mayoral duties. To be honest, he’s nearly always in a suit, so I think he just likes wearing them. They suit him and his personality, and he looks as comfortable in a suit as he does in our usual job uniform of cargo pants and t-shirts.

Before I can answer, Pete walks through the door, an excited Shadow going around to greet everyone and then slowing her pace before she gets to Lyric and greets her calmly. It fascinates me how she knows that Lyric is pregnant and she needs to be more careful.

“Perfect timing. We were just telling Lyric and the guys what happened today,” Rome tells him with a smile.

“In that case, they’ll want to see the footage. It explains the more complex part of what happened, and we can fill in the blanks,” Peter suggests, already striding toward the TV with the laptop so he can put the footage up on it so that everyone can see better.

“Oooh, you didn’t tell me there was footage,” Lyric says excitedly as she bounces on the couch.

“Can we get popcorn?” Ezra chuckles.

“I wouldn’t. Not this close to dinner, you know Rafe's views of that,” Rip points out, and Ezra grimaces slightly.

“Good point, I’ll wait.” He wisely decides.

“While you guys are doing that, I’m going to go and find Jensen and check his hand,” Luc says, kissing me softly and then leaving the room.

Luc

It doesn’t take me long to find Jensen sitting in the extension on one of the couches and thoroughly absorbed in the book he’s reading.

“Ezra and the others are here,” I tell him as I take a seat next to him.

“Awesome, I just want to finish this chapter, and then I’ll come and say hello,” he replies with a small smile.

“I just want to check your hand quickly and make sure that you haven’t done any more damage to it,” I add, and then grin as he simply nods and holds out his hand, his eyes still moving across the page of the book.

After a quick but thorough examination of his hand, it’s clear that, thankfully, he’s just knocked it, and there’s nothing to be concerned about. He hasn’t rebroken it, and it still looks like it’s healing pretty well. I put the support back on, briefly smiling because if the doctor had put a cast on it, he would’ve ended up cutting it off anyway.

“All good?” Jensen surprises me by asking, and I glance over to see that he’s put his book down and is watching me curiously.

“Yeah, man, it’s like you thought, you’ve just knocked it,” I reply with a smile, leaning back in my seat.

“Thank fuck for that.” He replies, “I’m so fed up with being in pain.”

“I know being in pain is shitty, but if I had to choose between you being in pain and you being dead, I’m going to choose pain every time, sorry man.”

He chuckles, “I know. I would too. I’m just bitching. I’m sorry for scaring you.”

His words shock me slightly, but I reply honestly, “Dude, it wasn’t your fault, but please, for the love of everything, just don’t do it again.”

“I’ll try not to,” he replies, smiling wryly, and then perks up, looking excited and making me wary in the process. “You know I’m practicing being sneaky?”

I chuckle as I relax back into the couch again, “Yeah, and you’re getting pretty damn good at it as well.”

Jensen grins, “Thanks, dude. Everyone knows that you’re the best at sneaking around though, so I was wondering if you could give me some tips. Especially about moving silently with injuries.”

“Oh yeah, of course I can. It will build up your strength as well,” I reply thoughtfully.

“And you can also make sure I don’t overdo it, and that will keep our beautiful girlfriend happy,” he adds.

I burst out laughing, “Smart move, man. There’s no way she would let you do some of the more acrobatic stuff without supervision and training.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Jensen agrees.

I start nodding as my mind begins to bring up different ways to train him while he’s still injured until something occurs to me, and I frown, “Shit, we’re going to have to be careful of your clumsiness.”

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“I’d be offended, but I agree it is definitely a concern,” Jensen replies, not seeming as concerned as I certainly feel about it, especially since if I’m becoming responsible for making sure that he doesn’t hurt himself then that also means Ever giving me that look if he does.

“Dinner is ready, guys,” Rafe yells from the kitchen.

“Thank god, I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving,” I reply with a grin and then add, “I’ll start working on some stuff that we can practice that should help you build up the strength you need as well. You’re going to be walking and running too, right?”

He nods as we make our way to the table to join the others, “Yeah, down in the gym until the snow melts, and I don’t want to risk slipping on the ice.”

“Okay, good,” I reply, my mind going a mile a minute.

Rafe made curry with all the trimmings, and it’s fucking delicious, but then I can say that about pretty much everything that Rafe cooks. Ever and the others already filled Lyric and her men in about what happened, so the conversation turns to their next job instead.

“You guys have another job in the next couple of days, right?” Jynx asks.

Dominic nods, “Yeah, only Ezra, Creed, and I are going. The others have work commitments that they have to keep.”

“Do you need any backup?” Rome asks.

“Nah, thanks though, man. It’s really straightforward this one,” Ezra replies.

“No worries, let us know if that changes,” Rip smiles.

“Wait, can you guys even help?” Lyric asks as everyone looks at Trick.

Trick shrugs, “I don’t see why not. I mean, if they did need the extra backup, then it would be because we can’t be there because of the Rylie case, and Jynx and the guys are helping with the Rylie case, so in a roundabout way, you’d still be helping because of that. Besides, Mr R knows that there’s no way that I’d risk any of you because of not having any backup, especially when we’ve got extra people who are very capable.”

“There you go,” Rome grins.

“Great, hopefully, we won’t need to call you in, but it’s good to know that we can,” Creed smiles.

After that, the conversation is our usual easy-flowing banter as everyone completely devours the food that Rafe’s made, making him smile proudly. We don’t end up hanging out for much longer as everyone is pretty tired, either from the long day or being pregnant.

Ever

“Elijah is calling with the team debrief if you want to sit in?” Trick asks me as he stands in the doorway of my room.

“Yeah, absolutely,” I reply, putting the book I was reading down and hopping up to

follow him down to his office, where he likes to take these kinds of calls.

Once we're seated, Trick answers the phone, "Hey guys, how did it go?"

"It went as expected, surprisingly smoothly, and we got the evidence that we needed, so the local cops can now arrest him without worrying that they don't have enough evidence or he will get off on a technicality again," Elijah replies with a smile.

As always, while Trick listens to the more in-depth debrief, I take a moment to look over Elijah, Callen, Marty, and Noel, making sure that they're okay and that none of them have any serious injuries, that sort of thing. Other than the fact that Marty and Noel are standing as far away from each other as they possibly can and refusing to look at each other, they all seem to be okay.

I pull out my phone and send Noel a text message asking if everything is okay, and he immediately replies.

Noel: Just the usual, but this time, I brought him up on it and asked him if he ever wanted anything more with me since he knows how I feel, and this constant back and forth isn't fair.

Me: Wow, well done. I'm really proud of you. What did he say?

Noel: Nothing. He refused to answer and hasn't spoken to me unless absolutely necessary. It's pissed me the fuck off.

Me: I'm not surprised that's a dick move. I'm sorry.

Noel: It is what it is. At least I know now.

I frown. I know that I didn't imagine the chemistry between them or the blatant

interest on Marty's behalf. Something more is going on, but it's not my place to interfere.

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Me: We can talk and watch movies or something when you get back.

Noel: Definitely.

I smile at his reply and then switch conversations to send a quick text to Marty to tell him that I'm here if he ever needs to talk. I watch him standing behind Elijah, smile at his phone, and then look up at me through the video chat and nod. His eyes are sad, and I have no idea if he's going to take me up on it or not, but I've offered, and that's all I can do. Some things can't be fixed.

"Great, send me a copy of the reports as usual, and enjoy the next few days off that you have," Trick orders, signaling the end of the conversation.

"They're already on the way to you," Elijah replies. We're all used to how Trick likes things done now.

"Thanks, guys," Trick replies with a smile.

"Now that's done with, what's happening with the Rylie case?" Callen asks curiously.

Interrupting, I tell them, "While you guys are talking about that, and now I know that you're okay, I'm going to go and start packing because we're leaving for Pete's parents in the morning, and I've not packed yet."

"Of course, you haven't," Elijah teases, and I stick my middle finger up at him, making him and the guys laugh as I leave the room.

As I leave the office, I walk past the door to the gym that's been left open, and I pause as I see Jensen on the treadmill. He was supposed to be walking and taking it easy, and instead, he's doing a gentle jog. I'd warn him that he needs to slow down, but he's more than aware that if he does too much, then it's going to take him longer to heal, and I know that he's not going to risk that, so if he feels ready to do that, then I'm not going to argue.

Besides, Cash is on the machine next to him, his arm strapped tightly to his chest, and Luc is also in the room, keeping an eye on him while he does his own workout. Luc will stop him if he thinks that Jensen is pushing it too far, and Jensen will listen to him purely because Luc has seen his medical record; he understands exactly what is wrong with Jensen and how much he can feasibly do.

I decide to leave them all to it, not wanting to interrupt and also not wanting to work out myself. As I let myself out of our hidden hallway and into the main living area, my phone starts to ring, and I answer the video call from Pete.

Surprised to see that he's with Ace, I say, "Hey guys, is everything okay?"

Pete grins, "We're fine, although we're not exactly calling with great news. We've been looking over the surveillance from the warehouse, and there's nothing embedded in the looney tunes part of the video as we hoped. It's a dead end."

"Another one," Ace adds, looking frustrated. "We're also still trying to find the second location but coming up empty."

I sigh, "Thanks, guys. I'll let the others know. It seems we're going to get a lot of dead ends and no information on this one, as frustrating as it is."

"We'll get there, and hopefully not before it's too late," Ace replies grimly.

My heart rate spikes, “We’ll find her in time. We have to.”

“I know we will.” Peter smiles reassuringly and then adds, “I’m going home because my gorgeous fiancé is finally home, and I haven’t seen him for far too long.”

I smile, “Before you disappear, what time are we meeting at yours tomorrow to drive up to your parent's place?”

“Six?” Pete asks, “That will give us enough time to get there and get ready before the party.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll let everyone else know,” I reply.

“I’m going to keep working on this location. It shouldn’t be this hard, and it’s making me mad as hell now.” Ace frowns, already looking down at his laptop and typing away.

Pete smirks, “I’ll say goodbye for both of us since I don’t think you’re going to get a reply out of him now.”

“Bye, Pete,” I reply with a chuckle.

“Go and pack Ever,” he adds just before I hang up.

“How the fuck did you know that I haven’t packed yet?” I ask incredulously.

He raises his eyebrow as mirth dances in his eyes, and he replies sassily, “Seriously? Because I have known you for years, and I know that you always leave your packing until the last minute and then end up panicking because you haven’t packed.”

I purse my lips as I try not to smile, “You know, I feel kind of attacked right now.”

“I’m not wrong though, I am?” he pushes.

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Sighing dramatically, I reply, “No, you’re right. I’m going to pack now. You go and enjoy having your fiancé home.”

A spark enters his eyes as he replies, “Oh, I intend to, bye Ever.”

“Bye,” I reply as he hangs up.

Before I head upstairs to pack, I make my way into the kitchen to get snacks and also so that I can find one of the guys to give them Pete and Ace’s update because otherwise I’m likely to forget.

“Hey Princess,” Atty greets me with a smile, and I make my way over to where he’s leaning on the side in the kitchen and talking to Rafe.

Kissing him thoroughly before I say anything, I turn to Rafe to do the same and then say, “I’m just going to go and start packing, but Pete and Ace called, and there’s nothing on the surveillance from the warehouse, and Pete wants to meet at his for six tomorrow morning so that we can convoy to his dad's place.”

“Got it,” Atty replies, as Rafe holds me tightly to him, my back to his chest.

“Do you need some help packing?” Rafe asks me as he kisses my neck.

I know for a fact he doesn’t mean actually helping me pack, and I know if I accept his offer, I won't end up packing until tomorrow morning, so I sigh heavily and reply, “Sorry, Big Guy, I really do need to pack.”

Chapter Twenty

He chuckles and nips my neck, “Yell if you change your mind.”

“Don’t tempt me,” I reply, as I turn around in his arms and kiss him again.

I force myself to take a step back before I can get carried and say fuck it and then turn around and head upstairs, leaving the guys to do whatever it was that they were doing before I came in here and interrupted.

Maybe, if I pack quickly enough, then I can reward myself with sex with Rafe? That’s how adulting works, right?

As soon as I walk into my room, I’m meowed at rather loudly by Runa, who is, of course, curled up on my pillow. I know that she won’t give me any peace unless I give her some love first, so I reach over the bed and give her some strokes, making her purr loudly as she squiggles around on her back, and she then meows loudly when I stop stroking her and move away to grab my suitcase from under my bed instead.

Surprisingly, it doesn’t take me that long at all to pack once I stop procrastinating, although I am only packing for a couple of nights, so that shouldn’t surprise me in the slightest. The thing that takes me the longest to decide is what to bring to wear to the party tomorrow night, and because I know that Pete’s dads go all out when they throw a party, I decide to wear this ombre effect black to gold sequined dress that in the style of a flapper dress and truly stunning. I bought it because I fell in love with it and haven’t had the opportunity to wear it yet. Fortunately, this seems like the perfect time to wear it.

Feeling satisfied that I’ve got everything I need and some of my favourite weapons because, let’s face it, I never go anywhere without them, my phone once again starts to ring.

“Hey Ace, what’s up,” I say as I answer the phone and start to drag my suitcase out of my room and down the stairs to put it with the others that have been waiting by the front door for a while because the guys are so much more organised than I am.

“I fucking found it,” Ace exclaims, and I frown in confusion as I start to ask him what he’s found when he carries on talking, “I tried to call Pete to let him know, but I couldn’t get hold of him.”

I chuckle, “Yeah, Elijah has only just got back from his job. You won’t be able to get hold of Pete for a while.”

There’s silence on the other end of the phone for a moment before my meaning sinks in, and Ace chuckles, “Right, got you.”

Walking through the kitchen and into the other room, where it looks like I’m just in time for lunch, I put my phone on speaker so that all the guys can hear too and ask, “Ace, what did you find?”

“Oh shit, yeah,” he replies, “sorry. I found the second location.”

“Seriously?” Trick says, “That’s great news.”

“Yeah, it was a tricky fucker to find. They had some serious security measures hiding the location, which is good news now that we’ve found it because it means that they have something there that they don’t want to be found.” Ace says.

“He hasn’t slept,” Jynx yells in the background.

“Ace!” I chastise, now worrying about him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get some sleep in a minute,” he replies, dismissing me entirely as I

expected.

“I’ve just sent you the coordinates. Unfortunately, although I can now find the place, I can’t see anything, so I can’t tell you what kind of building it is or anything,” Ace explains.

“We’re going to have to be really careful when we check it out,” Rome says, and I hadn’t realised that they were all there listening, although that makes sense.

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“One second, I’m just trying to bring up the location,” Rage says. “Got it.” He zooms in on his phone and then adds, “Actually, it’s not too far from Pete’s father’s place, about two hours away, give or take.”

“Great, so we could go and check it out on the way back from Peter’s?” Luc suggests.

“Do you guys need us to be with you?” Rome asks.

Trick glances around at the rest of us, “We should be okay. There’s no point in you guys driving all the way out there when we’re so close.”

“That actually works for us. I need to do a bit of catching up with Sawyer about what’s going on with the Raven’s back home, so it will give me a chance to do it,” Jynx replies.

“Okay, so it’s sorted then. We’ll go and check out this second location on the way back from Pete’s place and hopefully find a lead because we desperately fucking need one.” I say, trailing off in frustration toward the end because I really am getting fed up with this shit now.

“Yes, and while you guys are gone, Pete’s given me access to the program he’s using to run facial recognition in the town near the first location to see if we can find any sign of Rylie and start to piece together what she was really up to,” Ace adds.

“That would be great. Thanks, man,” Atlas replies.

“No problem,” Ace replies.

“Keep us updated, and we’ll let Lyric and the guys know what’s happening too,” Jynx adds.

“Sounds good. Ezra, Dominic, and Creed are all on that job now, so Lyric could probably do with the distraction anyway, and we’ll let you know if we find anything.” I reply as I pick up my fork and start eating because I’m starving.

“Great, we’ll let you know if the facial recognition gets anything, but I have to warn you that if it’s not found anything by now, it’s unlikely that it’s going to,” Ace warns us.

“Understood,” Trick replies grimly.

“Oh, would you guys be okay to check on the horses and Runa while we’re gone? Lyric normally does it, but I don’t know if she’s going to want to stay close to home.” I ask.

“Yeah, of course, no problem,” Mason replies happily for them all as he adds, “what about Shadow?”

“Pete and Elijah are bringing her,” Rage replies with a smile.

“Awesome, text us what we need to do, and we’ll do it,” he replies.

“Thank you,” I say gratefully, and we then all say goodbye.

“I’ll message them all the details now,” Rage says, his phone already in his hand.

“Here’s hoping that we find something at the second location,” I mutter, murmurs of agreement sounding around me.

We packed up the car last night and met Pete and Elijah at their place only a few minutes later than six this morning. Pete is absolutely buzzing with excitement. I'm not actually entirely sure how he's managed to keep the fact that he's engaged from his dads for so long. I mean, it's not like he barely talks to them. He calls them at least three times a week unless we're on a job.

It becomes an unspoken decision between us all that we just leave the Rylie case for the night. It is, after all, New Year's Eve, and we can get back to it tomorrow. For now, we're going to enjoy some family time.

Driving up to Pete's house, I'll never stop being in awe of the beauty of the place as Shawn and Zeke come out as soon as we stop in the driveway, and we all get out to say hello.

"Hey, kids," Shawn greets excitedly, reminding me so much of Pete.

We're all full of smiles and hugs despite the fact that we're standing outside and it's not exactly warm.

"Dad!" Pete suddenly yells once all the hugs have been given out, and Elijah and I share a look. I think we both know what's about to come out of Pete's mouth.

"Erm, Pete," I start to say, but it's too late.

"I'm engaged!" he yells, unnecessarily since his fathers are standing right in front of him.

He waves his hand around in their faces, and Zeke grabs it while Shawn gasps dramatically and says, "Shut the fuck up, really?"

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Peter suddenly realises what he's said, and his eyes widen as his hand goes over his mouth, and he glances at Elijah apologetically.

"Shit, I was supposed to wait to tell you, and we were going to do it together," Peter says, while his dads both look highly amused.

Elijah moves closer to him and pulls him in for a tight hug, kissing him softly as he says, "Babe, I really didn't think you were going to last as long as you have, and I'm so proud of you, don't worry. We can tell my parents together anyway. They're going to be here tonight."

"I love you," Pete replies with relief.

"Oh my god, my baby boy is engaged," Shawn exclaims, pulling Peter from Elijah's arms while the rest of us watch, amused and, on my part, at least a little bit emotional.

Zeke pulls them both into his arms and then immediately reaches out and pulls Elijah into the hug too. I start to feel like I'm intruding slightly on their moment, and I know that the guys feel the same, so we all turn around and begin to grab our stuff from the car instead, giving them a moment.

I see the guys all start to exchange money when we get to the back of the car to unload, and I raise my eyebrow.

"We made bets on how long Pete would last," Jensen grins, entirely unrepentant.

"Okay, I'm offended that I wasn't included in this. I could've made easy money," I

reply, staring them down with my hands on my hips as I try not to show them just how amused I am.

“Sorry, Sunshine,” Riot grins, quickly seeing through my fake pout, “we’ll make sure that you are included next time.”

“Thank you,” I reply primly, as I grab my bag, blow him a kiss, and then move back over to where Pete’s dads have finally let go of Pete and Elijah.

“Shit,” Shawn suddenly exclaims.

Pete’s eyes widen, “What?”

“We need to throw you an engagement party!” he exclaims, and everyone sighs as we realise that there isn’t actually anything wrong.

“Dad!”

“Shawn!” Zeke exclaims, rolling his eyes.

“What?” Shawn asks, with enough innocence that I almost believe that he has no idea how much he just worried everyone.

“We thought something was wrong,” Elijah spells out for him as he calls Shadow, and we all head inside.

We dump our bags by the bottom of the stairs as we follow Shawn and Zeke into the kitchen. At least, that’s my intention, but honestly, I get distracted by the hustle and bustle of the house. Like always, Pete’s dad’s have a lot of people decorating and organising. Unsurprisingly, they’ve gone for the theme of glitz and glam. There’s a lot of gold and sparkles around, but it’s so cleverly done that it doesn’t look tacky or

gaudy. It looks classy and elegant instead.

I'm also super excited because I've unintentionally matched my dress to the theme; Pete's going to be so proud of me.

Once we're all sitting down with coffee in one of their cozy sitting rooms, Shawn starts up the conversation about having an engagement party for Elijah and Peter again.

"We'd love one," Pete starts and then adds, "the only problem is going to be when we're so busy with work, and so are you guys."

Shawn deflates slightly and asks, "Do you guys have a date in mind?"

"Pete wants to enjoy being engaged for a year, maybe, so we're starting to plan now, but we're looking at next year at some point," Elijah replies.

"I probably won't last for a year, but we were waiting for Christmas to be out of the way before we really decide," Pete grins as he sips his coffee.

Zeke nods, "That makes sense. You know, if you need any help planning or anything like that, just ask."

"Thanks, Pa," Pete replies with a smile.

"How about we do the engagement party for around March then?" Shawn suggests thoughtfully, "That will give you enough time to get some time off, and it will give me enough time to plan. It will also be not too far away from when you actually get married because, let's face it, I know you, and you're impatient. You'll end up getting married within the year."

“He’s not wrong,” Cash points out with a smile, making us chuckle.

“And I’ll organise it all. All you have to do is give me a list of people you want there and turn up; that’s it.” Shawn says, getting excited again when the idea isn’t immediately dismissed.

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“That’s, of course, unless you want to be involved in the planning,” Zeke interrupts, giving his husband a stern but amused look.

“Oh, of course,” Shawn replies somewhat sheepishly and makes us all smile.

Pete and Elijah glance at Trick, who smiles and replies, “There’s no reason why we can’t make it work. As Shawn said, it’s far enough in the future that we should be able to work around it easily enough.”

“In that case, absolutely, we’d love that, and I will leave all the planning for it to you. I trust you, and I know that Pa will reel you in if you do go a little bit over the top,” Pete replies, making his dad’s smile widen with happiness.

“I will, of course, keep you updated on all the decisions that I make,” Shawn reassures him.

We talk for a bit longer about the plans for the party. Well, Pete, Elijah, and I talk it over with Shawn while the others devolve into another conversation about god knows what because I’m not listening.

“We should really start getting ready. Guests will be arriving soon,” Zeke announces, interrupting everyone’s conversations.

“Oh shoot, I had no idea how late it was getting,” Shawn replies with a smile and closes the notebook that he pulled out when we started to talk about the engagement party.

“I texted my parents and told them that we had something to tell them, and they said they’d come up a bit earlier so that we can speak,” Elijah tells Pete, whose eyes go wide.

“Eli!” Pete exclaims as he jumps up, “That means I have even less time to get ready. Come on.”

Elijah smiles as he allows Peter to drag him from the room, and the rest of us all get up a little bit more sedately.

“It’s a good job that none of you need showing where your rooms are,” Zeke jokes as we head out of the room and up the stairs.

Once we reach the top, we all split up into separate rooms, and I grab Riot’s hand before he can go anywhere. Not only do I feel like I haven’t seen him much since we’ve all been so busy with Christmas, but I’ve only really seen him while we’ve both been helping Rafe in the kitchen and snuggles, I miss him, and he’s fun to get ready for these sorts of things with because he likes putting on music dancing around the room with me while we sing at the top of our lungs.

It means that it takes us a bit longer to get ready, but it’s one of my favourite things to do.

He smiles as he opens the door to one of the bedrooms for me, and we dump our bags. He pulls out his phone, “Are you ready for this?”

“For what exactly?” I question as I start to rummage through my bag for my outfit and all my makeup and hair stuff.

“I made a playlist for us to get ready to,” he grins proudly.

“Awesome,” I grin. “What are you wearing?”

I start to strip out of my clothes. I don’t need to put my dress on yet, but I don’t want to risk messing up my hair or makeup, so I always end up doing those things in my underwear.

“The usual shirt and smart trousers,” he replies flippantly, his eyes dragging over my body and leaving goosebumps in their wake. He presses a button on his phone to start the music and then holds his hand out to me as he puts his phone on the bed. “Dance with me?”

Butterflies start to build in my stomach as I take his hand and step closer to him, “I would love to.”

No more words are needed as he spins me around the room, dancing beautifully as the whole world around us falls away. It’s just him and I.

One song blends into the next as we move and spins me around, making me giggle and unable to wipe the happy smile from my face. He dips me, his eyes practically glowing with happiness as with me still in his arms, he leans down and kisses me. The kiss starts off sweet and full of love and emotion, but it very quickly becomes more than that as his hand that’s not stopping me from falling on the floor, trails up my naked side, skimming the edge of my bra-covered boobs, up my neck and then cups my face, standing me up as he deepens the kiss and my hands find their way under his shirt, searching for the warmth of his skin.

I pull myself closer as I allow my nails to trail down his back, causing him to growl and hoist me up, not breaking the kiss as my legs wrap around his waist, and I can feel his arousal, only separated by the thin scraps of material between us.

“We’re going to have to be quick,” I say between kisses.

“Not too quick,” he smirks as he walks us over to the bed.

Chapter Twenty-One

He drops me down onto the bed, and I push up onto my elbows as I watch him greedily take his clothes off until he’s standing completely naked before me, golden skin, taut abs, and hard as steel dick all begging for my attention, so much so that with my eyes still on his dick, I lick my lips loving that he’s letting me stare at him, and not immediately moving toward me. He knows how fucking sexy I find him.

I scoot to the edge of the bed, closer to him, as I reach behind me and unclip my bra setting my boobs free. I push him back from the edge of the bed slightly so that I can drop to my knees before him. I run my hands up his thighs as I look up at him and find him staring down at me with such heat in his gaze that it makes my pussy clench with anticipation. Wrapping my hand around the base of his dick, I pump it a couple of times as I lean forward and swirl my tongue around the tip. He lets out a groan as one of his hands threads through my hair, and his head drops back as his eyes close.

His grip tightens in my hair as I take him in my mouth, moving my hand in time and swirling my tongue around his shaft. My other hand moves down my body and dips under the hem of my underwear, my legs widening as my fingers delve between my folds, finding my clit and circling it. I glance up at Riot to see his eyes on my hand as he growls, and my pace picks up. Driving us both closer to the edge.

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He pulls me to my feet, my mouth releasing him with a pop as his mouth immediately devours mine, and he lowers me back onto the bed, kissing down my neck and paying attention to my boobs as he works my underwear down my legs, his lips trailing further down my stomach as he discards them. My back arches as his tongue finds my clit and sucks; I am already getting close, thanks to my own playing, and his expert tongue flicks have me writhing beneath him.

Just as I get to the edge of oblivion, he stops making me grumble in protest, and I catch his smirk as he moves further up my body, kissing, sucking as teasing until he gets to my lips and kisses me deeply, lining himself up at the same time and we both moan in pleasure as I lift my hips to meet his my pussy clenching around his dick.

We move together, his lips still tasting mine, as his hand moves to grasp my neck, squeezing just tight enough to heighten my pleasure, and my nails dig into his back in response. He picks up the pace, both of us getting closer to the edge; as he changes the angle slightly, it causes a delicious amount of friction against my clit, and wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me; Riot's deep voice growls out my name as he reaches his own climax.

Once we've come back down from our high and have caught our breath, he peppers me in kisses and then starts to get up.

"As much as I would love to stay and cuddle with you, we really need to get ready," Riot says as I look at him curiously.

My eyes widen, "Well shit, I'd completely forgotten where we were."

He chuckles as he strides naked over to his bag and starts to rummage around, looking for his clothes. I have a quick shower because I'm now sweaty, and that's not a great look for the ball or in general. One of the things that I love about Pete's father's place is that they keep the rooms fully equipped with everything that you could need; this means that I didn't need to bring hair curlers or anything; they have it all.

As always, I keep my hair and makeup relatively light and minimal, mostly because I simply don't have the skills in order to do it. While I'm sitting there, Riot moves past me every now and again and brushes a hand over my back or kisses my shoulder, and every time that he does it, he sets off a whole fleet of butterflies in my stomach, and I'm just so full of love for him.

We also predictably dissolve into song when one of our favourites comes on Riot's phone, which has us both grinning like crazy people and dancing around erratically.

This is the scene that Rafe walks in on, and immediately, a giant smile crosses his face, "I was just coming to see if you were ready yet; everyone else is heading downstairs."

Riot and I share a surprised look; he's shirtless still, and I'm still in my underwear, although I do have my hair and makeup done, so it's just a case of having to put my dress and shoes on.

"Whoops," Riot grins cheekily, striding over to Rafe, who watches him approach with hooded eyes; they kiss each other thoroughly, hands exploring and making me want to join in so badly that I only just manage to hold myself back, and that's only because I'm already late and I've just done my hair.

However, Riot steps back, smirking at me, and then walking over to grab his shirt. Rafe's eyes move to me, and he strides over, pulling me close as he kisses me. He

then smiles softly before a wicked glint enters his eyes, and he smacks my ass.

“Better get dressed, Baby,” he chuckles.

I’d give him shit for telling me what to do, but he’s right. I really need to get dressed. It doesn’t take me very long at all, and before we leave the room, I pull them both close and kiss them softly, telling each of them that I love them and smiling more when they reply.

As we’re walking down the hallway to the staircase, which, as always, has been cordoned off so no guests can make their way upstairs, I can hear the party downstairs, and it makes me grin as the excitement starts to build. I love Shawn and Zeke’s parties; they’re always so good, with very little drama.

If we forget about the one where I ended up murdering someone in the upstairs closet, to be fair, that wasn’t their drama. That was ours.

“Did Pete and Elijah speak to Elijah’s parents?” I ask, “How did it go?”

“I’m surprised that you didn’t hear the yells up here. They were even more excited than Pete’s parents, and then they turned up, and they all joined in celebrating excitedly and talking about the engagement party. I think it’s a good job that Pete is happy to hand over the reins for that because I have a feeling all four of them are going to end up planning it.” Rafe smiles happily as he explains.

“I love that they both have such supportive parents,” I say.

“Me too,” Riot agrees, a slight sadness in his eyes, and both Rafe and I grab his hands and squeeze them tightly, making him smile. “Let’s go and party.”

“Hell yeah.” I agree, as I let go and start to rush down the stairs, which is precarious

because I'm wearing heels, and I'm not exactly an expert when it comes to walking in them.

Pete can do it better than I can, and he likes to point that out at every opportunity he can.

"You look absolutely stunning, Angel," Jensen compliments me as soon as his eyes land on me, making my cheeks heat.

The others all give me similar compliments and kisses, and by the end of it, I'm feeling incredibly spoilt and loved.

"I'm so fucking lucky, look at you guys," I compliment back, making them grin, and Atty, Jensen, Luc, and Cash all pull ridiculous poses that make people stare, and me burst out laughing.

We quickly make our way into the ballroom and disperse into the crowd as those of us who like dancing are immediately drawn to the dance floor, thanks to the brilliant music that they've got playing.

"Damn, look at you all colour-coordinated!" Pete yells, suddenly appearing in my sightline.

"Are you proud?" I grin.

He takes my hand and spins me around, "Damn straight I am."

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My smile widens even more as we start to dance, my men and Elijah all around us, enjoying the atmosphere.

The rest of the evening is spent the same way. I dance with all of my men, Elijah and Pete, and even Shawn. I do have to tell Jensen to take it easy at one point when he somehow manages to find himself in a dad dance-off with Shawn, which, while hilarious, is definitely not something that he should be doing right now. Thankfully, he pouts but listens.

I'm standing at the edge of the room, enjoying watching everyone and chugging a very much-needed drink, when Riot suddenly appears next to me, my phone in his hand. One of them always looks after my phone at these sorts of events, so I don't lose it, and just in case Lyric or Jynx try to get hold of me.

"It's gone off twice now, so I thought you might want to check and see who it is," Riot explains before adding, "just in case it's important."

I frown. The only people who could be calling me are Lyric or Jynx, but they know where we are and what we're doing, so unless something is wrong, they wouldn't call me. I instantly start to worry as I unlock my phone and open my missed calls.

Riot watches me curiously the whole time; before I can tell him that both calls were from a number I don't know and most likely spam, it rings again, and I figure that it might be easier just to answer and tell them I'm not interested in whatever they're selling and to enjoy New Year's Eve instead of bugging people.

"Hello?" I answer, a note of impatience in my voice that I'm hoping they pick up on.

Riot raises his eyebrow, but I'm too busy trying to make out what the voice on the other end of the phone is saying. It sounds really muffled, and they're speaking really quietly, coupled with the loud music and the people talking around me, and it's impossible.

I give up trying to understand and just say, "Look, I don't want whatever it is that you're selling. Don't call again."

"Spam call, really? On New Year's Eve?" Riot questions as I hang up and give him my phone to keep safe in his pocket.

I shrug, "Honestly, nothing surprises me much anymore!"

"I know they're just doing their job, but it pisses me off they have to work on holidays," Riot replies with a frown.

"I know. Oh well, they shouldn't call again, let's go and find the food I'm freaking starving!"

Riot chuckles, "Sounds good. I think Rafe is over there trying to pick up tips."

"That doesn't surprise me; he takes any opportunity to learn more."

The phone call is quickly forgotten as we stuff our faces with delicious food, and they head back to the dance floor. I spend the rest of the evening and the early morning hours dancing with my men.

I honestly have no idea what time we all made it to bed last night. I do know that the sun is shining through the window and looks like it has been for a while, so I'll be

surprised if it's not afternoon. I also know that I very definitely need to pee, so quickly detangling myself from Rage and Atlas, who are still so asleep that they don't even stir, I shuffle my way to the end of the bed and rush into the bathroom.

Once I'm done, I catch sight of myself in the mirror and groan; last night me didn't think it was necessary to wash off her makeup clearly, because it's currently all down my face. Stripping out of my underwear, I turn the shower on and hop in, finger-combing my hair to get some of the knots out, and then thoroughly enjoy just standing under the warm spray. It wakes me up a bit more and makes me feel more human. Unfortunately, thanks to the time, or what I think is the time anyway, we're going to have to leave pretty soon so that we can get to the second location that Ace found for us and check it out before we have to head home.

Coffee and breakfast first, though. I'm not going anywhere without coffee and breakfast.

When I step out of the shower and back into the bedroom, it's to find the room empty and Rage and Atlas's bags already gone. I'm assuming that they realised the time too and have gone to put their bags in the car. Getting dressed in a comfortable outfit, I make sure that it's still practical in case I need to fight and load up on my weapons as well. I then shove all of my stuff haphazardly in my bag, making sure that I haven't left anything behind, and then head out of the room and down the stairs, dumping my bag with the others by the front door, and follow the noise into the informal dining room, because obviously, they have more than one.

"Good morning, Ever," Zeke greets me, as he's the first one who sees me, my men all too focused on their food and in various states of being awake.

I reply happily and then go around and give each of my men a kiss before settling down in the only seat that's left and in front of a plate that's already piled high with my favourite breakfast foods. Apparently, everyone woke up late today, and although

it's nearing two in the afternoon, Shawn and Zeke decide that you can never go wrong with breakfast, even if it's for lunch instead. Of course, before I eat anything, I reach for my coffee. The first cup is necessary, the second cup is for pleasure, and yes, I am aware that I might have a slight coffee addiction.

"Do you guys really have to go already?" Shawn asks, "I feel like we've hardly seen you."

"Sorry, Dad, we've got to get back to work," Pete replies, regret in his tone.

"You work too much," Shawn mutters.

Pete chuckles as he raises his eyebrow and points at his other dad, "Pa is working right now. It's no wonder I have the work ethic that I do."

"Semantics," Shawn replies, brushing him off with a smile playing around the edge of his lips. He then changes the subject since that's not a conversation that he's going to win. "Are you leaving straight after brinner?"

"Brinner?" I ask, unable to hide the amusement from my tone.

Shawn grins, "Breakfast and dinner."

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“Right, totally makes sense,” I tease, and he sticks his tongue out at me since he’s so mature.

“Yes, we are leaving straight after. We need to stop off somewhere on the way home for work,” Trick answers him, sensing that our conversation could devolve quite quickly.

Shawn nods, “Okay, I’ll get planning for your engagement party, Pete and Elijah, and if you could let me know the dates that you can get off, then I can make sure that I plan everything for then.”

“Sounds good,” Pete replies, “thank you.”

Breakfast conversation then turns to everything wedding, and Pete is in his element as Elijah watches him happily and picks at his food. Zeke has a similar look on his face while watching Shawn speak excitedly. What’s really interesting for me is the things that the guys are chiming in with their suggestions show that they’ve clearly thought about it, and to a certain amount of depth too. I know I’m not the only one who notices when Atlas makes a suggestion about sticking to a relatively simple colour scheme and then having pops of the colour throughout; Pete’s eyebrows raise slightly as he looks over at me and winks, Elijah, nudging me subtly from beside me and making me smile.

It’s nice to know that they’ve thought about it.

We talk for a while longer, trying to drag out the amount of time that we have here before it really starts to get too late, and we need to go if we’ve got any hope of

getting to the second location before it gets dark and then get home before it's ridiculously late too.

“What are they going to do with Shadow while we check out the building?” I ask, unable to stop the concern from entering my tone.

“She’s going to come and sit with Jensen, Cash, and me until you’ve cleared the building, and then she can come in with us,” Trick explains from the passenger seat.

“You never know; she might be able to pick up on something that we wouldn’t normally notice,” Atty adds from the driving seat.

“Yeah, that’s true. It’s almost a shame that we haven’t got anything of Rylie’s for her to smell and get the scent,” Jensen adds thoughtfully.

“True, but she should still be able to smell some stuff, so it will be interesting to see what she’s like,” Cash adds, sounding intrigued.

"Before I forget, Ace messaged, and there's no results on the facial recognition," Trick tells us.

"I don't think any of us are surprised at that, although I am disappointed," Rage replies, and we all agree with his sentiments.

“Not to sound like that person, but how long left?” I ask, making them chuckle.

“About ten minutes until we’re at the rough area that Ace pointed out.” Rage chuckles, looking down at his phone.

“Really?” I ask as I look out of the window at the heavily built-up area.

We're surrounded by houses, deep in the suburbs, and it's not somewhere that I expected us to be or to find the second location, so unless we suddenly come out the other side of the estate and end up in the woods or a warehouse district I'm already completely thrown.

"Yeah, it's not what I was expecting," Luc agrees.

"Me neither. I kind of thought it would be another warehouse or something," Riot replies.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"Or like an abandoned insane asylum," Jensen offers, "with all the equipment still in place and ghosts."

"Ghosts?" Rafe asks, with his eyebrow raised, "You were expecting ghosts?"

Jensen shrugs, "Well, I wasn't expecting them, but it would've been super cool if we could've found them."

"As if we need anything else to deal with at the moment, the revelation that ghosts are real would just tip me over the edge," Luc admits with a chuckle.

"Yeah, I think I'd just nope out at that point and hope there was another secret part of the government that could deal with it and not us," I reply.

"Oh, do you think they have that?" Jensen asks, his eyes wide with intrigue.

I shrug as the others groan, "You know, it really wouldn't surprise me. All the stories had to have come from somewhere, right?"

“That’s an interesting theory,” Rafe adds, clearly thinking about it.

“We’re here,” Atlas says, and the confusion in his tone has the conversation coming to an abrupt halt.

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“Are you sure?” Trick asks as we all stare at the very ordinary-looking suburban house in front of us.

It’s not even like we’re in a run-down neighborhood we’re not it’s a nice middle-class neighborhood, complete with people walking dogs and even a jogger, although I have to question her sanity, considering it’s New Year’s Day and still cold as fuck.

“For some reason, this creeps me out more than an insane asylum would,” Riot mutters, hums of agreement sounding around the car.

I definitely feel the same way. In my experience, normal can hide a lot more evil than the places that you would assume harbored evil.

“Everyone stay alert and be aware that you may need to pull your weapons at a second notice. Obviously, you can’t walk in with them drawn as it would attract too much attention.” Trick orders, sounding worried, and I know for a fact that he’s hating that he has to stay in the car right now.

“You got it,” Atlas replies, “I’ll call as soon as we’ve cleared the place.”

“Could you actually do what we did before and have us connected via phone call?” Cash asks.

“Of course, we really need to start bringing the earpieces with us,” I reply.

“I know, and we would be bringing them normally. I think because we’re doing it alongside doing family stuff as well, we’re forgetting the basics,” Riot points out.

“Yeah, maybe, alright, enough stalling; get in there and find us some sort of clue,” Trick orders.

“Yes, boss,” Rage replies with a smile as we all get out of the car.

Seeing us get out prompts Pete and Elijah to as well, and Pete says quietly, “Am I the only one super creeped out by this cookie cutter, Stepford, perfect place?”

“Nope, I am too,” I reply.

Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, I haven’t decided yet, the door to the house is unlocked, and we can just walk straight in, which hopefully means that we aren’t going to gain any unwanted attention. In hindsight, we probably should’ve only sent a couple of us in. The inside is empty, not painted entirely white and sterile like the last place, but just empty, like someone has just moved out.

“Spread out and check to make sure that the place is really empty, and then we can have a proper look and see if we can find anything useful,” Rafe suggests, and everyone nods before splitting up and doing what he suggests.

I pair up with Luc as we head deeper into the house; it becomes evident pretty damn quickly that there’s no one here, and there hasn’t been anyone here for a while. We look everywhere that we can in the hopes that we find something that will give us an idea of

“I haven’t noticed any surveillance cameras or anything, have you?” Luc asks me as we lower our weapons and head back to the central area of the house to find the others.

“No, I haven’t,” I reply, smiling slightly when I see that Trick, Jensen, and Cash are now inside. Either Atlas gave them the go-ahead to come in, or they decided it was

safe themselves.

“Did you find anything?” Trick asks as we join the others.

“No, and I’m guessing no one else did either?” I ask, my hope diminishing that we’re going to find anything worthwhile here.

“No people, obviously, but I did find this. It was hidden in the top of the closet, under a loose board at the top. It’s pure fucking fluke that I found it,” Riot replies as he holds up an envelope, “It’s addressed to you.”

“Me?” I reply as he hands it over, and sure enough, I see my name written on the front; quickly opening it, I pull out the piece of paper inside and read, “Hey girl, be fucking careful this isn’t your usual enemy, he’s fucked up. Love ya.”

“Is that all it says?” Rafe asks.

I flip the page over to double-check and then nod my head, replying with a frown, “That’s it. Which is fucking infuriating because surely she could have written something that would help us.”

“She must have known that you were working for Mr R, though; otherwise, how else would she know that we’d find the letter,” Elijah asks.

“Which means she also knew that if anything went wrong that, Mr R would call us in,” Trick points out.

"It also means that she was here, potentially staying here," Pete adds.

“And yet she still didn’t leave us any extra information,” I reply, “you know when we find her we’re going to have a long talk about leaving actual clues behind if one of us

ever gets taken or is in trouble because this is driving me mad.”

“I know,” Jensen says, wrapping his arm around me and offering me some comfort.

“What’s our next step?” Atty asks, folding his arms over his chest and clearly as displeased as I am.

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“We need to get back on the road, just in case this is some kind of trap or we’re being watched. Pete, call us from your car, and we can talk it through then,” Trick replies as he glances around, a slight note of urgency in his tone.

We all do as he says and head back outside to the cars. I keep an eye on our surroundings as we walk toward the car, and I don’t so much as spot a nosy neighbor. We pull away from the creepy house and the suburban neighborhood and head back toward home.

“Alright, first, did anyone notice anything suspicious while we were walking to the cars?” Trick asks once we’ve called Pete and Elijah and are well on our way back home.

“No, absolutely nothing. Which is either suspicious in itself, or it's just coincidental, and there really isn't anything to worry about,” Cash replies with a slight frown.

“Okay, well, until proven otherwise, we’ll take that as a win,” Trick replies.

“So, what’s our next steps?” Elijah asks.

“Pete, do you think that you and Ace could trace the owner of the house? That might give us a bit more of an insight, and maybe even a link to Hunt,” Trick suggests.

“Yeah, we can do that,” Pete replies, “I’ll message Ace and the guys now and fill them in with what we found. I’ll ask Ace about starting the search into who owns the house. I’d say that it should be simple enough to find, but so far, nothing about this location has been simple.”

Trick's laugh is dry as he replies, "No, it hasn't. Thanks, man, that will save us having to have a meeting with them when we get back home."

"No worries," Pete replies.

"So, what are we still waiting for then?" Rage asks with a slight frown, "I know that we had several things running at the same time, but what's left still running?"

"The facial recognition that we had going on in the first town has finished, and we didn't find anything. Rylie is either damn good, or she was never there in the first place, even though that's where Mr R was supposed to pick up the information." Pete explains.

"What about the facial recognition around the location we've just come from?" I ask.

"Ace is still running that, but I doubt that he's going to find anything," Pete replies, sounding as exasperated as I feel.

"Actually," Trick interrupts, "I told the guys just before we went in. Ace messaged and said that one had come up empty as well."

Pete nods, "Yeah, I thought that would be the case."

"It's just one dead end after another," Jensen grumbles.

"We'll catch a break at some point. We have to," Elijah adds somewhat optimistically, considering the very little progress we have made so far.

"I really wish she said a little bit more in her note," I mutter, reading it again, just in case I'm missing some sort of secret message or clue or something. Unfortunately, I see nothing, so if there is something there, then it's hidden well enough that I can't

freaking find it.

“As Elijah said, we’ll catch a break at some point,” Trick tries to reassure us all, and I share a skeptical look with Luc, who’s sitting next to me.

“Ace just messaged back, and he’s on it. It didn’t take him too long to find the owner, which is a surprise, but it’s owned by a private company with no ties to anyone of any importance,” Pete replies.

"A dead end again then," I mutter.

“Alright, thanks, man. We’ll see you when we get home,” Trick replies and then hangs up once Pete and Elijah say goodbye.

I get lost in my thoughts for the rest of the journey, eventually falling asleep and only waking up when we get home.

It’s no fucking good I can’t sleep. I should’ve known that falling asleep in the car on the way home was a bad idea, and to be honest, I’m not even sure how I managed to fall asleep in the first place since we’d had a late start, but I obviously needed it, although now it’s biting me in the ass.

Looking over at the bedside table, I carefully grab my phone and check the time, hoping that the light from the screen won’t wake Cash up.

Four am.

Fuck it, I may as well try and burn some of this extra energy off, and then I might be tired enough to actually get some sleep and get my sleep schedule back on track.

Carefully getting out of bed so that I don't disturb Cash since he's incredibly grumpy when he gets woken up. I quickly find some cotton workout shorts and pull them on along with a sports bra before I grab a pair of my comfiest trainers and then head out of the door, feeling incredibly proud of myself when Cash doesn't even stir.

The house is still and quiet, and I have no idea where Runa decided to sleep tonight since she picks and chooses and ends up in different places most nights. She usually appears in the kitchen for breakfast.

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As I make my way to the gym, I pull my hair up into a messy bun so that it's out of my face and doesn't get all sweaty, while I'm working out. My eyebrows rise as I enter the gym and see that I'm not the only one who is unable to sleep.

"Couldn't sleep, Angel?" Jensen asks from his gentle jog on the treadmill.

"No, I don't think napping on the way home was a good idea," I admit as I set myself up on the treadmill next to him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I just had a bit too much energy and thought I'd burn it off," Jensen explains, having a similar thought process as I've just had.

We fall silent as we start our workouts, or I start, and he continues. The silence between us isn't awkward or anything like that; it's just comfortable and gives us each the space that we need.

I must admit that I do keep a little bit of an eye on him to make sure that he's not pushing himself too far, even though I know that he knows his limits. I decide just to stick to running, there's something kind of soothing about the rhythmic pounding of my feet. I gradually increase the incline as well as the speed, but I don't want to push it too far and wear myself out too soon. Strangely enough, I'm enjoying running. I usually try to get this part of my workout finished as quickly as possible, but right now I find myself really enjoying it. I finally decide to start to slow down and then step off the treadmill and grab my towel, wiping the sweat off my face.

My face is still buried in my towel when I feel Jensen press up against my back, his arm with his injured hand wrapping around my waist as his other hand moves to grip

my neck firmly and his lips start to brush up the side of my neck. I drop the towel to the floor as I tilt my head to the side so that he has better access. Spinning me around his lips land on mine as he carefully leads me backward toward the ring where we spar, my legs hit the side and we break apart as I put my hand on his chest and then turn him so that he's sitting on the raised mats, his doctor may have cleared him to start gentle exercise but I'm going to be on top for a while.

It's been far too long since I've had him, and there's no romantic undressing of each other. We just strip as quickly as possible, and then I practically dive on him. I have to remind myself at the last moment that I need to be gentle with him and that he is still healing.

He apparently doesn't have any of those reservations as he grabs me and pulls me toward him; I barely have time to get my knees up on either side of his hips and, in a seriously impressive move, has me situated on his dick, causing me to cry out in pleasure. His eyes blaze with heat as I start to move, and his lips slam against mine. We have to be gentler than we would normally, but we're by no means gentle. He bites my lip hard as my nails dig into his back, causing him to hiss and groan in pleasure. Because of the way that I'm sitting with every rock of my hips, my clit is grinding against him in the most perfect way and sending zaps of pleasure throughout my whole body.

Jensen pulls his lips away from mine and leans back, placing his hands on the mats behind him and staring at me with desire blazing in his eyes as I continue to ride him, his eyes trailing over my naked body as I throw my head back, my speed increasing as his look sends me even closer to flying off the edge and into oblivion.

I can't hold in my moan as I feel his fingers pluck and roll my nipple between them, pinching them firmly enough that he's riding that knife edge of pleasure-pain. I move my hands from his legs and sit up, still rocking my hips and as he continues to play with my nipples, alternating between the two to give them both equal attention, I

move one of my hands, down my body and find my clit, my fingers circling it.

Jensen pinches my nipple, and my eyes stay glued to him as he meets me thrust for thrust, and my fingers circle my clit faster; my orgasm builds until I fly off the edge, my hands moving to land on Jensen's chest as my nails dig in. He sits back up, his arm wrapping around me, holding me up slightly as his lips devour mine and his thrusts speed up, the walls of my pussy clenching around him as I ride out the last of my orgasm. Holding me tightly to him, I grind down, meeting his hips with my own and then moaning in pleasure as he bites down on my neck before huskily growling my name as he tips over the edge and into his own release.

I desperately want to collapse down onto him, but even in my post-sex haze, I know that I could risk hurting him if I put all of my weight on him. I don't want to risk that, so I move off him, and he tilts his head to kiss me softly.

"Come on, Angel, let's get cleaned up, and I'll make you hot chocolate. I can't promise it will be as good as Rafe's, but it'll still be good," Jensen offers with a smile as he stands up and offers a hand to help me up.

We decide to share the shower that's attached to the gym rather than go upstairs and risk waking up any of the others, considering it's still really early and no one is awake yet. After we've showered and changed into some spare sweats that I had no idea were down here, we head to the main part of the house, unsurprised to find it empty and quiet.

"Why don't you get comfy on the couch with some blankets and choose something to watch, and I'll get us some snacks and hot chocolate," Jensen suggests, kissing me on the side of my head and gently nudging me toward the couch.

"That sounds absolutely perfect," I admit as I do as he asks, and end up making the comfiest looking couch nest ever.

I have to admit that by the time Jensen comes back, my eyes are closed, and I'm very nearly asleep. I just manage to open them back up enough to accept my hot chocolate and take a sip.

"It's good," I praise as Jensen settles under the blankets next to me and then lifts his arm so that I can get comfortable on his chest.

"You're just saying that," Jensen jokes as he presses play on the TV show that we both like to watch.

"No, seriously, it is," I grin, and then ask, "what snacks did you get?"

He smirks mischievously as he pulls out a Tupperware tub, "I raided Rafe's cookie stash."

"Oh, good call," I reply excitedly, making grabby hands at the cookies.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We fell asleep. It was inevitable and somehow neither of us ended up spilling hot chocolate, although I think the only reason why I didn't is because Jensen must've saved mine from spilling. It was just what I needed: some quality time with Jensen, doing something chilled out without worrying about the millions of other things that we need to be doing.

I think that's definitely something that I've got to learn. I need to get better at taking proper breaks, proper time off, and proper time to relax. Otherwise, I'm going to end up burning out, and I'll be absolutely useless to everyone.

Unfortunately, that moment of peace and rejuvenation didn't last very long as, over the next few days, we hit even more dead ends where the Rylie case was concerned,

and I started to lose hope that we were ever going to find her. I haven't felt this helpless for a long time, and I have to admit that I'm not a fan of the feeling, not at all.

"Alright, put some boots on and come with us," Lyric announces, suddenly appearing in our front room with a grinning Jynx and a bouncing Ace and Ezra behind her.

"What? Why? Where are we going?" I ask in rapid succession, getting up anyway because, of course, I'm going with them regardless of the reason. I'm just curious about where that is and how many weapons I should bring.

"Can I come?" Jensen asks, already up and walking over to the excited duo standing behind Lyric.

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“Of course, man, you’re not going to want to miss this one,” Ezra smirks, and my curiosity increases.

“Do I want to know?” Trick asks, his eyebrow raising.

Ace shrugs, “Probably not, man. We’ll bring them back in one piece though.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t reassure me,” Trick replies drily.

“Me neither,” Atlas adds, standing up, “I’m coming.”

“Sure thing, let’s go,” Jynx practically yells, betraying her own excitement, and I chuckle as I finish putting my boots on and stand up.

It doesn’t escape my notice that they still haven’t told me where they’re taking us, and I get the feeling that they aren’t going to either.

“So what are we doing?” Jensen asks as we head down the driveway and out to the edge of town near to where Lyric and the guy’s place is.

“We’re going,” Jynx starts, and then becomes unintelligible when Ace puts a hand over her mouth. Of course, Jynx, being who she is, must bite him because Ace yells and pulls his hand back. You’d have to be blind not to see the heat in his eyes though.

“Did you just bite me?” He asks incredulously, looking down at the bite marks marring his hand; she got him good.

Jynx bares her teeth and snaps them at him as she replies, “Yep, you should know better.”

Ace chuckles, pulling her close and kissing her before he replies, “Yeah, that’s fair. I just didn’t want you to spoil it for them. I think it will be more fun to surprise them.”

“He’s got a point,” Ezra agrees, looking highly amused.

“I regret nothing,” Jynx shrugs and then winks at Lyric and me, making us both chuckle.

“Why do I suddenly feel like we’re going to end up stopping the women from doing something reckless?” Atty suddenly questions.

The others share a knowing look, as Ezra admits, “Because that is a very real possibility.”

I’m practically buzzing with excitement at this point, although I have to admit that I become slightly confused when we pull into what looks like an old quarry.

“Should we be here?” I can’t help but ask with concern. I know there are some pretty strict rules for these sorts of places.

“Don’t worry, we own it,” Ezra replies nonchalantly as he steps out of the car, and the rest of us scramble out behind him.

“Can I tell them now?” Jynx says excitedly, “Please?”

Lyric chuckles, “Go on.”

“We’re blowing stuff up!!”

My eyes go wide as Jensen whoops in excitement, and Atlas starts grinning. I glance between them, all my excitement growing as I ask, “Seriously? We get to explode some things?”

Lyric smiles, nodding enthusiastically as she rubs her bump, “Yep, I thought with everything going on or rather not going on with the Rylie case that we could all do with blowing off a little bit of steam, and I did promise you guys that we could blow some stuff up so here we are!”

“Wow, this is awesome. Thanks, Lyric,” I say gratefully as I pull her in for a quick hug.

“No problem, I have everything set up, but there are a few safety things I want to go over first. I’m not being responsible for any of you blowing yourselves up.” She replies firmly, leaving no room for argument, not that we would have argued anyway. Sure, we want to make things go bang, but not at the risk of injuring ourselves.

“Of course, go ahead,” Jensen says, being serious for a change and making us all smile.

Lyric spends the next ten minutes or so explaining all the safety protocols and exactly what we need to do. She explains where exactly we’ll be blowing stuff up and where we need to stand to remain safe. She’s set it up so that we get to blow at least three things up each and then hands us all ear defenders and eye protection as well.

“Alright, follow me. Ever you’re up first,” Lyric grins as we all follow her to where she’s set up the first explosion. She points to the button, and I appreciate that she’s set it up this way; it makes it even more fun. “Do you remember what to do?”

I give her a dry look, “Dude, you told me like less than five minutes ago,” when she just looks at me with her eyebrow raised, I sigh and reply, “Yes, I remember.”

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“Good, have at it,” she replies.

I don’t know why I suddenly feel nervous, but I do; it’s an excited kind of nervous, and I share a huge grin with Atlas and Jensen, who both look just as excited as I am.

“I’m not going to lie; I’m super jealous that you get to go first,” Jynx teases, a smile on her face as she adds, “I’m next!”

“Everyone ready?” I ask, just to double-check because this is going to be freaking loud, and I know that.

They all nod, and I grin, my hand hovering over the button, as I look to where Lyric said that the first explosion would go off. I feel like I should probably do a countdown or something, and I know the others are probably expecting me to, and it’s for that reason that I don’t. I decide to shock them instead and slam my hand down on the detonator far too enthusiastically for the size of the button.

My grin is manic as the wind from the blast hits me in the face, and I watch the explosion before me. The boom is so loud that it shakes the ground beneath me and makes my smile widen even more as I watch the fiery explosion take a considerable chunk out of the rock wall.

“Shit, a little warning next time!” Jynx exclaims.

Ace reaches out to high-five me, his eyes twinkling with happiness. He loves explosions, and actually, he’s incredibly knowledgeable about them too. If I ever find myself face to face with a bomb, I seriously hope that he’s there to help diffuse it

because although we do have training in how to diffuse bombs, just in case, nothing can compare to the years of experience that Ace has and he does have years, despite being so young, and I don't know the details of exactly how he can have years of knowledge despite his age, I just know that his knowledge is extensive.

The rest of the afternoon, we spend blowing stuff up, and of course, the guys come out with as many movie and TV show lines as they can, getting more and more ridiculous the longer that they go on. Their antics have Jynx, Lyric, and me all in fits of giggles.

Eventually, we run out of explosives, and I'm impressed that we managed to stay out here for as long as we have. It's late afternoon now, and we're all grinning as we head back to the car.

Once we're inside the car and heading back toward the town, Atlas says, "The others are going to be so fucking mad that they didn't come along."

"We can come back at some point," Lyric replies with a smile, looking tired as she adds, "Can we stop for coffee before you drop us back?"

"Of course," Atty replies before adding, "Jynx, do you want us to drop you guys home while we're down here? You can pick up the car when you next come up?"

"Yeah, actually, that sounds good. It's surprisingly tiring blowing stuff up," Jynx admits as she lifts Ace's arm and snuggles down on his chest.

"Coffee first?" Atlas asks with a teasing grin, knowing full well that she's going to want to get coffee before we head home.

"Duh," Jynx replies, rolling her eyes.

We've just finished dropping everyone off and are heading back home when my phone starts to ring, and I pull it out of my pocket, seeing that it's Trick. I don't bother putting it on speakerphone this time since I don't need to. I really only do that when we're getting updates from someone about a case or something important.

"Hey, Trick," I answer, sipping my coffee.

"Hey, Sweetheart, you sound a lot more relaxed," he replies, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Yeah, I am. We got to blow stuff up," I reply excitedly.

"I am entirely unsurprised that something that would usually stress people out is something that relaxes you," Trick teases lightheartedly.

"Hey, I never claimed to be normal," I retort.

"And we wouldn't have you any other way." He replies and then becomes serious as he adds, "I don't want to cut your day short, but I was just wondering when you're thinking of heading back?"

I frown slightly at the way that he's chosen to word that. It's almost like he needs us back home for some reason. "We're actually on the way back now. Is everything okay?"

"Good. Everything is fine; I just got a call from Raiden about Jensen's case. It can wait until you get here though." Trick explains.

"Got it. We're heading up the drive now. See you in a minute," I reply and then hang up. Turning to face a curious looking Jensen, I explain, "Raiden called, and it sounds like there's an update on your case. He said that he'd explain more when we get

inside.”

Jensen’s expression tightens as he nods, “Alright, let’s get inside then.”

Atlas stops the car outside our home and then glances back at me. I nod in answer to his silent question, and he gets out. As Jensen goes to get out as well, I lay my hand on his arm, stopping him.

When he glances back at me, I ask gently, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just hoping it’s good news. I’ve been waiting for so long to be able to close that part of my life properly. Not the part with my sister and my mom, obviously, but the ending. I want to be able to look back with a smile, remember just the good, and not have it all be tainted by the way that it ended.” Jensen replies.

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“I think that anyone in your position would be feeling the same way. It’s going to give you and your dad closure, which, after so long, you definitely both need,” I reply, squeezing his hand.

“Exactly.” He replies, lifting my hand to his lips and kissing it, “Let’s go and find out what’s going on.”

Walking through the front door, we find Trick and the others all waiting in the front room, and I read the atmosphere quickly, taking a breath of relief when there’s no real tension or sign of something being seriously wrong. That’s a good sign. I really hope that, for Jensen’s sake, they haven’t lost track of the fucker who murdered his mom and sister.

“What’s up?” Jensen asks as he plops himself down on the couch next to Rage.

“As I told Ever, Raiden called. They’ve found the guy who murdered Jensen’s mom, sister, and multiple others, and they’re heading out in a couple of hours to bring him in.” Trick starts to explain and then looks at me, “Raiden mentioned that you had offered them help since they’re down a few members still like we are?”

I nod, “Yeah, that’s right. They’re down two members, much like we are, and we don’t want to risk the fucker escaping, so I offered our help. Plus, we knew even at that point that the Rylie case was going to go slowly, so I thought it would be a nice mix-up.”

“They’ve asked for backup tonight, and I’m guessing that you want to be one of the people going?” Trick asks.

I nod enthusiastically, “Absolutely. I could do with kicking some ass and doing a relatively normal job.”

Trick smiles and opens his mouth to reply but gets interrupted by Jensen, “Obviously, I’m not going to be involved. Not only is it, not a good idea while I’m not at one hundred percent, but also because I can’t guarantee that I’d be able to keep my calm, and that fucker needs to suffer for a long time.”

Trick’s face becomes serious as he nods, “I think that’s a really wise choice, man.”

“I’ll go with you,” Rage offers, violence lighting his eyes.

“Me too. I could do with getting out of the house,” Rafe offers.

“Great, I told them we’d send at least three, so that works out well. The rest of us can go over some of the Rylie details and see if Pete or Ace have found anything. We’re getting really close to stalling, and we need to try and work out where we go next if that happens.” Trick replies.

“Sound’s good to me,” I say, deciding not to comment on the stalling part of his sentence as I stand up. “I’m going to go and get ready. Where are we meeting them?”

“At headquarters, it seemed like a good idea since you don’t want to be driving our personal vehicle to the crime scene. The last thing we need is for it to be tracked down.” Trick replies.

“Good point,” I reply.

As I start to leave the room to get changed and grab some of my weapons, I pause when Rage asks, “Is there anything we need to know?”

“I’m going to print the case notes off for you so you can read them in the car on the way to headquarters. It will be quicker than trying to go through it with you all now. You haven’t got much time before you need to get to headquarters. They’re on a pretty tight schedule since there’s only a small window where they know that he’s definitely going to be at the address. After that, it gets a little bit dicey,” Trick explains.

“Got it.” Rage replies and then turns to look at Rafe and me, “Meet by the front door in ten?”

Rafe nods as he gets up, “I’m pretty much ready anyway.”

“Sounds good,” I reply, switching my mindset to work mode as I take the stairs two at a time to change, and the other two head into the weapons room to pick their own weapons.

As I get dressed in something black, durable, and that won’t easily show up any blood stains I get on it, as well as my favourite boots for working in, it occurs to me that I’m the only person that keeps their favourite weapons in their room instead of in the weapons room with everyone else’s. I know that they have maybe one or two, but I keep all of mine in my room. I think it’s most likely a habit from when I was younger that I haven’t let go of, and to be honest, I probably won’t. I have very specific weapons that I like to use, and although I will go into the weapons room to pick up a couple more if I need them, it’s rare, and those extras always go back to where they belong.

I double-check my weapons before I leave the room and amend my previous thoughts. I know for a fact that Jensen has a lot of knives in his room; he actually has a lot of knives hidden all around this house and has a similar connection to them as I do.

“All ready?” Jensen asks, looking slightly worried as I reach the bottom step of the stairs.

I nod, pulling him for a tight hug and then kissing him passionately, when I pull back I add, “Don’t worry we’re going to get him, and we’re going to get justice for your mom and your sister, and for all the other people that he’s hurt without remorse.”

Jensen’s smile is vicious, “I know, make him bleed for me.”

“You bet your ass I will,” I reassure him, my smile matching his.

I quickly go around to each of my men and say goodbye. Normally, they’d all look slightly nervous at this point, but this is a fairly straightforward case. There’s a lot of us going after one person, so there’s not too much threat to Rafe, Rage, and me, and that’s even taking into account that these things never go to plan.

By the time that we get back, Jensen will be able to have closure finally, and so will his dad.

Chapter Twenty-Four

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“Did you guys go over the file that we sent?” Raiden asks us as soon as we step foot out of the car.

I nod, “Yeah, we’re all caught up.”

“Great, we’re going to head out in the surveillance van, and then Saint and I will stay in the van and keep an eye on everything since neither of us is up to being involved, and we don’t want to risk any of you,” he replies.

Rage nods, “Okay, that sounds good to me. I guess that we’re going to be driving the prison van?”

“Yeah, you guys can follow us in that, and then when we’ve got him, we’ll swap so that we can drop him off, and you guys can head home,” Wilder replies with a smile.

“Got it,” I grin. I’m more than happy to leave the prison transport and subsequent paperwork to them. I fucking hate paperwork. Especially since this kind of paperwork is so intense and detailed. It really fucking sucks.

“We’re going to surround the house and then all enter at the same time. All the comms will be hooked up together so that we can communicate and make sure that we all enter at the same time,” Zemi adds, shifting from foot to foot and looking ready to get going.

Like Jensen, she isn’t very good at staying still, especially when there’s a job to do. I have to admit that I’m with her on this occasion; I don’t want to stay still either. I just want to get on with it and get going. Blowing stuff up today was great fun and

definitely helped with the frustration of the lack of progress when it comes to Rylie, but it will be really nice to get the bad guy and achieve the goal without the delay.

We go through a quick rundown on what will happen when we get inside, which is all pretty much the standard process, and after they've reminded us that we need to take him in alive, which makes me smile, we set off following Raiden and the others in their van.

We stay silent as we head to the fucker's current base of operations, even though it's a fair drive from headquarters. It's quiet in our van, which is how we usually are when we go on jobs, at least it is for us three; we tend to remain silent as everyone else talks around us. It's not because of nerves, at least it isn't for me; it's more about calming my mind and getting into the right headspace to do what needs to be done while we're on the job.

It also helps me to prepare for the worst-case scenarios, which probably isn't a healthy thing to do, but it's what I do, and it's how I've always done it, so that's how it's going to be. There's no point in changing my process now; it's what works for me.

I go through the plan in my mind, cementing it in my memory so that I don't have any questions or hesitations when it comes to actually executing the plan at the perpetrator's location. That also helps to calm my mind and keep me focused.

I fucking love that I get to do this for a job.

"We're about five minutes out," Rafe says from the driving seat and effectively pulls Rage and me out of our thoughts as he adds, "Raiden wants us to turn on the earpieces now so that we can communicate properly."

"Got it," I reply as I reach up to my ear and press a tiny button that switches it on. "Testing."

“Hey!” Zemi’s excited voice comes through the earpiece and makes me smile.

“You guys park up on the left, and we’re going to park just slightly further up so that Saint and Raiden have a good sight line to the house,” Zep explains.

“Alright, we’ll head around the back while you take the front,” Rafe replies as he pulls the van over. “Is one of you going to bring the van closer so that we don’t create a scene once we’ve got him?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” Raiden replies.

“See you in there,” I add as Rafe, Rage, and I step out onto the dark street.

Unlike where we found the second location for Rylie, this neighborhood is run down. Most of the houses look to be unoccupied, and if they are, the people inside aren’t going to be bothered about what’s going on out here, which will play in our favor quite well.

The file didn’t say anything about any known associates, but that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t have any. It isn’t a massive problem, but it does mean that we need to be aware that there could be more than just him in the house and that if there is someone else in the house, there is every possibility that they are innocent and in the likelihood that this does turn violent, we need to make sure that we do everything to keep them out of harm's way.

I’m not going to lie; it would be a hell of a lot easier if there were no one else in there.

I share a look with my men and blow them a kiss, making them smile as we silently make our way through the night and toward the house that we know belongs to him. From the outside, there is nothing that would give it away as different from any of the

others. It's in just as much disrepair as all the other houses on the street. Of course, that's probably because this isn't his house. We know what happened to the people that used to live here; they became his victims. We aren't actually sure how he's managed to retain his anonymity here and not get reported, but I'm guessing that it has something to do with claiming to be a relative who's looking after the house while they're out of town or something similar.

As we round the house, noting the trash everywhere in the backyard, we all position ourselves at the back door, ready to enter as soon as we're given the go-ahead.

"Now," Raiden's voice comes through the ear pieces sounding tense, and because I've worked with him before, I know that it's not because we're doing a job, especially this job, which is far simpler and less dangerous than our usual jobs, Raiden is nervous because he's not in here with us and has to watch everything from the van.

Just like Trick, he hates not being there with his team, which is probably why Trick and he get on so well; they understand each other.

Rage wastes no time in kicking down the door as we hear a bang from the front as the front door is taken down at the same time. We stay silent as we keep our guns raised and clear the house. Sounds of yelling and a fight coming from the front of the house have the three of us speeding up and keeping alert as we walk through the kitchen, but wanting to get to Zemi and the others just in case something goes wrong or there is more than one person that we need to be aware of.

We needn't have worried though. When we round the corner into the front room, it's to see Zep kneeling on the fuckers back and securing him tightly. The fucker looks worse for wear and clearly put up a fight that he had no chance of winning, as his face is already looking bruised, and there's blood dripping down into his eye's which are filled with fear and disbelief, disbelief that after all of this time, he's finally been

caught and can no longer continue his murder spree across the country, one that he has somehow gotten away with for nearly two decades.

“I’m going to secure him in the van,” Zep tells us, pulling the guy roughly to his feet.

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“We’ll carry on searching the house just in case anyone else is here,” Rafe replies.

Once Zep has walked out, Zemi says, “From the state of the outside, I did not expect the inside to be this spotless.”

“I suppose he has to keep it this way so that he doesn’t leave any evidence of his presence behind,” I reply.

“Good point,” she replies, and then adds, “Alright, let’s get this place cleared and ready for the forensic team to come in. They should be here soon. Zep will have notified them back at the van.”

“We’ll take upstairs, and you take down here?” Wilder suggests.

Rage nods, “Sounds good, yell if you find anything.”

“Got it,” Zemi replies.

We split up once again. We aren’t searching the rooms for any evidence or anything that links him to all of the murders. We know that he did it, and besides that, it is the job of the forensic team and the agents trained to do that sort of thing. We catch them and put all that work into finding and securing them, and the agents that come after us go through all of the evidence we have gathered in order to catch whoever we’re after and compile their own evidence based on things collected by the forensic team and what they can get out of the person during interrogation. All we’re doing as we search the house thoroughly is making sure that there is no one else here.

We've finished clearing the downstairs and are waiting for Zemi and Wilder to finish checking out the upstairs before we leave when Zemi calls down.

Her voice is full of tension and disgust as she says, "Guys, you might want to come and look at this."

I share a wary look with my men and then head up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She didn't specifically say that she found someone, and I find myself hoping that she hasn't found another victim.

"What did you find?" I ask as I approach them.

They're standing in the doorway to a room and looking inside. Wilder's face is full of disgusted horror as he steps back, pulling Zemi with him, and says, "I have no idea how to explain it, you better just look."

Hesitantly, I move forward to glance inside the room, and I immediately understand what I'm looking at, "It's a trophy room. The sick fucker kept trophies from his kills."

"It looks that way," Zemi confirms, "it's actually how we finally managed to link him to so many murders and not just Jensen's mom and sister; he takes the tip of his victim's pinky finger."

There are shelves filled with vials that have these pinky fingers floating inside. He's managed to preserve them, which is going to be his downfall. Not only is this all the evidence that we need to make sure he goes to the worst place we have available, but it will also help identify all of his victims.

"There's more here than we've managed to link him to," Wilder frowns, "that means there are more victims out there."

“Quite a few more, judging from the amount of vials there are,” Rafe adds.

“We’ll make sure that they all get identified and that their loved ones can finally put them to rest properly,” Zemi adds firmly and with such conviction that I know that she is going to help to ensure that they are all identified personally.

“There are some really little fingers in some of these,” Rage adds, and I glance at him to see him pale.

He’s right. There are fingers that can only be from children, and small children at that. I know that he has no problem killing children; he did, after all, kill Jensen’s sister, and she was four or five, I think, when she was killed, but seeing the actual evidence glaring at me in the face is quite another thing.

“Forensics and the other team are here to take over,” Raiden says, shocking me because I had temporarily forgotten that he was in my ear.

“Got it,” Rage replies for all of us, and we turn around, leaving the room of horrors.

I can’t leave without showing him just a small portion of the pain that he caused his victims, though.

“Hey guys,” I greet the team coming through, and they smile and say hello back. Since what happened at the retreat, it seems that they’ve all decided to drop some of their hostility toward us, finally, and I’m grateful for it. I can’t be fucked to deal with the unnecessary drama. At the end of the day, we all want the same thing, and that’s to make the world safer.

“You need to check the first room on the left upstairs. It’s got his momentous from his kills in,” Rage warns them, and their faces are grim as they nod.

Unfortunately, this is a part of the job that we're all used to; it doesn't mean that we like it.

"Ever, where are you going?" Rafe asks me curiously as I head straight out of the door and toward the van that we arrived in, and that holds the prisoner.

Zep's eyebrow rises as he sees me approach with everyone else at my heels, but he clearly sees something on my face because he nods and steps to the side, allowing me access to the doors.

"Mr R wants to see if you can get anything interesting out of him before he hits interrogation," Raiden says in my ear, clearly watching me from the other van.

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I pause, “Does he actually, or are you just clearing the path for me?”

“I think he knew you’d want to have a word with the fucker, so yes, he did say that. His only warning was that he needs to stay alive.”

“Got it,” I grin sharply, I wink at my men who know full well that Shadow is about to come out to play, and are matching my smile with harsh smiles of their own.

I pull open the door to the back of the van, turning around and smiling cheerfully at Zemi, who looks slightly apprehensive as I close the doors behind me.

Zemi

“She terrifies me,” I mutter out loud. I didn’t mean to, but then most of what I say I don’t actually mean to say so that others can hear me. When everyone looks at me and sounds of pain start to come from the van, I snort and point at it unnecessarily, “Seriously? You’re telling me that even a not-quite-sane person wouldn’t be slightly terrified of the noises coming out of that van?”

Rage chuckles, looking proud as he replies, “Yeah, okay. I guess you have a point.”

“Dude, it’s because she’s so tiny and looks innocent enough that you never expect her to do things like willingly shutting herself in the back of a van with a known serial killer,” Saint adds as he and Raiden finally make their way over to us.

Raiden winces slightly, “She kept her earpiece in. I know that she is more than okay in there, and the sounds were getting disturbing, so I took it out. I have it with me if

you want to check on her?”

Rafe shakes his head, “Nope, she’ll let us know if she needs help. It’s best to just leave her to it.”

His response has all of us smiling. Ever is undoubtedly unique, and I often feel grateful that she decided to be on the right side of the law because I honestly don’t know if we’d be able to stop her if she was on the other side and decided to be one of the criminals that we go up against.

I find myself surrounded on all sides by my men, and yes, I call them mine in my head, a bit of wishful thinking and a tiny acknowledgment of my feelings toward them that I allow myself to have in my own mind at least. They’ve been a lot more protective and close since everything that happened at the retreat, and I have to admit that I’m not bothered by it in the slightest. Quite the opposite, in fact, I fucking love it.

“Are we sure she’s going to be okay in there?” I ask just because I worry, and although I’m more than aware that Ever is capable of looking after herself, I can’t help but worry about her.

“Yeah, she’ll be fine. She knows better than anyone when to stop and how much a person can take before they can’t take anymore,” Rafe replies with a proud smile, having misread my worry.

Before I can point that out though, the sounds from the van fall silent, and the doors open, out steps, a blood-splattered Ever grinning and somehow looking more relaxed.

“He’s alive,” she tells us as she swipes her bloody knife on her jeans and then sheathes it. “He’s missing a few fingertips, and he’s a little bit bloody. He’s just taking a nap.”

“You say that like it was a nap he took willingly,” Saint chuckles.

Ever shrugs, “I never said that it was a willing nap.”

“Will he make the journey to the prison, or does he need to be seen?” Raiden asks her, and I feel my lips twitch.

“He’ll be fine, in a lot of pain, but none of his injuries are life-threatening.” Ever confirms.

Raid nods and then adds, “Did he tell you anything?”

“Nothing useful,” she confirms and then asks, “so what’s the plan now?”

“You guys can take the surveillance van back to headquarters so that you can grab your car and get home,” Zep explains and then adds, “and we’ll take him and get him transferred.”

“Sounds good,” Ever smiles, “thanks for including us. We needed an easy case.”

I frown. I wasn’t aware that they were on a case, but of course, they can’t talk about it, “Tough case?”

“You have no idea,” Rafe replies.

“See you later guys, we’ll get the reports written up and sent over to you,” Rage adds.

After saying goodbye, we all watch them climb in the other van and take off before we get back to doing our job.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ever

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:10 am

“That was fun,” I say as we finally get back in our car and head home.

“It looked like you had fun,” Rafe comments from the driving seat.

I shrug as I try not to think about what I’m covered in, “He deserved it, and more, to be honest, I also told Jensen that I’d give him hell.”

“Oh, I’m not arguing, Baby,” Rafe clarifies, “he definitely deserved to feel some of the pain that his victims felt, even if it was only a tiny amount.”

“He’s right,” Rage agrees. “I’ve just messaged the others to let them know that the mission was a success, that we’re on the way home, and that we’ll fill them in properly when we get home.”

“Good idea. They will be worrying despite how easy this case is compared to some of our other ones.” I reply, knowing that I’d be feeling exactly the same if it was me.

“Exactly,” Rage replies.

“At least we’re not getting back too late,” I add.

“That’s true,” Rafe agrees.

The drive home is relaxed and I hope that having the fucker finally behind bars will allow Jensen and his dad to start healing properly. They deserve that.

When we get home, we’re greeted by the guys, and Cash immediately moves to wrap

his arms around me.

I hold my hand up, making him pause, and the others all look at me curiously, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I’m covered in blood, and it’s not mine.”

Cash’s confusion turns into a proud smile as he replies, “You had fun then.”

“Yep,” I search for Jensen, whose smile is feral as he watches me, and I say, “he’s been taken care of. He’s on his way to the worst place that we could think to send him, and he’s missing a few fingertips now.”

The relief that cascades over Jensen’s features is massive as his smile turns into something softer, “Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” I reply, “he deserved what he got and a hell of a lot more. I’m going to let the guys debrief you though, because I desperately want to shower and get this blood off me.”

“Alright, Sweetheart, you go and do that, yell if you need any of us,” Trick says softly.

Nodding, I start to walk past all of my men, only to be stopped by Jensen grabbing my hand. He smirks, “There’s none on your lips.”

I smile as he kisses me thoroughly, but somehow manages to keep space between us so that I don’t get any blood on him.

“Can we give the debrief in the kitchen?” Rafe asks almost predictably, “We haven’t eaten, and I know for a fact that Ever’s hungry.”

“Damn, straight I am,” I reply with a chuckle as I pull back from Jensen.

Trick chuckles as he replies, “Of course we can.”

“I’ll be quick,” I tell them, making them all chuckle because they know that it’s mainly because I’m hungry and not because I want to add anything to the conversation.

I ignore them as I take the stairs two at a time and then assess my clothing as I get to my room. It really is only splatters here and there, so there’s no need for these clothes to go in the trash. Which I am always grateful for because I hate waste and I hate throwing things away just because of a little bit of blood.

Reaching into the shower, I turn the water on so that it’s almost burning hot, take my phone out of my pocket and place it on the bathroom counter along with all of my weapons, and then strip out of my clothes, being careful not to get any of the blood that’s on my clothes on my skin, or at least trying to, dumping them all into the hamper in the corner of the bathroom before stepping under the steaming water and washing the day away.

I don’t take long in the shower, mainly because I can start to smell the food that Rafe is cooking wafting up the stairs, and my mouth is salivating. I should have known that he wouldn’t do something as simple as just making sandwiches, and I fucking love him for that.

Of course, in my haste to get into the shower and out of my blood-splattered clothes, I didn’t bring any spare clothes in here with me, so when I step out of the shower, I wrap a big fluffy towel around myself and grab my phone off the counter as I walk out of the bathroom.

Out of habit, I check my phone to see if Pete or the girls have messaged me, and I pause in my onward trajectory toward my closet when I see that I have a message from an unknown number. I can’t explain it, but before I’ve even clicked on it, my

heart starts beating faster, pounding in my chest. As soon as I read the first couple of words, I do an about-turn and rush out of my room and down the stairs, heading straight into the kitchen.

The guys being guys all start wolf whistling and making comments on my appearance since I'm in just a towel, but for the first time ever, I don't bother to reply or retort.

"Guys!" I yell over the sound, and they instantly fall silent, sensing that something has happened.

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“What’s wrong?” Luc asks, concern etched on his face.

“Rylie texted me,” I announce, and I’m met by utter silence, shock adorning all of their faces as I decide to just plow on with my explanation and hope that they catch up, “I checked my phone after my shower and found this, it says, Hey girl, and then list coordinates and she adds hurry the fuck up and come and get me.”

Jensen smirks, “Of course she did.”

“Fuck, okay,” Trick starts as the shock wears off, and he starts to get back into work gear, “Atlas, call Jynx and Lyric; get them up here. Riot, you call Pete and get him up here as well. We’re going to need him.”

“What about Noel and the guys?” Riot asks immediately, his phone already in hand.

“Have them on standby, but we don’t need them up here right now. They have only just finished the job,” Trick replies and then looks at me, “Ever, you go and get dressed before everyone arrives.”

Everyone splits off to various things, and I take a moment to just smile at Trick. Moving toward him, I move up onto my tip toes and kiss him gently, “Thank you for realising that I was getting overwhelmed and needed something to focus on you.”

He smiles softly, “I’ve got you, Sweetheart, now go on. Everyone will be here soon, and you need to eat. Don’t even bother arguing.”

I smirk as I step back and salute him because I’m feeling excited that we may actually

be getting somewhere with Rylie's case, and then add, "Yes, Sir."

"Ever," he warns as his eyes heat, and I smirk before spinning on my heel, making sure that the towel flies up a bit and reveals my ass before I prance from the kitchen, enjoying the sound of his frustrated muttering behind me.

As soon as I get to my room though, the enormity of what has just happened hits me, and I rush to get dressed and make sure that I'm wearing something decent before I rush back down the stairs, pulling my hair up into a messy bun as I go, which I know I'm going to regret later since it's soaking wet.

"Here," Rafe says as soon as I walk into the kitchen, "go and sit at the table and eat this. It's probably the best place to have a meeting with all of us anyway. Jynx and the guys are already here, and so are Pete and Elijah. We're just waiting for Lyric and the guys, and they shouldn't be too much longer."

I nod, taking the plate of delicious smelling pasta over to the table and then chuckling as I see that all of Jynx's men and Jynx herself have bowls in front of them.

"We couldn't help it," Ace shrugs, stuffing another bite into his mouth.

"It smelled far too good to resist," Pete adds, and I notice for the first time that he and Elijah both have bowls in front of them too.

"I can never resist Rafe's cooking, and he offered," Jynx adds with a shrug, and I smile proudly as I take a seat, Rafe sitting next to me with his own bowl.

"It's a good job that I made extra so we could have a leftover night later this week," he comments, and then adds, "Fortunately, there's enough for Lyric and her men too. I do not want to know what will happen if Lyric decides she wants some, and I don't have enough to give her."

Jynx winces and replies before I do, “Yeah, I wouldn’t want to test that either. I mean, she nearly cried when she ran out of pickled onions the other day, and it was seconds before Jonah gave her another jar.”

“It was serious, okay,” Lyric suddenly announces as she walks into the room. None of us noticed that she had arrived. “Something smells amazing.”

“I’ll get you a bowl,” Rafe grins, starting to get up.

“You eat your food, man. We can help ourselves. We know where everything is by now,” Dominic chuckles, and Rafe nods, sitting back down and eating more.

Once everyone is seated and eating happily, Pete asks, “Okay, so show me the message. I’ll see if I can trace back the number first, although that seems like a long shot.”

“And if you give me the coordinates, I can try and see if I can find the location. Hopefully, it will be a lot easier than the last set of coordinates that we tried to find,” Ace suggests, pulling out his laptop as well.

It’s coming in pretty handy to have them both working on all things technical because it means that we’re getting things done a lot quicker than they would be if we only had Pete working on it, and that’s what we need right now: speed.

I read the coordinates off to Ace before I hand my phone over to Pete so that he can do his thing. I have no idea what it involves, so it’s just better for me to give him my phone and let him do what he needs to do.

We’re silent and tense as we wait for what will hopefully be good news, the sound being the scraping of utensils on empty bowls as we finish eating.

Only a few minutes later, a lot sooner than I thought we'd have answers, Pete speaks up, "The phone number belongs to a burner, and I'm trying to triangulate the location to the nearest tower. It is still on for the moment, but I wouldn't suggest calling it or even messaging because we know that she's in a perilous situation, and we don't want to alert anyone to her whereabouts. I just need it to stay on for a few more minutes."

"Brilliant, that's actually good news. Hopefully, we can trace it, and she doesn't turn it off. She must know that we'll be trying to trace where she is, so hopefully, she will keep it on for as long as she safely can," Creed replies.

"Exactly," Pete adds, his eyes focused on his screen.

"I've found the coordinates as well," Ace adds once Pete has finished. "They're quite far away; we'll need to take the jet to get there, and then there's maybe a two-hour drive, which isn't so bad. They seem to be leading to the middle of nowhere, but after some hacking of some things that I probably shouldn't have hacked, I can see that there's a huge house, I mean bigger than our house, huge kind of house, and our house isn't fucking small. It looks old too, and I'd be willing to bet that there's some kind of basement."

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“Which is most likely where Rylie and anyone else Hunt has is being kept. He seems to be the kind of person who would like the whole dungeon thing,” Rip points out.

“Good point,” Ace replies, “anyway, we should be able to get the jet ready on pretty short notice.”

Jynx nods, “Yeah, Carter is on standby anyway, so as soon as we’re ready, we can head off.”

“She sent another message,” Pete interrupts suddenly, his words surprising me, as he adds, “It’s a photograph.”

“Of what?” I ask, infinitely curious.

“Erm, a duck, on a pond,” he replies.

“What?” Lyric asks and then looks at me, “Is that some kind of hidden message between you two?”

I shake my head, “Not that I remember.”

Ace frowns, “Can I try something?”

Handing the phone over to Ace, Pete replies, “Yeah, of course. It could be a coincidence, but from what I’ve learned about Rylie so far, I don’t think it is. The signal has now gone as well, so I’m pretty sure she sent the message and then turned the phone off.”

“Did you manage to get her location?” Trick asks.

“I managed to get a rough location before it cut out, and it’s fairly close to where the house that Ace found is, so we can assume that she’s there and has somehow managed to get a communication out to us,” Peter replies.

“I thought so,” Ace mutters, gaining all of our attention again.

When he doesn’t continue, Jensen smiles and asks, “What did you find?”

Ace looks up and winces slightly as he replies, “Shit, sorry, guys. The photo has information embedded in it. It’s not a simple photograph. It would probably be best if I try to decode it on a big screen.”

“Use the one in the front room. At least we’ll all be able to see what you find on it then. It must be important if she’s risked sending it.” Atlas suggests.

We all get up and follow Ace into the front room, taking seats where we can while he sets everything up so that it’s showing on the TV, and then getting to work. We stay silent, not wanting to disturb him as we watch him work, and admittedly, it does take him a while, with Pete making quiet suggestions that seem to be helping, and he’s obviously the only one who actually understands what Ace is doing right now.

Eventually, a little box appears over the picture, and even I know that it’s asking for a password.

Ace looks up and around at us all as he says, “It would save us quite a lot of time if any of you who knew Rylie could suggest a password suggestion. Otherwise, I’ll have to run a codebreaker, and that could take a few days at least to find the right password.”

Atlas frowns, “And, Rylie obviously deemed this important for us to know now so, we don’t want to make a move on the location until we know what information this photograph holds. Which means it could hold everything up if we don’t know the password.”

“Fuck,” Cash mutters with a frown.

A couple of the guys start to suggest passwords, none of which work, and Jynx even suggests a couple that don’t work. I stay silent, thinking over everything that I know about Rylie. We know that she wants us to gain access to it because it was sent to us, specifically, it was sent to me, so that would make me assume that it would be something that was reasonably easy for me to guess.

“Try Red Girl,” I suggest randomly. When I get curious looks, I add, “It was sent to me, so I assume it’s something that I can easily guess since she wants us to have this information. Red was the name of her girlfriend, and she always called me girl. In fact, she even said it in the first message that she sent. It’s worth a shot.”

“You make a good point,” Ace replies as he types it in and presses enter. There are a few seconds where I feel the flood of disappointment as I think that it’s not going to work, and then Ace cheers as loads of files start popping up on the screen, “We’re in. Good work, Ever.”

“Alright, what are we looking at?” Lyric asks, scooting forward in her seat and squinting at the screen.

“If I were a betting man,” Rome starts.

“Which you are,” Jynx points out, making him smirk.

“Which I am,” Rome concedes, “then I would be willing to bet that it’s the

information that she was supposed to get to Mr R before she went missing. She's obviously found a way to get it to us."

"I hadn't thought of that, but that makes sense," Rafe replies, and I nod in agreement.

"Well, let's see what is in it. We don't need to go through everything, but it will give us a better idea of what we're dealing with," Trick suggests.

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Ace nods, "I'm just going to pick a random file since there doesn't seem to be much rhyme or reason to it."

"Fair enough," Trick replies as we all watch curiously.

He clicks on a file, and lots of photographs of people come up. He picks one at random, and as soon as it loads, it becomes even less clear what they mean.

"They're employees, maybe?" I ask, unsure but aware that the level of knowledge on each person as Ace starts to click through more is extensive and more than a boss should have. This is something else.

"I think it's training, or how to train them?" Jensen suggests, "I mean, it lists their weaknesses, how to control them, what can be gained by employing them, how to ensure their loyalty. Some of them are incredibly well-trained ex-soldiers, some of them are hackers, and some seem to just work in the offices of extremely powerful people."

"It's almost like he's trying to create an army, people who will blindly follow what he wants, and judging from some of the comments, if they don't do what he wants them to, then he kills them," Rage adds, his voice dark with the realisation.

"Gauld said that Hunt said that he was training people, so that would make sense," I point out.

“So he researches them and then exploits them so that they do the dirty work for him, gathering information and things like that. I mean, some of those people seem to be employed under extremely powerful people. Hunt could have been manipulating and controlling some of the country’s most powerful people for years,” Luc adds horror setting in as the depth of the situation truly begins to sink in.

“Fuck,” I say harshly. It seems to be the only phrase that will work right now.

“It makes things a lot more complicated.” Creed points out.

Everyone murmurs in agreement as Ace carries on flicking through, and he says, “All the ones that haven’t done what he’s requested or that he’s run out of use for have dead written in big red letters over their picture, so he’s definitely taking them out if they don’t get him what he wants.”

“Go back!” Jonah suddenly exclaims as he jumps up from his seat, his eyes frantic.

What the fuck is going on?

Ace doesn’t question him and simply goes back one picture.

“Another one?” Jonah asks, a desperation in his voice that has me confused until the photo goes back, and I find myself staring at someone vaguely familiar, although I can’t place where I recognize him from.

“What the fuck,” Ezra exclaims loudly.

“Isn’t that Quinn?” Atty asks, sounding like he’s in complete and utter disbelief.

“Quinn, as in the one that ran away and didn’t come back?” Peter questions as he pulls his eyes away from the screen and then jumps up immediately.

I follow his gaze and immediately do the same, rushing over to where Lyric is staring at the screen, tears streaming down her face. Her men are in just as much disbelief as she is, so Pete, Jynx, and I try to console her before realising that it's useless and she needs them.

“Guys!” I say harshly, “Lyric needs you. Snap out of it; we’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

My words seem to have the desired effect as the three of us back up so that they can surround her and comfort her. Once they seem to have Lyric calmer and they themselves are a bit calmer, we all turn to look at Ace.

“Alright, tell us what you can. Why is Quinn there? How is he there?” Trick asks Ace, who nods.

“First, he’s alive, all of the ones who were dead have the stamp across their photographs. He’s alive, and I read through while everyone was in shock, and this is what I know: he’s been there for four years.”

“That coincides with when we thought he left. He didn’t leave he was fucking captured,” Ezra curses as he jumps up and starts pacing.

Ace nods. We’re all aware of the Quinn situation. It’s one of those things that we don’t talk about because of how much it still hurts them, and I can’t even begin to imagine what they must be feeling right now.

Ace glances at Trick to see if he should continue and when Trick nods he says, “Hunt wanted him for his training, and skillset, he’s incredibly well fucking trained and because he has links with Mr Rising.”

“What?” I ask.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Dominic adds, “he never said anything.”

“He wouldn’t. We didn’t know of Mr R when he was still with us.” Lyric adds, her voice sad but strong.

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“And Mr R wouldn’t have known of the link because we have an agreement in place about your pasts that’s similar to the one that we have for when Jynx works with us.” I point out.

“We need to call Mr R, now,” Lucien orders, and Trick nods in agreement, pulling out his phone and dialing, putting it on speaker so that we can all hear.

“Trick, is everything okay?” Mr R starts.

Trick wastes no time, knowing that Lyric and the guys must be going out of their freaking minds right now, “How do you know, Quinn Relipsek?”

“Where did you hear that name?” Mr R’s voice is sharp.

We all share a perplexed look, not expecting that response from him as Trick replies, “He’s a part of Lyric’s family. They thought that he went off on an adventure that he was prone to do, except he never came back. They thought it was because of personal reasons. Except, we’ve just had a break in the Rylie case, and one of the people in the files is Quinn. He’s still alive, and it says that there’s a link with you.”

“Fuck,” Mr R curses, and before any of us can question him, he continues, “I honestly thought that he was dead. We were sent a finger and a pretty fucking convincing video. You have to believe me that if I had any idea that Lyric was the woman that he was so fucking in love with, I would have told you guys. He didn’t give me any information on his family other than to speak about the woman he was in love with and his brothers, which I now know meant you guys. Like most people at the organisation we kept the details of our private lives secret, but that was especially

so for Quinn because he wasn't actually technically employed by us. I had no way of finding you guys and telling you what we thought at the time had happened, and we fucking tried. In fact, I still have some of the tech team trying to locate Quinn's family so we can inform them. He kept you incredibly well protected."

I glance at Lyric again, and it's no surprise that she's got tears streaming down her face.

"That sounds like Quinn," Atlas smiles, and I remember that he knew him quite well since he came to this town so often.

"If I had known that it was you guys, I would have told you immediately," Mr R says again, and I know that it's important to him that they know that.

"We know," Ezra replies, his voice tight with emotion.

"How do you know him?" I ask, infinitely curious and sensing that the others are reeling too much from the revelation to say anything else.

"We grew up in the same town actually, and he used to do some jobs for me every now and then. I'm sure you know that he has a very unique skill set; he was happy to help me out, and then he went missing on a case that I had no idea was linked to Hunt, and we got the finger and the video." Mr R explains.

"Fucking hell," Jensen mutters, "that's wild."

"I'm so fucking glad that he's alive," Mr R's words are filled with relief, and it's evident that he genuinely cares about Quinn.

"Obviously, we will extract him along with Rylie," Trick tells him.

“Of course. Do you know where they are?” he asks.

“Yeah, Rylie somehow managed to get a message and an encrypted photo sent to Ever. The photo contains hundreds of files, and so far, we’ve managed to find that they’re people that are of interest to him, and as far as we can tell, they’re involved with or directly under the control of Hunt.” Ace explains.

It’s a unanimous and unspoken agreement that we’re going to leave Lyric and her men to gather themselves before we try to get them involved in the conversation again. They aren’t currently capable after everything that has just been revealed and need to get on the same page before they can tap back in, which is entirely understandable.

The rest of us all listen intently as Trick explains all of the details that we have so far, and Mr R asks the relevant questions.

When Trick is done and he’s fully caught up, Mr R asks, “What do you need for the extraction?”

“We’re going to need Alaric and his team if he’s available, Zemi and her team, and a couple of other teams as well. Obviously, we’ll be going in, and so will Jynx’s team and Noel’s.” Trick replies and then looks over at Lyric and her men, who are now listening, their features stony but determined.

Ezra and Creed share a look, and then Ezra adds, “Creed and I will also be attending. Lyric and the others need to stay here but we can’t not help. We need to get him out.”

“I thought you might,” Mr R replies, “I will get it all sorted. Let me know as soon as possible when you’re going out, and I’ll have everyone meet you at the location that you decide.”

“We will give you the information as soon as we have it,” Trick replies and then hangs up.

“Right, the first thing we need to do is see if we can get some live footage of the area so that we can see what we’re dealing with and if we’re going to encounter any issues,” Pete says, already tapping away on his laptop.

“You have to bring him home, Ever,” Lyric suddenly announces, staring at me pleading.

I get up, grasping her hands in mine and looking into her dismal and hurting eyes, as I reply, “Lyric, I promise you that we will bring him home.”

I will do everything in my fucking power to ensure that I don’t break that promise.

“Thank you,” Lyric replies, relaxing back into the seat as if the sheer weight of the revelation is pinning her down.

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I share a worried look with her men, and sounding slightly unsure because of how my suggestion might be received, I say, “Why don’t you guys head home? It’s gone midnight. Lyric needs some time to decompress.” When they start to protest, although not that heavily, I add, “We all need to go to bed; it’s been a long day already, and we need to look at this with fresh eyes. There’s not much we can do now, even if Pete manages to get a live aerial of the building, because it’s night, we aren’t going to be able to see much of anything.”

“Ever is right,” Jynx agrees standing up, “we all need to get some rest and we can meet up here first thing in the morning to really get started and put all the plans in motion to go and get Rylie and Quinn.”

“We will be no good to either of them if we’re running on empty,” Atlas adds.

“Tired agents make mistakes.” Rage says, quoting Mr R and something that he’s drilled into us multiple times.

Jonah nods as he looks around at his family, his worried eyes falling on Lyric, “They’re right. Come on, let’s get home. We can come back first thing in the morning, but stress is not good for the baby, and although it’s unavoidable in this situation, it is something that we can minimize.”

“Yeah, okay,” Lyric replies, standing up and sounding absolutely exhausted.

Everyone else gets up as well, sharing a relieved look because we all know that Lyric needs to get some proper rest.

“I’ll have breakfast ready for everyone by seven tomorrow. Come up when you want, and as soon as everyone is here, we’ll eat and get properly onto planning the extraction.” Rafe suggests as we walk everyone to the door.

“I’ll call Carter first thing in the morning and have him put the plane on standby and prepare everything for us, so we can just leave when we want to,” Jynx adds, and I can see the relief starting to flow through Lyric and her men that we’re not being idle when it comes to this and that we will be getting to it as quickly as we possibly can.

“That’s a good idea,” Riot replies.

“I’m hoping that we can head out tomorrow evening, fly overnight, and then start our surveillance by the next day. We just need to ensure that we can see Hunt and maybe even Rylie or Quinn, and then we can move in.” Trick replies.

“Great, we’ll go over it more tomorrow. For now, everyone needs to go to bed,” Elijah reinforces as we all start to linger, and it effectively gets us going again.

“He means you too, Pete,” Ace says to Peter with a raised eyebrow and a knowing look.

Pete looks mildly guilty, like he’s been caught, as he replies, “Fine, but I will be here at seven sharp to eat, drink copious amounts of coffee, and get this sorted.”

Ace grins, “I think we all will.”

Jynx heads out of the door, threading her fingers through Lyric’s and prompting them all to follow after her.

“Call me if you need me, Lyric,” I call after her and she turns back to smile over her shoulder at me.

“I will, don’t worry. I am absolutely exhausted though, like you pointed out, and I’m going to try and get some sleep so that I can be fully awake tomorrow morning and engaged in the conversation. I don’t want to miss some kind of important information just because I’m tired.” She replies.

“Sounds like a good plan,” I reply.

Once the door has closed behind them, there’s just a moment of silence before Riot says, “Fucking hell, Quinn.”

“Him leaving and disappearing really hurt them, and now, to find out that actually he never intended to leave them, and was doing a favor for Mr R and was then kidnapped, that’s got to be really messing with their heads,” Rafe adds, his face set in a deep frown, and his arms crossed over his chest.

“I can’t even imagine what they’re going through, all we need to do is make sure that we’re there for them,” I say, the worry undeniable in my voice.

“Let’s get to bed. We need to get up early tomorrow, and I have a feeling that it’s going to be a long day,” Trick starts and then looks at Rafe, Rage, and me and adds, “You three especially need to get some sleep. You’ve had a really long day today, and we need you well-rested for whatever is going to happen tomorrow.”

I nod, “You don’t need to tell me twice. I’m exhausted.”

We all say goodnight when we get to the landing at the top of the stairs and then split off into our separate bedrooms. I put pyjamas on when I went downstairs early to greet everyone earlier, so I settle into bed and put something on the TV to hopefully distract my mind from the eventful evening and day actually. Otherwise, I’m never going to be able to get sleep.

Surprisingly, or maybe not surprisingly, since today we managed to fit in enough stuff for at least a week, I fall asleep quickly, and if I do dream, I don't remember.

"This smells amazing," I tell Rafe as I walk into the kitchen at six thirty the next morning. "Do you need any help?"

He pulls me close and kisses me before smiling down at me and replying, "No, everything is pretty much doing its own thing. We've got twenty minutes before things need to start coming out, and we can start plating everything up. The bacon, eggs, and sausage links are all in the warming trays on the table, so they're ready for people to help themselves, and I set the table already."

"You've been up a while, huh?" I ask as I pour myself a coffee and then pour one for him as well.

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Rafe shrugs as we take our drinks to the table and sit down, “Yeah, I couldn’t sleep. I’m worried about them, and I’m worried about what sort of condition Quinn could be in after all of this time. I mean, he was there for years.”

“I know what you mean, and if Hunt was willing to cut off his finger, fuck knows what else has been done to him. That finger had to have belonged to him as well because Mr R would’ve tested it extensively.” I reply it’s something that’s been bugging me.

“Jonah and the guys will be aware of that though, and they’ll be able to help him. Not only that, but Mr R employs some of the best-trained therapists in the world, so he’s going to have all the support that he needs,” Rafe adds.

“Yeah, that makes me feel a bit better,” I reply.

“He’s also got to get his head around the changes that have happened since he’s been gone. I mean, Lyric’s pregnant,” Trick says, clearly having overheard our conversation as he takes a seat next to me.

“Fuck, yeah. That’s going to be an adjustment. Do you want me to get you a coffee?” I ask him since he can’t carry it while on his crutches.

He smiles, “No, it’s okay. Jensen is doing it.”

The room quickly fills up with the other guys, and Rafe and Rage get back up to pull everything out of the oven as we all help him lay the table. We’ve just finished, and I’m on my second cup when we hear the front door open, and all of the others stride

in together. I check my watch, and sure enough, it's seven on the dot.

Everyone looks ready to go as they help themselves to coffee and food and sit down at the table while Pete and Ace sit next to each other and pull out their laptops as they both start to work and eat at the same time.

Their dedication and readiness to get to work immediately impresses me and makes me proud at the same time. This is why we work so well as a team.

“Noel and the guys are all on standby,” Elijah says, and then adds, “I can get them to come up now if you want them in on the debrief.”

“We could really do with them here, but I don’t want to waste any more time, so could you just fill them in later?” Trick replies.

“Yeah, of course.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Itake it that you two are already trying to get the satellite imagery up?” Trick asks Pete and Ace, who just hum and nod in agreement, making the rest of us smile, even Lyric and her men, who all look worried sick.

I know if I were them, I wouldn’t be able to stop my worry until I knew that he was safe. I am worried about the effect it's going to have on Lyric though, and judging from the way that all of her men are watching her so closely, they’re also worrying about it. I’m really glad that they aren’t all coming with us. Not only am I not sure it would be a good idea for Lyric, but also because we don’t know what we’re going to find, and that really fucking worries me.

“Okay, so what’s the plan bossman?” Atty asks Trick.

“It’s reasonably straightforward. We’re going to wait for Ace and Pete to find the imagery, which will hopefully show us if the place is occupied and give us a heads-up as to what we’re dealing with. Once we’ve established that, then we need to inform everyone who’s helping us and get them set up where they need to be, and we can head straight out. I want to do at least a small amount of surveillance in person before we head in so that we know the best entrances and exits and all of that.” Trick starts.

“So you want to head out this evening?” Jynx asks, her phone in her hand.

“Ideally, yes, depending on what the guys can find out from the satellite imagery. It’s going to take us a while to fly there, so if we aim to leave this evening after dinner, then we should get there at about three in the morning. That will give us enough time to coordinate with the other teams and get them in place as well as set up so that we can keep an eye on them to find the exits. We’re going to have to move fairly quickly because we don’t want to risk them realising we’re there and putting any security measures in place.” Trick replies while everyone listens intently.

“I think it’s also worth noting that this guy was able to procure an incredibly rare poison,” Mason adds, pointing out something that hadn’t actually occurred to me. “If he can get a hold of something like that, and a lot of it too, then we need to be extremely careful.”

“Mase is right. I think I’d even suggest wearing some sort of breathing apparatus to make sure we didn’t inhale anything nasty,” Jynx adds thoughtfully.

“I can talk to Mr R about getting some breathing gear. I know the tech team has some pretty advanced stuff where they’ve streamlined the design so that it won’t affect our view or anything like that and still keep us protected,” Trick replies, looking to Pete for clarification since he’s the only one of us that spends a considerable amount of time with the tech team.

“Pete?” Elijah nudges him since he’s still engrossed in his laptop.

“What?” Pete asks, glancing up, “Sorry.”

“Jynx suggested that we use a breathing apparatus when we go in since Hunt has proven to be a very well-connected adversary,” I explain.

Pete nods, “Yeah, that’s a good idea. The tech team has some awesome equipment that’s just finished going through all the checks and is ready to go. We should be able to take it with us, and the design is fucking awesome. It’s not heavy or restricting at all, and it tells you if there’s anything harmful in the air around you and what it is.”

“Wow, that is really fucking cool,” Mal replies, looking thoroughly impressed.

“The tech team are some of the best in the world,” Dominic points out. “I’m glad they’ve decided to use their skills for good.”

“Me too,” Pete agrees and then immediately goes back to what he’s doing.

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“Well, there you go,” Trick smiles. “I’m going to ring Mr R and fill him in on the plan so far. He’s already texted me to see how it’s going; it’s obvious that he really cares about Quinn.”

“While you’re doing that, I’m going to call Carter and make sure he’s got the plane ready and that we should be heading out tonight,” Jynx adds as she pushes away from the table and stands up.

“The rest of us can’t really do anything until the guys have found the imagery,” Lyric says.

“Sorry, like the second location, it's taking a bit of time to get the imagery. We’re currently working together to hijack one of the satellites,” Ace explains, still typing away.

“But at the same time, not show that we’re there because I don’t think even Mr R would be able to get us out of trouble if we were caught using it,” Pete adds, “and because of that, it’s taking us a while to do.”

“Is it going to be done by this evening?” Ezra asks them.

Ace nods, “Absolutely, but it will take us a few more hours.”

“Got it.” He replies, with understanding, that we don’t want to cut any corners now, especially not with a job that’s so big and that personally affects us.

“Does everyone who needs their gear have it with them?” Rage asks.

“Yeah, it’s all in the car,” Jynx replies, “we’ve got Ezra and Creed’s stuff in our car too.”

“I’ve filled Noel, Marty, and Callen in on what’s happening. They’re getting their stuff ready, and they’ll meet us at the airport later.” Elijah adds as he looks down at his screen.

“Great. I have a feeling that we’re going to need all the help that we can get,” Luc replies.

“We definitely don’t want to take any chances, not with this one,” Ezra adds.

“No, we’ve got two of our own there. We won’t cut any corners and risk them,” Atlas confirms.

“Alright, Mr R has put Alaric in charge of all of the other teams and looped him into the Rylie and Quinn situation, which he had some knowledge of anyway. We’ve got to contact him when we’re leaving, and he’ll make sure that everyone is ready to meet us at the location. He’s also going to have all of the breathing equipment for us. There is a limited number though, which changes how we’re going to be able to go into the property.” Trick explains as he walks back into the room.

“In what way?” Creed asks.

“Alaric and the other teams are going to surround the property and cover all the exits while we go in and get Rylie and Quinn. We’ll all search the house and call the others when we find Rylie and Quinn. We’re also going to be keeping an eye out for Hunt, and we’re going to have to check the air using our masks. We’ll try and drive as many people out to the periphery team waiting outside, then we can call the back up in to get anyone else that’s in there,” Trick explains.

I nod, "That makes sense."

"I hate to be the devil's advocate, but are we sure that Rylie is there?" Rip asks.

I nod, "Yes, her message said to come and get her, so we know that's where she is, and it's not just a location that she wants us to check out."

"Good," Rip replies.

"Fuck, but there's no way to know if Quinn is there," Lyric suddenly exclaims, panic hitting her tone.

"Listen to me," Atlas says firmly, stopping her panic in its tracks, "we will scour the place for him, and if he's not there, I promise you that we will find him. We will not take on any other jobs until he's found and home safe with you. It will become our number one priority."

Lyric nods, clearly trusting Atlas, "Thank you."

"He's right," Trick adds, "we'll put everything else on hold until we find him, and we'll use every advantage that we have because of our connection to the organisation."

"And judging from Mr R's reaction so far, we won't have to worry about him not allowing us to use the resources at the organisation to find him," Jensen points out, having stayed reasonably quiet so far.

"Thank you," Jonah replies.

"There's no need to thank us. We know that you would do the same for us if we were in the same situation," Rage replies.

We don't really know what to do with ourselves while we wait for the guys to find the imagery of the location, and while Lyric and her guys end up sitting in the front room staring at some comedy on the TV and quietly talking along with Jynx, some of the others are spread all throughout the house doing various different things in order to keep themselves occupied. I'm not too fond of the waiting game. I want to get going, and I want to rescue them. I want to be doing fucking something because right now, I feel like I'm going out of my mind.

I sit in the front room for a bit before I get up and head to the weapons room and start cleaning weapons and taking inventory because we're going to be taking a fair few of them with us. The only time I come out of there is to help Rafe with lunch and then dinner. I find that the methodical cleaning and sorting of the weapons is soothing and helps to keep my mind on something else.

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I'm about to disappear back into the room, aware that it's getting late and we're now not likely to be heading out tonight, when Pete suddenly exclaims excitedly. Throughout the whole dinner, Ace and Peter stayed silent, ate with one hand, and carried on typing and comparing screens with the other one.

"We're in," Ace grins proudly and then promptly stands up. "We'll put it on the screen in the front room so that we can all see what's going on."

No one questions him or bothers to say anything at all, really, as we follow them into the front room and take our seats, waiting for it to load.

"Wow, okay, so it's a massive fucking house then," I point out the obvious as we see it from above for the first time.

"Oh yeah, it's huge and pretty much looks the same as the stills we were able to find, so at least there's that," Ace replies, and we all study the video feed before us.

"There's a lot going on," Jensen points out as we watch people moving in and out of the house.

"Right first, we need to check all the entry points and things like that, just to give us a vague idea for now, and then we can reconfirm and get a better idea when we are actually there." Trick suggests, and Ace nods as Peter looks over his shoulder.

We all make a note of the various points of entrance and things that we need to make sure that we're aware of for when we breach the premises. The last thing we need is to be caught off guard because we rushed this process.

“There’s a van coming up the drive,” Dominic points out, and Ace zooms in on the van approaching the house up the long driveway.

We all watch as Ace manages to zoom in well enough that we can see the expressions on the people's faces. It also means that we can see just how well-armed they all are. Four heavily armed people get out of the large van, and they all look around the area as if looking for threats, their hands on their weapons as they head toward the back of the van.

“I think they’re transporting something pretty damn important,” Jynx points out as we all watch intently.

“There’s our confirmation that Hunt is there,” Luc says as he points to the doorway of the house, and we see Hunt step out onto the vast front porch as he crosses his arms over his chest and smiles at the van.

“That’s more than we hoped to find on this surveillance,” Atlas murmurs.

“I’ve taken stills to go down in the report,” Peter says, and then Ace switches the camera view back to the van just in time to see the guards notice Hunt and nod.

We watch with trepidation as they pull the door open and aim their weapons inside. I don’t think any of us were prepared for what, or rather who steps out of the back of the van.

“Rylie,” I say.

“Quinn,” Lyric adds.

They both look worse for wear, beaten and bloody, but they’re upright and walking, which is a good sign. They also both have smirks of defiance on their faces as they

keep their heads held high and stare in Hunt's direction. I can't help the surprised laugh that escapes me when Rylie blows him a kiss with her middle finger and Quinn finger waves at him sarcastically. They are clearly enjoying pushing Hunt's buttons.

"I love that he's still got that snark to him," Jonah smiles, emotions clouding his eyes.

"Either they are the only two that Hunt is trying to break to get to work for him, or they're the ones that are causing the most trouble and, therefore, need the armed transport." Rage suggests. "We're not going to know if any of the other people that Gauld mentioned are there until we get there."

"Yeah, I think I'd be more inclined to think that it was the second reason," Ezra chuckles, "And that's going on how well I know Quinn and also what we just witnessed of the two of them together."

"Yeah, Rylie's not been captured for long, but it's clear that they've struck up an alliance at the very least," Rome adds.

"I think they might be the only ones there. I mean, Hunt has just lost his people inside Mr R's organisation, and from the information that he has managed to get out, he knows that there's a wealth of information there that could offer him a serious advantage in most aspects. It also gives him access to some very powerful people and technologies that certainly aren't widely available." Rafe suggests, making a really good point.

"That would make sense. It also presents him with a challenge because he was caught, and Hunt seems like the kind of person that would enjoy the challenge that it would bring him to get back in," Rip says thoughtfully.

"Whatever the reason is, at least we know for certain that our three main interests are there, and we know the layout as best we can from the view that we have. we'll have

more information when we get there, but at least we know where to send Alaric and the other teams to keep the escape routes covered.” Trick adds thoughtfully and then turns to look at Jynx, “Is the plane ready?”

“Yep, ready and waiting for us.” Jynx confirms, “Are we heading out?”

“Yes, let them know we’re on our way down,” Trick replies and the rest of us start to stand to get everything ready.

“On it,” Jynx replies.

“Atlas, can you message Alaric and let him know that we’re on the way and our rough arrival time? Tell him that we’ll call him when we land,” Trick orders. When he gets a nod from Atlas, he turns his attention to Elijah, “Can you message Noel and the guys and get them to meet us down at the airport? Make sure that they’re ready to go.”

“Yeah, absolutely,” Elijah replies before adding, “All of our stuff is ready to go in the car.”

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“Great,” Trick replies, “those of you that need to put your bags in the car, do it now we’re leaving in ten.”

“Got it,” I reply, and then turn on my heel, taking the steps two at a time and rushing into my room to grab my bag before I rush back down the stairs and follow everyone else out to the cars.

I throw my bag into the back with the rest of them and then turn to face Lyric, Jonah, Dominic, and Lucien, who are all staying behind. I hug the guys first, promising that we’re going to bring him back.

I then turn my attention to Lyric. As I hug her, I say, “We’re going to bring him home. I am here for you, and you can text me whenever you want. If I can reply, I will. I will also message you as soon as we’ve got him.”

“Thank you,” Lyric replies simply, her voice watery.

I step back so that I can look at her and add, “I do think you need to be aware that he may be different. He’s been captured for years, and we have no idea what kind of effect that’s had on him,” I feel like I have to warn her because I think the shock of realising he’s not the same would be worse if she weren’t prepared for the possibility.

She nods, steel resolve overtaking her features, “Yes, I know. I’m prepared, and I think I’ll be more worried if he comes back and pretends that he’s okay. I’ve got Mr R’s therapists on standby. I have their numbers, and I’m ready to call as soon as he agrees. Jynx also gave me the numbers of the therapist who is on D’s payroll, which he might feel more comfortable with. We’ve dealt with trauma like this before, and

although it hasn't been years worth of capture, we know we can help and support him through it all."

"He's not alone," Jonah adds, pulling her under his arm and holding on tightly.

"Good," I reply, smiling softly, "I just wanted to make sure that you were aware, that's all."

"Thank you," Lyric replies and then steps out from under Jonah's arm and pulls me into a tight hug. When she steps back, she says, "Now go bring the last piece of my family home."

"I will," I reply.

I wave as I jump into the car that's already loaded, and we head down to the airport. For a long time, this case was going nowhere, and I honestly thought that we weren't going to find Rylie, but now, finally, we've got a massive breakthrough, and by this time tomorrow, hopefully, Rylie and Quinn will be safe and back where they belong.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Once in the air, Trick pretty much orders us all to try and get some sleep, but even his tone says that he knows that's going to be pretty much impossible to do tonight. We're all amped up and raring to get this fully started so that we can get them back. This just means that the flight is long and tense. I think some of us manage to drift in and out of sleep sporadically, but none of us got a good night's sleep.

"We're coming into land, guys," Luc announces to the plane, and we all sit up in our seats as I check the time and find that it's four in the morning.

It's still winter, so we have a couple of hours before the sun comes up, which should

mean that we can still use the cover of darkness to our advantage.

“When we get out onto the tarmac, I need everyone gathered around one of the vans that Mr R has gotten for us so that you’re all aware of the plan as far as Alaric and the other teams are concerned.” Trick says as we all start to gather our stuff and get off the plane.

“Sounds good. Our team is happy to be wherever you need us,” Marty replies as we head toward the vans.

They have been relatively quiet on the plane ride here, listening when we gave them all the information that we have so far. They all understand the connection we have to this case, but since they are outsiders because they don’t know either of them, it puts them in a somewhat unique position. As always, when we do jobs, Pete will be with us, and Elijah will be with his team.

As soon as we get to the first van, Trick opens the back, and we put our stuff inside before he makes sure that everyone is close enough to hear and then calls Alaric.

“Hey Alaric, you’re on speakerphone. We just wanted to let you know that we’ve landed, and we’re going to be heading into position for the surveillance as soon as this conversation is over,” Trick starts.

“Good. We’re here. I have teams placed at every escape route that you sent to us, although we’ve had to spread ourselves a little bit thin to cover everywhere equally.”

“That’s not good. Hunt is someone that we want to be able to throw everything at,” Atlas replies, sounding worried.

“We can head out there and cover a route so that everyone doesn’t have to be so spread out,” Elijah suggests, checking in with his team, who all nod in agreement.

“Yeah, that would work great unless you need them to breach the main house with you?” Alaric asks.

“No, we’ve got Ezra and Creed, as well as Jynx and her men. We’re covered,” Trick replies.

“As soon as you give us the go-ahead, we’ll all converge on the building to make sure that no one escapes out of the exits. When we do that, we will be leaving a skeleton crew on the roads leading out. We should be able to catch everyone at the house. I’ve got a lot of people here,” Alaric replies.

“Yeah, that works. We can then try and flush some people out of the house toward you as we clear the house and look for Rylie and Quinn.” Rage replies.

“I’ll message Elijah our location and let the others know that they will be arriving. The breathing apparatus that you requested is in your van, and they’ve written short instructions, although they said that if you had any questions to ask Pete since he was the main designer on it.”

I turn to look at Pete and raise my eyebrow because with all that explaining yesterday, not once did he mention that he was actually the leading designer. Pete just shrugs with a smile; we all know that he doesn’t like to toot his own horn, but seriously? I will be having a word later.

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“What about how we’re communicating through this?” Trick asks, frowning slightly.

“Well, you, Cash, and Jensen will be running the proper surveillance of the house, hence the van that you’ve got. Everyone will be wearing bodycams, and you will be able to switch through all of the feeds so you know exactly what is going on. Everyone will also have earpieces that you can use to contact people. However, I am the only one who will be on the same frequency as you guys because I’m in charge of the perimeter team. That way, we can communicate, and you can let me know when we need to head in. Trick, you guys will be responsible for that because I imagine that we’re not going to want to risk the others talking.” Alaric starts to explain.

“Yeah, we can do that,” Cash replies.

I can see the tension in all three of them that they’re going to be watching instead of participating, but there’s no denying that we need this help to keep everything running smoothly and keep everyone in the loop. There are so many of us that it's vital.

“There will be seconds between when we send the teams into the house and when we tell you to make your approach,” Trick replies, “the teams entering the house are going to do so as quietly as possible. As soon as we see the first people being alerted to their presence, I want you guys to come in fast and hard unless the teams inside state otherwise.”

“Got it,” Alaric replies, respecting who Trick is as a leader, “Everyone needs to be on the lookout for Hunt, its inevitable that he’s going to try to escape, he’s been free and getting away with this sort of shit for a long fucking time and he’s not going to give it

up without a fight. Not only that, but he has been in this position before and managed to escape.”

“Understood,” several of us reply together. We all know that he’s elusive and difficult to catch. Otherwise, we would’ve caught him by now, and he wouldn’t be the massive threat that he is.

“Our main focus is getting Rylie and Quinn out, but one of them may know where in the house that Hunt is, and if they’re able to tell us, then we’ll use that to our advantage.” Jynx comments.

“Of course,” Alaric replies, a smile in his voice.

“Right, we’ll send Elijah and his team your way, and we’ll get to the location now. As soon as we’re in the vans, we’ll put the earpieces in and then let you know when we’re going to head in. We want to observe for a while first to make sure that we don’t get surprised by anything,” Trick explains.

“That sounds good. That’s definitely how I would play it,” Alaric replies, making Trick smile, and then he adds, “We’ll talk soon.”

Once Alaric has hung up, Trick looks around at everyone and says, “Elijah, you and your team take one of the vans. You’ll be on our frequency, so you’ll know what’s going on before the others. Jynx, you and your team, along with Ezra and Creed, take the second van and go to the agreed place to keep an eye on the main entrance road but close to the house. We’ll get as close to the gate as we can. We’re going to have to climb over in order to get in.”

“Got it,” Jynx replies.

“I should be able to get us through the gate and keep them open without alerting

anyone inside that there's anything wrong with it," Ace says. "I just need to get close enough to the gate."

"I can help," Pete offers.

"Great, we'll have you two do that, and then we'll head in, and Cash, Jensen, and I will keep an eye on things from out here," Trick replies.

"Sounds good," Rome replies.

Everyone splits off to their own vans, and it's not until I'm in ours, sitting between Cash and Jensen, surrounded by screens and equipment, that I quietly ask, "Are you two okay?"

I would ask Trick too, but he's sitting up front with Atlas and Luc, and I know that they are both checking in on him to make sure that he's okay.

Jensen nods, but although he smiles, the skin around his eyes is tight with tension. When I just raise my eyebrow at him, he sighs and rubs his thumb over the back of my hand.

"I'm struggling with not going with you guys. There's a small voice in my head telling me that I'm well enough to do it, even though I know it would be a big risk, and that isn't necessarily true." He replies honestly.

"I know it's hard. We all know I wouldn't be coping very well if the situation was reversed, but that voice is wrong, and you wouldn't be able to forgive yourself if something happened to one of us because you couldn't do something as quickly as you usually do." I tell him, being relatively blunt because that's what he needs right now.

“She’s right,” Cash replies, “as much as I hate to admit it, and as much as I want to be out there with them, we’d be more of a hindrance than we would be a help, and I know that neither of us wants to risk that.”

“You’re right. I just haven’t been in this position before, not when there’s such a big case to do. It’s a steep learning curve,” Jensen replies.

“You’re going to be able to talk to us whenever through the earpieces and you’re going to be able to see things and warn us of them before we may be able to see them, and that’s fucking invaluable, especially in a situation like this one when Hunt poses such a big and unknown threat because of the reach that he has,” I reply.

“You’ll also be able to communicate with all the other teams too and see what they’re up to and the progress that they’ve made, you’re technically going to have more information than we do,” Riot points out having easily overheard our conversation in the small confines of the van.

“Yeah, that’s true. At least we aren’t just sitting doing nothing with no information while you guys are in danger,” Jensen replies thoughtfully, looking slightly less tense.

“Exactly,” Peter replies, “we need you to help keep everyone safe. Like usual, it’s just in a slightly different capacity than it is normally.”

“That helps,” Cash replies.

“Good.”

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“We’re here. We’ve just passed where Jynx and the guys are going to be parked,” Atlas announces, effectively putting a hold on our conversation.

“It looks quiet,” Trick adds as we drive past the gates, “No, guards or none that I could see anyway.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not,” I muse.

“Well, if he wants to stay under the radar here, then having guards posted outside the entrance to his home would immediately get people talking and bring attention that he doesn’t want,” Rage suggests thoughtfully.

“That’s how I’d do it too, actually, and it's going to work in our favour.” Rafe says as we pull over not too far up the road in a little alcove that should obscure us well enough unless you are literally right next to us.

We can’t really do any surveillance from the van because we can’t park close enough without being seen, so we’re going to have to do it on foot. We also need to make sure that the van is out of the way because the guys are vulnerable right now, not that I would bet against them. They’ll still take a threat out with relative ease, but we don’t want them to have to, so they need to stay hidden. They’re also in charge of all of the communication with both groups of agents, so they have a really important role to play.

“Give me a second, and I will set everything up so all the earpieces are linked up, and we’ve got the footage up from the bodycams,” Pete says once the vehicle has stopped moving and the rest of us stay out of the way as he works. He adds, “You guys know

how to work it all from there, yes?”

Trick smiles. Pete knows that they do. Not only did we go through the training that all of the agents had to go through but also, he then ran through a few other things with us. We’re better trained than most agents, but we all know that Pete starts asking questions he knows the answers to when he gets nervous.

Because Trick knows that he answers him honestly and without snark, “Yes, we all know how to work that man. We just need you to link it all up, and then we’re done.”

Pete chuckles, “Thank you. I know that you know that, but I appreciate you answering anyway. All done.”

“Great,” Trick replies, and then adds, “Everybody sounds off.”

Everyone, including Alaric, Elijah, Jynx, and their teams, all sound off so that they can hear him loud and clear. Trick then presses a couple of buttons on the massive console that has plenty of room for the three of them to sit and observe what’s going on and says, “Sound off, guys.” Sounds of all of the other agents from the periphery team fill the van and is confirmation that everyone is in position and ready to go. “Good. Stand by and wait for the go-ahead. Detain anyone who comes from the direction of the location.”

“Yes sir,” is the resounding response that comes through the earpieces. Trick smiles and presses a button to mute both sides of the earpieces so we can’t hear them, and they can’t listen to us as he switches back to the frequency that just has us on it. “Can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Alaric replies, along with some of the others.

“Great, Ace and Pete are going to disarm the gate. Ace said that he can do it in a way

that means that the people at the house won't be warned that it's been tampered with even if they check it." Trick explains.

"Great, keep me updated." Alaric replies.

"Before we head out," Pete starts gaining our attention, "I found the blueprints to the building when we were on the plane. Obviously, they're fairly old, and there are no updated ones, but I think that we should definitely check out the basement. On the plans, it's substantial, and Hunt seems like the kind of guy that would revel in doing things in a medieval way."

"Oh yeah, he definitely would. Thanks Pete, that's a good idea," Trick replies.

"I'll come with you guys to watch your backs while you're occupied with the gate," Riot says, leaving no room for argument.

"Rip is coming with me too," Ace says, "you guys ready?"

"Yes, we're leaving now," Riot replies as he opens the back of the van, his hand on his weapon just in case. When he's sure that the coast is clear, he motions for Pete to follow him, and they both step out.

Before the door closes behind them, Trick says, "We'll be watching on the monitors, any issues whatsoever, and we'll be there."

"Got it," Riot replies with an easygoing smile, and I can hear the guys from the other van chime in their replies as well.

This always makes me nervous. No matter what job we're doing, there is usually a point where we have to split up or go in different directions. It makes sense we can't effectively do our jobs if we insist on sticking together, but at the same time, I hate

that we split up. Being in danger, life-threatening danger, and then splitting up and heading into more just seems unnatural.

Yeah, I'm not a fan of this part of our job at all.

At least we get to listen and watch everything that is going on this time.

Riot

Pete and I both stay alert as we head up the road to the gate. It's still dark, which is what we want because it gives us an advantage and cover, which is always a bonus. The downside is that it limits our field of vision too and can become a hindrance to us if they know we're here and we don't know that they are aware, especially because they know they are a lot better than we do.

Both of our hands are on our weapons, just in case we need them, but I'm hoping that we don't because we need to keep the advantage of surprise that we have for as long as possible.

"Gates in view," I say as quietly as possible to alert Ace and Rip that we're approaching. The last thing we want is friendly fire.

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“Us too,” Rip replies.

I can see their familiar silhouettes as we stay on opposite sides of the vast entryway and check to make sure that the coast is still clear. Thankfully, it is, and we move forward. We can’t risk speaking just in case we are overheard, but we know the plan, so while Ace and Peter approach the gate and start to do their thing, Rip stays facing the gate to cover them from any threats that could be coming from behind the gates and I face outwards, putting my back to them all as I move to the edge of the entranceway to make sure that I can see up the road on both directions and can warn them if any vehicles approach.

“Shouldn’t take us too long,” Ace mutters under his breath.

“Got it,” Trick says in our ears.

I have to admit that it's reassuring to have his calm and in-control voice in my ear. I know that he will always have our backs and will have his eagle eyes on everything that we may not be able to see.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Riot

Awhooshing sound behind me has me glancing over my shoulder to see the gates sliding open almost silently and Pete and Ace with proud smiles on their faces.

“All done,” Pete replies.

“Sending in the others now, I think keeping an eye on things for a while is going to waste time rather than save it, especially since it’s going to be daylight soon, and we’re going to lose our advantage,” Trick replies.

“I think you’re making the right decision,” Alaric replies, sounding proud. After all, he is the one who gave us the majority of our training.

“Thanks,” Trick replies, and I know that it means something to him that Alaric is proud of him, “Jynx, you guys start heading to Riot, and the guys too. Make sure your bodycams are on and put the masks on.”

“Got it,” Jynx replies, “we’re heading out now.”

“When the house comes into view on the body camera’s, I’m going to get you to start sending in all of the other teams as silently as possible, Alaric.”

“Understood, we’ll be ready.”

“Those breaching the house, your sole objective is to find Rylie and Quinn. Hunt is a secondary objective and only if it's safe enough to do so,” Trick adds.

“What if Quinn and Rylie need immediate medical attention?” Ezra asks, his voice tense.

“Then you get them out. If they aren’t well enough to move them, then I will treat them wherever they are,” Luc is the one to reply this time since he is now trained extensively in the medical field and in treating people in extreme circumstances. “I have my medical bag with me, and I have the supplies to stabilize them enough to help them and get them out of the house to the ambulances that will be on standby.”

“Got it,” Ezra replies, a thread of relief in his voice.

“Approaching the gate now,” Ever’s calming voice comes through the earpieces, and I instantly feel lighter.

“We’re about a minute out,” Creed replies.

It’s not long until all of us are together, and we share a sharp smile, which can only be seen because of the unique design of the breathing apparatus that we’re all wearing. There is no denying that all of us love what we do and that we find a thrill in it that most people wouldn’t.

As one, we move through the gate before we all instinctively spread out and approach the house. Jynx and her team are heading around one side of the house while we head around the other side and come in from the front. I spot Jynx and Ever sharing a wickedly sharp smile, and it wouldn’t surprise me to learn that they’ve made some kind of bet to make this more interesting as if what we’re doing is boring.

“They’re up to something,” Atlas says from under his breath next to me, but of course, because of the earpieces, the women hear us, and Ever turns around to blow us a kiss. She looks deadly and beautiful, and I have to remind myself that we’re on a job, and I can show her just how fucking beautiful she is later.

You know when our lives aren’t under threat.

We all split up, as planned, and I slightly envy Rage, who goes with Ever to make their entrance around the side of the building. We wait until Jynx confirms that they’re all in the correct positions, and then we start our breach of the building.

Luc and I move toward the front door, and I turn to watch his back as he drops to his knees and pulls out a lock-picking set to open the front door. We did toy with the idea of having Jensen come and do this bit since he is so much quicker at it, but it was quickly decided that if he got this far, then it would be even harder for him to turn

back around and go back to the surveillance van, so he stayed where he was. Luc is no slouch when it comes to picking locks anyway, so we aren't losing too much time.

It is slightly concerning me that we haven't run into anyone. I'm hoping that it's because Hunt is so prideful that it didn't even cross his mind that someone would be able to locate him, so he didn't put all of the security measures that he should have around his property. It's either that or he knows we're here, and he's planning something. It makes me nervous.

Hearing the lock snick quietly, I murmur, "We're about to breach the front door."

"We're heading in now," Jynx replies.

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“Us too,” the others reply from the various places they are around the giant house. We fall silent as we enter, and we’ll stay silent unless something goes wrong. We need to remain under the radar for as long as possible in order to have the best chance of finding Rylie and Quinn.

I still can’t believe he is here. We only met him maybe once or twice, but we have heard so many stories about him over the last couple of years, always followed by this matching look of sadness and loss. They are still incredibly affected by his absence, and I can’t even begin to fathom what they must be going through now, especially those of them who stayed home with Lyric.

I refocus as we head through the door, and it’s a damn good job I did because we come face to face with the end of a gun. I pull the trigger of my own gun before he can, and he drops to the floor.

Sharing a grin with Luc, we push forward, clearing the house before we head toward where the blueprints showed the basement entrance and where we planned to meet.

Let’s do this.

Cash

“Time to move in, Alaric,” Trick says through the earpieces as soon as he hears that the guys are entering the house.

“Understood,” Alaric replies.

We watch in silence as Alaric instructs all of the teams that he's brought to move in, and Trick switches between several different bodycams as we watch them surround the entirety of the house.

"Fucking hell, I know he said he brought a lot of agents, but I didn't realise he meant that many," Jensen mutters.

"At least we know that there's very little chance of anyone escaping." I point out.

"I'm going to split the screens so we can see the teams inside and the approach from the outside too," Trick says into the tense silence of the van as he presses a few buttons.

I have to admit that I'm glad that this setup is relatively easy to use and that Pete gave us some extra training on how to work everything. Otherwise, this situation would be even more of a nightmare.

Trick presses a button on the earpiece and says to our teams inside, "The house is now surrounded. There's very little chance that anyone will be getting past them. Flush everyone you can out of the house and then meet at the basement entrance. Hopefully, Rylie and Quinn will be down there."

"Got it," Ever replies for all of them.

It's reassuring to hear her voice, as it always is when we do one of these jobs.

"Here they come," I say as we watch people starting to move away from the house. "Keep an eye out for Hunt. We don't want him getting away, and he could easily get lost in the crowds of people flooding out of the house."

There's no need to reply as we all watch, and more and more people are taken into

custody as they come out of the house. Seeing that Alaric has clearly got the outside situation under control, I turn my attention back to the screens that are showing the inside of the house.

It's understandably taking the team a long time to clear the inside of the house, mainly because it's so massive and has so many different rooms. That's why we decided to send them all in and in as many entrances as they possibly could so that we could try and get the house cleared quickly.

We all hold our breath as a fight breaks out between Ever, Rage, and Rafe and some unknown assailants, who are incredibly well trained, but then again, so is our family, and they quickly dispatch them as Ever smiles victoriously.

"I love it when she gets all bloodthirsty," Jensen says, his voice dreamy and filled with love.

I'd tease him for finding something like our girlfriend being bloodthirsty and making him go all mushy, but quite honestly, it does something to me as well. She's magnificent and gets this confidence about her when she's armed and fighting for something that she believes in. She is such an amazing mix of contradictions when she's not on duty, as it were, she's soft and funny, always with a bit of bite and mischief to her, but as soon as she's on a job, it's like a switch gets flipped, she's confident, deadly and so fucking capable, she could lead if she was so inclined and we all know that.

Finally, it seems like they're happy that they've cleared enough of the house that they're happy to head to the meet-up point.

"We've cleared our section, heading to the basement entrance now," Atlas says to the others over the earpieces and then adds, "no sign of Rylie and Quinn up here, and we haven't seen Hunt either."

The others reply that they're either on the way or they've got one more room to search, and then they will be down. No one else seems to have found Hunt either, and I share a concerned look with Trick and Jensen.

Trick is clearly on the same wavelength as I am because he gives them a warning through the earpieces, "We saw that Hunt was here on the satellite footage. Just be really careful. It wouldn't surprise me if he had a safe room or something similar in the property."

"Understood," Ezra is the one to reply this time.

"Stick to the plan, locate Rylie and Quinn now that you've cleared the house. I have the outside being watched like a hawk, and as soon as you've got Rylie and Quinn, we will send them in to do a more thorough check of the house. Our objective is just to get those two out." I remind them gently.

"Got it, we'll keep you updated," Jynx replies.

They're working surprisingly well in this sort of situation, considering they aren't used to following these kinds of rules, but then again, they do jobs together like we used to; they just aren't legal, and if they get caught, they go to jail too, whereas we don't because we're law enforcement. I understand, now more than ever, why they can't be a part of Mr R's organisation with us, but I know it would make Ever worry less if they were.

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Of course, if they ever were in trouble with the law, we'd pull some strings and help them as best we can, but there are no guarantees that we could actually help, and I know that weighs on Ever.

Finally, they're all gathered around the entrance to the basement, which has a pretty solid-looking door. Ace easily picks the lock, and I actually didn't know that he was that good at it; otherwise, I would've suggested that he go through the front instead of around the side.

"What if they aren't there?" Jensen mutters what we're all feeling as we watch them slowly descend into the darkness. "I mean, there was quite a long time where we were traveling, and it is possible that they were moved."

Thankfully, we've got our earpieces turned off so we can hear them, but they can't listen to us because the last thing we want to do is to distract them while they need to pay such close attention to their surroundings.

"What if they are there, but they aren't okay," I say, only just daring to say it out loud, "they obviously weren't behaving themselves, and we know that Hunt has absolutely no problem with torture or simply killing them if they don't do what he wants."

"We're just going to have to hope with everything that they are okay. At the very least, they're alive. I think something that points to their survival is that Quinn has been with him for years now, and he's still alive. He may look worse for wear and most likely has been through more than we can imagine, but he is still alive, which means that Hunt finds him too valuable to end." Trick replies, once again seeing the

situation in a different way.

“I fucking hope so because not only would it be difficult for Ever to deal with the loss of Rylie, but if Quinn didn’t survive, I’m not sure that Lyric and the guys would be able to handle that, not after everything that has happened and the history that they have,” Jensen replies, worry in his voice.

“Found them!” Ever suddenly exclaims through the earpiece, and our conversation is forgotten as we focus all of our attention on the screens. I know I’m not the only one of us with everything crossed in the hopes that they’re both okay.

Ever

“Hey girl,” Rylie greets me with a smile, stretching the bloody lip she has. “It took you fucking long enough.”

A feeling of euphoria goes through me, and I smirk at her as I hold my hand out to her to help her up and reply, “Well, it’s not like you made it easy for us. You could’ve given us a bit more of a clue.”

Rylie shrugs as she stiffly pulls herself up and then pulls me into a hug before replying, “Well, thought I’d challenge you, see if you were really up to it. I didn’t want you to get bored.”

I burst out laughing, as do the guys.

"Is anyone else here?" Rafe asks her.

Rylie shakes her head, "No, it's just me and Quinn."

“Ezra? Creed?” a voice that I don’t recognise asks into the relative darkness, and the

rest of us fall silent, even Rylie, who looks at me with her eyebrow raised but doesn't ask the question I know she wants to.

Ezra and Creed both rush forward, pulling him into a tight hug and then loosening their grip slightly when he moans.

"Shit, sorry man, I just can't fucking believe that you're here," Creed says, emotions straining his voice.

"Me?" Quinn exclaims, "What the fuck are you doing here and with," he pauses as he squints and looks at the rest of us, "Atlas and Rage? And his people that I vaguely remember."

"Hey man," Atlas smiles, which is apparently a shock for Quinn because his eyebrows rise, and I realise that Atlas has changed a lot since the last time Quinn saw him. "It's a really long story, we can explain, but let's get you out of here. Put these on you two, just in case."

Atlas hands them both the breathing masks which they put on without question, they've been around Hunt long enough now that they know how dangerous he is.

"It's not going to be easy. Hunt has a lot of mercenaries here," Rylie says and then smirks, "did you bring the calvary?"

I grin, "You bet your ass I did. There are more agents out there than I have ever seen in one place."

"Agents?" Quinn asks, "I feel like I'm going to be in a constant state of shock when we get out of here."

"I'm not going to lie, most likely," Ezra teases, a soft sheen to his eyes that has Quinn

pulling him in for a tight hug again.

“You have no idea how fucking good it is to see you,” Quinn says quietly.

“I think I do,” Ezra replies and then clears his throat, “can you walk, or do you need me to carry you out of here like the princess you are?”

Quinn’s eyes flash with amusement as Creed smiles happily.

“I’m good, although I would like to be referred to as princess only for the foreseeable future.”

“You got it, man,” Creed chuckles.

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I turn to look at Rylie, “What about you? Are you good?”

“Of course,” she replies like it’s a no-brainer, and I’d push the subject, but I feel like we’re running out of time.

“Did you find Hunt?” Quinn suddenly asks as we start to head up from the basement.

“No, and we’ve checked the house from top to bottom to flush everyone out,” Rage replies.

“I know where he is,” Quinn replies, “I can take you to him. He’s got a safe room here.”

“Are you sure you’re up to that?” I ask, concern lacing my voice. I know he doesn’t know me, but I’ve heard so many stories about him from Lyric, and he’s a part of this family, even if he doesn’t realise it yet.

He smiles at me, looking slightly confused about the amount of concern that I’m showing him, and he replies, “Thank you, Ever. I think I remember your name being,” he pauses while I nod and then continues, “I refuse to leave this place without taking him with me. He’s so fucking dangerous, and I can guarantee that you guys haven’t even scratched the surface of what he’s involved with.”

“Understood,” I agree with a sharp smile.

“Here, man,” Riot says as he offers him one of his weapons, and I give Rylie one of mine and a knife because I have a feeling that she likes using them as much as I do

and judging from her smile, I'm right.

"Trick, did you get that man?" Atty says, and Quinn looks confused.

As Ezra quietly explains it to him, Trick answers, "Yeah, I'll keep Alaric and the periphery team outside. Just let us know when you want me to send them in."

"Yes, boss," Atty replies, and Quinn once again looks shocked, poor guy.

Chapter Thirty

"Quinn, you'd better lead the way," Rage offers as we part to let him through.

It doesn't escape my notice that Ezra and Creed stick close to him and don't let him get too far away. I don't think they're going to let him out of their sight for a while. Quinn is a big son of a bitch, with broad shoulders and as tall as Alaric, he's covered in tattoos, but he's also peppered with cuts and bruises, some of them healing and some of them new. I can tell just by looking at him that he's been through hell, and he's going to need some help to deal with it in a healthy way.

We keep our weapons drawn and stay alert as we head through the house. I wasn't a part of the team that looked down here, so nothing is familiar to me. Quinn stops at the end of the hallway and pushes on a panel that opens easily under his touch into an elaborately decorated office.

I expected that we'd have to search the room to look for the safe room where Hunt would be hiding, but instead, he's sitting behind his desk smiling at us and looking like he's very much at ease and not as concerned as I feel he should be.

His eyes run over Quinn and Rylie, "I should've known that you two would be involved in this. I must admit that it may have been a bit over-ambitious on my part

to try to turn two of Mr Rising's top agents against him."

"Not an agent cunt," Quinn replies drily, having intentionally mispronounced his name, although I do think that cunt suits him a lot better.

I don't know what it is about what Quinn said or Quinn himself, but any composure that Hunt had disappears in an instant.

He jumps to his feet, and there's a resounding sound of triggers cocking. Despite the fact that he's got so many guns pointed at him, it doesn't seem to deter him at all, and more than that, he doesn't seem to notice Jynx moving one way as I move the other so that we can corner him and get him restrained.

He's too busy getting angry as hell at Quinn, "I could've given you the fucking world. We could've ruled together if you weren't so stubborn."

Quinn scoffs, seeing what Jynx and I are doing and deciding to help us out by continuing to distract him even more, "You mean if I didn't have morals and was a psychopath?"

"How dare you!" Hunt bellows, sounding genuinely unhinged.

Again, Quinn laughs, which seems to wind him up even more, and Quinn looks at Rylie, "What do you think, Ry? Was there any chance that we were going to break?"

"Not a fucking chance," Rylie replies, and I watch as her expression gets dark, and she adds, "his attempts were pathetic."

That is clearly the breaking point for Hunt, and he lunges forward. Fortunately, Jynx and I know each other well enough that we can predict what the other one is going to do, and while I swing out my leg and strike him in the gut, Jynx is then immediately

ready to pounce and has him secured with his arms behind his back and unable to move before he even knows what's happened.

“And that's enough bullshit from you,” I comment.

“Thank fuck, I couldn't listen to that shit for much longer,” Rafe mutters, earning a glare from Hunt, who wisely decides to stay quiet, although I think that has more to do with him still trying to catch his breath from my kick rather than him suddenly understanding that he's in a pretty precarious position and has suddenly lost all of the power that he thought he had.

“Do you want me to send the others in?” Trick asks over the earpieces.

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Something pings in my gut, and before anyone else can answer, I reply, “No, wait until we’re out.”

“You got it,” Trick replies with absolutely no hesitation and trusting my gut.

We all surround him as we escort him through his elaborate home and out to the waiting agents outside. We’ve just stepped out of the front door, Alaric striding toward us, when Hunt comes to a sudden stop, stopping us all as well.

“You aren’t as clever as you think, and I’m not going down this easily.”

Alarm bells start screaming, but before any of us can do anything, he lifts his bound hands and smacks them against the door. We don’t have time to ask questions as explosions start going off, and we all rush forward as one triggers another. I can hear Trick, Jensen, and Cash screaming in my ear, but I can’t reply. We’re all in pure survival mode as we rush forward, and I’m aware of the others around me as we race to escape the blast zone.

I feel the heat at my back as we all suddenly get thrown forward, and I pray to anyone who is listening that we all survive and that we’re all okay. I can’t lose any of those people. They are my family and world.

My ears are ringing from the sound, and I’m disoriented, not quite sure which way is up, but I’m also desperately trying to orient myself so I can check on my men. I can feel hands on me, but there’s not enough for it to be all of them, and that’s sending spears of panic through me.

Finally, my eyes start to focus, and Atlas's worried expression appears above me. Apart from some abrasions from being thrown on the floor, which I can feel that I have too, he looks to be in one piece although it sounds like he's talking to me through several layers of thick glass because the sound of the explosion has seriously messed with my hearing.

"Are you okay?" he asks me, and I just about understand him. I nod as he reaches a hand down and helps me stand up.

"Is everyone alright?" I ask, looking around and then breathing a massive sigh of relief as I see my men and all of the people that I've come to think of as family, standing and groaning with only minimal injuries.

"We're good," Jynx says, relief filling her tone as she keeps her eyes on her men.

"I'm good," Rylie replies, wincing as she starts to get up off the floor.

"I can't fucking hear, but I'm alive," Quinn grumbles sarcastically, making me smile.

"That hurt, but it could've been worse," Ezra comments, checking over everyone with his eyes and making sure they're all okay.

Creed just grunts in reply and looks pissed.

All of my guys are surrounding me, so I know that they're all okay, and my heartbeat starts to return to normal. I have to admit that wasn't something I was expecting after having him secured in handcuffs.

"Does anyone have any injuries that need to be attended to now?" Luc asks, a worried note in his tone as he looks over all of us critically.

When everyone confirms that they're okay and Luc is satisfied that they're telling him the truth, his shoulders slump with relief.

Looking around us, everything is in absolute chaos, and I can hear sirens in the distance that are obviously coming to put out the massive blaze that has now engulfed the house. Fortunately, because we were making Alaric wait for us to come out before we sent them in, we were the only ones with a risk of getting hurt in the explosion; everyone else had plenty of time to escape.

"Shit, can any of you hear Trick or the other two?" I suddenly ask.

"No, I think the explosion damaged our comms," Rage replies with a frown.

Pete pulls his one out of his ear and looks it over, "Yeah, mine's completely fried."

A commotion at the edge of my vision catches my attention, and I turn with the others to see the van that Trick and the rest of us arrived in come careening through the gates, barely missing some of the agents as whoever is driving swerves through the crowd and comes to a stop near us.

"I guess we don't need to call him?" Riot says, somewhat incredulously at the commotion that Trick's arrival has just caused.

Thankfully, the agents recognise one of Mr R's van's, and we also all held up our hands to stop them from opening fire or thinking that Trick and the others are a threat. They all stand down and go back to checking on each other and directing the fire engines that have just arrived.

"Thank fuck," Jensen exclaims as he rushes toward me and scoops me off my feet. His head buries in my neck as he mutters, "I thought you were dead. I have never been so fucking scared in my life."

“I’m here, and I’m okay, I promise, but you really need to put me down before you hurt yourself.” I remind him gently.

I can feel his smile against my neck as he puts me down and then kisses me quickly since we’re at work and surrounded by agents. I am then instantly pulled into Cash’s arms and given the same greeting as I hear Trick and Jensen checking on the others to make sure that they’re all okay.

It’s not long before Cash is replaced by Trick, and he holds me tightly before he steps back and then keeps a hand on me as he asks, “What happened?”

“Hunt had some sort of failsafe; he smacked his bound hands against the front door, and everything started exploding,” Atlas explains.

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“The explosion knocked out the earpieces, so we couldn’t contact you straight away,” Peter adds.

“That’s not surprising, but we thought the worst had happened,” Cash adds, his voice still tight.

“I would’ve too,” I reply, squeezing Trick’s hand.

“Guys, we have a problem,” Alaric announces as he comes rushing up to us.

“You mean other than the giant fireball behind us?” Jensen asks somewhat sarcastically, earning a stern yet amused look from Alaric, who chooses to ignore him.

“Hunt has escaped in the confusion after the explosion. I actually have no idea how he did it. He was as close as you guys were to the bomb so he had to have been disorientated,” Alaric explains.

“Fuck, that’s not what I was hoping you were going to say,” Quinn is the first to react with a deep frown, as he adds, “although I’m not surprised he’s a slippery bastard and gets harder to catch every time he fucking escapes.”

Alaric nods in agreement, “We have people combing the surrounding area, but he must have had an escape plan in place and most likely had someone helping him. We won’t stop until we’re completely certain that he’s no longer in the area.”

“Good,” Trick replies. “Have you got everything under control here?”

“Yes, you guys get home. I know you have some people waiting for you, Quinn,” Alaric says and then turns to look at Rylie, “Mr R requested your presence immediately, and he wants you to have a full check-up, so I need to escort you to the hospital. He did say that he would’ve offered the same to Quinn but that he’s not stupid enough to keep him from his family any longer.”

Quinn smirks, “Smart man. I promise I’ll call him with an update.”

“He’s aware it may take some time,” Alaric replies and then looks at Rylie expectantly.

Rylie sighs heavily and then turns to me and pulls me away from Trick and into a tight hug, “Thanks for coming for me. I knew you’d be able to find me, even with the little information you had.”

“I promised you that I’d always come for you,” I remind her, and then as I step back, warn her, “don’t you dare fucking disappear on me now. I will fucking find you.”

Rylie’s eyes spark with amusement as she replies, “Fuck no, that’s it now. I promise you I will call you as soon as I’ve jumped through the hoops for Mr R, and then we can meet up and catch up properly.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I warn her, making her smile again.

“I wouldn’t expect any less,” she says and then turns to look at Jynx, “don’t think I didn’t fucking notice you. I want the whole story about how the fuck this happened and everything fucking else as well because I have a feeling it’s one hell of a story. I would be inclined to think that my mother sent you, but you are far too familiar with everyone here, so I know there’s a story here.”

Jynx smiles and comes closer, giving her a hug, “I thought you might’ve forgotten

me.”

“Never,” Rylie replies as they share a meaningful look.

“I’ve known Ever almost as long as I’ve known you. I’ve known Atlas for even longer. It turns out we’re all crazily connected, and I can’t wait to fill you in. Technically, your mom did employ me to find you, but I was already involved.”

“Me neither,” I add, “it’s a fucking doozy.”

“It sounds like it,” Rylie chuckles, “I better get going. I will call you, and we can meet up.”

“Got it,” I reply.

Jynx and I both give her tight hugs, and then she surprises me by going around and hugging the guys too. I don’t know what she says to them, but it has them bursting out laughing and nodding. She also makes Quinn promise to stay in contact, which he readily agrees to. Being captured together creates a bond that isn’t easily forgotten, and I imagine that they’ll keep in contact for the rest of their lives. Even though Quinn was captured for so much longer, that reminds me of what Mr R said, and I subtly glance at Quinn’s hand to see that he is indeed missing a finger. I know that there’s a lot of trauma that must surround that.

I don’t know him well enough, but I hope that he is the type of person that will ask for help if he needs it because I know from my own personal experience that he will need to fucking speak to someone, and if he’s not comfortable with it being one of Mr R’s therapists despite the fact that he’s got a close connection with him, I’ve made sure to let Dominic know that he can offer one of D’s who are actually the therapists that I used.

Once Rylie has gone, I feel a pang of mild panic that it will be the last time I see her for a while, but at least I know that she's okay, and I know that if I really need to get hold of her I can pass a message through Mr R, I am hoping that I'm wrong though and that I hear from Rylie soon.

"Would you guys mind if we head home?" Ezra asks, shifting from foot to foot. "I know that we usually hang around for a bit longer, but Lyric is going out of her mind, and I want to get back to her."

"Me fucking too," Quinn says, his voice full of longing and relief floods me as it becomes clear that he really had no intention of leaving Lyric and the guys.

"Jynx?" Atlas questions.

"Plane is ready to go, and I'll call Carter while we're on the way there so he's ready to be wheels up as soon as possible. I don't want to keep our bestie waiting," Jynx replies.

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Quinn looks so confused but clearly doesn't want to ask any questions and risk making us take longer. We're all being very careful not to mention anything about Lyric being pregnant. It's not our place to say anything, and it's up to Ezra and Creed whether they prewarn him or how they want to tell him. After all, they know him a hell of a lot better than we do. Plus, he used to be a flight risk, so there's no telling how he's going to react. I know that he already has so many questions about us and our link to him, so he's going to have even more when he sees his family.

"Let's go then," Trick replies as we start moving toward the van that Jensen drove in here like a bat out of hell. He adds, "Alaric doesn't need us for any of this anyway."

The drive to the airport is filled with the usual relief that we get when we complete a job. Yes, Hunt got away, and that's an issue, but I'm still viewing this as a win because we've got Rylie and Quinn back. That was the main objective for us. We have also put a massive dent in Hunt's operation because of the amount of his staff that we've managed to detain.

I can feel my adrenalin starting to crash now that the job is over, and the lack of sleep that I've had starts to creep up on me. The sun is up, and I try to sleep on the plane, as does everyone else, but I know that we're all going to be heading straight to bed when we get home because no one sleeps well on planes.

When we finally touch down, everyone is strung out, yawning and feeling the effects of the last few days. All of us are quiet as we get off and start heading toward our own vehicles.

"We'll message you guys when we finally wake up," Jynx mutters in our direction.

“Got it,” Trick replies, repressing a yawn. “I’ll need reports written up.”

“Uh huh,” Rome replies, and I don’t think he’s actually listening.

“We’re heading straight home,” Ezra says.

Trick wakes up a bit more then, as he replies, “We’re going to leave you guys alone. You contact us when you’re ready, no matter how long it takes. Family comes first always.”

“Thanks, man,” Creed says and pulls him into a hug.

I hug them both at the same time, “Tell Lyric I love her, and if she needs me, I’m here.”

“We will,” they reply together.

Quinn tilts his head to the side as he watches me and then says, sounding slightly confused, “I like you. You clearly care about my brothers and Lyric a lot.”

“I do. It’s a good job, you like me; we’re family,” I tell him with a smile, making him look even more confused.

Ezra chuckles as he clasps him on the shoulder and says, “We’ll explain, man, don’t worry.”

“Thank fuck,” Quinn replies, and we watch as they head off to get in their car, a still confused-looking Quinn in tow.

I really hope for Lyric’s sake that everything goes okay, but I know that it’s going to be a really intense time for them all, and I hope that they realise we really are here for

them when they need us.

Chapter Thirty-One

The drive home is a blur and makes me grateful that I am not the one who's driving because that would be seriously concerning since I have absolutely no idea how I ended up in bed or who's in bed with me. I'm just incredibly glad that we have decent blackout blinds and curtains in here and that, despite the fact that it's daylight outside, you can't really tell in here. Which means we're going to be able to catch up on some much needed sleep.

My phone pings just as sleep calls to me, and although I desperately want to let sleep claim me, I am aware that it may be Lyric, and if she needs me right now, you bet your fucking ass I'm going to get up and go to her, after chugging about three gallons of coffee and maybe a cold shower.

I tap the person lying next to me, seeing that it's Rafe, and murmur groggily, "Pass me my phone. It might be Lyric."

He grunts, reaches his hand out without opening his eyes, and pats around on the bedside table randomly before he finally locates it and hands it to me. I force my eyes open as I realise I am right, and it is a message from Lyric.

Lyric: Thank you. I love you, bestie.

Me: I love you too.

There's no need to point out that she doesn't need to thank me because she knows that she doesn't. It's also a nice hint that she may be okay. I have a feeling that it will be the last communication between us for a while; they all need to focus on their family and Quinn. It's going to be a massive adjustment for them all.

I sort of just put my arm over Rafe and let my phone slide to the floor. Rafe is snoring softly, and whoever is behind me is snoring as well. I don't want to wake either of them up so my phone can live on the floor for the foreseeable future.

I think I'm snoring before my phone hits the floor.

I don't know what time it is when I finally make my way down the stairs after a really good sleep and a long shower, but it is light outside, and I have a feeling that I may have slept through the whole day and night and into the next one. I checked my phone before I came down here, and I didn't have any messages. I didn't expect any from Lyric, and I'm assuming that Jynx and her men, Pete and Elijah, are all still sleeping or taking it slowly.

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I have to admit that I'm aching today. The blast from the bomb didn't seriously injure us, but it has, certainly for me at least, made my whole body hurt. I feel like I was run over by a truck or at least nearly blown up, which I was, I guess.

Shit, I need coffee.

A cup is suddenly thrust in my direction, and I smile happily at it before I shuffle over to the table and plop my ass down, taking a sip. It's not until I'm halfway through the cup that I look up to thank whoever made it for me, only to find them all smiling at me lovingly.

"What?" I ask, forgetting that I was going to thank someone.

"Sleepy Ever is one of our favourites." Jensen grins while the others all nod in agreement, making my cheeks warm and happiness fill my chest.

Outwardly though, I just grumble because I still need more coffee before I deal with anything emotional.

"Did they manage to find Hunt?" Cash asks Trick.

Trick shakes his head, "No, he's completely disappeared, but they've got all the resources that we have trying to locate him. We know the kind of person he is, so we know that he's not going to stay hidden for long."

"He's also extremely well-connected, and that makes me nervous. He's unpredictable, and we have no idea what his next move is going to be," Rage adds

thoughtfully.

“That’s true, but we can also be more prepared for him and his tricks; we know he likes to blow stuff up,” Riot points out.

“We might even be able to convince Ace to help. I have a feeling that he doesn’t like to leave things left open,” Rafe suggests.

“None of them do. I think if they can swing it with what they have going on, then they will all help. If not, Ace definitely will, especially since his specialty is explosives,” I reply.

“We can cross that bridge when we come to it,” Trick replies, “Mr R messaged and let me know that Rylie is fine, and repeated what Alaric said that they will keep us updated on the situation with Hunt. He also said that Hunt is most likely going to lay low so he can gather his resources before he retaliates or reemerges and lets his presence known again. Because of that, he’s going to have us working other cases while waiting for a lead, and when they have one, we will be the first ones called on because we’ve now got the experience with Hunt but also because Rylie wants to be involved and she won’t be able to be if another team handles it.”

“That makes a lot of sense. I’d want to be involved if I was in Rylie’s position too,” Jensen agrees.

“Exactly,” Trick replies.

“And it means that we definitely get to see her again,” I point out.

“It does, but she did tell you she’d call you, so that was going to happen anyway,” Luc reminds me gently.

I sigh, “I know, but it kind of doesn’t seem likely, and we only saw her for a few minutes before she was whisked away by Alaric.”

“Yeah, I get that, but Rylie doesn’t seem like the kind of person who would go back on her word, and I’m sure she’s aware that it means a lot to you,” Atty replies with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, I know you’re right,” I say and then change the subject, “have any of you heard from any of Lyric’s men?”

They all shake their heads, and Rage replies, “No, I haven’t, but I did send them all a group message just letting them know that I’m here if they need me, that we all are.”

“I did the same,” Jensen smiles, and nods of affirmation go around the table as they all agree that they’ve done the same thing.

One thing’s for sure: none of Lyric’s men will question whether they’re loved, and neither will Lyric because I messaged her the same thing, and I know for a fact that Jynx and Pete did the same.

“That’s all we can do for now. Just let them know that we’re here for them whenever they need us,” I say, my heart full at how kind and thoughtful all my men are. “I imagine that it’s going to be a while before we hear from them. They have a lot of shit to sort through. Years worth, actually, and that’s just what Quinn has been through, not including everything else, and then they’ve got to explain their involvement with Mr R and all of that. Quinn has a lot of things to wrap his head around.”

“Oh yeah, they’re going to be in their world and focusing on their own family for a few days at least,” Luc agrees.

“Alright, we need to get these reports written before the details start to blur, and we

don't report it as accurately as we need to," Trick announces, making the rest of us groan. None of us are fond of the paperwork that comes along with this job.

"Oh man, do we have to?" Jensen moans, "Can I just write we rescued Rylie and Quinn, and then things went bang?"

Trick chuckles and raises his eyebrow at him, "Obviously not."

Jensen opens his mouth, getting ready to complain again, when a mischievous light enters his eyes, and he sits up a bit straighter, a giant smile crossing his features, "Wait, are you making Jynx and the guys write up reports too?"

Trick tries not to show his amusement as the corners of his lips start to twitch, "Mr R has requested reports from everyone and sent a template for Jynx and the guys to use to write theirs. I'm just about to send them across with an explanation of what they need to put in it."

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I try not to laugh, I really do, but I know the exact face that Jynx is going to pull when she gets that message, and I know that they're all going to bitch about having to do it apart from Mason and Rip because they'll actually enjoy the writing upside of this, and I can almost guarantee that their reports will be incredibly well written and detailed. So much so that I would be surprised if a couple of the others, Jynx and Ace, don't try to copy the reports despite the fact that they will all have different points of view.

"Oh, that's going to be a fun one," Atty grins and then stands up, "alright, I'm going to go up to my room to write everything up. I'm taking a giant cup of coffee with me though, because I feel like I'm going to need it."

"Good idea," I agree as I stand up and grab one of the most oversized travel mugs that we have and fill it up, "wish me luck."

"You guys are so dramatic. It's only a report," Trick mutters, rolling his eyes as he pulls out his laptop and places it on the table in front of him.

"Yeah, a report that has to be written meticulously, with no errors and with every single detail that you thought you couldn't remember written into it, or it gets sent back to you to do it again," Riot points out as he too stands up.

"It's important that we get it right, and it saves time if we just do it right the first time," Trick replies.

"We know you've drilled that into us," Cash smirks.

“And just because we know you’re right and we know that it’s all for a good reason does not mean that I’m not going to bitch about it,” Rage adds, making us all nod in agreement.

Trick sighs, a smile playing around the edge of his lips as he seems to give up having this conversation with us yet again and instead says, “Send the reports through to my email when you’re done, and I’ll group them all together with the ones from Jynx and the guys and send them over.”

“Yes, boss,” Luc teases with a salute, and I chuckle as I leave them all to it, taking my coffee back upstairs with me so that I can get this report written up as quickly as possible.

I set myself up on my desk, slightly wishing that I had brought up snacks as well, but I’m not going to waste any more time and go back down to the kitchen right now. I will just wait until I get super hungry and then go down. I’ve only been writing for a few minutes when my phone pings, and I check it to find a message from Peter.

Pete: Why? I hate reports; they will be the death of me.

Me: Just a little bit dramatic?

Pete: No, I’m not being dramatic at all; it might actually kill me, and then you’ll all feel bad for mocking me.

I burst out laughing as I type out a reply.

Me: Okay, my super dramatic bestie, I promise I will announce to everyone how bad I feel if you do die from doing paperwork.

Peter: Thank you, that’s all I ask. Now stop messaging me. I’m working.

I once again burst out laughing at his message, and I have to admit that it was a nice break from writing the report. I do what he's asked though. Otherwise, this conversation could end up going on for a really long time, and I just want to get the report done.

About ten minutes later, my phone goes off again, and I chuckle, thinking that it's Pete complaining again. It is someone complaining but not Pete this time, although the message is just as amusing as Pete's was.

Jynx: How do you do this after every job? It's like being in school, except there's no way for me to cheat! Mase and Rip won't let me copy, and Mal has tried everything to help convince them to help us now, and it's not working. This is why I couldn't do what you do, the paperwork. It's like a form of torture.

Me: Hello to you too, my second dramatic bestie.

Jynx: Pete already messaged you, huh? Seriously though, I'd tell you anything you wanted to know if it meant I didn't have to do paperwork.

Me: Lol, that really is dramatic. The sooner you get it done, the sooner you can chill out for the rest of the day.

Jynx: Yes, mom.

I laugh, as I can practically see her rolling her eyes at me while she curses that I'm no help at all. I really need to get this done; with all of the interruptions, I'm not going to get it written up before dinner at this rate. Thankfully, all of the text messages stop after that, and I figure either Jynx has taken my advice or she's gotten her way with one of her men, and they've let her copy it.

I've nearly finished with the first draft, which means I'm still not finished when my

phone rings.

Figuring it's one of my two besties, I answer it without looking and say, "I know writing reports is boring as hell, but it really is necessary to do, so yes, you have to do it, and no, I can't do it for you."

A vaguely familiar laugh comes from the other end of the phone as Rylie replies, "Jynx isn't too keen on writing the reports then."

"Is anyone?" I reply with a chuckle and then add, "But no, she's trying to convince Mase or Rip to help her, and it's not going well."

"I bet," she agrees. "Also, how weird is it that we all know each other?"

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I lean back in my seat, “Honestly, I still don’t think I’ve wrapped my head around it.”

“Did she fill you in on how we met?” Rylie asks.

“Yeah, she explained how she knew you, but I’m sure there’s more to the story though.”

I then quickly explained what Jynx told us all.

“Oh yeah, there definitely is, and I want to know about the link you have with her,” she replies curiously, “did you know her before you came to Serendipity?”

“Yeah, I did. It’s a long story though, and probably best saved for when we can catch up properly. You never know who’s listening,” I point out, aware that we both need to be careful about what we say. This is by no means a secured line.

“I hear you,” she replies with a smile in her voice before she continues, sounding slightly nervous although I can’t fathom why, “That’s actually why I was calling; Mr R has insisted that I take some time off, which is ridiculous. I mean, I’m pretty fucking used to being kidnapped by this point.”

“You do get kidnapped a lot, dude. You should probably do something about that,” I tease.

“Don’t you think I would’ve fixed it if I could’ve? It’s like I’ve got some supernatural fucking gift for being kidnapped,” she replies, and it’s good that she can find amusement in it.

“Dude, I don’t think that would be classed as a gift,” I point out.

She’s silent for a few seconds before she says, “Curse then. I don’t know what, but at this point, it has got to be supernatural. It happens so often.”

“Hey, you’re not going to get an argument from me,” I reply, with a teasing note to my voice.

“Fuck off,” she replies before we both start laughing.

Once we’ve calmed down, I ask, “You said that you had a reason why you called before we got distracted by your supernatural abilities.”

“Oh shit yeah,” Rylie replies, “what I was saying was that I’m not going straight on another case, so I’ve got some time. I was wondering if you wanted to meet up and catch up. It would be nice to see you, the guys, and Jynx and her men.”

“Yeah, that sounds great. There’s a restaurant that we like to go to. I can send you the address, and we’ll meet there?”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll never turn down food. Are you guys free tomorrow? I honestly have no idea when I’ll get called in for another job, so sooner rather than later would probably be better.”

“I know that feeling,” I agree, “that should be fine. We’re free for the next few days at least. I’ll contact Jynx, but I’m sure she’ll be free.”

The reason why I suggest that I contact Jynx is that although I’m sure that Jynx will give Rylie her number, there are no guarantees, and there could be a security reason which means Rylie shouldn’t have it, so I will leave that as her decision to make.

“Great, I better go and leave you to your report writing,” Rylie replies.

“Thanks a bunch,” I snark back.

“You are so very welcome,” she replies sarcastically. “See you tomorrow.”

The first thing I do when she hangs up is send her the address to the restaurant. It’s in the closest city, and it’s one that we use when we don’t want people to know where we live. Rylie is someone that we knew when we were younger, but we don’t know her now, and I will never take any risks when it comes to my family.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Once that’s done, I quickly make a booking online at the restaurant and send a follow-up text to Rylie to confirm. Then, I call Jynx and explain what we’re doing tomorrow. There’s no point in me asking her if she wants to go or not; I know she’s going to want to catch up with Rylie, and she’s just as curious as I am about what she’s been up to.

“Call Pete and see if he wants to come too,” Jynx suggests, “he’s bound to be going out of his mind with curiosity.”

I chuckle, “Oh yeah, of course he is. I’m actually surprised that he hasn’t bombarded me with hundreds of questions already. I was already planning on asking him. I don’t think he’d forgive me if I didn’t.”

“No chance, you’d never hear the end of it.” Jynx agrees.

After she’s confirmed what time we need to leave here in order to get to the restaurant on time for our reservation, she hangs up, and I flick through my contacts to find Pete’s name. While it’s ringing, it occurs to me that I never checked to see if

Jynx finished her report or not. As I expected, Pete is definitely on board and wants to come tomorrow, and although I invited Elijah too, he decided to stay at home and get some errands done that he needs to do instead.

Leaning back in my chair, I smile. I really was worried that she would just disappear again, and this proves that she's not going to. It's all reassuring that we seem to have been able to pick up where we left off friendship-wise, and that's a rare thing to be able to do. I have never doubted that she was one of my people though, those people that you find throughout your life that you instantly click with, and no matter how long it's been since you last spoke or saw them, it's easy—Rylie's one of those.

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It suddenly occurs to me that I've told everyone what's happening tomorrow except for my men; fortunately for me, Rafe shouts up the stairs at that moment to say that it's lunchtime, and that's definitely easier than trying to find them all.

Jumping to my feet, I make my way down the stairs, meeting several of the others who also chose to write their reports up here instead of down in the communal spaces. They give me curious looks, but the lure of food clearly prevents them from asking any questions.

When we take our seats in the extension, we find the table laid out with an array of different sandwiches and snacks that we can easily pick from. It would be a nice simple lunch if it were made by anyone else, but Rafe, of course, hasn't put simple fillings in them.

"How's everyone getting on?" Trick asks as we load up our plates.

"I've got to do my final draft," I reply, "I've just finished my first draft."

"I'm almost done," Cash replies, and one by one, they go around the table and say how far they've gotten. It's clear we're going to be doing it for a while longer yet.

I hate writing up reports.

"Rylie called me," I announce, and everyone immediately stops talking and looks at me curiously, "we're going to meet at our restaurant in the city tomorrow. I've given her a time, and Jynx is coming too."

“That’s great. It will be nice to catch up and learn some more,” Atlas replies with a smile.

After lunch, I spend the rest of the day finishing my report. It takes me even longer than it should, and that’s simply because I’m excited about tomorrow, so I keep getting distracted, but I do finally get it done just before dinner, and then the guys distract me with movies and snuggles.

Pulling up into the parking spaces, we all get out, and Jynx immediately asks me, “What’s wrong? Why are you nervous?”

“How on earth could you tell I was nervous within a minute or two of actually seeing me?” I ask.

She raises her eyebrow and gives me a look that says, seriously, you’re really asking me that right now, “Don’t try and avoid the question.”

I sigh, sticking my tongue out at her, “Not to sound super needy, but what if she doesn’t show up?”

Jynx smiles, “Then she had a job to do, and she’ll let us know when she can. Come on, let’s go sit down and order drinks. We could all do with a drink.”

“Here, here,” Peter agrees wholeheartedly.

“I could definitely do with one,” Luc adds.

“Me too,” Ace agrees, “let’s go.”

Heading inside, it's reasonably quiet but by no means empty, and I look toward our usual table to see Rylie sitting there, with relief filling her features when she sees us all walk in. She stands up and instantly pulls me into a hug.

"I thought you weren't going to turn up," she mutters quietly.

Stepping back, I look at her, surprised, "I thought the same. Why on earth would I not be here?"

She shrugs as we all take our seats and adds, "Well, we didn't exactly leave on good terms the last proper time we saw each other. I said I couldn't be involved in your world, and now look at me. I'm sorry."

I smile softly, "I get it. Well, I want to. Alaric explained a bit, but I'd like to know what happened after he'd given you Mr R's card. If you can explain it, of course."

She nods, "There are some things that I can't explain, but I will definitely explain what I can, and then I want to know how this all happened."

"Deal," Jynx agrees for everyone.

"Why don't we order drinks and food first, and then we don't have to be interrupted?" Rafe suggests.

This is one of his favourite restaurants, which is why we eat here so often. He's not constantly saying what he'd do better or anything like that. He can't help it; food is one of the biggest things in his life, and he wants it done right.

"Sounds good to me," Rome grins as he flags down the waiter, and we all place our orders.

Once everything is ordered and we have our drinks in front of us, Rylie smiles, “So, Alaric told you that he gave me Mr R’s number, yeah?”

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“Yes, but that’s all he knew,” I reply, as we all listen intently.

Rylie nods, “Okay. Well, I want to explain that just after you left, I was so fucking angry. I was scared when I told you that I couldn’t be involved with you because of where your life was heading, but that fear quickly turned into anger when I watched you walk away and realised I had just voluntarily lost my best friend because of some stupid reason. That’s when I decided that I wasn’t going to escape this life, it’s a part of who I am, and I’m pretty well fucking trained in it even though I kept my training reasonably light since I stopped living with my mother.”

I nod, understanding her reasoning, “And that’s when you spoke to Alaric?”

“Yeah, I think he saw the change in me, and it shocked him. When I explained a bit more, he must have seen that although I’d accepted my fate of being in this world, I wasn’t entirely comfortable with it, not like my mother was. I assume you know who my mother is?”

“Mona Romano, the matriarch of one of the most prominent families in the US,” Atlas replies, unable to sound anything other than impressed.

Rylie chuckles, “Yep, that’s dear old mom.”

I want to point out that no one else would dare to call her old or anything similar, but she carries on explaining before I do.

“Anyway, that was when he explained as much as he safely could about his job and what he does. It seemed like it would fit me a lot better. It utilized my very unique

and vast skillset yet kept me on the right side of the law. I was pretty much sold on the idea, but I didn't want to rush into something, especially something like this. I had just turned eighteen, which seemed to be important, but once I confirmed that Alaric gave me Mr R's number. I took a few days to think it over properly, and to be honest; my decision was helped when I overheard a conversation between my mom and dad. He was struggling and really missing her; he was also struggling to deal with normal life."

"I didn't realise that your dad was that into the life?" Jynx asks curiously.

Rylie smirks, "No one does. They assume he's a kept man. He's actually one of the best assassins that Mom has, and because he's so unassuming, no one knows, he's her best-kept secret."

"Wow," Jensen exclaims, "I was not expecting that."

"Me neither," Mal agrees, looking slightly shocked, and it occurs to me that he probably met him, so he has a face to put to the reputation.

"I can see why he struggled. He was a mechanic, right?" Trick asks. Of course, he remembered what Rylie's dad did in the town.

Rylie nods, "Yeah, he was, but you see why he struggled with it all. You guys weren't there anymore. I'd begun to recognise Red's behavior for what it was, and that was controlling, and to top it off, my dad was struggling. He never would have admitted it to me, either. All of that cemented my decision, although I didn't want to make it quickly since it was such a big one. I had a long conversation with my dad, and he agreed that being more legal would probably suit me better. He also told me not to worry about the family; it's easy to keep separate, and there would be ways around it, something similar to what D does."

The rest of the table looks at Jynx for an explanation, although I already know what Rylie is referring to.

“D does some work for the people above Mr R occasionally in exchange for free reign and immunity within reason, and I’m guessing that Mona has done the same.”

Rylie nods, but before she can continue, Rage mutters, “That makes so much more fucking sense.”

“Doesn’t it,” Luc agrees. “I mean, I always wondered how Alaric could be friends with him and Mr R not have a problem with it, and then there was the whole not willing to make D angry when it comes to Jynx being involved, although I still don’t understand that one.”

“I don’t either, if I’m honest, and he’s my uncle,” Jynx admits, “there’s just no point in asking him some things because he won’t answer at all.”

“It’s just another mystery that surrounds D, I guess,” Peter adds, and everyone at the table nods in agreement.

“Anyway, as soon as I contacted Mr Rising, it turned out he knew a lot more than I thought was possible, and he presented me with an offer. He correctly assumed that I wouldn’t want to work in a team, and because of how my mom had done all of my documentation, he said that it would be pretty easy for me to disappear from all government sources. That’s how the Ghost Agent thing came about. I was extensively trained for a really long fucking time, longer than normal agents because I am my whole team; I don’t have anyone else to rely on when I’m on a job, so I have to have as many skills as possible and be fucking good at what I do if I want to survive.”

“Wow,” I mutter.

She chuckles, “Yeah, I fucking love it. Because of the whole ghost agent thing though, I couldn’t contact you, and you were technically on the other side to me for a short amount of time. I knew when Mr R brought you in, but I kept that quiet, it wouldn’t have been safe for you or me, and I honestly thought you’d hate me after everything that I said.” Before I can tell her how wrong she is, she continues, “Then this whole thing with Hunt happened, and I knew from the very beginning that this was a job that I might need help with. I also knew that I only trusted you and the guys to help and that Mr R had come to trust you enough to get you to help if something went wrong, which was reassuring to me.”

“You could have made it a little bit easier,” I tell her honestly because, seriously, she was hard to find.

“I couldn’t have you be bored trying to find me,” Rylie chuckles. “Besides, you found me, didn’t you?”

“Only because Pete and Ace are so fucking good at what they do,” Rip points out.

“Well, thank you, and at some point, you’re going to have to fill me in on how you guys know Quinn, but first, I want to know how you guys know each other?” Rylie asks as our main course is delivered, and we all dig in, falling silent for a moment.

Jynx looks at me, “I’ll start, shall I? Is there anything you don’t want to be shared?”

She means about Shadow, and I honestly don’t know whether Rylie already knows, but either way I don’t mind her knowing. It’s a part of who I am, and knowing it makes the whole story Jynx and I are about to tell make a whole lot more sense.

“Go for it,” I reply, “I’ll fill bits in when I can.”

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“Okay, so you know when we met?” Jynx starts surprisingly.

“You mean when we were kidnapped?”

Jynx nods, “Yeah, well, when I left, I was taken to Shadow.”

Rylie winces, “Shit, I’m so sorry. What does that have to do with Ever, though.”

I frown slightly as I tilt my head questioningly, “You don’t know?”

Rylie looks confused, and it’s clear she has no idea what I’m talking about.

Riot chuckles, “Oh, this is going to be a good shock.”

Jynx points at me, “Rylie, I’d like to introduce you to Shadow.”

Rylie’s eyes go wide, “No fucking way? Does Mr R know?”

“Yeah, I use my skills as Shadow occasionally for him,” I reply.

“Well fucking hell, how did I miss that one?” she mutters and then grins, “You’re fucking badass, like mom was looking to try and hire you, she still is if I’m honest. You are still very much a hot commodity in the criminal world despite the fact that you’ve disappeared the last few years, and now I know why.”

Relief fills me. I was genuinely worried that she would react badly, but I shouldn’t have been. She’s just impressed.

“Obviously, no one is to know who she is,” Trick says firmly.

“Of course, I wouldn’t put Ever at risk,” Rylie replies. “So, what happened?”

Jynx goes on to explain what happened and how I saved her instead of doing what my father wanted and took her back to D. We then spend the rest of the time eating our food and explaining a bit more about our shared history, we also tell Rylie about Quinn’s link to the others who are also one of our teams. She knows about them thanks to learning what she could about us when she realised we had joined the organisation but had no idea about the link between Quinn and them, which makes sense because even Mr R didn’t know.

Quinn kept everything separate.

We’re starting our desserts, and the conversation has thoroughly moved on to more laidback topics when my eyes catch on someone approaching the table, their face completely obscured by a hood and scarf.

I tense, putting my hand on my weapon as everyone, being as highly trained as they are, tenses and does the same, quickly realising that something is going on and locating the figure.

“Ever?”

My eyebrows hit my hairline, I don’t recognise the voice, and I can’t see the face. I can tell it’s a woman, but that’s it, “Who are you?”

“He says this is just the beginning, and he doesn’t take kindly to losing. Butterfly, help me,” she pleads.

Lead hits my stomach, and I feel myself go pale as the guys all start to stand. Butterfly? There’s no fucking way.

Before the guys can fully get out of their chairs, in one smooth move, she takes off her hood, removes her scarf, and opens her jacket.

“Mom,” I reply, slightly in disbelief.

“Mom?” Jynx and Rylie exclaim at the same time.

“Oh shit,” Ace mutters, and it takes me mere moments to see that she has been strapped with a bomb.

“Fuck,” Trick mutters.

It’s at that moment the restaurant seems to realise what is going on, and we’re seconds away from chaos breaking out. As I stare at the woman who birthed me, my guys move around the room, showing their badges and telling people to make their way to the exits calmly. Trick is on the phone, and I know that he’s calling it into Mr R. We’ll have backup in minutes.

Fortunately, we have the best explosive expert in the country with us right now, and he’s frowning at the bomb as he stays back and examines it.

Amelia’s eyes are wild with fear, and I know that I need to snap out of this right now and do my job. I will not be useless, and we’re very much in danger.

“Who said that Amelia?” I ask her gently, as I would anyone in this situation. That’s how I’m treating her as a stranger.

“Careful Ever,” Rylie warns me, her voice low.

We’re all watching her carefully for any move that she makes. She doesn’t appear to have a Deadman’s switch, which means if we have to, we can take her out. Hopefully, it won’t come to that though, and the bomb could still be set off even if

she's dead.

“Hunt,” she exclaims, the name we all expected, but this is not the situation I thought I’d find myself in. She takes a step toward me, her eyes darting everywhere as she opens her mouth to explain more.

Suddenly, she stops, I feel warmth splatter my face, hear a thud in the wall behind me, and see blood bloom on the front of her forehead as her eyes become lifeless.

“Fuck, someone catch her before she hits the fucking floor. It could set off the bomb!”