



Ruined Castles (The Elite King's Club 8)

Author: *Amo Jones*

Category: Romance, New Adult, Thriller, Action, Suspense, Dark, Young Adult

Description: Nothing is going to make sense once you flip open this first chapter. You're going to wonder why the fuck I made the decisions I did. Why he did what he did. I'm not going to make this easy for you. I'm going to guide you through loops that you're going to wish I had just skipped, but I'm not going to do that either. You're going to feel my pain, my loss, and my heart breaking in my chest. You're going to watch me trip and fall, and get back up again. You're going to wish you could slap the shit out of Bishop and me, but among all... I'm going to take you back to when I left the love of my life, and ran.

This is an open letter to you.

Good luck.

Mads

Xo

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You know, for the last three books, I have forgotten to write an acknowledgment section. Who let me in here?

To my husband, first and foremost, because he gets to watch his wife turn into multiple demonic entities every single time I'm writing (you know... my method of writing is a problem).

To my children, because without you I wouldn't need the escape of these beautiful fictional worlds... I joke. I love my children. Don't call child services on me.

To my closest friends. I don't need to name all three of you. (This is seriously a bad joke—again, who let me in here?)

To Sarah Grim Sentz, for always being my biggest supporter and confidant.

To Serena, for still being my PA even though I'm an asshole to deal with because I forget everything and am more like a stray lioness than an actual human.

To Mel for making my newsletters all pretty every month and also dealing with the lioness.

To my editors—I cannot thank you all enough. Ellie McLove from My Brother's Editor, Petra, Paige Smith, Becky—you all contribute to making sure every manuscript is the best that I can put out. Thank you!

To my cover designer, Jay Aheer! Thank you for creating art.

To Stacey Blake, who always delivers the most beautiful formatting designs.

To my WOLVESSSS! For being my biggest inspiration, cheer team, and family. Gang, gang! That is a song... please don't come for me.

To my Blogger and Bookstagram teams, thank you SO SO much for all of the work you do for me leading up to a release! You ladies are incredible.

To the bloggers who sign up for my ARCs and Promo—thank you! I am so appreciative for all the time you set aside to read my new books, and then review them. I cannot tell you how thankful I am for each and every one of you.

Social Butterfly PR, Jenn, Shan, and the girls—thank you for working with me always.

Candi PR, thank you, woman! I hope I don't drive you too crazy with being spooky in general.

Last but definitely not least, my damn readers. MY READERS. My loyalty to you all is unmatched. I hope I always do you proud. Love you forever.

Now this is the part where I get paranoid that I have forgotten someone. I swear, this is why I shouldn't do these because now I'm going to be up all night, stressing that I've forgotten someone.

Hmmm, I think I covered it.

I am thankful for you too. Yes, you. YOU! Thank you for being here and reading my words. For taking a chance on a story from me. I'm honored.

—A xo

To

Sonia Grilletta

01.12.1981-10.10.2020

This one is for you, Queen. May you continue to rest in love. Maybe Julia will come by and read this one to you, so you can get some Madship answers.

Love always,

Amo Jones.

Madison

NOTHING IS GOING TO MAKE sense once you flip open this first chapter. You're going to wonder why the fuck I made the decisions I did. Why he did what he did. I'm not going to make this easy for you. I'm going to guide you through loops that you're going to wish I had just skipped, but I'm not going to do that either. You're going to feel my pain, my loss, and my heart breaking in my chest. You're going to watch me trip and fall, and get back up again. You're going to wish you could slap the shit out of Bishop and me, but among all... I'm going to take you back to when I left the love of my life, and ran.

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Good luck.

Mads

Xo

PAIN. I MEAN REAL PAIN. The kind that harrows its claws into your heart and rips the organ straight from your chest. At least, that's how I feel as I look down at the bright city lights below. Our apartment is everything I ever wanted while we waited for our home to be built in Riverside, yet there's an air of pain that lingers through the walls of this building.

Maybe it's the emptiness.

Or maybe it's the fact that right now, he and I should be happy. The expectation of having a happily ever after after you've just fought for a relationship by the fangs of your teeth seems like a fight that you shouldn't have to fight. We did the fighting. Right now, happiness seems like an illusion. Like wilted expectations that should have died in every fairy tale we were told as children.

The secrets. They're like an STD that just won't fuck off. I know he's hiding them. You don't fall in love with someone without picking up their habits. I know Bishop better than anyone. I clawed my way into his cold, dead heart until he bled right into mine. I have the battle scars to prove it.

The front door opens, and then closes, but I keep my eyes on the city below. On the glowing lights and bright archway of the bridge in the far distance. It's not until the warmth of his tattooed hand sprawls over my flat belly that my eyes close and I release a pent-up sigh.

His lips graze the nape of my neck. "Baby. How was your day?"

"It was good." I smile without turning to face him. Afraid that he'd be able to see every shrill anxiety that won't stop screaming inside my head. Secrets are a dangerous weapon in a marriage or a relationship, especially if you start using them as weapons. I often think back to the days when we were in high school and everything seemed fun. I caught the unattainable Bishop Vincent Hayes, who didn't give me butterflies, but a herd of fucking crows squawking wildly in my stomach. I never had cute flutters with Bishop. I'd bleed from the talons of crows that tore at the inside lining in my gut, and then after? I'd ride the high of euphoria every time he'd lick my wounds better. It was a toxic addiction, one I'd surely die from one day, but it was mine to keep.

I turn to face him, wrapping my arms around his neck. "What did you all do today?" The fireplace burns in the center of the family room and every now and then I want to lose myself in the flames. Maybe move closer to them until I feel their heat on my cheek because for so long, all I have felt are the claws of sadness scrape over my bones.

"Oh you know..." Bishop murmurs over my lips. Heat shoots straight between my thighs and I have to bite down on my lower lip to stop from moaning. "Trying to stop Tillie and Nate from killing each other."

"Mmm, that used to be us, you know?" I say, one raised brow. "No judging."

"Fuck that. We were at least fun about it. Those two are just straight-up indecisive."

I run my finger down the center of his chest, flicking off the first button until I uncover all of his tattoos.

I lean forward and press a kiss onto the swan over his neck. “I love you.” There’s one thing absolute, and that’s my love for Bishop. Even through the shadows of my melancholy, the love I have for him is untamed. Wild and loyal.

He unties my silk robe and it falls to a pool at my feet as his arm tightens around my waist when he lifts me from the ground. Wrapping my legs around him, I tilt my head back as he carries me through the apartment and to our bedroom upstairs. “I love you too.” Before he can finish his next sentence, I’m flying through the air and landing with a bounce on our bed.

Rolling onto my stomach, I sink my palms into the soft mattress, arching my ass into the air. “Wanna play?”

He wraps his fingers around his leather belt, tearing it from around his waist before crawling up the bed on his knees. Leaning over my back, he snaps the belt around the front of my throat before pulling it tight. Using the slack, he tugs on the lead and my head tilts backward as he looks down on me from above. “It’s cute how you think that’s even a question, Kitty.”

I reach for the edge of his belt, flexing my fingers between the space before I die of suffocation. Damn Bishop. Sucking in a deep breath when it loosens, I laugh around my coughs. “You’re going to kill me one day.”

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His head tilts to the side as his hand rolls beneath my chin, his thumb sliding between my lips. “Aw, baby. We know.”

I’m about to ask where he is when I feel his damp tongue touch the inside of my thigh. My back arches when he drags it up over my clit before making his way down over my entrance. With both hands squeezing each ass cheek, he leans up and flicks me gently. I reach for his hair between my thighs and he pulls back, sliding out from under me and grabbing my hips to slam me back against him. Running his palm down the center of my back slowly, he hits the curve of my tailbone.

“Gonna make it hurt a little.”

I flip my hair over one shoulder and grind my ass into him. “Okay, but if you break it, you gotta buy it.”

He grabs me by my hips and turns me around until I fall onto my back in a fit of laughter.

He lowers his full body weight down, moving the stray hair off my face. “I already fucking own you.” Lowering his lips to mine, he sucks my tongue into his mouth as he slowly sinks himself inside until his girth stretches me to accommodate him.

“Bishop,” I whisper, but he catches my moan when he deepens the kiss and slowly rocks into me. The lighting is wilted, with nothing but burning city streets blazing through the window.

I raise my hips to meet him as our kiss remains frantic, but soft. Gentle. Bishop

doesn't always do gentle sex, so this is something different. My stomach rolls into a ball of live wire, sparking each time we touch.

He finally breaks our kiss and lowers his forehead down onto mine, searching my eyes as our bodies slap together with sweat. With every stroke in and every drag out, I feel the familiar tingle spreading from my clit, all the way over my lower belly.

Bishop kisses me again, his hand coming to my throat. He groans deeply and I see fucking stars when he lowers his face into the side of my neck and bites down on the flesh between my collarbone and shoulder. "Changed my mind. Kind of wanna worship you right now."

His hips pick up pace as he hardens every thrust until I'm getting fucked literally up the bed.

Wrapping my hair around his fist, he leans up to look right into my eyes, his nose barely touching mine, all while never missing a single thrust.

"Let go, Madison. Give me all of you."

My lip catches between my teeth, but he kisses me instead, and all at once the pent-up energy and clenched muscles release around him. My thighs turn numb, my lips quivering as my orgasm rolls through me so violently that my body jerks, and tears prick the corners of my eyes.

He smirks down at me as I'm still catching my breath. Reaching up to his dark brown hair, I run my fingers through the sweaty strands, rolling my lips beneath my teeth to stop my smile.

"That was nice."

“Yeah?” he asks, and when his dimple pops out on his cheek, I know it’s not over.

Rolling onto his back, I straddle him and push up from his hard chest with a slight sigh. “I’m tired now.”

“Tired?” his fingers trail over my lower belly until his thumb is pressing on my clit. He licks his bottom lip, his eyes rolling to the back of his head. “Mmmm, don’t know that word.”

My hair hits my tailbone when his other hand comes to my breast and a lazy moan slips from my mouth. “Okay, maybe you’re right.”

I begin rolling my hips over him slowly, feeling that familiar heat build from between my thighs and spread like venom all over my body. Bishop pulls me back down until my lips are back on his and one hand is tight in my hair while the other on my ass.

“Fuck.” His animalistic grunts vibrate over my sweat laden flesh and I almost pass out from the intoxication of power it gives me. “Ride me harder, not faster.”

I smirk against his mouth before sucking on his bottom lip. Keeping the same rhythm, same pace while pushing my hips further into him until I feel his dick twitch against me. “Like that?”

“Faster...” he pants, and I swear it’s the sexiest sound I’ve ever heard.

“But I though—”

His hand is on the front of my throat, squeezing tight enough to cut off my oxygen. “Baby...”

Leaning over, I ride him faster, pulling out just enough until the head of his cock

crowns my entrance before slamming back down onto him. Covering him like a glove. Hard and fast. That familiar heat is back, spreading like wildfire through my veins with no escape plan.

“Bishop...”

The slapping of our bodies becomes more desperate, more brutal, as his grip on my hair tightens and his other hand lands on my ass with a loud slap! As soon as the sting vibrates over my muscles and to my inner thighs, it's enough to tip me over the edge. I sink into the crook of his neck with weak whimpers leaving my mouth as his dick jerks inside, both of our releases dripping out and down the inside of my thighs.

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“Pretty sure you just got pregnant,” he says breathlessly, his sweaty chest rising and falling beneath my cheek.

I laugh, running my finger through the sweat covering his tattoo. “Let’s hope not.”

I wake up the next morning with a smile permanently etched on my face. After last night, I feel lighter on my feet. Maybe Tillie was right, and I just needed attention from him. Maybe I should just be honest about what I need. Bishop is a hard man, but I know he softens with me.

Swinging my legs off the bed, I sweep up my phone and open Instagram as I make my way down to the kitchen. I go through Tate’s story, snickering at her gym selfie in the mirror after a workout and a weird selfie shot with some jacked-up pop-eyed looking gym nut.

I chuckle, texting off a reply while opening cupboards to find the granola. We’ve been here for a couple of weeks now, but I still struggle to find everything.

@madisonvmontgomery stop exposing your toys.

Tate has an uncanny ability to make the men she plays with feel inferior. I feel for Spyder, I do, but it wouldn’t be Tate if she didn’t at least make him hurt a little.

I place my phone on the counter and finish making my breakfast. I know I’m fortunate to live the life I do, but it doesn’t come with its battles. For one, I’m bored. Secondly, the dangers of this world. Losing Tillie and Nate’s baby Micaela recently hit a spot in me that I didn’t want to touch. When God takes a child, he doesn’t do it

gracefully. She was the most beautiful baby in the entire world, an angel, and this world ruined her.

My phone starts vibrating and I swipe it unlocked, hitting speaker while spooning granola into my mouth.

“You know, you didn’t have to do me dirty like that,” Tate scolds through the phone.

“Oh please!” I say around my food. “You and I both know you don’t even know his name.”

Silence.

“What are you doing? I feel like we should be doing something, you know, for Tillie, but I don’t know what.”

“I know,” Tate sighs gently. “Look, it’s no secret we don’t like each other, but Madison...”

“I know,” I whisper, staring off into the distance. There are no words that can fill the gaping hole of losing a child, so what do you do for your best friend when this happens? “And I’m not sure what we could do. I think right now, she needs to heal, and unfortunately, I think the only way she’s going to do that is with Nate.”

“Her healing isn’t going to be easy. We know that.”

I snort. “Yeah, because of who is doing the healing. Those boys are going to torture her to push her through, I just know it. Their love language is torment.”

“I don’t understand why you guys tolerate it,” Tate says. “Anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow. We have a lunch date.”

I hang up with Tate and continue with my day. I eat, train, shower, sleep, and then shop. It's almost a routine, all because Bishop is so desperate to push me out of the fold. It's not until I've had my bath that night that I realize what the time is, and that Bishop still isn't home.

I lotion my skin, blow out the luxury scented candles in the room, and slide between the sheets before unlocking my phone. Seeing Hunter has added to his stories, I click on his circle and my heart sinks. Music is playing at his condo as he moves through the house. I see the Kings sprawled out across the sofa, Nate looking as fucked as the last time I saw him and with no Tillie in sight. I feel my throat swell until it's blocking my air intake. As much as I know if I keep watching I'm going to be more annoyed, I click next. I like the taste of pain because it reminds me why swallowing the good in life is important.

Bishop raises a glass up to his lips and I watch in slow motion as a red-haired girl falls comfortably onto his lap. I squeeze my eyes closed as rage burns through my veins.

Mother-fucking-fucker-cocksucking-fuck!

I shove the covers off me and make my way back into the kitchen. Sliding open the butler's pantry, I climb up on the counter and take down the metal box my body instinctively yearns for.

Leaning against the wall, I bury my face in my hands. "You don't need to do this, Madison. You don't need it." My phone vibrates again, and I swipe it open like a fucking crackhead, checking the latest notification. Do I want to do this? The more I watch, the angrier I'll become, and then what? What do you do with a handful of pain and no outlet? I know what I do.

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I flip open the box lid, pull out the small clear bag filled with the Devil's ash. It's ten p.m. I need a distraction. This is what my life is going to become, a series of waiting for my cheating partner to get home while he's off running a fucking billion-dollar crime empire. He's Hector Hayes' son, and as much as his mother has tried to imply that he is nothing like his father, he's morphing into his daddy every fucking day that goes by.

I rack up the lines in pretty little rows, swipe my phone up from the counter, and hit dial on Tate.

"Yes?" She answers sweetly. Fake. There's nothing sweet about Tate, and thank fuck for that because we wouldn't be best friends if she was.

"Are you out being a ho tonight?" Flicking the solid gold straw between my fingers, I bring it to my nostril and lean down, snorting a line before clearing my nose.

"Why yes, I am. I'm about to head out, and by the sounds of what I just heard, you need me to pick you up on the way..."

"See you soon."

I place my phone back on the counter and pull the clip out of my hair until my brown locks tumble over my slender shoulders. My razor-sharp collarbone swells out of my skin, and my cheeks are a little more sunken in than normal. I've lost a lot of weight. Probably from the coke. Bishop promised he wouldn't hide anything from me anymore, yet the secrets feel louder than ever. He comes home, we have sex, all is good, and then he walks out those doors and I feel like I've lost him until he walks

back through them again. Even as I make my way back to my room and start on my makeup, I keep thinking about him. At Hunter's. With a fucking chick on his lap. Suddenly, I'm whirl-winded back to when we were at high school and he used shit like this as a way to spiral me out of control. Truth is, no relationship has a happily ever after. It doesn't end after the simple words of "The End". There's no such thing. Love continues to destroy long after the final page of any well-written romance novel.

I finish up my makeup and browse through my clothes in the closet. Most of them are still new. All designer. Suddenly, I'm the girl with too much money and not enough sense. I choose a leather skirt, thigh-high boots, and a matching leather jacket with a white camisole underneath. My makeup is a creation of the anger I feel inside, with black smudges around my red-rimmed eyes and lips the color of slaughter. A key jiggles in the hole before the door opens and Tate walks through, wearing high-rise jeans and a crop top. I've never been so thankful that I gave her a key to our other entrance.

I finish off the lettering and step back to admire my work. With a note plastered on our fridge, written in Ruby Woo, I flick my tongue over my front teeth. Gone out. Fuck you very much. Xo

Tate pauses when she reads the note, twirling her keys around her index finger. "You're looking like a whole hot mess right now, Mads. And that note is going to piss him off."

I grab her by the arm. "I don't really care."

"Wanna talk about it?" Tate asks, closing the door behind us and using her key to lock up before jogging up behind me. We could have used the private elevator, but I know Bishop has direct camera view of it on his phone and I don't want him to get notified that we have left.

“No.” I push on the L button continuously, cursing the shitty music that won’t stop playing.

“Alright then, I guess it’s going to be a night of Tate and Madison take—one hundred?”

“Tate?” I scoop up some powder onto my pinky nail, taking the bump and offer one to her nose. “Shut up and take the hit.”

He told me he loved me.

And that may be true,

But the only thing left between us,

Is broken and strewed.

MUSIC. THE HEADY SOUND POUNDS through my ears, sending vibrations through my body.

My hair whips around the place as my body rolls to the music. I spin and grab Tate from the back of her neck, spilling her drink down her chest. “Bathroom!”

Neon lights flicker on and off to the beat, body sweat rubs against me, and every now and then, I lose sight of Tate, until I feel her fingers in my pocket, seeking that little bag.

I grab her by the hand and lead us toward the seedy bathroom stalls that hang right at the back of the bar.

Checking the stalls one-by-one, I pull my phone out to upload a snarky social media

post, when I see all of the missed calls and texts. With the music now nothing but a distant thrum against the walls, the reality of what I'm doing sinks further into my brain.

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“Madison,” Tate says gently, her hand on my arm. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Tate. That’s the problem. I just—I feel like he’s keeping shit from me, and then tonight I open Instagram and see some girl sitting on his lap.” My eyes collide with hers. “Everyone knows he’s mine, Tate, who would be that bold to do that?”

“Whoever she is, she’s going to meet my knuckles.” Tate moves to one of the stalls and pulls down her jeans.

I point to the door. “You going to close that just in case someone enters?”

“What?” She waves me off. “Hell no. No, seriously.” She flushes and meets me back at the sink where I’ve slid up to sit on the counter. “You both need to sort this out. Talk to him, Madison. He loves you.”

“I love Tillie.” That’s not what I wanted to say, but it comes out through a dying whisper anyway. “I’d do anything for her, especially right now, but I feel as though they’re pushing me out, you know? And that’s not on her, it’s on them.”

Tate snorts, cupping her hands beneath the water and splashing it onto her face. “No, I don’t. Those boys worship the ground you walk on. You’re irreplaceable.”

I shove off the basin and grab her by the hand. “Fine. Let’s go dance the night away, and then I’ll go home and fuck my boyfriend.”

We continue dancing the night away, recklessly lost in the music, drugs, and dancing. It’s not until four the next morning when we’re finally dragging our weak bodies out

of the club, my driver already at the curb waiting.

I hike Tate up with my arm around her waist as the driver climbs out and opens the back door. “Madison, Bishop is at home waiting.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say around my parched throat. All of that pent-up guilt raptures inside of me so viciously it almost knocks me off my axis.

As soon as I close the door behind me, I open my phone again to see even more phone calls. Shit. He’s mad. We drop Tate off at her dorm, and make our way back to the apartment, where my nerves have successfully spun themselves into a knot of full-fledged anxiety. Even as I stumble my way into the elevator, I feel my heart raging in my chest. Thud. Thud. Thud. God, he’s going to be so—

“—Where. The fuck. Have you been?” his voice is deathly shallow and instant, as soon as the private elevator doors open into our kitchen. He asks me this, but he would have known within three minutes of finding my note on the fridge.

“I’m—I just needed it.”

His hand flies to my chin, fingers flexing around my cheeks to examine my face. “Your fucking nose is bleeding, Madison.” He shoves me away like discarded trash. “Go fucking tidy yourself up.” He turns and leaves, ignoring the gaping hole in my chest that his words put there.

“Bishop!” I snap, just as he reaches the steps that lead to our bedroom. “Are you keeping more from me?” I watch as the muscles in his back flex. He’s fighting with himself right now, and I know I’ve got him. “You said you wouldn’t...” The words are a soft whisper.

“Do you fucking blame us for keeping shit from you, Madison? Are you fucking

kidding me? You're a fucking liability right now. You can't keep your fucking nose clean, and instead of coming to me like an adult about something that has upset you, you're still partying like we're in fucking high school!"

I flinch as his final words end in a roar. He shakes his head, running his hands through his hair.

"I don't know, Mads. You can't seem to keep your shit together and I don't fucking need this right now, okay? I fucking don't." He leaves, and my body trembles to the cold tiles in the kitchen, drawing my knees up to my chest while resting my head against them.

He hates me.

I've failed him.

He's right, to an extent. I haven't made any extra effort to include myself. If anything, I've pulled back. Am I jealous? So used to being the only girl in the group, I haven't adapted to Tillie becoming such an important person to all the Kings. I should be happy—I love Tillie. She is my best friend. Madison, you're a fucking idiot.

On top of all of that, I was supposed to be this person to him. Someone strong, someone he could rely on. Instead, I'm a liability. The aftershocks of his words cripple me as time goes on.

An hour.

Two.

It's not until I force myself up from the floor with a grunt of my knees that I realize I

stayed curled up there for three hours.

Putting my phone on the charger on my bedside table, I scrub through the shower and shuffle into fresh clothes. I take extra time to blow dry my hair, apply face creams, and swallow vitamins like I didn't just snort an eight ball the night before. Sliding on some fluffy socks and one of Bishop's old Riverside hoodies, I inwardly chant the same mantra in my head. You're going to do better. You're going to be strong. You are not weak, you're just lost. I know deep down he's right. I know that right now, I'm not being the woman he needs me to be because I'm too busy caught up in the girl I was.

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Opening my phone on the way to the kitchen after turning the TV on to Netflix, I see a new text from him.

Bishop: You saw Hunter's story.

I find a packet of microwave popcorn, push three minutes, and fire off a reply.

Me: Yeah.

Bishop: She was pushed right off the second she fell on me. Did you do anything stupid last night?

I slam the microwave door closed and throw the inflated bag of popcorn onto the counter. Despite the fact that my mouth waters from the scent alone, my fingers fly over the keyboard.

Me: Why the fuck would you think that?

Bishop: I don't know, Madison. Maybe because you're so erratic lately.

I squeeze my eyes closed to count myself down. I'll call Elena and Dad tomorrow. Maybe just being around family will make me not want to stab Bishop's eyeballs out with a blunt spoon.

Gathering my popcorn and a bottle of water, I make my way into the dimly lit lounge, falling down onto the leather sofa. The Netflix logo flashes over my TV as I pop the bag open and place two puffed kernels into my mouth, my eyes rolling to the back of

my head when the salted butter dissolves against my tongue. I scan through the horror genre, searching for something—anything to get my mind off the shitshow that is my relationship, when there's a beep from the front desk.

Sighing and disappointed that I haven't been able to shovel all this popcorn into my gob, I push the wool throw off my legs and make my way to the private elevator where the voice box is to contact the front desk.

"Yes?" I say into the little box.

"Ms. Montgomery, Nate is here to see you. Would you like me to let him in?"

Her name is Veronica Miles, and she has been a godsend since I've been living here. She's fresh out of high school, so around our age, and just... gets it. I'm going to be sure to tell Bishop that she needs a pay raise because despite the fact she's well aware how powerful the Kings are and who owns this place, she still made sure to check with me that I wanted a visitor.

"Thanks, V. Let him up." I release the button and cross my arms in front of my chest, waiting for the doors to part. As soon as they ding, my arms fall to the sides of my body. Nate's hair is ruffled, his eyes are lazy and weak, and I can smell the reek of expensive top shelf alcohol from a mile away.

"Nate—" All of my questions disappear as I launch forward and catch him around the waist, hooking his arm around my neck to move him into the kitchen. "God, you stink. Our parents aren't going to be happy if you've been playing in the cellar again..."

He laughs, but it's sleepily, much less drunk. "I'm coming down."

"You don't say..." I whisper, helping him onto the barstool and taking a coffee pod

out of the drawer to place into the machine. I turn to face him, leaning against the granite counter. “Nate...” I pause.

What do you say to someone who has lost everything? There are no words that will make him feel better. Nothing that will help him mourn the loss of his baby daughter, and I know Nate. He doesn’t like to be pushed and chatted to. He came to me for a reason, and I know what that is. That’s because despite everything, Nate and I are soulmates. We’re the kind who just would have never worked out. I think in another life, we were probably some form of lovers, but again—it would never had been enough.

I clear my throat as the machine switches off, grabbing down two mugs.

Sliding one over to him, I point to the dark lounge room, faintly lit from the floor-to-ceiling windows that offer the perfect backdrop to any upscale apartment in New York City. “Wanna watch a movie with me? Like old times?”

Nate buries his fingers in his hair before pushing it back and raising his eyes to meet mine. Usually Nate hides his humanity behind a thick shield of dark humor, but right now, he’s laid it all out for me. My heart breaks and I find myself walking toward him, lowering myself beside him and watching as he sips on his coffee. He’s always known that he can break with me, because I’ll always pick up his pieces and put him back together.

Running my fingertip through the side of his hair, I rest my head on his shoulder. “You can watch a movie with me but on one condition.”

“And what’s that, Kitty?” His voice is thick with unshed emotion.

“You absolutely must have a shower.”

He chuckles, but it's not his usual bouncy laugh. It's a sad kind of melody that wants to hurt every one of its listeners. "Okay. I'll watch with you."

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God gives us temptation to remind us what we can lose.

IT'S BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE Nate was at our place, and even though Bishop has hardly been home, I find myself feeling as though I'm being watched. Every turn that I make when I go to the markets, I feel invisible eyes lurking behind the back of my skull. I tried telling Tate, but she wouldn't listen. She said it was me coming off the snow since our night out, but I was certain that wasn't it. I knew I had to give it up for him. For us. I'm desperate to make things work with Bishop and get us back on track, and I know that in order for us to do that, I need to stop my recreational activities. Arguing with him by saying we all would do it, isn't an argument that I want to engage in either, because it's clear that none of them have been hooked on that elated high after the first dust of evil. Just me. They all can play with coke without it playing them.

I want to do better. I want to be beside him as his queen. Build the life we always talked about.

But right now, I find my paranoia becoming strong. Too strong. Not enough to have me reaching for a little white bag, but enough to make me look nuts. More than I am.

I dial Bishop's name on my phone as I cross the busy road, picking up my pace to the apartment and ignoring the blaring horns and profanities being screamed at me from angry New Yorkers.

"What, Madison?"

I swallow past the bluntness of his words. "I think someone's following me."

“Where are you?” He hardens his tone, but in a way that I remember him being. The protective asshole who fell in love with me, and me only. “Madison!” And he’s mad again.

“I’m almost home.”

“Keep me on the phone until you get there.”

“Okay.” I cross the road when it’s clear and round the corner that leads directly to my building—passing the scent of freshly baked bread from the bakery across the street. Peering over my shoulder, my heart beating in my chest—I let out a relaxed sigh when I see Eli jogging up to me.

“Never mind! It’s Eli.”

Bishop mumbles something under his breath before the line goes dead.

“Heey!” I say, shoving my phone into my jacket pocket. “What are you doing in the city?”

He hitches his thumb over his shoulder. “Running a babysitting errand.”

“Ah.” I continue my walk back to the apartment with him beside me. “King business?”

“I wish.” He chuckles, shaking his head. “Hey, is everything okay? You know I’m always here for a chat. I know you’ve got Nate and Bishop, but I also know they’re both going through shit right now, so just saying, I’m here.”

“Thanks, E. That’s really sweet of you.”

He nudges my shoulder with his and points up ahead. “I’ve gotta head back to Riverside. You’ll be okay?”

I tilt my head toward the opening doors of the building, stopping in front. “I’m home now. I’ll be fine.”

“Alright, Mads. See you soon.” And he disappears through the sea of bodies as I make my way up to our apartment.

Passing the reception desk, I notice V isn’t working, which isn’t unusual. She works nights, but the girl who works days could not be more opposite to V. I actually think she hates me a little too.

I don’t bother waving to her as I enter the private elevator, swiping my card to take me to our level. Seeing a text from Tate, I open it with a smile. Bet she’s hung over.

I lost your house key at the club. Fuck.

I ignore her text, typical Tate. She wouldn’t have lost it. It’ll be at her house somewhere or stuck in her bra. I’m flicking through Instagram when the doors part. I take one step in before something is being shoved over my head, cutting off my sight.

“Hey!” I yell, but some kind of rope ties around my mouth, my arms pinned to my back. Tingles spread through my body as I fall to the ground, desperate to kick something—anything. Only I’m met with air.

“She’s feisty.” A man’s voice.

I don’t recognize him. Oh my God, someone was watching me. Something pinches me in my thigh, and I scream, wriggling around on the ground to try to get on my feet. Dread drowns me along with whatever poison they just injected into my leg. I

know this isn't Bishop's shenanigans. I know. I can feel—my body liquefies, as if my limbs are slowly turning to Jell-O.

“What did—” I attempt to say, only I can't feel my tongue and I'm pretty sure drool is falling down my lip. I try to reach for it but can't feel my arms. Did they cut them off? Tears prick the corner of my eyes as whatever was covering my face disappears.

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I'm going to die.

“Move her to the bed. Set up the camera.”

My eyelids feel like lead, my will to fight slowly disappearing. Someone picks me up, I think, and I'm moving, floating through the air. Maybe I'm flying—that could make more sense right now. And now I'm falling... falling and falling into a soft cloud. I chuckle, smiling at the clouds surrounding me. Reaching out to touch them, air whooshes up my inner thighs, curling around my curves. I giggle at the way it tickles all of my sensitive regions, and then my back arches off the bed when I feel more air push around me. Widening my arms out, a smile spreads on my lips. I'm jumping now. Jumping and jumping on the clouds like balls of bubblegum, and then I'm falling... falling far down. Smack! My head hits the hard pavement and sets off a pounding headache. I groan, turning left and right. No longer on clouds, no longer bouncing, no longer happy. A familiar dread begins filling my mind again, touching all of the raw memories from what it felt like moments ago. Something is torn off and I'm looking up at an unfamiliar face. He's young. I don't know him.

Oh my God, they've been following me. Tate's key. The club. My recklessness.

My thighs ache, everything hurts.

He cracks a smile at me that reeks of evil. But it's not. It's not evil. I know evil, and he drives a Maserati. “Now, you're going to play along with this.”

“Fuck you!” I spit at him, trying to push up from the bed but failing. My arms still aren't working properly, despite the fact they're no longer restrained.

The boy leans down, meeting me at eye level. I can't tell how much time has passed since he drugged me, or what kind of psychedelic he drugged me with, but it's well worn off. It's not until I look down to my thighs to notice he's changed me into a small leather skirt and a white crop top with no bra. The jumping around must have been him changing me.

"Who the fuck are you?" I reach for the sheets on our bed to cover my body, only they're too tight to pull.

He takes a seat on the edge of my bed. Mine and Bishop's bed. And flicks open the button of his shirt. "I'm someone who is going to kill every single person that you love if you don't go ahead and play a cute little game with me. Don't believe me? We got into your house without you or Bishop knowing."

"What game?" I ask, my eyes falling up and down his body.

Jeans, hoodie, but an air of danger hovers over his shoulders and there's something. Something that is telling me that whatever Bishop has been hiding from me all this time, it has to do with this man here, which means that if Bishop was hiding him from me, he's dangerous. Dangerous enough to follow through on his threat. Bishop has always said I wasn't strong enough to stand beside him when he took the gavel. If I folded and destroyed everyone that I loved because I couldn't do my part, I'd never forgive myself.

I sigh, my heart beating fiercely in my chest. So hard that it almost snatches my breath. "What do you need me to do?"

The breakdown of a relationship isn't the only thing that breaks.

SUNSETS OR SUNRISES. ONE SIGNIFIES the end of the day as it baptizes the sky with streaks of blood orange, and the other symbolizes the start of a new day. New

sins to be made, new memories, new regrets.

I sit perched in a lounge chair on the patio of my parents' house. I couldn't go back to the apartment. I can't go back. Not after what I did.

Swiping the tears that fall down my face, I blow gently into my mug of hot chocolate. An empty void fills my chest that I know will never refill. I'm not broken, I'm damaged. I wasn't before. I was his, now I'm not. Guilt grips me from around my throat and refuses to let go. Even when I suck down the rich melted chocolate, the guilt lingers right there beside the notes of crushed cocoa beans.

"Are you okay, sweetie?" Elena takes a seat beside me. "It's cold out here."

"I like the cold." I swirl my drink around in the mug and peek at her under my lashes. "I'm not. I don't think. Okay."

Elena leans forward, crossing her hands on her lap while pulling her cardigan tighter around her waist. "Do you want me to cancel our trip and stay with you?"

I shake my head with wide eyes. "No! It's okay." I peer out into the distance, watching the baptizing from today's sin spread across the sky in a bright pink casting. "Just—I might stay here for a bit if that's okay."

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Warmth covers my hand and it's not until she touches me that I realize how cold I really am. "Of course, Madison. This will always be your home."

I smile up at her, but not enough to reach my eyes while willing my tears not to unleash. I've always liked Elena. She was good for my dad and still is.

"Well, I better go. You know how your father gets if he's waiting on one of us."

I chuckle, but the vibration feels agonizing. Like it's rattling all of my damaged bones while doing it. "Yeah, I do."

"Go inside. It's too cold out here."

"I won't be long behind you," I say up at her as she stands. "Have a safe trip." I watch as Elena disappears back through the same way she came, through the doors between the floor-to-ceiling windows of the family room. This is definitely home, but it doesn't feel like it right now.

Nowhere does.

My phone chimes in my pocket and I take a few seconds before deciding to see who it is. Do I want to? What am I supposed to do? Pretend like this didn't happen?

I swipe it unlocked and see Bishop's name.

Bishop: You not coming home?

The tears that I fought to keep locked up suddenly break through all of my barriers and fall down my cheeks. We weren't perfect before this happened, and I wanted to change, to get better, do better, but now he's going to assume that I'm still just being a stupid brat who doesn't want to give up snow.

"You will go along with this. You will tell him you cheated on him. You will not tell him the truth. Make it sound sexy, and if not—I'll make sure he gets this." The boy waved his phone in front of my eyes.

I have to protect them.

Me: I'm not.

I swipe the tears off my cheeks, wincing when it feels more like sandpaper.

Bishop: I'm coming over.

Shit. I drop my phone onto the daybed and sink my face into the palm of my hands. I'm not ready to see him. I'm not. But I know these people are my family, and if I suddenly pull away, it's going to only cause them all to yank tighter on my chains.

Alcohol.

I need alcohol.

Standing and making my way back to the kitchen, I open the liquor cupboard and take down a bottle of vodka. Flipping off the lid, I pour some into a glass, shooting it back, before doing it two more times. I need to shower again. No. I showered three times already. But even as the thought enters my mind, the memories begin sticking to my flesh. I need another shower. I'm going to break my soulmate's heart tonight, and the stench of that is far worse than being raped.

Picking up the bottle of Vodka, I jog upstairs to my bedroom, closing the door behind me. It's been a while since I've been in here, but it's like no time has changed. The closet where Bishop fucked me for the first time. The bed. The windowsill. The bed. When everything was simple and easy, and my only problem was trying to contain my ridiculous crush on the school's bad boy.

Finding the light in my closet, I reach for the little Louis Vuitton box on the top of the hangers, finding the bag of coke inside. Angel dust for sinners, it takes away my pain—whether I like to admit it or not.

I pour out the entire contents onto my desk opposite my bed, and rack up ten lines by using Bishop's black Amex card. I carve the lines until they're even, chewing on my bottom lip as tears continue to roll down my face. By the time my bedroom door swings open, I'm uncontrollable. Sobs rock my body so fiercely that I drop the funnel onto the floor, falling backward onto my ass as Bishop looks down at me, his eyes wild and his fists tight at his sides.

"Madison, what the fuck are—" I can see his anger at the coke, at me being a mess. I had to take that away, so I—

"—I cheated on you."

He pauses. No longer making his way to me. He stops moving completely and the atmosphere shifts to a dangerously low level.

My mouth opens, desperate to fill the silence with something. Tell him I didn't mean it and that he raped me—but I can't. I can't because I can't risk what would happen if I did.

"You what?" His voice breaks at the end before he falls into the chair beside my desk.

I still can't bring myself to look at him. I can't. I love him with everything that is me, and to see the hurt that will be shown across his face at my hand, I can't do that.

"Who?" he asks, and I bring my legs up to my chest. "Fucking why, Madison? Did I not give enough? You still needed attention and drugs?"

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“Bishop, please—I—”

My eyes slam into his and it’s like he’s slapped me across the face. Oh God.

“Who the fuck was it, Madison?”

“Please, I-I don’t know who it was, I just—”

He laughs, and perfect white teeth blind me as he tips his head back, the veins in his neck hammering against his tanned skin. Right over his swan tattoo. My swan tattoo. Fear cripples me from being able to move. “So not only did you cheat on me, but you did it with someone you don’t even know?”

I jump at the tone of his voice.

Turning slowly in his chair, he snatches the funnel off the floor and brings the tip to his nostril before taking a line.

Then another.

And another.

Finally he clears both nostrils, turning back to face me, all emotion now gone. The pain he bared to me seconds ago now covered in snow.

He flicks the funnel at my face and it clips my lip. “Come home when you’re ready. I’ll be waiting for you. Slut or not.”

Then he stands from the chair and leaves, slamming my door so hard it shakes the old photos of us all together. Every memory documented. A framed shot falls to the floor, shattering the glass it was in.

Picking up the funnel around the rogue sobs swimming in my heart, I take a line.

Another.

Another.

I take the fourth one with a promise to myself that I won't do this forever. The coke. The lies. The toxicity. The feeling like an outsider with people who I'm supposed to call my family. I brush the last three off the desk with my hand and turn some music on, cranking it up. Needing that distraction—other than the high of drugs.

Limp Bizkit comes on and I swing around the four posts of my bed. "Eat You Alive." Such a good song. Falling down on my bed covers drenched in sweat, my erratic laughter turns into full-blown cries.

I broke my soulmate's heart, now I no longer want mine.

I wake up the next morning with a dry throat and a headache that can only mean withdrawal. I know I'm acting like a mess. I know that. I want to stop.

I look at the fallen powder over my carpet, closing my eyes to take in deep breaths.

"Fuck."

The tears start again, and I wrap my arms around my legs, pulling them in closer. When my phone vibrates on the floor of the bathroom, I dive down to grab it, wishing and hoping it's Bishop. I'd take anything over losing him.

I notice Tillie's name and answer. "Hello?"

"Madison, ahh, Bishop is losing his shit in his office, and if I'm honest, I'm a little afraid he's going to kill Nate or any of them—"

I hang up my phone and shove on my Riverside Prep hoodie and Converse, snatching the keys to my Ferrari. Jogging downstairs to the showroom garage, I unlock my turquoise pastel car and slide into the driver's seat. My phone starts ringing again and I hit the phone emblem on the steering wheel as I reverse out of the garage, flooring it down our driveway.

"What?"

"You hung up on me!" Tillie whines.

"Sorry," I say, sniffing my nose. I reach up to touch my nostril and bring my fingers back down to see bright red blood on the tips. "Fuck." I swipe it on my hoodie and continue the drive. "Look, I'm on my way. Who is in there with him?"

"Nate and Brantley. Hey, what's going on with you two, Mads?"

"He'll be fine, but please don't leave him alone."

"Mads..."

"Look. We've... I can't do this right now. I won't be long." I floor it forward onto the highway and hang up the phone, panicking. My heart is broken, but it still beats for him, and the blood that's rushing around my body is hot—wanting to break out of my skin.

"Oh God." As soon as I pull into the hotel, my tires skid to a stop and the valet is

already there, smiling at me.

“Morning, Madison—”

I toss the keys at him. “I’m so sorry, Trevor. Please just park it somewhere.” I didn’t even stop to check myself and see how bad I looked, because right now I know Bishop’s spiraling. I can feel it inside of me that he needs me. He hates me, but he needs me. I need to be that person—the one he always doubts that I am.

I push the private elevator and swipe my key, waiting as the numbers climb along with my agitation when they don’t move fast enough.

The doors ping open and Tillie is standing there, eyes wide. “Madison—”

I ignore her, shoving out of her way and going straight for the office. I don’t bother knocking, pushing the door open and bracing myself for anger.

Chaos.

Maybe all three of them killing each other.

What I wasn’t expecting was seeing all of them sitting in different areas of the room, calm and settled. Goddammit. Tillie made it sound like this was urgent.

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“Sit down.” Bishop gestures to the seat in front of him. He points to the other two. “Get out.”

Nate and Brantley finally move out of the room, but not before Nate pauses, his hand on the door handle. “You both need to sort this shit out before Bishop takes the gavel. This shit? It’s not good. And Madison?” Nate swipes his nose. “Fucking get off the coke before it kills you.”

“If it doesn’t, I sure as fuck will,” Bishop growls under his breath.

I gulp, resting my hands on my lap as Nate closes the door in his departure. It’s then I realize the complete disarray of the room. Photo frames smashed, books thrown all over the floor, bullet holes shot into the bulletproof glass window behind his desk.

“Got a video this morning,” Bishop says calmly, reaching for the decanter and taking out a cigar. He clenches his teeth so hard the muscles on the sides of his jaw flex. “Gotta say, your little side-piece is sure theatrical with his success of being able to lay you flat on your back.”

“Bishop, I don’t know what else to say.” Other than the truth. The truth that I can’t feed you because it will hurt everyone around me. I’d rather them all hate me than they have any harm.

“Madison, you fucking cheated on me. He recorded it. Sent it to me. You fucked him on our bed.”

My face pales as my throat swells, and all of the words that I want to say can’t come

out. “I’m sorry, Bishop. It was a mistake.”

His silence is deafening. He pushes up from his desk and moves to the large window that overlooks the city, his body remaining hard, staunch. His shirt tightens enough to show his muscles, but his jeans are fitted enough to not give too much away. His hair is a mess on the top of his head, and when he reaches for his Zippo in his pocket to light his cigar, I notice his split, bleeding knuckles.

He doesn’t turn as he says the next words. “I won’t be telling anyone about what happened. You will not tell anyone. You will stay here, with me, and pretend that none of this happened.”

“Why?” I ask, whispering through the pain. “Why would you?”

“Because I’m not going to be the one who breaks this family. And if in a hundred years, when I decide I’ve forgiven you, then maybe—maybe—I’ll let you remember just how much I loved you.” He finally looks over his shoulder before fully facing me. “Because I did, Madison. I did love you. Now?” he growls, and I see it now. I see the boy I knew all those years ago, only this time it’s worse. It’s worse because he’s not a boy—he’s a man. “Now you’re nothing to me but a fucking transaction.” He flicks his hand to the door. “Get out.”

One Month later

When you find someone who destroyed you.

Kill them.

CHARITY EVENTS WITH THE ELITE Kings are never as they seem. For one, they’re used as a guise to distract people from what is really going on—and in tonight’s case, it is Hector Hayes and his usual laws, tricks, and games.

I never understood the extent of everything until I became close with the society of the EKC. Hector is by far the most hated yet respected and admired man in this world. We are now months away from him Bishop taking over for his father completely, and I'm not ready.

Not even close.

My throat closes around the bubbles of the light champagne as my eyes fly to Tillie who sits opposite me. Bishop is on one side, Nate on the other. Even as the music plays throughout the lobby, I know what Bishop is doing. He ignored me all morning, making sure to get ready with the boys. Things between us have been tense, to say the least. I wake up every morning and plaster on a smile to conceal the pain that bleeds through my veins. People think that when you're sexually abused it's only about surviving those few minutes while it happens, but it's not. Their hands stay on you long after the act is done.

Bishop's eyes come to mine. The same I hated when I met him, and loved without realizing. He's dressed in an Armani suit with the buttons undone at the top, and his hair is a clutter of a mess on the top of his head. I mean, we all know his family has some weird Italian bloodline, but he has some serious extreme gene enhancements going on. Even if Scarlet didn't tell me about their family history, you can see it in both him and his father. Their sharp features that have an underlying danger beneath their hazel eyes.

They're a problem.

Bishop Vincent Hayes has always been ominous, but I've always been his muse. Until recently. I fear I think I lost him for good this time.

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I watch as he leans into Tillie, brushing her pink hair off her shoulder and making a show to touch his lips to her ear, his eyes staying on mine. I know what he's doing. I wouldn't expect anything less. This is Bishop warming up. He thinks I cheated. This is nothing compared to what I know he would want to do. He's playing with Tillie because she's the only one that's there and knows I'm insecure about my place in the pack now. His arrow is non-existent because whatever bullshit game he is playing with me right now doesn't mean anything to me.

I grab my phone out of my pocket and send a text to Tillie.

Me: It's ok. I know what he's doing, and I'd rather him do it to you than anyone else.

I shove my phone back away and swipe up my flute, swallowing all of the contents of my champagne in one go before grabbing a passing waiter to fill up again. Reaching forward to take Nate's glass, I gesture for her to fill his too before swallowing them both in record time. The lights dim and music quiets. Suddenly, the room is too small and my throat too tight.

I push back off my chair, scooping up my Louis clutch and make my way to the bathroom to snort the entire bag of cocaine I have in my clutch when movement catches my eye.

He's dressed in a white linen shirt and a simple black mask covering his face. But I know. I know who it is.

He flicks his phone into his pocket, slipping between the two doors that lead up through the fire exit, and I quickly turn back to the table to make sure no one is

following me. Perfect. Shoving through the sea of people, I slide the chain of my purse up my shoulder and pass through the gaps.

“Excuse me, sorry, excuse me—” The words that mean nothing to me. I want to scream get the fuck out of my way!

I’m about to round the same corner he did when a hand is on my arm, pulling me backward and into the wall.

Bishop stares down at me, his eyes desolate and wild. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“Does it fucking matter?” I snap at his hand, shoving him away from me.

He falls backward, blinking through his shock.

I pause, swallowing past the pain of having his skin beneath mine. Warmth, home, pain.

He feels like home.

Like pain.

Like my favorite fucking drug with no comedown.

I turn away from him and push through the doors, jogging up the stairs until I reach the next level. I find the next elevator quickly just as my phone vibrates in my clutch and the doors close.

I open the message. Room 401

I push level four and watch as the numbers climb from each level.

1.

2.

3.

Ding! The doors separate and I'm met with a long hallway with blood red carpet. The sound of the elevator closing behind me shutter as I stare at the gold numbers curved into the door right opposite. 401.

I push through and hold my breath.

Silence. I've come to not like silence, especially if it's from walking into a dark room where I know my abuser is, but I rest my hand over the bump in my waist where the holster of my gun sits.

A light turns on in the corner of the room, a lamp, and the face that I've played over and over again sits right there in the flesh, smirking at me.

I grind my teeth. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Well..." He unbuttons his shirt and rests his ankle over his knee. "I have to admit, I thought you'd fold." He reaches for the glass of whiskey on the bedside table, swirling the amber liquid around in circles. "I've heard a lot about you, Madison Montgomery, and I hate to break it to you, but you're a bit of a fucking brat."

I test him by taking a small step forward. Not enough to alarm him, but just enough for me to see if he flinches. He doesn't. Too comfortable in his brazen disregard for any harm that could be done to him, the stupid fuck actually thinks I came here to

listen to him talk.

I turn my hip slightly back toward the door, so he doesn't notice me unclipping the holster. "Well, I may be a brat, but you're rather stupid." I intended every word, and as soon as this gun is in my hands, he's dead.

He laughs so loud that bile rises up my throat. "Ah, Madison, Madison."

This fuckwit has to be no older than twenty-five. He's not threatening. I know threatening men—I'm with one. The Kings are people everyone should fear. You see it in the way they walk, talk, and the way they hold themselves. It can't be faked. Mortals cannot replicate evil. It doesn't make you bad. It makes you a liar.

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Before he can stand from his chair, I have the gun in my hand and I swing it to him, aiming it right in the center of his chest. “I guess they forgot to tell you this brat also carries guns. Get in the fucking bathtub.” When he doesn’t move, his smug smile still boldly on his face, I point the gun to his stomach and do what I do best.

I pull the trigger.

He starts screaming way too loud, so I shoot him again in the leg. Bang. He falls to the floor and I press the gun to his forehead.

“Get up and walk to the bathtub.”

He finally begins stumbling to the bathroom door with a trail of blood in his wake, mumbling apologies, and saying Tillie’s sister’s name in between. I reach for my phone and hit dial on the one girl I know will ride this shit out with me.

I call Tillie.

There are best friends, and then there are my best friends. The kind that eighty-six men with their eyes closed and use their oozing blood as a signature lipstick.

It took five minutes for Tillie to get to the room. Less than that for her to kill him.

I shove Bishop’s hoodie around my body tighter, watching as the trees fly past the windows of the limo. Tillie and Nate are opposite me. I can’t look up. I won’t. Tillie is already disappointed in me for not telling Bishop the real reason, not because she wears my abuser’s blood on her hands. It’s not the blood that disturbs Tillie, it’s the

fact that Bishop is still mad at me for something I didn't do. For the past month, I've endured his empty stare, my cold bed, and barren home. There have been occasional parties that they've thrown and I've attended, but those parties have always ended the way we expected—with Bishop and me scrapping like stray cats, so I've found myself staying away more and more. Distancing myself from them all. Even Nate. He has a lot to deal with with Tillie, that I doubt he's noticed, and even more so, he doesn't need me anymore.

"Madison..." Bishop demands, and it's not until I look up at him from behind blurred eyes that I realize the limo has stopped moving.

I flex my fingers, sticky with dried blood. "Yes?"

"If I get out of this car right now, we are done, you hear me? I'm not fucking doing this with you forever. I can't. I thought I could. And now we have a body to clean up because you both"—he glares at both Tillie and me—"decided to whack your side-piece."

I don't blink. My eyes dry and my mouth waters. "I—okay."

I know this is it. This will be the time that I come clean to Bishop and tell him that yes, despite the fact we're messy love driven by obsession and fire, that I love him. I'd never willingly cheat on him. Then I'd punch him in the dick for even thinking I would do that—but I don't. I find the words stuck in my throat, unwilling to come out.

"Fuck that! You're going to explain this shit once and for all!" There he is. My dark prince with more passion to give than love. Unfortunately, he deserves someone else. Not someone like me. A burden.

"I don't have to explain shit to you, Bishop! Get out!"

“If I get out of this car, Madison, it will be forever.” There’s no lie in his statement, and the words slap me right across the face.

“Please do.” I don’t finish the last word before he ends the conversation by slamming the door.

“Madison...” Tillie’s voice filters through. I almost forgot she was there.

“Don’t. I don’t deserve him, and there’s so much...” I bring my eyes to hers. “You’ve always said that we love each other a lot. But there’s such a thing as loving someone too much, and that’s Bishop and me, Tillie. It’s not that we don’t love each other enough, it’s that we do so much that it consumes us.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Tillie reaches for my knee, squeezing reassuringly.

“Okay.” I smile up at her.

But she won’t.

She won’t see me tomorrow.

None of them will.

Sometimes it takes bringing a life in to know that you don’t want yours out...

I’VE ALWAYS LOVED GUNS. EVEN when my apparent mother shot herself in the head with my father’s shotgun, I still loved them. I’ve never felt so connected to an object more than I ever have with a gun. Well, that’s not true. I liked them a lot more when I was younger, but as I’ve aged, I’ve found myself too busy to go to the range. Despite what people might think, though... I do think that people who own one need to know how to operate it.

I'm not just talking about the logistics of one either.

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Mentally.

I twist the barrel around, checking the chamber.

Four rounds.

One filled, the rest not.

Tears spill down my cheek, but it doesn't matter anymore. The drive and will to live that I've always felt, that beautiful spark of warmth that the sunset would give me inside is dead. I'm a withered soul with a body that no longer wants to carry the burden of it.

"It's fitting," I whisper out loud, inhaling deeply and closing my eyes as the sun sets across my face. I feel the warmth of the retired rays, but no comfort like I used to.

Much like mine and Bishop's relationship.

Reaching forward, I graze my fingertips over the cursive writing of each envelope.

Tillie

Tate

Nate

Eli

Brantley

Hunter

Cash

Jase

And simply... B.V.H. My heart cracks in my chest as I run my finger over the H, a sob escaping my stubborn lips. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I can't—"

I fold my legs beneath my butt, flexing my finger around the trigger and bringing the gun to my mouth. The sun burns against my back, and I know I'm being cruel, doing it here. Where my brains will be splattered all over the beautiful glass windows. The same ones I promised Bishop that I'd keep clean. And right opposite the front door, so that when he opens it, it'll be the first thing he sees—right beside the envelopes for each member of my family.

Saliva rolls down my chin as tears drown my face.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I press the trigger.

Click!

My heart stops racing, but my breathing deepens. When I crack my eyes open again and see that I'm still here, I throw the gun down onto the floor as a scream tears its way up through my throat by its claws and I howl fucking murder.

I lean forward until my hair shades my face from the world. The world that doesn't see me. The world that moves without me. The liability. The damaged brat that can't do anything right.

Taking three more deep breaths, I pick the gun up again, flick the chamber, push it back in, and pull back the hammer, bringing the barrel to my mouth.

One.

Two.

Three—

I pause before I press the trigger again. Slowly lowering the gun from my lips, I rest it on my lap and sit as seconds turn to minutes. Three. Third. Jumping to my feet, I run into the bathroom to search for my phone, opening the app that tells me—

“I’m late.”

My phone slips from my fingers, falling to the floor as dread fills my belly and spreads all the way to my toes. “I’m fucking late.” I attempt to run dates in my head as I make my way back to the bedroom. I can’t know. I won’t know. “Shit.”

Scrubbing the tears from my eyes, I run back into the sitting room and gather up the envelopes. My hand hovers over the metal gun as my barely beating heart continues to thud in my chest. I gently pick it up and take everything to the bedroom, unable to check the chamber. I can’t know.

Closing my eyes tight enough to try to rub the guilt from my mind, I throw everything into a Givenchy shoebox and hide it in my closet, beneath the Louis box but on top of Prada. Bishop doesn’t look through my shopping addictions.

Gathering up my phone and a black trench coat, I shove my Chucks on and swipe my sunglasses up on the way to the elevator.

I need a test.

I need one now.

The pace I walk to and from the drugstore two blocks over is probably the quickest I've ever done, and I'm back home with my purchases along with juice and water before twenty minutes has passed.

So much water.

I'm sucking down a gallon of pineapple juice and moving to our bedroom before I dump all of the tests out over our black bed cover. When I say all, I mean I bought every single brand of pregnancy test—twice—just to be sure.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I take the first test to the bathroom and pee on the white stick, before placing it on the counter. Pacing back and forward in the bathroom, I run through the scenarios. Maybe I'm not. Then what? Then go back to trying to kill myself?

God. I could be dead right now and never know.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I suck in a deep breath, reach for the stick, close my eyes, and exhale as I flip it back over.

Two pink lines.

I'm fucking pregnant!

“Fuck...” I drop it onto the floor, run to the room, and go through the motion of every damn test I bought until I’m sure I’m going to piss blood instead of urine. Every single one is positive, in one way or another.

Falling onto the floor, I draw my knees up to my chest. What the ever-loving fuck am I going to do? Bishop will not think it’s his. Since the cheating, he’s fucked me once—and that was for his hindered masculinity more than it was for pleasure.

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I know what I have to do.

I pick up all of the wrappers from the floor before starting the gas fire in the sitting room, tossing them all into the flames. Gathering the littered tests, I throw them all into the Givenchy box and slam it closed, sliding it back into the closet.

“I know what to do.”

I’VE LOOKED DOWN THE BARREL of fear many times in my life, and all of them began with a wrist bound by the luxury of Rolex. Except for that time. The time I don’t talk about. He was my nemesis, but also my best friend. The man I hated with all of my heart, but loved with every ghosting of my soul. Unlucky for me, my soul is bigger than my heart.

He had scared me to death, chased me through forests, intimidated me enough to think I wouldn’t be able to move without him knowing, and yet...

I loved him.

I loved him so much that if you tear open any part of me, I would surely bleed the blood of Bishop Vincent Hayes. He was the kind of toxicity I craved. I needed. He was my drug, but now... now that all changed.

Because the last barrel I looked down wasn’t from him. No. It was the cold metal of a revolver and it for sure—was supposed to take my life.

“Flight ANZ787 is ready for boarding. Please make your way to terminal three.”

I knew I was making a big mistake. Possibly the biggest. This was going to come back and shit on my life in months to come, but for now, I knew I needed to do what I had to in order to make sure this baby was safe. I had to think of it now. Regardless whether it was Bishop's or—I pause, swallowing past the lump in my throat—his. This baby was mine, and I would protect it at all costs.

Thirteen hours later and my plane was descending. The child in the back had finally stopped crying, and the man who was beside me still hadn't woken. I wondered in the back of my mind if he was still alive, but pushed my tray up and clicked it back into place, preparing for our descent. I spent the first four hours of the flight searching through movies. Ones that didn't remind me of Bishop, or of Nate, to no avail. The problem isn't falling in love, it's the memories you make while doing the falling that will bounce off the pavement and stab you in the heart. How do you get rid of them? They're cemented into your mind forever, with nowhere else to go. Maybe Jesse will know a witch who can help me erase my memories of the past couple years. Make me forget them. But the pain of never knowing them hurts more than the pain of the memories.

Ain't that a fucking bitch.

Well done, Madison. Well done.

I jolt in my chair as the tires screech against the tarmac. My ears ring, clogged with ear bubbles, as I shuffle up in my chair, accidentally bumping the dead dude beside me.

He jumps, his eyes popping open behind his wide glasses. "Oh, we're here?"

"Yup." I unfasten my seat belt, glad to see I didn't just spend thirteen hours with a dead corpse beside me.

Every second that passes, I have memories flashing through my mind. Of my family, Tillie, Tate. No one will understand why I've done what I've done, but for now, I need this. I need to be safe, away from him until I figure out what to do next. No one will understand me.

Moving out of the aisle with nothing but my carry-on, I finally step foot out of the airplane and down the long corridor of the terminal in the airport. Once I've passed through customs, I find myself where all of the family members are waiting on the other side of a barrier. I know this place. It's not the first time I've touched down in Auckland, New Zealand, but it will be the first time that I'm alone in doing it and with no one on the other side waiting for me. I step past the happy reunited families and busy businessmen, making my way to the first mobile phone shop I can find. A bright red store that reads Vodafone over the top catches my eye and I rush in, heading straight for the cashier.

"Hi, how can I help you?" she asks, smiling at me.

New Zealanders have something about them that makes you feel safe. I can't explain it. Or maybe that's my bond with Jesse.

"Hey, can I buy an iPhone here?"

"Sure!" She begins typing on the keyboard of her computer. "We don't have any of the elevens in stock yet, but I can give you an X?"

"That'll be fine." I smile at her, looking over my shoulder every two seconds.

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Despite the fact that with only juice and water, and I have just come off a long flight, I feel charged. Energized. It must be the adrenaline pulsing through my veins.

She rings it up, and within minutes, I have a new iPhone in my hand with a working number. I came with enough cash to not have customs asking questions, which thankfully will be enough to get me through until I leave. Hopefully.

I power up my phone once I've found the nearest charging tower and open Safari. Typing in Jesse's Tattoo Studio in Mount Maunganui, I hit the number as soon as it opens.

Three rings.

"Hi, Jesse's Tattoo Studio, how can I help you?"

"Yeah, ah... can I please speak with Jesse?"

"I'm sorry. Jesse doesn't work here anymore."

My stomach deflates. "What?"

"Sorry, hon. We have other great art—"

"—I thought he owned it? You literally just greeted me by saying his name."

"He did, but he sold. Sorry, just a second—"

I wait for what feels like hours. What am I going to do? I'm in this foreign country, looking for a man who I can't find?

"This is Jesse."

At the sound of his voice, I let out a sigh of relief through the tingles in my throat.

"Oh my God, Jesse."

"Madison!"

"It's me, and I'm really sorry to do this to you again, but I need you."

I FIND A SPOT OUTSIDE the airport after getting off the phone with Jesse. He said he'd be here in three hours, though I doubt that. Where Jesse lives is literally halfway down the North Island. Where I am now is almost at the tip of it. New Zealand cannot be that small.

I swipe my phone unlocked and hide my number, knowing I need to call my dad. If anything, I don't want to worry him. I'll worry about the girls later.

I open a text and add my dad's number.

Me - Dad, it's M. I'm ok. Please don't stress. X

I turn my phone off once I've hit send and wait, watching as people come and go. Simple in their world. Easy. No one running from the love of their life because another man raped them and may have impregnated them. No. Easy. Simple.

I grab my headphones out of my bag and ignore Madship's playlist. Desperate to drown out the noise in my head with something other than my own shitshow of a life,

I hit play on Slipknot. He screams something about “Wait and Bleed” and I close my eyes, tilting my head back to rest on the wall. I don’t know how long I stay like that before I’m removing the screaming from my ears and a loud rumble of an angry V8 engine replaces Cory Taylor.

“Jesse!” I shoot up from my chair and wrap my arms around his neck.

“Hey, Trouble.” He squeezes me tightly, breathing into my neck before pulling me back by my arms. His brown eyes search mine. “Wow, look at you. Still the most beautiful girl in the room, huh?”

I blush, chewing on my bottom lip. Jesse is everything I should have had but couldn’t. He was simply too good for me.

“Same with you, big boy.” I bring my hand up to the scruff on his cheek. His beard is thicker than I remember, his skin tougher. He looks good. Rough, tall, muscular, and tattooed—but his heart is soft. Gentle. “I missed you.”

He rests his cheek into my touch. “Same with you.” Picking up my backpack, he swings it over his shoulder before leading me to a gloss red old-school muscle car, swinging open the back door and tossing my bag in before opening the passenger side. “Well, come on then. Tell Jesse what’s wrong.”

I giggle, sliding into the passenger seat. The interior has obviously been restored with cream leather chairs and dash, and a new stereo. It smells of leather and cologne too, but the type that has been lingering for centuries.

Jesse jumps into the driver’s seat and revs the engine.

I smile up at him. “Nice car, J.”

“Thanks, I don’t suppose you’ll know this particular car.”

“What is it?” I ask, peeping at the lion on the center of the steering wheel.

“It’s a 1970 Holden HQ Kingswood.”

“You’re right, I don’t.”

We both laugh as I kick off my slides and rest my feet on the dash. It’s late afternoon now, since we landed early morning, so the sun is putting on a dramatic show in the sky, leaving blazing fires in her wake.

“You wanna talk about it?” Jesse simply asks as he leads us onto the highway.

I sigh, resting my head against the window and closing my eyes for the first time since leaving. “Not yet. Maybe after a shower.”

The vibrations beneath me stop and I slowly peel my eyes open, scrubbing them from my sleep. My skin feels sticky and itchy, my thighs burning from chafe. I need a shower, stat.

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“Hey, I didn’t mention it to you, but I have my brother’s girl living with me now. She’s not going to be a problem.”

I push open the door, grabbing my bag from the back seat. “I didn’t know you had a brother?”

“Oh, I do.” Jesse flicks his keys between his fingers. “He’s in prison, and he’s, like always, left his mess on my doorstep.”

I pause, closing the door and making my way to him slowly as he closes the garage door with a push of a button. “Jesse, I’m really sorry to have barged into your life. Again.”

Jesse turns, bringing his arm around my shoulders while leading me to a door. “Hey now, you’re never a burden to me, Trouble. Just tell me you’ll stay a little longer this time?”

“Ah, careful what you wish for.”

He pushes open the door and waves his hand inside. “I’ll show you to your room. We only have one bathroom, but the water is always hot and the pressure is good, so there have been no complaints—yet.”

I chuckle, bumping his hip with mine as I find myself down a hallway. “You mean from girls, Jesse boy?”

He laughs, kicking the door closed behind him as I make my way down the corridor.

Family photos hang on the walls, a mother and two boys. I don't stop to look yet, but pass through and find myself in an open kitchen and living area. It's small and cozy, but the furnishings are modern. With a leather three-seat sofa, a giant TV, and colorful canvas art hanging on each wall. One looks like Mr. Monopoly, only when you get closer his face turns into Freddy Krueger. There's money sprayed in the background, with blood drops and knives. It's so ruthless and unique, I instantly find myself drawn to it.

"You like it?" Jesse asks from behind me.

I turn to face him. "I do. Yours?"

He tips his non-existent hat. "Nah, a friend's. Come on, you need a shower and I'll get something cooked for you."

I follow him to the bathroom, but it's not until the door closes and the faucet is turned on that the reality of what I've done sinks into me.

I slide down the door, bringing my knees to my chest and let the tears roll down my cheeks. My lip quivers as my heart snaps in two. I let them silently go before rubbing everything off and finally stripping down and stepping into the scalding hot water. Resting beneath the heavy shower stream, I squeeze shampoo and conditioner into the palm of my hand, scrubbing my skin until it's swollen and red. After thirty minutes, I turn the faucet off and step out of the glass shower stall, reaching for a clean towel. Shuffling through my bag, I pull out a spare change of clothes, placing them on the sink and rinsing my toothbrush.

I need to make this work. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I know I can't trust what Bishop will do once he finds out that I'm pregnant. He thinks I cheated. He knows this baby could not be his. He hates me. Every single second after me telling him I cheated, he showed that. Now I have to do what I have to do, and deep down, I know

this time, he's not going to chase me. This time, he's going to let me go.

After brushing my teeth and changing into a pair of sweatpants and a crop hoodie, I clean up after myself and make my way back out into the kitchen, placing my bag on the floor. The smell is what first hits me, and then it's the music. Warmth blankets my heart, A warmth I haven't felt in some time.

I close my eyes and sigh, giving myself a second.

A fucking second of normalcy.

Right now, that normalcy smells like crisp honeyed chicken and fresh vegetables. A soft reggae song is playing in the background, and when I turn the corner, Jesse is singing the lyrics under his breath, dishing up stir-fried noodles and marinated chicken onto waiting plates.

He turns, stopping when he sees me. "I made something quick and easy."

"We could have gotten takeout, Jesse. You didn't have to cook for me."

He cocks a brow, his face scrunching in disgust. "Mad, I love you, but we don't eat that shit in this house, unless it's Burger Fuel, then we eat that."

"Burger Fuel?" I ask, pulling out one of the metal barstools tucked beneath the counter.

"It's a burger place, but they're healthier."

Now I'm the one scrunching my face.

He rolls his eyes, sliding a plate over to me. "No, dickhead. They're real good. I'll

take you there tomorrow after work.” He rounds the kitchen island and takes the seat beside me. “You want wine?”

I shake my head. “I, uh...”

He slides over a jug of OJ. “Have juice.”

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I smile up at him, pouring the orange liquid into my glass. I pick up my fork. “So, I’m pregnant.”

Jesse coughs around a mouthful, banging his chest with his fist. “Shit. Sorry.” He takes a swig of his beer, his eyes flying around the room before he turns to face me slightly. “Mad, is that why you came here? I mean, I’m not a fan of your man, but running away with his kid isn’t the way to go...”

I shake my head, tears rolling down my cheek as I twirl the noodles around the tines of my fork. “I don’t know if it’s his, J.”

He doesn’t say anything, so I carry on. Jesse reminds me of a male version of Tillie. Non-judgmental and takes no shit.

“I, uh something happened to me.” I scoop the first mouthful and chew. Unfortunately, I eat when I’m stressed, and I’m stressed and hungry right now. My stomach rumbles from the first taste, but I swipe the residue from my lips with my thumb. “So now I don’t know if he is the father, and he hates me right now, J. If he finds out that I’m pregnant, he might do something to harm the baby.”

“Madison,” Jesse breathes out, his hand on my knee.

Jesse and I are platonic. I would go as far as to say that we were best friends in a past life.

“It’s okay. You stay with me for as long as you need. You don’t have to talk about shit until you’re ready, okay?”

I smile, swallowing past my tears as the muscles in my shoulders release some of the stress they've been carrying. "Thank you, Jesse. Truly."

We continue to eat in comfortable silence, until the song switches and Jesse has finished his plate. He starts humming to the song with his finger tapping the back of my chair.

"Who is this band?" I ask from behind my shoulder.

"Six60. You like?"

I nod, pushing away my empty plate. "I do. Good music."

Sleeping is hard. Even being in Jesse's house, I find myself struggling to do anything but replay the last twenty-four hours in my head like a bad movie that refuses to end. I could have killed myself and never known. The more I think about it, the more I find myself getting twisted and knotted in the range of emotions that I certainly do not want.

I turn my head to the bedside table. My American phone is off, but I know everyone will know I'm gone by now. I turn it on and wait as my global roaming kicks in. Texts come through one at a time.

Tillie.

Tate.

Tate.

Tate.

Tillie.

Tillie.

Dad.

Dad.

Closing my eyes, I tap on Dad's first. I have people there who can take care of you, baby. Just say the word.

I close my eyes and bring my phone to my heart, a single tear sliding down the side of my temple. My dad, the protector. The man who will always be on my side.

My fingers fly over the keyboard. Thanks, Dad. I'm ok for now.

I know at any other time, turning on my phone is just like turning on a single tracking device, but something deep inside of me knows that this time...

Bishop won't be coming for me.

I WAKE UP THE NEXT morning, checking the time on my phone through cracked lids. Two p.m. God. Jet lag is a real thing when you travel across the world.

Curling my arms beneath my pillow, I sink farther into the bed and close my eyes. Twenty-four hours ago could have been my death date, but this baby—this baby saved me. The more I think about all that I left behind, the more I realize how much I could have lost. Even though right now, it doesn't seem like they care very much. I know I'm being needy, bratty, and a little conceited, but I can't help the way I feel. How the hold on my heart just seems to expand the more I'm away, but the thought of knowing I am pregnant gives me a reason to do it.

There's a light knock on my door. "Come in," I mumble around my coiled thoughts. It's probably Jesse with yet another four-course meal.

"Fuck!" a girl's voice grunts, shocking me to look over my shoulder. "I told that stupid motherfucker that you'd still be asleep and that you're not dead." She has ash brown hair, blue eyes, tanned skin, and a tattoo that sneaks up the side of her neck. Swirls of curls and pattern work. Jesse once told me what they call it here—Tamoko. It's a traditional Maori tattoo that is an honor to have to showcase your ancestry.

I chuckle, shuffling up my bed while pulling my sheets up with me. "It's okay. Typical Jesse, always—"

"—freaking out, right?" she finishes for me, leaning against the doorframe and crossing her ankles. White linen pants and a loose crop top, there's something effortless in the way she carries herself. She's older than me, I'd say by a couple of years at least, but she's graceful. "I'm Grace."

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Did she just? “Madison.” I smile up at her, swiping my hair away from my face. “I’m so sorry if my sleeping here is... weird.”

“Oh!” Grace waves me off. “No way! This house has been boring since Levi got locked up. I love that I actually have someone who doesn’t have a dick to be friends with!”

Okay, so maybe she’s not exactly graceful, but she definitely looks it. I’m guessing it’s part of her charm. “I didn’t realize how bad jet lag was when you’re pregnant.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re pregnant?”

I wince. Shit. I wasn’t supposed to say that. She must read my expression because she kicks off the doorframe and makes her way farther into my room, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

“It’s all good. I’m not going to say anything. You know”—her eyes roll—“what with all my friends?”

I don’t need to ask her to explain, I kind of get it. I never met Levi, but Jesse spoke of him once the last time I was here. The older brother of the two, he had it rougher than Jesse did. In and out of trouble. I’m trying to figure out how Grace fits into the mold of a prison girlfriend.

Or maybe that’s the beauty of it—none of us fit into the mold of our soulmates. We create new ones with them.

“I could really do with something sweet.” I slide out from beneath the sheets. “Is Jesse serious about the no junk thing?”

Grace chuckles, making her way back through the way she came. “Unfortunately, yes, but lucky for you, we have a little beach café up the road that has amazing food. Get ready and we’ll go.”

As soon as the door is closed in the bathroom and I have my belongings on the counter again, I breathe through my anxiety.

This is going to be fine.

It’s temporary.

We settle into the little café that opens out onto the road which is directly opposite the beach. The sound of crashing waves and laughter drift past me and I exhale through the anxiety and stress from the weeks leading up to this moment.

Grace is stirring her latte when her eyes catch mine. I hardly slept last night, so every time I blink, they sting. My eyes feel like puffy golf balls.

“Do you know what I do for work?”

I could guess, but I’m too tired and I don’t want to insult her by saying the wrong thing, since I’m not feeling a hundred percent myself. “No.”

Her hair bounces over her shoulders as she tucks one side behind her ear. She’s not giving away any clues. Her features are relaxed, her pouty mouth slightly open. She is beautiful, sure, but there’s something else about Grace that just makes her—more. More than just surface pretty.

She breaks off a piece of her blueberry muffin. “Maybe we can save that for later.”

I smile at her, but it’s tense. It feels as though the lines around my cheeks are going to crack. I keep replaying the day I found out I was pregnant.

The day I almost took my own life.

Click.

Click.

My eyes close and a single tear slides down my cheek. Suddenly, the air seems thick—too thick to breathe in—and my chest feels heavy. I start to inhale sharper, needing deeper breaths when a warm hand rests on top of mine.

Instead of jolting away, I open my eyes to the connection.

“Madison...”

I look up and she catches my stare.

“When you’re ready, I’m here, okay?”

“I have to get my shit together, Grace. I am pregnant. I can’t go back to the same coping mechanisms that I used to use.” I close my mouth and peer around the tiny café to make sure no one can hear our conversation. The baristas are busy frothing milk, steam shooting up in front of their faces, and customers are lost in their conversations about their own lives.

Their most likely easy lives.

Mundane. Oh to live among them and have no expectations. No stress.

“You know, coping mechanisms are a trauma response. The fact you need them only means you have difficult emotions that you haven’t dealt with yet.”

I curl my lips behind my teeth. “That’s probably putting it lightly.” The words come out strained, as if it physically pained my body to give that much.

Arriving and traveling to get here, I felt fine. Because all of the endorphins of finding out I was pregnant were no doubt gassing me up, but now, now that I’ve slept, I’ve showered, and I’m on the other side of the world, running from my psycho boyfriend—or ex—I find myself feeling... deflated.

As if I pulled that trigger all those hours ago and I’m living in a different dimension. One where emotions don’t exist.

I slowly pull my hand away from hers and wrap them both around the mug in front of me, watching the chocolate flakes float among the puffy pink and white marshmallows. “I was going to kill myself.”

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I don't bother to catch Grace's reaction. That thing about Grace that I can't put my finger on, feels a lot like home. She offers comfort, and I don't know her enough to regret telling her anything. Deep down, I know I need to talk with someone about this—even if it is just Grace.

I'm pregnant.

I'm going to be a mother, and I want to be a great one. Great mothers are maternal, and to be maternal you have to feel. Right now, I can't feel anything. I barely feel the warmth on my palms from my hot chocolate.

"I just—" I swipe another stray tear as it falls down my face. "I'm sorry."

Grace stands from her chair and gestures to someone behind me. "Can we get these to go, please? And a couple of your danishes, Jaz."

I can hear shuffling, chatter, and even Grace talking to me, but I have no will to respond.

A hand is in mine as Grace passes me my hot chocolate, and I follow her absentmindedly as we cross the busy road in silence. Grace kicks off her shoes, but I keep mine on as we follow a sandy path down to the main beach.

I stop. My legs are unable to move once I hit a small dune. A tingling sensation moves in waves through my arms and down to my fingertips at the feeling of being near something so natural. Mother Nature is a force to be reckoned with. I could learn from her.

“You know, when I was a child, I would come out here and just sit and watch the edge of the ocean. I’d imagine sailing across the waters to Greece, or any other country.”

“What was wrong with this country?” I find myself asking, using what energy the sandy beach gave me to finally kick off my slides and slowly lower myself beside Grace, drawing my knees to my chest.

“Well, for one, it didn’t give me parents that loved me.”

I try not to be shocked when I learn new information about people, and after my years with the EKC and my friends, not much does surprise me. “You want to talk about that?”

“Sure, I don’t mind talking about my traumas.” Her eyes come to mine, a gentle shade of brown. “It’s how I dealt with them.” I sink my fingers into the sand, rolling it between my fingertips.

“Oh, God,” I moan, trying to hide my laughter behind a small sip of the hot chocolate. I can feel my chest lighten. “You’re a fucking shrink, aren’t you...”

Her shoulders shake as she taps her sunglasses down from her head to cover her eyes. “That obvious?”

“Well, no... not at first, but now? Totally.” A shrink. Grace with a boyfriend in jail and Jesse as a brother-in-law—a shrink.

We both stand after sitting in silence for thirty minutes and start making our way back to the road.

“So my trauma,” she finally says.

I'm interested in her life story, at the very least to take my mind off my own, but I don't want to force her to talk about it either.

It's not until we hit the corner of the main road and start walking the way we came that she continues.

"My damage isn't like the usual. I had parents who were present, but I would have rather them not be."

We continue walking until we reach the brown gate that opens out to the cozy beach home.

I flick open the lock. "Is that how long you have known Jesse and Levi?" I follow behind her as she leads us in through the front doors that open out to the patio.

She tosses the keys onto a coffee table then flops down on the sofa. "No. I met Jesse and Levi right after I finished university. Got my PhD in psychology and the night of my graduation—" Her eyes close, shaking her head and bringing her attention back up to me.

I already know at this point that this woman's damage is a lot worse and deeper than parents fucking with her. This is deeper. Darker. Maybe even at my level—most likely not—but damage, nonetheless.

"In short, I killed someone and now Levi is in prison."

I roll my lips between my teeth to stop any words from flying out of my mouth.

"You don't have to say anything," she continues, turning her head to face me.

I want to ask what happened and why. I want to curl up and listen to her life story

because this woman is interesting. She's like a new topic you want to explore.

"I dealt with it all years ago, but you asked about my damage, so I wanted to share a little with you."

"So that I would share mine with you?" I ask, my brow arched.

She shakes her head, kicking off her sneakers and curling her legs beneath her butt on the sofa. "No. I told you so that you know that whatever it is you're going through, you're not alone and I am here if and when you want."

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The front door unlocks, jolting us both out of our surprisingly intimate girls' day, for people who don't know each other at all. I watch as Jesse dumps his bike helmet onto the kitchen counter, ruffling his hair between his fingers before leaning down to untie his boots. Jesse and I have always had a non-sexual connection, people know that, but would Bishop still put a bullet between his eyes without thinking twice about it?

Absolutely.

"How was the studio?" Grace asks, and I start plaiting my hair to the side as Jesse walks into the sitting room, taking a seat beside Grace and giving off a whiff of oil and burned rubber.

"Good." His eyes come to mine. "I know it has been a while, but there are a couple of people who have come in and asked for certain styles that I know you'd be good at."

"Jesse..." I whine, at the same time my palms become clammy and sweaty and my shoulders tense. I do love art, and I've always found a home with sketching and drawing, but something about it now feels painfully like a memory. It's not a broken heart that hurts after love; it's the memories that you made. It's the fact that Bishop has connected himself to every single thing I loved, and now I have nothing.

Nothing that doesn't remind me of him.

Grace nudges Jesse with her arm. "Maybe give her a minute."

A minute? I'll most likely need a month.

Or two.

Two months later

I AM OFFICIALLY INTO MY second trimester. As time drifts on, I find new little tweaks about pregnancy that I find myself wanting to share with Bishop. It's a pain I have no right to feel, I know that, but it doesn't stop it from paralyzing me. So I've started documenting all the things I wish he could see. Maybe one day, I'll show it to him. Maybe. But the thought of Bishop knowing I'm pregnant horrifies me, and that's mainly because I don't know if the baby is his. I won't know until I give birth, and then what? Then I have to find a way to get his DNA to get them both tested? All while hiding the baby from him?

Sighing, I fall down onto the sand, watching as waves crash against the beach. I've come to love the peacefulness of the ocean and the endlessness that the edges bring. You don't know what's out there, but I like to imagine America is just over the edge. Not far, not close—just there. Losing myself in my art again is a pastime I didn't realize I needed to relive until I picked up that pencil. If it wasn't for Grace and her undying persistence throughout these two months, I don't know if I could say I would be here right now—with the mental clarity I have. Jesse is a given, someone I know I can trust and rely on, but what I am dealing with is an emotion that only another woman can touch. I love Jesse, but there's no way I would have made it through without Grace. She's never made me feel like I'm seeing her as a therapist, because in actual fact, I'm not. She sits in my room at times, we go to the beach, the café, do everyday girl shit, and slowly, I've begun to realize what she's doing is her way of therapy on me. By the time I figured it all out, of course, I had trusted her impeccably.

I flick through my apps on my phone, opening the camera and snapping a selfie. The salty wind whisks through the long strands of my hair, the setting sun casting a golden tan over my skin. My cheeks are glossy and red, my eyes wide and happy.

Am I happy?

I rest my hand on my already somewhat swollen bump. Happy enough to exist, and right now, that is enough. It has to be.

My phone starts vibrating in my hand and Tillie's name flashes over the screen. The kind of warmth that floods through me is only that which comes from family. I've been keeping in contact with her and Tate a lot lately, as well as my parents. Nate has tried to call me a few times. I'm gathering it was after Tillie told him about the not cheating, and more, assault.

I hit ignore on the call just as I hear laughter from behind me. The sun is setting through the sky, blazing a glowing flare that could match the burning deep inside my heart.

I wrap my cardigan tighter around my waist, tucking my hair behind my ear and smiling at my friends over my shoulder. Jesse is carrying a box of Long Whites with one arm and tucking Grace under his other while kissing her on the top of her head. Behind them are Marama and Tuwhata. Marama is the receptionist at the studio and Tu is another artist. Quality not quantity, and when I say that Jesse and Tu have some of the best art I have ever seen—I mean it. Tu specializes in the traditional Tamoko. He did Marama's, who has hers on her chin. One day she tried to explain it to me, and I sat and chatted with her for hours about the Maori culture as she educated me on the indigenous people of New Zealand and the racial discrimination that their people have suffered here. I'll be taking all of my new knowledge home with me, including four new friends who I truly will miss.

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Tu and Marama drop their blanket down opposite me as Tu turns on the sound dock, smiling up at me behind a cheeky grin. Tu has soft dark brown skin and blue eyes. He has to be around Grace's age, so a little older than Jesse and me, but he wears it well. When he's not at the studio, he's at the gym or spending time with his four-year-old daughter.

Marama is around my age with short purple hair and almond eyes. The only tattoo she has is her Tamoko. She says she doesn't want any more yet, but I think she does it just to annoy Jesse and Tu because they both want to tattoo her.

"Why do you have to go, Mad?" Marama whines, popping open a large white box that they call a "chilly bin". She takes out a small platter filled with cheese and crackers, laying everything out nicely as Grace hands me a glass of apple juice.

I sigh, leaning into Jesse when he wraps his arm around me, pulling me into his body. "I wish I didn't have to."

Grace takes out her phone and aims it at Jesse and me. The warmth from the setting sun brushes against my skin and Jesse buries his face into the crook of my neck, chuckling against me.

I shove him away playfully. "You know you do shit to piss him off."

Jesse gestures for my phone from Grace with a sly smirk. Things between the two of them have been awkward, to say the least.

Grace tosses it onto his lap instead and he picks it up, glaring at her briefly before

smiling back down at me. Six60 is playing in the background, Marama and Tu are fighting, and Grace is, despite staying far away from Jesse, happy.

Jesse's thumb flicks through the shots Grace just took and we both laugh when we see them. One of him in my neck and me laughing, one of me obviously growling at him and his head tilted back with laughter, and the last one of him smiling down at me just as he's about to pull me back under his arm.

Jesse has loved me like a sister and taken me into his home when I had no one—twice now. I owe him my life, but it's something he will never allow me to give him.

He starts chatting with Tu about a back piece he's working on, and I take this time to shuffle closer to Grace. I'm going to miss them all—especially Jesse—but Jesse and I are like family. No matter how much separation is between us, that will never change.

Grace is like a friend. I'm going to miss her.

“Don't, or I'll cry and that will ruin my street cred.” Grace deliberately refuses to look at me as she keeps her eyes locked on the ocean ahead of us.

I laugh, taking her hand with mine and waiting for her to finally look down to me.

She does, but it's the unshed tears that distract me. I wrap my arm around her waist and rest my head on her shoulder.

“Are you going to be alright?”

Grace doesn't answer for a while, and just when I think she's not going to, she raises her bottle to her lips and swallows almost half the contents. Damn, girl. “No, but I'll keep going anyway.”

I squeeze her tightly. “Selfie?”

She laughs, swiping the tears off her cheeks. “Okay then. One to add to our million.” She isn’t lying either. We have millions of photos together. Climbing the mountain, surfing, swimming, fire pit nights, backyard BBQs, dinner dates. So many memories in two months.

But tomorrow everything changes.

I FIDGET WITH FLUFF THAT’S stuck to the sofa, pulling at every little nub until it’s torn from the fabric. The hotel is nice. Too nice. It reminds me of New York a little, with the floor-to-ceiling bay windows that overlook the bustling city below.

I miss the comfort of Jesse’s home.

I miss Grace and her ridiculous habits that started to grow on me.

I miss Jesse and Grace. Marama and Tu. The life I got a sneak peek at viewing if I had chosen a different path, but this is my life. I have to deal with it before it destroys everyone I love.

Tillie’s name flashes over my screen again. They don’t know I’m pregnant. This baby is a secret I will protect at all costs. I hit ignore.

I know what she is calling about, though. In fact, after her little invasion of a group video chat with Saint, I’m almost certain I know why they’ll all be calling me soon.

If things have gone well and to plan, Saint should be forty thousand feet in the air and somewhere over the Pacific Ocean.

I should feel guilty, and I do. Bishop needs as many people as he can have around

him right now, but he has everyone.

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For right now, I need Saint.

My phone vibrates against my thigh again and I swipe it unlocked when I see it's my father. "Hi."

"Hey, baby. How are you holding up?"

I find myself searching the room, as if it can help me with my answer. How am I holding up? Truthfully, I'm lost, but that's not something I have any interest in telling my father, since he's already on edge since I left, and honestly, I would be worse if it wasn't for Grace.

"Good, Dad. I'm in Auckland now. I've rented a hotel room in the city. I need a favor, though..." I leave out the part that I am still in New Zealand only thanks to my Esta Visa, and those three months are dangerously close to needing to be reset.

He sighs, and I can almost feel the weight he's carrying on his shoulders. "Anything you want, baby. You need to come home, so anything to help make that happen, I'll make happen."

Squeezing my phone in my hand, I breathe out a sigh. "I need a driver, someone you trust. And Dad?" Suddenly the air seems heavy and my chest tight. The room I was just admiring for its vast space shrinks around my body and I fly up off the sofa, squeezing my eyes closed. "I need a doctor. A very good one." And here it comes. I'm going to have to tell my father that not only am I pregnant, but I don't know who the father is. I've caused him a lot of stress over the years, but despite everything, he has been my constant.

Silence. “Madison? Is something wrong?”

No. I want to scream down the phone at how not wrong this baby is. It saved my life. I was in a downward spiral to a silver bullet to match my status as a silver swan—so no, this baby is not something that is wrong. It is my reminder to take a breath. To fight for my life.

“No, Daddy...” My throat constricts around the words and my hand flies up to my mouth. “I’m pregnant.”

More silence. It’s a fear that I think most girls dread as teens—telling their parents they’re pregnant, especially a child in a position that I’m in; and even though I know my father, Elena, and biological parents are supportive as a whole, it still doesn’t cancel out the fear that’s crippling my bones as every second passes. I hear the sound of the clock tick in the background, the fridge turning off and on, a single raindrop hit the window. It’s not until I’ve curled up on the sofa with my phone still squeezed in the palm of my hand that he finally breaks the silence.

“Okay, baby. I’ll do what you need, and then promise me, Madison. I need your word that you will come home.”

That’s Dad. No questions, no judgment, no real parenting. It worked for me, though. Sometimes all a parent needs to do is show that they love their children unconditionally.

“I’ll send you over what I need, and Dad? I will need it in the next few hours.”

“Can I ask one question about my grandchild?”

The word grandchild in his tone warms my heart in a way I haven’t felt in so long. Almost as though it breathed the second breath of life into me—with the baby being

the first.

“Sure.” I play with the leather bangles on my wrist, my thumb finding the crown pendant beside the swan.

A black leather box sat on the counter. It was the first thing I noticed when I came home today, and the little crown emblem embossed into the leather gave away what it was. I wonder...

No, he wouldn't.

Bishop isn't the kind to propose at all anyway, but if he did...

I reached for the box and popped it open. Gasping, my hand covered my mouth when the gold and silver opulence blinded me. It was a pendant for my leather strap. The same ones I've had since my first day at Riverside Prep. A little card slipped out from beneath.

“Always my silver swan. – your BVH”

My heart rate slows. I miss you even though I hate you.

“I think you know what I want to ask...” The fact he feels like he needs to ask should bother me.

“I do, and I can't answer that right now. That's why I need a doctor. Please, Dad. Someone good who can perform early DNA testing.”

“Leave it to me.” He hangs up and I'm left in the silence of this hotel.

The tightness of the air begins to subside the longer I take deep breaths. I know Dad

will handle it, and when he does, that'll be one less stress that I can tick off.

I tap my phone screen. She will be landing in three hours. That's three hours to stalk Instagram and see what everyone has been doing. Even though I've kept in contact with both Tillie and Tate over the months, I crave to see their faces. All of them. Even Nate. Typing Instagram into Safari, I search Tate's name first. Before I even packed my bags to leave, I had logged out of my account. I decided to keep it instead of deactivating it, with hopes that Bishop could open it and burn every time he saw my face.

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Our memories.

The love we had.

Grace spoke about this during our many “off the record” sessions. The bitterness that I carry in my heart for Bishop, and even Nate. How it’s so easy for betrayal to taste like hate.

I breathe in, hold four seconds, before opening my eyes and exhaling and tapping on Tate’s name.

The first photo I see is her profile photo. A selfie of her and me on my bed at my parents’ house. Chocolate wrappers everywhere, an empty bottle of Grey Goose, and me buried in the sheets with Bishop’s hoodie covering half of my face. I remember that night like it was yesterday. I had just told her about a weird dream I had and how real it had felt...

Tate held her hand up to stop my talking, pushing the empty wrappers off my bed and onto the floor. “You’re telling me that you had a dream.”

I nodded.

“And they were all in it... well, with the exception of your brothers.”

I nodded again, pursing my lips together. This was the first night it had just been Tate and I since she had been hanging off Nate’s dick by her bare teeth.

“You know, if anyone got to, it’d be you.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” I scoffed, shuffling deeper into the sheets while sighing every time Bishop’s signature scent hit my nostrils. “Bishop would slaughter everyone.”

“Well, it would be a fun porn to watch.” She scooted up the bed farther, pulling out her phone in selfie mode and snapping some shots.

That was when I thought that was it. Bishop and I had our very own HEA, like the cute movies you watch and books you read—I was wrong. How could I assume that anything Bishop and I had would be anything less than chaos? Our story will never end.

I keep flicking through her photos, finding one of her and Bishop’s cousin Spyder. They look so happy, with his arms wrapped around her front, leaning against the hood of his Porsche. Tate deserves to be happy, and I’m without a doubt satisfied that Spyder is the one who is giving that to her.

I tap on her following and find Tillie’s name, ignoring the other names’ thumbnails of the people who I don’t want to see right now.

Tillie’s opens and her profile photo is of her and Nate. I click on her following and find myself on Bishop’s name. Do I want to do this?

Before I can stop myself, I click on the last photo he shared. It was dated the day before I left.

Huh.

He hasn’t posted since I left? Interesting...

After fulfilling my stalking itch, I toss my phone onto the sofa and make my way into the kitchen, peeking that the fridge and pantry are stocked. I don't know how long I'll be here for, and I guess a lot of that answer depends on the DNA of this baby. Nervousness takes root in my gut when I realize I'm about to find out if my world is going to crash or burn. I know that underneath it all, Bishop loves me, but raising a baby who is not his and is a product of a man who hurt me?

I don't know. I don't think he loves me that much to be able to tolerate and live with that forever, and I'm not sure I'd expect him to.

There are two roads ahead of me now. The first one, Bishop is the father and I figure out a way to tell him, we move back to the US, and he and I try to figure shit out.

The other road is this baby is not his. If that's the case, I will live in New Zealand forever, but still figure out a way to tell him. I love Bishop. I love him more than any human can love another, but this baby is mine. The thought of going down that path cripples me so badly that I feel my heart snap in my chest, but I know the probability of that happening is a straight fifty-fifty chance.

Tillie was right. Saint does look painfully similar to Bishop. It's uncanny and like a swift slap in my face. She has the parts of Bishop that his darkness hides, but he allowed me to see. She's not beautiful—she's so far beyond that I can't stop staring at her. There's also a gentleness to her energy that you want to protect.

Oh, Brantley. What have you got yourself here...

"How was your flight?" I ask, trying to not stare at her too hard.

She rests her head against the back of the chair. "Long. How are you holding up?" Saint is definitely the other girl we needed in our friendship group.

“Thank you again,” I say, looking down at the pendant on my bracelet. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m happy to do anything to help Bishop.”

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I smile, but the wrinkle lines don't reach my cheeks. "You and he are very close."

"Very," Saint whispers. "He's my brother, and although I haven't known him for very long, I already know him—if you know what I mean."

I nod, sadness sweeping through me and taking root in my stomach. "I do, unfortunately. Brothers are special." I pause, running straight past the memories of Daemon as the limo pulls up to the lobby of the hotel.

We both climb out, and I gesture to the front doors. "The doctor and his assistant are already upstairs. They've kind of turned my hotel room into a small hospital."

Saint follows me through the front reception area, looking down at my belly every few seconds. "They're his, you know."

I pause, pressing on my private room number once we're in the elevator. The doors close and I turn to face her. "What?"

Her pale cheeks flush with the softest tint of pink. "Sorry, it doesn't matter."

The doors open into my room and I lead the way through to the kitchen, pointing out where everything is before showing Saint her bedroom.

"How soon can you have the results back to me?" I ask the doctor once Saint has unloaded her bags in the bedroom, chewing on my lip nervously. My heart isn't here anymore. It's just not. I want to be home. I want the family, the love—I want Bishop. I love my baby. I love it so much, but I'm praying. I'm praying it's his so I can go

home.

“For you, I can have it back within a couple of hours.”

“Thank you.” I sigh, resting my head back on the sofa. A couple of hours. A couple of hours and I will know if my life is going to be changed for the better.

“Will this work?” Saint asks softly, slowly lowering herself down onto the single sofa. “I mean, because Bishop and I are only half-siblings? I know that we share fifty percent DNA, and half of that—like twenty-five percent. Will this work?”

Dr. Henare offers Saint a small smile. “Yes, because you and he still share twenty-five percent of that DNA, which this baby will hold fifty percent of his DNA. If this comes back inconclusive, it means the child is not his.”

Dr. Henare’s assistant—I didn’t catch her name—gestures to the sofa. “Lie down, sweetheart. Let’s get a peek at this little bub.”

“I’m nervous.” I slowly lie back while lifting my shirt.

“Have you had an ultrasound yet?” Saint asks as cool jelly glides over my belly.

“No. I guess I haven’t felt like I wanted to. And—” I take a deep breath, closing my eyes. The shame of my initial reaction closing in around me, even if it was only for seconds. “And at first, I didn’t know if I was going to keep it.”

Thud. Thud.

“There’s your baby.” The woman gestures to the screen, and I hold my breath, watching as gray and black colors swirl together.

Thud, thud, thud.

“And there’s the other one!” It comes out as an echo. Like words my brain doesn’t want to hear, so it refuses to acknowledge them.

I stop breathing. “What?”

Her long finger lines the two shapes on the tiny screen. “Two babies in different sacs. They won’t be identical, so it could be a boy and a girl. Lucky.”

“No!” I yell, but it comes out as a whisper. “Two? Oh my God, no!”

“Madison, hey, it’s okay.” Saint rushes beside me, her hand on my arm.

I flinch away from her, no longer fighting the tears. “I’m sorry. It’s just, you look like him at times and I wish—”

She flexes my arm. “It’s going to be fine.”

I appreciate her optimism, but it’s not. It’s really not. I’m not just having one baby, I’m having two babies. Two babies that may or may not be Bishop’s.

The doctor wipes off the gel from my belly. “You’re safe to have the extraction. Would you like to do it here, or we can take you into a bedroom?”

“Here is fine.” The words leave me, but my mind is still reeling. Two fucking babies.

Saint disappears into the kitchen. She’s just got off a long flight. I feel bad for jumping at her straight away, but the sooner that these results are done, the better. I’m distracted. Distracted by the continuous what-ifs. So deep in my thoughts that I don’t feel the needle pierce my belly.

Both doctors repeat that they will have the results back in a couple of hours. I thank them for their time and slip more cash into their hands—even though I know my father would have made it well worth their while. It's not until I'm looking down at the busy street below that I notice them slip into a high-end Mercedes with a familiar-looking number plate.

Could there be Kings in New Zealand?

“God, what am I going to do...” My phone rings in my hand and I jump, sliding it to answer just as I catch Saint in the kitchen, pulling food out of the cupboards.

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“Hey, Dad...”

“It’s me, darling,” Scarlet murmurs into the phone and my whole body contracts. Goose bumps raise all over my skin and panic seizes my muscles. “Look, please don’t be upset with Elena. She overheard the conversation with your father and—well—”

“—she’s your Tate. I get it.”

“I want you to know that regardless of who the father of that baby is, that it will still be my grandchild.”

I hiccup when a sob escapes, but instead of rubbing the tears off my cheek, I let them roll.

“Scarlet, that’s so nice of you, but your son—”

“—was raised better, despite his past actions and who he is as a person,” she grumbles off the last part. “Do you remember the talk I had with you years ago about his grandfather and how much he idolized him?”

“Yes.” I rest my arm on the windowsill, swiping the tears off my cheek with the collar of my shirt.

“Well, that grandfather was also a grandfather to someone who wasn’t his by blood. Bishop, though he is much like his father, holds the same attributes as his grandfather. Even from the grave, that old man is still raising him—bless.”

I stifle an awkward laugh as I slide to the ground, but the tears come faster until I need to lean forward and rest my forehead on my knees. “Scarlet.”

“Yes, princess.”

“There’s two of them.”

“Two of what?”

Silence. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, then you’ll have two of my grandchildren.”

I change ears as my eyes fly up to Saint. Her cheeks are flushed, but she’s chewing on grapes like she’s filming a fucking ASMR video.

“I’ll call you as soon as I know, okay? But Scarlet?”

“Yes?”

“Can I be the one to tell him?”

“Of course! Of course. Talk soon.”

I turn my phone to loud and make my way into the kitchen, lowering onto a chair. I need to pass time somehow, and the best way I see it, is I get to know Saint a little more.

“Where words fail, letters scramble.”

THE HOURS WOULD HAVE PASSED slower had I not completely lost myself in Saint. She's set to fly back in the morning, and I'm here, lying in my bed wondering how I'm going to be able to tell him. The love of my life. That I'm carrying his babies.

His babies.

I stare at the medical form, reading over the words. Positive match. That's all I see. I can't see past anything else. My body is buzzing with adrenaline, but now—now I'm terrified. I'm scared because now he's going to hate me for trying to take this away from him. He's not going to understand because Bishop is reckless with me. He won't see past his own wrath.

They're both his. Yes, because apparently you can have twins and they can be from different sperm. Who would have known?

I look down at my phone. I know his number by heart, I could text him. No. I can't do it that way. I have too much to say, and I know if I do it through a phone call, he'll interrupt me. No. I know what I need to do.

Shoving the sheets off my body, I open the drawer attached to the computer table and take out a pen and paper. The paper is old and dusty with cracks and holes.

Turning on the lamp, I click the pen and begin writing...

Dear Bishop,

I figured I would write to you by hand since you can trace just about everything else. First of all... I'm sorry for the pain I have caused you and the boys—my boys. I know Tillie will be taking care of you all, but I needed to get away. I needed to be away from you right now. I can't explain. I can't say why. But please don't forget

me, Bishop. Don't forget Madship.

It drives me crazy to know you would have moved on from me, but this is something that I had to do in order for you and me to both heal.

I'm sorry for failing you and not being the strong woman that you needed to stand by your throne. Maybe another lifetime with different circumstances. Maybe fate will give us another chance.

There is something I need to tell you though and writing it in a letter is so much easier than telling you in person. God. This is so hard... so freaking hard because I wish we could be together—happy and how we were. You're my soulmate, my best friend, and the love of my life. I'm sorry you have to find out this way.

I'm pregnant.

I lift the pen from the paper, rereading the lines over and over again. After everything that I've just endured. Months of pain, anguish, and fucking neglect. This is what comes to me when I have his undivided attention?

Nope. Not going to happen. He's about to hear me roar.

Tearing the paper away, I scrunch it up and toss it into the trash by my feet. Anger wraps itself around the heavy beating of my heart as all the emotions I've contained throughout these past months pulse through my fingertips.

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My lips curve in a grin. Let's try that again...

Bishop.

I know what you're thinking. "Madison is being extra as fuck and couldn't pick up the phone and call me. Instead, she writes a fucking letter." First of all, fuck you. If you truly knew me that well, then we wouldn't be in this position to begin with. That castle we built together is fucking ruined, and guess what, baby... you're gonna hear everything I have to say...

I don't want you to come for me. Don't set foot on that billion-dollar private jet unless you plan to make changes yourself, because let me tell you something, Bishop... I will not go back to the hell I was slipping into before I left. I won't and can't. I will be everything that you want—need—from me as a partner. A wife. And now?

A mother.

Because I'm pregnant.

With twins, and if you haven't already guessed it yet, that was why Saint disappeared and came to me. I needed her DNA to test the babies.

You hurt me. Bad. I don't think you'll ever realize the extent of the damage, and I hope you don't because I love you enough to not want to inflict that burden onto you, but Bishop? You broke me. I left because I didn't trust you anymore. I felt like I was pushed out of your life, away, and that's not on Tillie, that's on you and me. We

didn't set our foundation, and by the time the walls were crumbling down, it was too late.

I'm in New Zealand. I'm open to working things out with you. I want to come home, despite the pain because I'd rather be beside you and in pain than not have you near me and feel nothing. Nothing. It's like mourning someone who is still alive. I hate being away from you. I hate that you're missing important milestones of this pregnancy, and I—

I'M NOT A GOOD MAN. I know that. Fuck, everyone knows that, so me not finishing the letter she most likely tried writing out at least more than once does not bother me.

Saint is safe.

The Kings have everything under control.

And my plane is about—I look down to my Rolex watch—thirty minutes away from landing in the land defended by God.

I roll the squishy ball around in my fist, breathing in and out while resting my head back against the headrest. I won't kill her. She's carrying my kids. I know it's not her fault. But every time I find myself thinking that, I go back to the start. To where she could have told me, and I would have fought for her. From day one, Madison has been impossible. In every fucking sense of the word. But has she been worth it? Fuck yes.

Still want to kill her, though.

My phone pings on the seat beside me and I pick it up, opening a text from Nate.

Nate: We telling the girls about the wedding part?

I run my tongue over my teeth, smirking. Fuck no.

Nate: They're going to castrate us. I mean, dawg, this is their day...

Me: Don't fucking care.

I toss my phone back onto the seat, turning to face Abel, who is staring at me from across the aisle. Everyone knows he and Bailey have been going back and forward, but it's bad. Way fucking worse than Madison and me, and because of that, I can't say shit.

"Don't even fucking start. I'm here, aren't I?" my stupid half-brother murmurs sleepily. I'm sick of my dad knocking up random women. I wonder how many other half-fucking-siblings I have. Especially one with the habits of fucking Abel. I shouldn't give him so much shit. He's a product of his environment and still has a lot to learn, and because of that—it's why he's with me right now. Because above everything, I know I can trust him like I can a King.

"You wanna talk about you and Bailey?" I flick my switchblade between my fingers.

He chuckles, shifting his head so he's looking directly at me. His eyes fall to the blade. "Not while you're playing Edward Scissorhands."

Rolling my eyes, I tap open Instagram and scroll through my home page. I pause on Madison's name when I see her profile active again. She restarted her fucking account? That bold bitch. She knows I'm coming for her. Clicking on her name, I don't realize how hard I'm squeezing my phone when I see her profile photo. It's a photo I took near our fucking bed. She's sitting on the chair in lingerie and I shot it from above. She didn't want to look at the camera because her eyeliner was all

smudged from gagging on my dick seconds earlier. She knew what she was doing putting that photo as her profile shot. Fucking brat.

The flight attendant starts pushing her trolley down the aisle. She's dressed in all black—little skirt, shirt with the top buttons undone, and black fishnet tights and the little EKC skull emblem sitting above New York City is stitched over her left tit.

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“We’re about to land,” she says sweetly, and I bring my eyes up to hers.

Black hair like Madison, but the wrong color eyes. She reeks of desperation too, and if there’s one thing I have always admired about Madison, it’s that she’s anything but desperate.

The flight attendant bends over, flashing Abel her ass but bringing her hands down onto my thighs. “Do you have any other trash that I need to take?” Her fingers travel up farther.

I raise a brow at her, a smirk creeping onto my lips as I stretch my legs wide. Leaning forward, I brush my lips over her ear. “Just yourself.” I lean back in my chair and whack her hands off my thighs. “And don’t ever fucking touch me again.”

Her cheeks redden, but I’m already looking back down at my phone, lost in Madison’s profile. I’m going to murder her. The problem with playing cat and mouse with someone that you love is that they know exactly how to bait you.

Out of the corner of my eye, I ignore Abel pulling the flight attendant onto his lap, burying his face into her swollen tits. I draw the line when he starts undressing her.

Tilting my head, I watch as his hands dip beneath her panties and her eyes come to mine as she shoves Abel’s face into her chest. She sinks her teeth into her bottom lip and my face distorts in distaste. “Abel, take your fucking to the mile-high area.”

They do, both leaving to the back of the plane.

I click on the last photo Madison posted. An ocean in the background with her and fucking Jesse smiling smugly at the camera. There are more people in it, but all I see are she and Jesse. If that wasn't enough to have me popping off, the caption sure as fuck does. To friends you can trust. I grit my teeth. I know that's a dig at Nate, but it still pisses me off. She doesn't trust me.

Fuck no. Yeah, I'm dragging her ass home. Yeah, we're having these babies and we will be a family, but nah. I'm not going to make this easy on either of us.

The car idles outside as I keep my eyes fixed on the front doors to the hotel.

"What if she runs again? Like in ten more years," Abel says casually, his finger tapping against his thigh.

"She won't."

"Oh, you know that? Bet you didn't know that she was going to run this time."

I calmly start counting down the minutes in my head. Turning to the side, I watch as she comes into view, jogging down the sidewalk. In yoga pants and a windbreaker jacket, she slows her run, checking her smartwatch as she walks through the entry doors.

"Come on, baby... let's see what you've got." Abel quiets, and I watch her glorious ass sway side to side as she begins to disappear through the entryway. Her walking slows until she finally stops, her back still turned to me.

My lip curls upward. "There she is."

Goose bumps swell over the nape of my neck as adrenaline surges through my veins. She slowly turns her head over her shoulder, her eyes landing straight on the city car.

The windows are blacked out, but she knows. She fucking knows.

She starts running.

“Bitch.”

I shove open the door in a blink and fly toward the entry, pushing people out of my way. The person behind the reception calls out, but I flick my hand up to shut them up as Abel jogs in behind me, heading straight for the sassy receptionist. Most likely to name drop to the manager exactly who the fuck we are.

Madison’s eyes fly around in panic as she pushes the button on the elevator continuously. Just as I’m about to reach her, she slips between the doors and hits the close button. Just before the crack closes, she smirks up at me, her middle finger up.

I bang my palm on the metal door, pushing the button again but watching what level it lands on. Penthouse. No doubt.

“I’m going to marry this fucking woman, and have kids with her? Fuck!”

The doors open again, and I jump in, hitting the button to the penthouse while hoping that it’s not a private elevator level.

When the elevator starts moving, I pull out my switchblade to keep my fingers busy. You know, just in case they end up wrapped around her frail fucking throat.

The doors separate and I take the first step down the hallway. My black loafers against ash-colored carpet. Rolling up the sleeves to my button-down shirt, I start looking left and right. There are two rooms on this level. I’m hoping one is empty and the other isn’t.

My phone vibrates against my leg and I pull it out, reading the text from Abel. Room 100.

One hundred.

Motherfucking one hundred reasons why I should kill Madison.

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One reason why I shouldn't.

I squeeze the handle, pushing it down slowly while hoping she was dumb enough to keep it unlocked. When it doesn't open, I snarl against the plain wood. "Open this fucking door, Madison."

Another text hits my phone. Room 101 empty. I'll be at the bar. Try not to kill each other.

Another reason why I brought Abel instead of a King? I knew he would leave me to do whatever the fuck I wanted to her. The others care too much. Even Brantley—in his own fucked-up way.

"No!" she yells through the other side. I hear tables and chairs scraping against the floor.

Running the sharp tip of my blade down the card reader, I slide the edge through the crack of where it connects to the door. These fucking things are bullshit. I know this because we just got rid of them in our hotels and replaced them with an app.

I yank back the blade, a loud crack sounding when it separates from the wood. "Baby, you've got about five seconds, because I'm getting in, and if I get in this way, I'm going to be mad."

She laughs maniacally through the doors. "Oh, that's real cute, Bishop. Except I'm fucking mad too!"

I knew this wouldn't go down easy. We both disappointed each other at some point, and I think in the back of my mind I knew we would have in the future. Love doesn't cure all, it just gives you a reason to keep fighting.

This is me.

Fighting.

"Three." I pull again and the little light bulb that was red flickers.

"Two." It turns green, and then red again.

"One." The device hits the floor with a thud. The crusted hinges creak as the door slowly opens, and suddenly the inside of the room is too quiet. Too dark. Too calm. The lights are all out, the blinds drawn.

"Fine," she whispers from somewhere in the darkness. "I won't fight you."

I slam the door behind me, leaning my head back. Smirking, I continue to move through the space boundlessly while reaching for a wall, or anything to lean on. Something hard presses against the back of my arm.

"But I will shoot you."

Bang!

Pain carves itself through my upper arm and I spin around to face her when a light finally turns on. She's sitting in a kitchen chair, her leg crossed while flicking a fucking gun around her index finger. She smiles innocently up at me as I reach for the wound, instantly knowing that the bullet went right through.

“As graceful as a floating swan, but as deadly as a silver bullet, right?” She smirks, standing from the chair and making her way closer to me.

“Madison,” I growl, and as soon as she’s within arm’s reach, my bloody hand flies to her chin. She doesn’t flinch away, because she fucking knows I’d never fucking hurt her. Despite the fact she just fucking shot me.

She bats her fucking lashes up at me. “Yes, lover?”

“You fucking shot me.”

“I did,” she says proudly, nodding. I watch as a flash of anger sweeps over her face and defiance cripples her features when her eyes look straight through mine. “Not nearly big enough to match the one in my heart.” Then she shoves her face out of my grip, but my hand flies to her arm and I pull her back to me, gripping the backs of her thighs and lifting her off the floor. I slam her up against the door I just broke through and her eyes roll to the back of her head.

“I want to fucking kill you right now, but because you’re pregnant, I’m going to fuck you hard enough that you wish I would have just killed you.” My hand is on her throat as she rubs herself over me.

I tighten my grip. “Don’t fucking move.”

She finally stops wriggling but brings her face closer to mine until our noses touch. Seconds pass and I’m momentarily distracted by how in sync our breathing is. And then she kisses me. Hooking my finger beneath her panties, I slide my finger inside of her, pressing all of the areas I know she loves. I can fuck Madison with my eyes closed and make her come so hard she can’t fucking see straight, but right now, I’m too angry at her to give her that. Right now, she’s going to be punished.

Grabbing her shirt at the collar, I tear it away until nothing but her red bra is exposed.

I tilt my head. "Fitting."

She wraps her fingers behind the back of my neck to pull me in closer. "You suit the color better." She whacks my arm and I growl, the pain a reminder of why the fuck I'm going to fuck her to the brink of death.

Flicking open my button, I shove my pants down as her fingers wrap around the heavy base of my cock. She squeezes and pulls slightly, swiping the cushion of her thumb over the head before directing me over to her entrance.

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I place one hand against the door and slam into her so hard she yelps, and her fingers sink deep enough into my flesh that it'll leave bruises.

Gripping her throat with my other hand, I fuck her hard. Rough. Fast. Her brown hair slides up the door as her legs tighten around me every time she's near.

"You wanna come, baby?" I whisper-growl into her ear.

Her head moves against my cheek when she nods.

Catching her earlobe between my teeth, I pull out and carry her to the kitchen counter. "Well, you ain't gonna."

She groans when I flip her backward, kicking her legs out wide and pressing her facedown onto the counter. "Bishop, please—"

"You know I hate when you beg. Take your shit and own it, Madison."

She wriggles beneath me, but I snatch her wrists in my hand and keep them locked behind her back.

She sits up a little, enough to rest her other cheek against the counter. "Well, I would."

Yanking my belt off, I wrap it around her wrists and tug on the leather, clasp it tight enough to give her no wiggle room. "No, the fuck you wouldn't. Because you haven't—all this time."

“Fuck you!” she snaps.

I chuckle, licking my bottom lip while tearing off my shirt. “Yeah, thanks. I’m about to... just not where you’re expecting.”

She pauses. The air grows tight as she tries to look over her shoulder. Madison and I have never fucked fair. We fight dirty, fuck dirty, and will most likely kill each other one day, but it’s what we both need. Two halves of the same goddamn soul. Love would never work with us. It’s too boring, too mundane, too basic. We needed something more than love, and we found that in each other.

“What are you doing?”

“You know what I’m doing.”

“We don’t have lube...” she growls. “And you know how much I love it, but I can’t—”

“Yeah, actually, thanks to your trigger finger.” I cup my palm over the blood oozing down my arm. “We’ve got some ‘lube’.”

“Bishop!” she cries, just as I cover her pussy and ass with that same palm. She whimpers gently as I circle my blood over her clit. “Oh, this is wrong...”

“So wrong?” I ask, smirking down at her. Leaning over her body, I wipe the excess of my blood onto my dick and direct it near the tight entrance of her ass. With my other hand, I grab the front of her throat and force her head backward so she has to look back at me slightly. “Then tell me why you like it.”

I slowly push into her ass and her little mouth widens, her eyes rolling to the back of her head. “Oh my—”

“—Bishop. You mean oh my Bishop.” I hook my thumb into her mouth as my cock slips into her tight gap, a hiss escaping through clenched teeth. We’ve done anal probably—ten times—none of which were lubed by blood. Something primal digs into the marrow of my bones when she finally relaxes around me.

My grip around her throat tightens as I lean over and drag my tongue down the apex of her back. “You ever pull this shit again, we’re both going to the ground, you hear me?” She doesn’t answer as I slowly pump in and out. “Madison!”

“Yes!” she releases around her moaning. “Yes, okay, deal.”

I pick up the pace until my hips are slamming viciously against her ass cheeks. Hard, not fast.

This. If I can’t kill her, I’ll fuck her.

WHISKEY. THAT’S HOW I’M GOING to get through the rest of my life with Madison and—my eyes fall to her semi-swollen belly as she sits on the sofa opposite me, shirt torn, bra showing, her hair a mess, and blood smears over her cheek and lips. Both of our clothes are still in disarray all over the floor, in the midst of bloodstains and probably cum. The hotel is nice too. Well, at least it looks like it would have been nice. Before Madison and I happened. I go back to the belly. Two. Two fucking kids right at once. This should terrify me, and I think in the back of my mind it does—at least to an extent.

Madison leans back on the sofa, blowing her hair out of her face. “So which King did you bring with you?” Her tone is nonchalant.

I narrow my eyes. “Careful. Might need to fuck more of that attitude out of your stubborn fucking ass. Literally.”

The door opens and Abel pauses at the threshold, his eyes swinging around the room. He finally lands on me, making his way farther in. “Holy fucking shit, bro. Tell me you didn’t kill—” He stops talking when he finally sees Madison on the sofa opposite me.

Abel inspects her for injuries while pointedly ignoring her belly, and then comes to me. “Alright, who shot who?”

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“You really think I’d shoot her while she’s pregnant?” I bristle around my whiskey.

“Yes—” they answer together.

I glare at both of them, my glass hanging between my fingers. Abel is both a blessing and a curse. Mainly because he doesn’t have a fucking filter and doesn’t bend for the Kings. Can’t blame him, really. We probably don’t make a shitload of sense to someone like him.

Abel lifts my arm while sitting on the sofa beside me. “Fucking hell. I left you both for under an hour! Is this the only wound I need to be worried about?”

I snicker, staring right at Madison. “The only visible one.”

She laughs maniacally, her head falling back against the couch while flashing her white teeth. Fuck. Why does she have to be so beautiful? Fuck! What if they’re twin girls?

I sink back the rest of my whiskey and place the empty glass on the coffee table in front of me.

Madison finishes her manic laughing fit. “You know, it’s humorous that you continue to think this is my fault.”

Abel tenses beside me, releasing my arm while shuffling farther away on the sofa.

“What the fuck are you talking about now?”

“‘The only visible one’,” she mocks. “Are you fucking kidding me? How is it my fault that I was raped, Bishop?”

I close my eyes, squeezing my jaw to stop myself from saying something I know I’ll regret. I don’t regret a lot of shit, but when it comes to Madison, I find myself in a lot of situations where I wished I handled shit better. She’s my humanity, my weakness, and my fucking soulmate. I act irrationally when it comes to her. She’s both my karma and my curse.

“Madison,” I growl softly, keeping my eyes closed. I can hear Abel on the phone behind me, but I ignore him. “When the fuck have I ever said that I blamed you for that?” I keep my breathing level, even though my heart claws at my ribcage with every beat. It’s done with her shit. Unfortunately, the soul doesn’t care what the heart wants.

“You don’t fucking have to, Bishop!” she yells, standing from the sofa.

Here we go.

I chuckle, looking to the side while spreading my legs wide. “Girl, if you don’t sit your pregnant ass down.”

“I’ll do what the fuck I want!” she snaps.

I slowly turn my head back around to face her. My eyes narrow and the top of my lip curls. “Not while you’re carrying my kids.” I need to punch and fuck something. Preferably simultaneously.

Abel flashes his phone in front of me and Nate’s face comes into view.

“Yo! I told you I should have come! What the fuck is going on there?” He’s running

his hands through his hair, his cheeks flushed and veins popping out of his neck.

“First of all,” Madison calls out. “Fuck you!”

Nate’s hand slides down the side of his face, covering his mouth. His eyes flash with pain. “Give her to me.”

I clench my jaw. “Never.”

“Bishop!” Nate snaps, grinding his teeth. “Pass the fucking phone to her.”

I shrug, handing her the phone. “Your funeral.”

Madison snatches it out of my hand, raising it to her face. “What do you want?”

“Jesus Christ!” Nate scowls through the phone. “Why is there so much blood everywhere?”

“I shot Bishop. Now what do you want?”

The way those words fall comfortably from her mouth should make me feel uneasy, but they don’t. I know deep down, and I mean deep down, I deserve it. She is right. I should have known her better and picked up the cues. I’m not going to fuck around with excuses. She doesn’t need that. Right now, even as I watch her argue with Nate, I see it. The hurt she carries deep in her eyes. The betrayal. I had tunnel vision with taking the gavel that I never stopped and took a hard look at how I was destroying the most important person in my life.

Fuck, I hate her.

Abel flicks his hand at my arm. “I’ve got a doctor coming to take care of that.”

“And what about you?” I ask, watching as he leans against the large windows. “When are you going to be the doctor?” I’ve been hammering him to go to uni. Do it now, get his MD, and become a doctor. It would be beneficial to us to have him in that field.

“Yeah, yeah.” He ignores me, turning back around to face the busy city. The sun is going down and fatigue has long since dug its claws in. “I will.”

“Good.”

Something heavy lands on my lap before Madison is storming off down the hallway.

“You gonna chase that?” Abel asks, making his way back to the bar cart to pour another drink.

I sigh, running my fingers through my hair. “Probably for the rest of my life.”

The little fridge door closes as he pops off the bottle top of a beer. Steinlager. Huh.

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“Damn,” Abel says, looking down at the dark green bottle in his hand. “That’s some good beer.”

The doctor came and left, and when I wipe the condensation off the mirror after a long, hot shower, I see there are four stitches knotted into my skin. All of the anger that I felt has evaporated. Understanding someone else’s emotions is important when it comes to forgiveness, which is exactly why I don’t do it often.

I make my way into the master bedroom, where Madison lies beneath the stark white sheets, one leg out and the other hidden beneath. Her brown hair is sprawled over her pillow and her mouth is slightly open. I’m paralyzed, unable to move for seconds as I take in her body. How it’s changing and glowing. Fuck. She has never been more beautiful than she is right now, carrying my children.

She’s wearing a little crop top and booty shorts, so her belly is bare for me to see. I can’t fucking move.

Bringing my hands up to my face, I scrub my eyes with the back of them, stumbling backward until my back hits the wall. Guilt tears at my throat, desperate to escape as every second passes. It’s torture knowing you’ve hurt someone you love and knowing there’s nothing you can do to force their forgiveness.

I know this ride isn’t going to be easy. She’s not going to forgive me overnight. Maybe not even in a month. But I do know I’ll wait right here for her for as long as she needs.

...I just won’t let her know that.

I pull the sheet back and slide in behind her, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her body into mine. She tenses and I slowly kiss the nape of her neck, lapping my tongue around the bump from her spine.

“Don’t fight me.”

She relaxes, melting into my arms, and for the first time in fucking months, I relax. Minutes pass, and I wait until her breathing evens out. Blanketed by darkness with her in my arms, I squeeze her body tighter, kissing her head. I know she’s asleep, and I also know that what I’m about to tell her I’m not ready to say with her conscious.

“I’m sorry. Fuck, I’m sorry, baby. If he wasn’t burned to ash, I’d dig him up and kill him all over again. I failed you. I know that. But those days are over... I’ll wait for you as long as you need, because I know you’re going to need time. A lot of it. And there are still things that are about to happen that you’re going to hate. Like for one, we’re getting married in a couple weeks, but you won’t know about that until it’s already done. Sorry in advance, it’s just how it is. I’m not going to make this easy on you either, because of who I am as a person. If I kneel to you—” I pause, a hiss leaving my lips— “when I kneel to you, it’ll be forever, and, Madison, you’re the only fucking person walking this earth who I’d get on a knee for. But the next few months are going to be rough.”

I smirk against the curve of her shoulder as her little snores sound out. “See you on the other side, baby.”

Six months later

“I DON’T THINK THIS IS a good idea...” Madison says from the courtyard.

I tried calling it a house once, but then Nate laughed at me. I said mansion, and Brantley rolled his eyes. They’re not being dramatic either. The castle is like no other

home I have ever seen. We hired a world-famous architect who flew from Italy for three months while it was being built, had four construction crews on-site constantly so it could be finished before Madison gave birth, and we were lucky because it was. It was only possible because I never actually stopped the work on it—not even when she was in New Zealand. I knew it would have only been a matter of time before I put an end to her tantrum. She doesn't know this, but even if I had found out that she was pregnant and those babies weren't mine, I still would have raised them as my own.

“Oh, come on.” Tate hooks her arm in Madison's and drags her away from the antique table and down the grand backyard stairs to the beginning of the hedge maze.

Yeah. That's how far Madison went with the designs on this house. Head of my finances are not surprised by the length of expenditure she spent on this house. But Madison is Madison, and after spending close to two hundred mil on this house, she felt guilty. I tried to reason with her, but we both ended up deciding to sign off on five million to sexual abuse victims, on top of me agreeing to allow Madison to take over the yearly EKC charity event balls. Madison deals with pain by doing what she can to ensure no one else feels what she does. It makes her an idiot because she'll always suffer before anyone else. It's one of the things I need to keep on top of with her.

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“What if I go into labor in the maze?” Madison is saying to Tate as they start to disappear down the stairs.

I don’t bother to tell her that I’m pretty sure I’d hear her screams. The past few months have been tense, but it’s an angst we needed. I wasn’t lying when I said love didn’t come near the way I feel about her. There’s love, and then there’s what I feel for Madison fucking Hayes. Which she reminds me of daily.

Music played through the speakers as we all sat around a table out on the patio of Nate and Tillie’s house. Saint and Brantley were in the kitchen, probably fighting over who was bringing what out. Brantley hasn’t let her lift shit since finding out she’s pregnant, as he should.

Madison’s constant tension was tight enough to snap, and I knew what she’s still mad about. Tillie and Saint didn’t care as much, but Madison was still irked about the surprise wedding. I didn’t know if she’s mad about the wedding or the marriage at this point.

Her thigh touched mine before she quickly moved away from me, only she didn’t get far because my hand landed on her thigh and I squeezed. “What the fuck is your problem now?”

Nate and Tillie continued with their chatting to Abel in the background. Everyone was used to our bickering at this point, so anything that was said usually went unnoticed. With the exception of Nate watching my tone with her now. Since she forgave him, he’s back to being a psychopath with her. As he should...

She moved out of my grip. “Fuck you. I’m nothing.”

“Hey.” I snatched her chin between my fingers, yanking her eyes to mine. “You’re Madison motherfucking Hayes, and you’re my bitch.”

“Wrong, I’m worse than that.” She raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. “I’m your wife.”

Yeah. I fucked up.

“Tsk.” I released her chin and waved her off. “Fuck outta here with your bullshit.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket, pulling me out of one of the many fights we’ve found ourselves in lately, and I answer when I see it’s my old man.

“Yeah?” I keep my eyes zoned on the entry of the maze. Madison is due any day now. Her midwife wants to induce her this week if the babies don’t come naturally.

“How are my grandchildren?”

“Too scared to come out. Must know who their grandfather is.”

He chuckles. “Everyone knows who their grandfather is, son.”

I run my tongue over my lip. Precisely the problem. “Everything okay?” I ask, sipping on my coffee.

“The Gentlemen are ruffling feathers.”

“Ruffling feathers, how? We had an agreement.”

“I know, and his woman just went into labor. I don’t know what’s happening over there, but you need to sort it out.”

“I will. Explain the feathers, though.”

A door closes in the background, and when I see both Tate and Madison exit from the maze, I smile tensely at them while turning back around and making my way through the doors and into the family room. Madison is smart, she most likely caught me retreating, and those familiar alarm bells will be signaling in her head that I’m hiding shit from her.

I’ve come to the realization—among the chaos that is our life—that she wants to know. She wants the nitty-gritty bullshit we go through. I know she can handle it—it’s just I don’t want her to have to.

“There seems to be a rogue fish in their circle. I do think it’s an in-house issue that they’re dealing with, but ideally we do need to check Danny’s head and see where he’s at.”

I keep my eyes trained on the Gothic architectural kitchen. The stark white fittings and steel fixtures. Three windows arch up to the ceiling, which overlook the maze down below, and I move closer to keep an eye on Madison, but see she and Tate are no longer there. “I’ll make the call. I take it he’s in the position that I’m in. We don’t want any blood spilled while our families are expanding.”

“You could just kill him. Make it easier.”

“Dad.”

“Logically, Bishop, you should. Listen, if you cut the head off the top, the soldiers below will fear you. It’s the only appropriate action—” His words die out. Hector

fucking Hayes.

“I’m not doing it that way. You gave me the gavel, how I do things is going to be different. You knew this was going to happen.”

“...son.”

“Dad. They call you The Mad King. I will not be taking that name. Let me handle it.” I knew he was going to take a while to detach from his role, but fuck. Yet another time I wish my grandfather was here to tell me how Hector took the gavel when it was time. I’m sure I could ask my mom, but as usual, she’s biased as fuck when it comes to him.

“Alright, alright. Let’s talk our baby Kings. Do we know what they are yet?”

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“It’s going to be a surprise. Madison didn’t want to find out.”

“But?” he asks, and I flip the tap on to full pressure to drown out my answer.

“Boy and girl.”

“Yes...” Dad laughs loudly through the phone, matching the smile on my mouth.

“We got ourselves another King.”

“Two. We got ourselves two Kings.” I don’t bother reminding him about how we no longer name the girls Swans. They’re just Kings... as they should be.

“That we do.” He laughs heartily. “Anyone fucks with those two, they answer to me.”

“Alright, Dad, pretty sure they’d have to come through me, their uncles, their mother and aunties, and the rest of our affiliates, but yeah, you’re right. Crossing Hector Hayes is a scary thought.”

“Son...” His laughter dies out and I feel the seriousness of his tone through the phone. “Do me a favor.”

I don’t answer. He could say anything right now, that’s how unpredictable Hector Hayes is. And to think we all almost killed him a couple times. To be fair, that never would have happened. Yes, he’s fucking unhinged, and yes, he has always put the Kings first and his family second, but right now—now that he has stepped down, I feel the dark cloud that once hovered over his head move to mine. Now, he can be a family man because I’ve got to take care of the Kings.

He sighs. “Put your family first. Alright? The Kings, The Empire, it’s nothing without family, but know this—”

Here we go. The surprise of those words is very short-lived. As expected.

“When you do need to be a King, be Hector. Don’t be Pope. The old fuck was too soft.”

I can hear the girls in the other room, so I know I need to rush through this call. “I will rule with one hand Hector and one Grandpa Pope. That’s a promise.”

“Good. Now handle this shit before I do. Even when my old ass needs to carry a cane, that cane will have a damn blade on the end of it.”

I hang up and toss my phone onto the counter. I can handle this Gentlemen shit after I’ve checked on Madison, and if I’m right, it should be as easy as a conversation. We will never side with The Gentlemen, but we don’t want their shit bleeding into Riverside—especially now that we’re all on homeland.

Madison is sprawled out on the sofa, with Tatum at the end, pouring massage oil onto her feet. It occurs to me—more so recently than ever—at how much the two of them rely on one another. Madison and Tillie are close—very close—but Tate and Madison have that old-school kind of friendship. The kind that is not a friendship, but a sisterhood. I knew when Madison and I became a thing that I’d also be dating this fucking headcase of a best friend.

“Tate, go home.”

She glares at me, eyes narrowed. “You do know we’re cousins by marriage soon, right?”

I groan, taking two steps down into the floating family room. The lounge is built into the floor in a perfect square, with cotton pillows and beige knitted throws decorating it to fit the design of the house.

“You wanna do this?” she asks in challenge.

“Yeah, I will. Now get the fuck out.”

Tate ignores me, continuing to massage Madison’s feet. Sliding down beside her, I brush Madison’s brown hair off her forehead. “You like Tillie, right, baby?”

Madison’s eyes close as she snuggles into my lap. “Of course I do.”

I smile down at her, running my thumb over her soft cheek. Smirking up at Tate, I sneer, “So you won’t miss Tate if she goes missing.”

Tate stops massaging, her eyes narrowing on mine. “Fuck you, BVH.”

I laugh, resting back against the sofa while keeping the same circular motion on Madison’s cheek until I feel her turn weak on my lap and her soft snores fill the silent room.

Without turning to face Tate, I breathe out, “You know she would do anything for you.”

“I know,” Tate whispers quietly as she slowly stops her massaging.

“I’ll talk with Tillie about her grudge. The only person it’s gonna hurt is Madison, and I’ll cut both you bitches out of her life if I think your toxicity is burning into her.”

“Bishop.” She wipes her hands on her pants and turns to face me slightly. “It’s not

me. I have no beef with Tillie. If anything, I'm slightly embarrassed with the way I threw myself at Nate. First loves and all that..."

"No, not love—just fucking Nate."

She giggles, but it's not filled with sadness or jealousy. It's a woman who is judging the girl who didn't know better.

"Don't be so fucking hard on yourself. He knew what the fuck he was doing playing you. It ain't your fault."

"Oh no, that's not it." She takes a deep breath. "I'm so in love with Spyder that anything I felt for Nate is minuscule. He numbed all of that. So trust me—my Nate obsession days are over."

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“Good.” I shuffle farther down on the sofa. “Now, can you please at least go to your room? I kinda wanna fuck my wife when she wakes up.”

“Actually, do that!” Tate says, slipping out from beneath Madison’s legs. “I’ve heard it brings on labor.” We can jump over the fact she has her own fucking room in this house.

I wait until Tate has disappeared upstairs when I finally grab my phone off the kitchen counter and hit dial on a certain Gentlemen’s number.

He answers on the fifth ring. “Hayes, to what do I owe this displeasure?”

“Heard congratulations are in order.” I slide out a stool from beneath the kitchen island. “Not every day you give birth to a little girl.”

Silence.

A door closes in the background before he finally answers. “Fucker, what the fuck do you want?”

“Tsk, tsk...” I smirk, running the palm of my hand over my abs. “Touchy, touchy. Look, you’re going to need to get your crew in line before I do it for you, and trust me, you’ll want me doing it and not my old man.”

“What makes you think we have an issue here?”

I chuckle, running my finger over my upper lip.

“Right...” he answers with a heavy sigh. The thing with The Gentlemen, is they’re rebellious by nature. They hated The Elite Kings, and Danny’s family created that hatred. I believe Danny is better than his ancestors, but I also know that has a lot to do with his woman and less to do with who he is as a person. He loves her more than anything and fought to get her. He fought hard. It makes sense.

“I’ll handle it. It’s an in-house issue, so I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I can respect that.” I stand and make my way to the sink, looking out through the windows. “Madison isn’t far off, and let me tell you, if a war erupts while I’m raising my family, Danny, I will fucking kill you all. All of your men, your children, your wives. You will think Hector ‘The Mad King’ Hayes is more like a soft prince if you ever come near my family—and I mean my entire family. Comprene?”

He grunts, “Yeah, we agreed no one touches the families.”

“No one touches the families.” I turn and lean against the marble counter. “Your kid might want to come to Riverside when it comes to schooling. We all know the grass is gold on this side.”

“Fuck you,” he spits, and I have to choke back my laugh. Danny Dale is the great-great-grandson of one of the most despised men known to not just the streets, but to the suits. My grandfather put a blade into one of his eyeballs when they were in their late twenties because he disrespected my grandmother—who was Italian by birth.

“What’s your girl’s name, Danny boy?”

AFTER THE PHONE CALL WITH Danny and three fingers of whiskey, I make my way up the grand staircase and then farther to the master stairs. I made sure to send a text to my psycho father so that he knows I’ve dealt with Danny. The last thing I need is him going homicidal in his old age, whacking Danny and enticing a century-long

war. The Gentlemen are something now. They have chapters up and down the border and across the fucking Pacific Ocean. They don't own the streets, because we do—but they definitely play a part in running them.

Suits, on the other hand... well...

Slipping beneath the cotton sheets, I slide my arm under Madison's pillow and pull her closer into me, burying my nose into her thick mane of hair. It's gotten thicker since she's been pregnant, and I fucking love it. More to grab on to.

She wiggles against me, her ass hitting my dick. "You know what can entice labor."

I sink my teeth into the curve of her shoulder, running my palm down her back. "Yeah, I do."

She chuckles, just as I slide my hand up her inner thigh, raising her leg up to reach beneath. I slip one finger inside of her and she groans, tilting her head to the side.

She tenses around my finger and I inch up higher to see over her shoulder just as warm liquid spills down my finger and onto the palm of my hand.

She grumbles, "You are fucking kidding me!"

"Wait! Did your fucking water just break?" I keep my finger inside of her because not even that would stop me right now.

She turns over onto her back, her eyes coming to mine. "Looks like it. You ready to be a daddy?"

"Shit..." I shove the blankets off my body, searching around the room to find the bag we packed a couple months ago. We spent an hour packing that fucking thing and an

hour arguing what to put in it. I managed to slip a flask inside.

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I'm reaching under the bed and pulling out the suitcase when she starts laughing so loud the fucking bed shakes.

I dump the bag onto the mattress, glaring at her. "What? And why are you still lying there? Get your ass up."

"Bishop... labor can last hours—days even. I'm not in any pain right now. We will sleep and see how I feel in the morning before calling the midwife."

I'm shaking my head way before she finishes that final word. "No. Fuck that. Madison—baby..." I lower myself back onto the bed. "These babies, they're my babies. They ain't gonna tiptoe around your discomfort."

She leans up on her elbows, a smile glowing on her face. "Bishop, I—" Her face scrunches slightly, her eyes closing, and I watch as her chest inflates and deflates as she takes deep breaths. "Okay..." She slowly releases her breath, her eyes back on mine. "Yeah, okay. Maybe we will go—"

I run around the bed to grab her by the hand and help her out when she collapses, her hand on her lower belly. "Ouch! Fuckkk—" Her teeth dig into her lower lip as she winces through the pain. "Mmmm, no. You're going to need to call Rebecca. Now."

"Alright, alright! Fuck. Sit down and don't move." I crawl over the bed to grab my phone, tapping on Rebecca's name and pushing the speaker button.

"Hi, are we all a go?"

“Yeah, fuck. Her water broke less than fifteen minutes ago and she was fine, but she just tried to stand and said it hurt.” There’s shuffling in the background, doors closing.

“Madison, on a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you in?”

“Um—” She pauses again, doing that little lip bite.

I’d rather she do that during other shit and much less when she’s in so much agony.

“Shit, they’re really close, Rebecca. That was the second one in less than five minutes, and the pain is hovering at a solid seven.”

“Okay. I’m on my way and calling some colleagues to assist. Bishop, prep the room. Sanitize everything and push some pillows below her belly. I’ll call the EMTs to let them know to be on standby if we need.”

Madison is already moving onto the middle of the bed when I snatch my phone from the mattress, hitting it off speaker. “Rebecca, we didn’t agree to a fucking home birth. She is birthing twins.”

“Look, it sounds scarier than what it is. Her body is going to do all the work for us. I’m only two minutes up the road so I’m coming in now. The EMTs—”

“—I have a fucking chopper on my roof, Rebecca. We can fly her ass to the hospital.”

She sighs. “Look—beep me in.”

I hang up on her and dial the security at the front gate. “Let her in and any of her assistants.”

“Sir... is that wise?”

I clench my jaw. “Yes, we’re safe to do this, just have them show you medical ID.”

“Yes, sir.”

Shoving my phone into my pocket, I make my way back to Madison, who has stripped down into a little sports bra and is rocking on all fours over a pile of pillows.

“Baby.” I swipe her hair from her sweaty face. “I’m right here, okay?”

She starts groaning, and I lean forward to kiss her on her head just as the bedroom door opens and Rebecca bursts through with Tate hot behind her.

Tate has been staying with us a lot leading up to the birth because she’s the only one who Madison will allow to care for her needs. I’m thankful for her in this time, because I’m man enough to understand that there are attributes in a best friend for women that we men just cannot provide.

Rebecca leans over Madison, placing her bag on the floor. “How are we, Madison? Ready to welcome these two beautiful babies into the world?”

“Yes,” Madison pants, reaching for my hand. “Please, just to have this pain stop.”

“Is there anything we can give her for that?” I ask no one in particular, pulling the hair tie out of her brown locks and pushing it all up onto the top of her head. I tie the scrunchie up in her bun and gesture to Tate.

“Can you make the calls?”

Tate nods. “I can do that. Do you want them all over here?”

“I don’t think we’re going to be able to stop them all.”

“True.” Tate laughs, before sobering when she looks back to her best friend. “I’ll be right back. Don’t you go birthing my babies without me here.”

I roll my eyes just as there’s another knock on the door.

Rebecca nudges her head to the door while pulling out a plastic tool.

I open the door and stare down at a man in his early thirties, dressed in a sweater and slacks and carrying an identical bag to Rebecca.

He flashes a card in my face before putting his hand out to me. “Afternoon, sir, I’m Roger Camden, here to help assist Rebecca Camden.”

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“Let him in!” Rebecca calls out from behind.

I stretch the door wide, gesturing for him to enter. “Rebecca, you didn’t tell me that your husband was a midwife too?”

“Because he’s not. He’s a surgeon—and a very good one.” She must see the flash of panic on my face because she smiles reassuringly. “She won’t need that, and you don’t need to worry. She is in very good hands, Bishop. I promise.”

The tension in my muscles relaxes. I do trust her. Madison and I did hours and hours of research to find the perfect candidate to bring our children into the world. Rebecca was by far the best we came across.

Before I can close the door, Tate is walking back in, now wearing a short silk robe to cover her half-nakedness. I swear this girl is way too comfortable around me now.

Her hand comes to my arm. “They’re all on their way. Tillie is having contractions too so there’s a chance they may all just be born together.” Her laughter dies out as she goes back to the bed beside Madison.

I lower myself on the other side of Madison, no fucks given that I don’t have a shirt on, still dressed in my gray sweats. “How you holding up, baby?”

“I’m not,” she moans, twisting to face me while resting her head on the pillow.

“Madison, I’m going to have you lie down on your back for a second so I can do some checks, okay?”

Madison groans, but it's not one from her contractions, more because she doesn't want to move—or doesn't have the energy. I regret giving her shit about these babies being mine and how vicious they're going to come into the world now that they're literally doing that.

When she doesn't move, I lean over her and pick her up from below her ribcage, shuffling us up the bed together and laying her back to rest between my legs with my back against the headboard.

“Shhh.” I move her hair out of her face, rubbing little circles over her cheek.

“Hey, Mad, Tillie and Saint are here,” Tate says, looking down at her phone. “You want me to let them up?”

Madison starts nodding while blowing out deep breaths. I keep my arm over her chest and watch as Rebecca places a little light-hat on her head, covering her hair, and sanitizes her hands before putting on gloves. Roger is gathering out things from their bags and typing into an iPad.

Madison doesn't move when a clicking sound vibrates out from between her thighs, her groans becoming deeper. More desperate. She squeezes my arm so tightly that her fingernails leave half moons in my skin.

“Well, little lady. You're eight centimeters, and by the feel of everything—” She continues to press around Madison's belly. “We have one baby in breech and one in anterior. Thankfully, the baby who has moved down into the canal first is the one in the anterior position which is exactly what we want.”

“What if the other baby doesn't shift?” I ask, placing my hand on her swollen bump.

“Then I will need to manipulate it into an anterior position or into an occiput

posterior by doing an internal. If that doesn't work, I would usually recommend a C-section—"

"—No!" Madison starts shaking her head.

My eyes fly back to Rebecca. "Why would you suggest that?"

"Well, delivering a baby through the vagina in breech can be very dangerous for both mother and baby. During the birthing process, the baby can get stuck in the—"

"Nope. She can get a C-section if that's the case."

"Bishop—" Madison growls through her pain, taking deep breaths as she rolls through another contraction. "Let me make this choice."

My mouth snaps closed as the door opens and the girls walk through.

"I would usually advise for a C-section and organize the EMTs now to rush her to the hospital, but I believe that this baby will turn in the last minute," Roger adds, pressing to the side of Madison's stomach. "After the first baby comes, I will get you onto your knees and we can try to manipulate it this way. The only thing that worries me with this is blood loss."

I pale, squeezing Madison tighter. I've seen death and watched people bleed out all over my very hands, and never once has it ever bothered me, but blood loss and Madison together? Hell fucking no.

"So I'm going to call an ambulance and have them here. Is cost an issue?" he asks me, although I know he already knows the answer to that.

I laugh, almost fucking maniacally. "No, the fuck it ain't." I instantly feel bad about

snapping at him, and Madison squeezing my leg is an obvious display of how unimpressed she was also.

“Sorry,” I mumble up at him. “I just—I’m never doing this shit again.”

Tillie and Tate sit on one side of Madison, as Saint comes right beside me on the other. Saint kicks her Vans off and slides right up beside me, her hand coming to rest on Madison’s head as she lays hers against my arm.

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“Hey, family,” Saint says gently, and I feel Madison relax in my arms. “Want me to sing?”

“Mmhmm, okay,” Madison says sleepily, the most relaxed I’ve seen her since her water broke.

Saint starts humming off a slow tune as Rebecca goes back between Madison’s legs.

“I would say you’ve got a couple more contractions before we’re going to start pushing.” She gently pats her knee. “I have two pediatricians and an obstetrician who are going to be coming into the room any minute.”

“Nate is the gatekeeper down there, just so you guys know.” Tillie chuckles, wincing every now and then.

I nod at her. “You okay there, Little Terror...”

“Ehhh, I’ll be fine. He will wait for the twins, I’m sure. I’m only two centimeters.”

Rebecca looks to Tillie. “Who is your midwife?”

“Jay Verbose.”

Rebecca nods. “He is very good. You’re in good hands.”

The door opens and everything turns up a notch. Madison is wailing in my arms as Rebecca is back between her legs with the light on. There are three more people

down at that end of the bed, not including Roger, who is now fully suited up with gloves that reach his elbows.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Oh my God.

My brain starts short-circuiting when I realize I'm about to be a dad and what if something goes wrong? What if the second baby doesn't turn around and something happens? Suddenly, these babies are becoming very real—minutes away from arriving into this fucked-up world with me as their father—fuck! I'm gonna be a dad. I—fuck!

“Hey—” Saint's hand is on my chin, turning my face toward hers. “You're going to do great, big brother. Let's get your babies here safely.”

I search her gray eyes, and a wave of relief slowly washes over me just as I hear—“push!”

My grip tenses around Madison as Rebecca starts counting—“one, two, three, good girl!”

And then Madison exhales through a scream, her body turning slack in my arms.

I catch Rebecca's eye. “Is this normal?”

“It is.” She nods, losing herself in what she's doing while still managing to answer all of my pathetic questions. She points to Tillie and Tate. “Are you up to holding her legs?”

Tillie raises an eyebrow at her, but I growl before she can answer.

She straightens her shoulders, all sass gone. “Yes, I can.”

Rebecca, who didn’t even notice that she was about to get slapped by a Tillie one-liner, gestures to the spot in front of Saint. “Take her leg on that side, and you,” she points to Tate without looking, “take that one. The head is a centimeter away from crowning.”

“You hear that, baby?” I whisper into Madison’s ear, sweat rubbing onto my cheek. “We’re almost there. You did that. You’re doing this.”

Madison starts crying uncontrollably in a way I’ve never witnessed from her before. “I can’t do it. I can’t—”

“Yes, you can, baby. Yes, you can because you’re the strongest fucking person I know, you hear me? You tolerated me. You’ve got this—”

“I, Bishop, I almost killed myself. I did it—” she hiccups and my blood turns cold, but she doesn’t stop. Relentless with her pain and grief, she continues through her wailing. “I had the gun ready. I had it all ready, the bullet, the letters. Everything was ready. I was done, but then I remembered the date. My period was late—” She stops talking and screams so loud my ears bleed.

In that moment, my heart snaps in my chest. All of what we’re experiencing now is powerful enough to drown out her confession, but I almost lost her.

I almost lost my fucking world, all for what?

Tears sting the corners of my eyes as Saint reaches up and catches them from my cheek.

“I could have lost you...” I whisper, but no one can hear me because Madison is screaming and Rebecca is counting, and Tate is hollering for her to push, push, push! And Tillie has a wide smile on her face, joining Tate with her chants while simultaneously saying she’s doing amazing, and Saint?

Well, Saint is focused on me. Her comfort on my arm, her soft touch, her gentle reminders that I’m not a bad person—but none of that matters, because right now I’m about to become a dad.

“One big push, Madison!” Rebecca yells, and just like that, there’s a gasp, followed by excited cries.

“Congratulations, parents!” Rebecca says, quickly handing the little baby to Roger. I watch in amazement as my world expands.

“It’s not crying...” I whisper, but Rebecca is already back to Madison.

Roger calls out from behind her. “He’s okay, Bishop. I just need to squirt some saline into his nose.”

“Him?”

Rebecca smiles up at me. “Yes, congratulations on your little boy.” Then she looks back to Madison’s belly and presses on the sides. “Now let’s get this next little bundle out.”

“She’ll be stubborn like her mom...” I growl, kissing Madison’s head.

“Where’s my baby?” she murmurs as another contraction hits her and her back curls into me.

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“Roger is just cleaning him up. He is safe and sound and healthy.”

“He didn’t cry,” Madison worries, and I rub her arm gently.

“Not all babies do,” Rebecca reassures as the other two people who are in here move between Rebecca and Roger. I read the room, making sure they’re not hiding anything, and I don’t think they are. All three of the professionals don’t seem tense or worried.

“Shhh, let’s get the little girl King out now, yeah? Let them do their job.” I kiss her again, rubbing little circles on her cheek.

“Girl?” Madison snaps, looking up at me from below. “I fucking kne—” She screams and Rebecca is back between her legs. Oops.

“It’s okay to push, Madison. Your baby has moved down the canal in the birthing position. Your next contraction, okay?” She’s still talking when Roger is beside us both, carrying our son in a little white wrap.

He smiles down at us but passes the baby to Madison. “If you can hold the baby to her chest, Bishop, he can rest on Madison skin to skin for a few minutes before she starts pushing again. When that happens, just take him.”

I nod, but I can’t take my eyes off the perfect baby sitting in Madison’s arms. I hook my hands beneath him for extra support and so I’m ready to take him when her next contraction hits.

I watch as all of her pain disappears and a wide smile I've never seen on her mouth appears, running her finger over his cheek. "You are perfect, Priest Hayes."

"Yeaahhh, did we agree to that?" I ask, watching as he searches for food against Madison's chest.

"Be quiet. It's a generational thing with your families. Hector and I already agreed."

I roll my eyes.

"Bishop—" she groans, and I take Priest out of her arms, bringing him to mine while keeping my legs tightly pressed into her so she can use them as she needs. A vicious wail rips out of her as the girls start again. This time the OB and pediatrician come closer to Madison as Roger pulls out a sterile silver plate with a line of stitching and a single needle.

"Good girl, Madison! One more big push!" Rebecca yells, and instantly a loud cry wails out through the air just as laughter and smiles erupt around the room.

Rebecca places her right on Madison's chest this time, covering her little body with another white wrap.

Madison smiles up at me from below. "We did it."

I kiss her on the head. "You did it, baby." I reach around and rub the cushion of my thumb over—"Halen." I say her name out loud and everyone stops.

I side-eye Saint with a smirk and she chuckles softly.

"Halen..." Madison tries the name on her tongue. "Priest and Halen Hayes. Why do I feel like this is also a thing between you and Saint?"

“It is,” Saint says, peeking at Halen. “But mainly because of Van Halen, but also because her little cousin will be called Vaden.”

“Ah, I actually love that.” Tillie sighs, as she and Tate both lean against each other, swooning over the babies.

“Oh my God, is it possible for babies to look so perfect so soon after childbirth?” Tate asks, sliding closer to us.

My eyes go to Tillie, who is smiling happily at both of them, but there’s a sadness in her eyes that I knew would come.

Madison reaches for Tillie’s hand. “We love you.”

She smiles at all of us. “I know.” She looks to Saint. “And I know she’s happy.”

“Can I hop up, baby? I think these babies are hungry...”

The girls all stand, kissing Madison and the babies on their heads.

Tillie looks at us from over her shoulder. “We’ll all be downstairs or in a room to sleep. You guys enjoy this.”

When Saint stands to leave, I stop her with a hand on her arm, ignoring when the door closes behind Tate and Tillie. “Thank you.”

Saint leans over and presses a gentle kiss to my forehead. “Forever and ever.” And she slowly leaves the same way as the girls.

Once everyone is out except us and the staff, Rebecca places her tools back onto a tray. “You just needed a few stitches internally and externally. It was expected,

especially with twins, but you are healthy and so are your babies.”

I watch as the professionals start running their checks on Madison, and I slide out from beneath her, still carrying Priest.

I look down at him, reaching for the flask of whiskey and flicking off the lid. Pressing a finger to the nozzle, I tip it back and run my finger down the center of his forehead while jiggling him gently around the room. “Welcome to your Kingdom, my little King.” I press a kiss onto his head and he finally opens his eyes.

“Bring him over here, he’s probably hungry.” Madison shuffles up the bed as Rebecca directs Halen over one breast.

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“You gonna feed them both at the same time?” I ask skeptically.

Madison rolls her eyes, and right here and now, with her skin glistening with sweat from the hard labor of bringing our babies into the world, she has never been more beautiful. Never.

Rebecca laughs lightly while looking up at me from beneath her glasses. “That’s actually normal, and you’re both very lucky. It looks like you have one who is quite demanding and one that is placid.”

“Huh,” I joke, sitting where Saint was. “I wonder where she gets that from?”

Madison glares at me, but before we can take it any further, we both burst out laughing. She shakes her head. “We are so screwed.”

I lay Priest over the other side of her breast and watch as he finally latches on to her.

Picking my phone up from the floor, I open the camera app.

“Take a shot.” Madison smiles up at me, her lashes fanning out over her cheeks.

“You want me to?” Rebecca asks, gesturing for the phone.

I hand it to her and tuck back behind Madison. Rebecca takes a range of photos before handing me back my phone.

“I’m going to help you get them settled and you for a shower. Do you have

everything here?” Rebecca asks Madison, and I stand from the bed, closing the camera app and opening the contacts.

“I’ll call Pia up to help.”

Madison nods, smiling at me. “Please.” I take both babies from Madison when they’re fast asleep, and Rebecca helps her off the bed as I move to the other side of the room where the fireplace is blazing and their two bassinets are set up and freshly made.

Taking a seat on the recliner in the corner, I rock them gently and wait until Madison and Rebecca are out of earshot and it’s just my two Kings and me.

“Don’t tell Mommy yet, but how do you both feel about being in a wedding in six months?”

I keep rocking back and forward, resting my head against the chair while looking down at both of them.

“Yeah... sounds like a plan, right?”

Six weeks later

Madison

WHEN I WALKED THROUGH THOSE halls all those years ago, nervously flicking my leather bangles around my wrist while thinking my life was about as prosaic as anyone else’s, I never would have thought I would be here right now. A mother to the most beautiful babies I have ever seen in my life and married to my best friend while being surrounded by the people I love most. Our family is big—so big you can’t do anything but feel love.

We are the creation of our own choices, and every single one of us chose each other along the way. That's what family is, it's not blood. Even through war, hate, arguments, and destruction, we all always chose each other.

I lean back against the chair, sparkling colored lights lining the courtyard and maze, and a big Happy New Year! banner in black and gold writing sitting over the entrance of it. Every single King and their partner are here tonight, and right now and right here, I'm at my happiest.

I find Bishop talking with Abel and his father and Elena, holding both babies in each arm and dressed in slacks and a button-down with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, showcasing all of his tattoos. Jesse came to visit us a couple of weeks ago and we inked more into his neck tattoo to add the twins, and I got a crown on the back of my neck. Bishop's crown, the Hayes' crown.

"You know, holding those babies looks so good on him."

Scarlet nods her head at Tillie's comment behind her glass of bubbles. "I'm glad he got some of that maternal gene."

"I didn't doubt that." I cheer the cool air, taking a small sip of wine.

"You pumped tonight?" Saint asks, resting her hand on her bump. Her pregnancy has been rough. She hasn't been able to eat hardly anything without spewing it up, and Brantley is about a second away from tearing the whole world apart.

"I did. It fucking hurt, but I need this wine. It's been too long."

Tate shuffles her chair around, her eyes zipping out into the crowd. "How is Abel?"

I find him instantly, near the chocolate fountain and champagne bridge that's set up

below the DJ stand. There's a countdown clock hovering below the Happy New Year! banner and caterers shuffling among the sea of bodies.

"He's not good, but has enrolled into REU to get his med degree."

I run my hands down the little black sequin skirt I'm wearing, with tassels hitting my thighs. I dressed all of us in similar outfits, with Tate wearing the exact same skirt but in white, same with Saint, and Tillie and me in black. Matched with a little crop top with matching tassels hanging above my belly button, I'm being far too bold with this outfit considering I just had twins six weeks ago.

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“That will be helpful for us, and for him to maybe help with his pain.”

Tate sighs, shaking her head while sipping on champagne that’s in her rose gold flute. “I don’t think he will ever recover from Bailey.” Of course, she’s right. Her death rocked all of us, as did Cash’s. Death is something that we’ve all become accustomed to, as sad as that sounds.

I pull the girls to their feet, Saint holding her belly as Tillie and I shuffle us through the people and make our way to the little photo area where there are celebration balloons and celebratory banners. We take a range of shots before we hear the timer start beeping.

Live music is playing some covers of new music, and the time reads three minutes left of this year. My eyes find Bishop, and I smile when he catches me, juggling both twins in each arm before handing one to Hector.

I curl my finger at him as he shoots back his whiskey. “Dance with me?”

He looks up to the timer, just as everyone starts counting down the seconds.

Ten.

Nine.

He pulls me into his chest and kisses me.

Eight.

Seven!

Six.

My tongue slips into his mouth as his hand cups my ass, lifting beneath my skirt.

Five!

Four...

His fingers slide beneath the lining of my panties.

Three!

Two!

He drops to one knee while flashing a little black box.

Grinning up at me, as everyone turns to watch, he smirks. “You want a wedding, baby?”

Five months later

The sun is going down, but it isn't quite dark enough for the solar lights to all ignite. I look down from the window in our master bedroom, at all of the fairy lights that hang down the aisle, where sticks and leaves curve up into an altar. There are black tipped candles that line the aisle and steps leading down from the grand courtyard, and to the seating area and altar. Deep inside the house, in the largest atrium style area that connects one side of the house to the other wing, is currently being set up for dining.

Only Bishop and I would get married twice in one year. So much for the twenty-year

pact the girls and I made, but I'm sure one way or another, we will find a reason to celebrate.

The bedroom door opens and Nate whistles loudly, leaning against the threshold. "Damn, Kitty. Now that's a sight to see." He's wearing all black, with a black suit jacket and shirt, black slacks, and black loafers. I drew the line at him wearing sneakers.

My lower lip trembles and I make my way to him, resting my hand against his cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too." His brows wiggle. "Has Tillie told you yet?"

I tilt my head, brows curved. "No, what?"

Tillie pushes past him, glaring while carrying a bottle of Grey Goose. "Tillie hasn't told her because today is her day. Out!" She shoos him out of the room, closing the door on Nate.

"Nope!" I turn to face her, picking up the dress that's pooled around my feet. "You must continue with what you were just about to say."

She places the bottle on the vanity table, curling her lips beneath her teeth. "I'm pregnant."

My mouth falls open. "What!" I jump into her arms, squeezing her into a hug.

"Don't! Your makeup looks amazing, and that little devil face is perfect."

I wave her off. "Oh my gosh, Tillie! Pregnant!"

“Yes.” She lowers herself onto the bed. “War is only a few months old. I am so screwed! And this pregnancy feels like Micaela’s, so I think it’s a girl this time.”

“That’s—amazing. I’m so excited for you, Tillie.” I take the spot beside her, curling her hair behind her ear. “One of us has to pop out another, you know, since Bran got a vasectomy and Bishop and I have drawn the line at two.”

“Anyway!” Tillie takes my hand and directs me to the medieval-style mirror in the corner of the room. “Look at you.”

I do this time. All day I’ve been ignoring the fact that in hours, I’m going to be standing in front of all of our friends and families to promise our lives to one another. Even though we are already married, the premise of how it was done angered me, and Bishop knew it. I haven’t had much control over our lives since he walked into it, and having this wedding helps me take back some of that control.

My dress is laced in black. It sucks in at my waist and flares out in the traditional bridal gown design at the bottom. The bodice is my favorite. Made up of one thousand black feathers, it curves up both sides of my breasts, leaving a slit in the middle and my back bare. I have to be careful I don’t slip a nip with how it’s laced. My hair is twisted in a messy knot at the nape of my neck and a black crown is pressed into my hair on the top. My fingers are painted matte black, with gold tips in the shape of a coffin, and my lips are painted black. Bishop let me do what I wanted with the aesthetic of our wedding and I did not hold back.

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The door opens again and Saint and Tate are standing at the threshold.

Saint smiles up at me, her cheeks red. “Everyone is ready for you.”

I take the bottle of Grey Goose and flick off the lid, taking a long swig of the alcohol before passing it to Tate.

“Okay, let’s take a selfie.”

I raise my phone up high and we all bundle together to take a quick selfie, then I post one of just the floor and the girls surrounding me. Their black silk dresses blending with mine perfectly.

Opening up Instagram, I post the image I just took, not the selfie, and upload it with a skull.

Saint hooks her arm in mine. “Your skull face looks stunning. Is that how you always wear yours?” I reach up to touch my face as we make our way down to the bottom level of the house.

“No, not usually. I didn’t want it to be too heavy, so I asked Scarlet to only line it with pencil.”

“It looks hot,” Tillie says, picking up my dress from behind me. “Like seriously hot. Not trying too hard, but then, you know—Queens don’t have to try hard. Their people just know who she is.”

I laugh, squeezing Tate's hand as she slides up beside me. "It's not too late to run. I still have our old passports." Her whispers die out as we reach the family room, where the doors are opened wide with no lighting but the candles that burn through the night and what fairy lights are drooping overhead, leading to the altar.

Oh God.

Why am I so fucking nervous?

Someone squeezes my hand and I turn to face my father, who is striking in a black suit just like the rest of the boys, only his has patterns sewn in it. "You're going to do really well, baby. You ready?"

I take the first step down the aisle, trying not to count how many it takes to get there. I follow behind the girls, who are ahead of me, and the air whooshes through my hair, brushing a couple of stray strands over my collarbone.

The flickering flames from all of the candles illuminate a soft shade of orange through the dark space, and it's not until Dad turns me around to kiss me on the cheek when I finally look up to Bishop, who is taking me from my father.

God.

If I was wearing panties, they'd be melted. Bishop's tatted hand takes my chin, pulling my face to his where he kisses me gently. "Hey, baby. You look fucking beautiful."

I can't help but laugh, hiding my smile by tucking my lips between my teeth. Of course, he had to say something out of theme.

He takes me to the altar, where a priest stands, holding a Bible.

A damn Bible.

Good lord.

“We are gathered here today to celebrate the love between Bishop and Madison Hayes.”

Someone coughs in the crowd. “Madship. Just say Madship.” There’s chuckling and I turn to see who it is when my eyes land on Jesse, winking at me while squeezing Grace under his arm.

I shake my head and smile before going back to Bishop. His dark hair is styled slick, with the sides of his scalp shaved in a delicate fade. His skull outline is similar to mine, and only penciled so it doesn’t take away from his beautiful face.

He squeezes my hand and I come back into the now, not realizing I had lost my train of thought by how hot he looks right now.

He slips my other ring off my finger and places it onto the middle finger before taking the new one out of the box. “I, Bishop motherfucking Hayes, take you, Madison the fucking queen Mont—” He flashes a devilish grin. “Hayes, as my wife.” His thumb runs over my bottom lip and my heart short-circuits because there’s no way this frustratingly aggressive man has written his own vows. “I promise to love you when you’re screaming at me, just as much as when you’re not. I promise to chase your ass to the end of the world every goddamn day that we’re both alive, and lastly, I promise to fuck the attitude right out of you anytime I feel it coming near.”

Only Bishop. He lowers his lips onto mine.

“Till death we don’t part.”

I smile against his lips, sucking his bottom one into my mouth. “Till death we don’t part. And all of what he said.”

I can’t even get the words out of my mouth before his arm is around my back and he’s lifting me off my feet until my legs are wrapped around his waist and he’s kissing me. Loud cheers erupt around us as I vaguely hear the priest exhaustingly say, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Bishop lowers me back to the ground before flinging me over his shoulder and carrying me back down the aisle with his hand on my ass.

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Till death we don't part because even if we do die, our souls will continue to find each other.

We're all seated in the—I haven't figured out what to call this particular area of our home yet. It's very on theme with the rest of the house, in the Renaissance era. The ceiling is constructed into one big circle that's painted to look like the clouds in the sky. Angels with skull faces are flying toward it in an artistic flurry of movement.

The walls are plastered pillars, where the room dips in the steps lead down. There are six round tables carefully placed around the room, with a fountain of champagne in the center and the big eight-tier black and gold cake with artistically molded skulls sitting on the top. Biggie is playing through the speakers, and I've since changed out of the big gown-style dress and am now wearing a short black dress with feathers sewn into every inch. The skirt cuts off below my ass.

"Hey!" Tate bumps my hip with hers. "Some wedding..."

I laugh into my flute. "Yes, some wedding."

"The twins are with the nanny, rested and asleep."

"They're the best babies ever." Just as she's about to say something else, Nate covers my eyes from behind me.

I smile against his hand, placing mine on top of his.

He kisses my forehead when I finally turn to him. "The most beautiful bride. Just

don't tell Tillie."

"Well, technically, she hasn't been a bride, so I doubt she will be mad."

"Ehhh..." His face contorts. "It's Tillie."

"True." I chuckle, turning back around to face the crowd. Our families, best friends. Every single person who means something to Bishop and me is in this room right now.

Bishop's arm snakes around my waist, pulling me into his chest. "Come, let's go check on our babies." He leaves his empty glass on a table and my hand slips into his as he leads us out the side doors and around the corner of the family room toward the grand stairs.

"Bishop! We have guests!"

"Pssh!" He climbs the stairs two at a time and I follow closely behind him, feeling a little guilty for leaving everyone. "They're all drunk and mingling. It will do them all good since they either hate or love each other in that room."

We make our way down the hallway and through to the private wing where the twins' rooms are. The nanny sees us approach and turns the TV down in the sitting room.

"Hey, you two! You should be out there enjoying yourselves!"

"We will," Bishop answers smoothly. "But first, I just need to see my children."

The nanny smiles gently at us as Bishop continues to drag me into their joint room.

I mouth a quick sorry to her before I close the door gently behind us, not wanting to

wake either of them up. Despite whatever plan Bishop has right now, if he wakes the twins, I'm throwing hands.

Their room is the master bedroom in this wing, but won't be their bedroom once they get a bit bigger. We didn't want to be cliché and buy half pink and half blue, because Halen is my daughter, and I hate pink. I also don't think colors should be gender exclusive, and Bishop agreed, so we went with a more modern take and did gray and white. Both cribs are in the middle of the room, with nets covering each one, and the entire back wall is curved with windows overlooking the side of the house. White curtains brush the plush carpet, and a single fireplace is against the opposite wall. There's a small basketball hoop, and a racetrack already built in here, ready for them to grow into. No dollhouses. I mean, if she wants that, we will get one.

"Look at what we created." I'm looking down at both of their sleeping faces when I feel him behind me, caging me in with both of his hands on either side of me.

My heart warms and a rush of heat blossoms deep in my chest. "They're so perfect."

"Right now, yes. But you do realize—"

"—I know." I pat both of their tiny bodies. "I know."

Bishop kisses the nape of my neck. "I'm sorry I failed you all those months ago."

"—Bishop, I—"

"Shut up and listen to me, Madison. You telling me that shit while you were in labor didn't just break my heart, it fucking shattered it. It broke all of me. I'll never fail you again, and God help anyone who does."

I finally turn in his grip, his chest brushing against mine. Running my finger over the

swan tattoo on his neck, I tell him, “I love you.”

He kisses me, his lips soft and tongue warm. “I more than love you.”

We both laugh quietly into each other’s mouths. Bishop Vincent Hayes.

Ruler of our old school.

Now King of the outlaws.

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King of the suits.

God of crime.

Father of my children.

My husband.

So, The Silver Swan turned human and grew her own wings.

Madison

Eighteen Years Later

THE SUN DIPS BEHIND THE tall trees in the forest as goose bumps break out over my flesh from the whoosh of cold air bristling through the branches. The water is still and calm, and the rock that's poking out from the shore brings a smile to my mouth.

"I can't believe this place looks exactly as it did all those years ago. Timeless." I shuffle, turning in Bishop's grip and he widens his legs for me to do so.

Reaching up, I run the tip of my finger over the stubble on his cheek. Bishop has aged like fine wine, but I already knew he would. It's genetics—as much as I, at times, have butted heads with Hector.

He smiles and the wrinkles on his cheeks deepen as his white teeth flash. "Mmmm, timeless, huh?" He pulls me over his body and lays us flat against the sand. I push up

from his chest, biting his cheek as he grinds me into him with his hand on my ass. “A bit like you.”

“I wouldn’t say that...” I murmur. “Raising the twins has definitely bitten into my chance of aging gracefully, and you know, there’s the fact that my husband is a ruthless underground god.”

“Shhh,” Bishop growls, laughing as he bites into my bottom lip and sucks it into his mouth. “There are eyes everywhere.” When he points up to the sky, I look up and catch a firefly buzzing above us.

“Huh, the fireflies...”

He follows my eyes up, his arm tensing around my body. “You know when we were kids, our parents told us that fireflies symbolize guidance. They only appear in the dark, a light trying to guide you through something that you may need direction with.” I rest my head against his shoulder. “Of course, they’re full of shit. It’s just so the little fuckers can get laid, but I don’t know. It always stuck.”

I stifle a laugh, kissing his neck, where stubble scrapes over my lips. “Actually, it makes a lot of sense.”

His fingers slide beneath my chin, raising my lips to his. When his tongue slips in, he swallows my moans like whiskey, leaning up to deepen our kiss. I bring my hand to the side of his cheek and grind my hips over his dick, swelling against my—

My phone starts blaring, and I pull back.

“Fuck them,” he growls, grabbing me from the back of my neck to pull me back to his lips.

“Bishop.” I laugh, pushing him back down and reaching for my phone. “It could be important.”

He sighs dramatically, lying back against the sand as his fingers crawl up my outer thigh. “It fucking better be.”

I pick up my phone and see Priest flash over the screen.

Chuckling, Bishop snatches my phone and sucks my neck. “The boy can fucking wait.”

I yelp out a scream when he pushes me back down onto the sand, spreading my legs while resting between them. “So fucking beautiful.”

“Bishop... we’re not teenagers anymore. We can’t—”

“—we can do whatever the fuck we want.” He lifts my skirt and hooks his finger beneath the string of my panties, pulling them down my legs and tucking them into his back pocket. A light breeze whistles over my clit before warmth from his mouth replaces it. My fingers dig into his hair as the tip of his tongue circles down my slit before sliding inside. Leaning up on my elbows, I watch as his jaw protrudes when his tongue glistens against my soft flesh.

He peers up at me behind thick lashes. “Wanna play a game?”

I laugh, pulling him up my body and wrapping my arms around his neck.

His eyes search mine, the same ones I looked into all those years ago. “I love you.”

He grinds against me until the head of his cock presses at my entrance. Gliding his nose over my jaw, he releases a soft growl as he sinks into me. “I love you too, baby.

Now fuck your dick.”

“Bishop...” I laugh, my back arching off the sand as he busies himself with my boobs. “We can’t right now. They’ll be here any minute.”

“Fuck them,” he growls, biting on my nipple through my shirt while peering up at me through dark lashes. God, but he aged perfectly. His features are still the same, only harder. Rougher. And—I reach for the stubble on his cheek, my face reddening when I contemplate actually fucking my husband in what time we have left to do it.

“You and this beard.” He lifts himself off me and I instantly mourn his weight.

Leaning up on my elbows, I look up at him as he pulls at the belt holding up his slacks. “What are you doing?”

He looks over his shoulder slightly as his shirt glides off his tight arms. The sun has long since set now, with the only light coming from the small bonfire behind us on the sand and the beacon of light from the moon. “Meet you at the rock?”

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“Bishop!” I chuckle, though I know he’s dead serious. I’m distracted by his bulging muscles in his back and the tattoos that artistically sweep over his skin like a million-dollar painting.

When he begins walking into the lake and dives into the water, I quickly jump up to my feet, turning over my shoulder to see if anyone is coming through the clearing.

Bishop surfaces from the water. “Oh come, Kitty. Age has turned you soft.”

I glare at him, making my way to the water while removing the straps of my fitted maxi dress. When it hits my feet, I raise one eyebrow at Bishop, reaching for the clasp of my bra.

“Fuck no!” he growls loudly. “You keep that shit on unless you want me to spank you until you bruise.”

I unclip the bra and let it fall to the ground.

He doesn’t even respond as I dip my toes into the water, covering my nipples with my hands. After the twins, I got them lifted, tucked, and expanded. Not for Bishop, but for me, so safe to say, they’re my favorite weapon right now.

Wrapping my long hair into a tight bun on the top of my head, I dive into the water, pushing myself to the surface when the cool temperature bites my flesh.

I haven’t opened my eyes when strong arms catch me around my waist. Stifling my laugh, I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck.

“Just for the record...” Bishop mumbles into my lips as he drifts us closer and closer to the rock. “You asked for this.”

As soon as my foot hits a small place that is below the rock, I push myself up until I’m looking down at him below.

Cocking my head, I spread my legs wide, expecting him to do what he did the last time we were here when we were in high school, but instead, he lifts himself from the water and suddenly, I’m me and he’s—well—he’s Bishop Vincent fucking Hayes, The Ice King.

He stands straight, his shoulders and back staunch, before his fingers find my chin. His thumb dives between my teeth. “Suck.”

I wrap my lips around his thumb, peering up at him behind damp lashes. I haven’t released his thumb before he’s pulling me up from my seat, turning me until my chest hovers against the water and my ass is in the air.

“Tsk, ts... still don’t listen, huh?” His hand is on the back of my neck as his other rubs circles over the cheek of my ass. It jiggles now—it jiggles really good. “Sexiest fucking ass in the world. Be a shame to, I don’t know...” silence before a loud slap! vibrates over my flesh. “Drown the owner.”

“Bishop!” I yell, the calm water getting closer to my face. Just when I’m about to turn over, he drives into me roughly and a stifled moan jumps out of me.

He pulls out, runs his thumb over my ass cheek again before that familiar slap sounds and my ass cheek stings with fire. After he dips his finger inside of me, I turn slightly over my shoulder to catch him sucking it into his mouth behind a dark smirk.

“Bisho—”

He slams into me again, lowering me farther to the water as he jackknives against my ass viciously. I stop protesting as soon as pleasure sweeps through my body and takes it hostage.

I hear him spit before saliva slides down the crack of my ass while his other hand is back around my hair. “You’re lucky I can hear them coming through that forest or I’d fuck you like a maniac while drowning you.”

“Do it,” I groan, reaching boundlessly behind him. “Go on, BVH...” I smirk at him from over my shoulder, and I know I fucked up because his pace slows and his grip around my hair loosens. “Let’s play a game...”

The corner of his mouth curves into an evil grin, his eyes darkening and the water dripping over his tight abs.

He tilts his head and drags his finger down the crack of my ass, his eyes coming to mine when he spits again, his mouth slightly open.

As soon as his eyes connect with mine, he slams into me harder this time when his fingers tense around the back of my neck and he forces me down. Oxygen gone, water surrounding my face while he fucks me hard from behind, my body jerking forward with every thrust, has my orgasm tearing through all of my sanity to tell him to stop.

In a flash, he tears my face up from the water by tugging on my hair and we both lose ourselves through our release, my knees buckling together and my muscles releasing.

“Oh, fuck off!” we hear Nate yell from the lakebed, and we both laugh breathlessly.

I lean up on my tippy toes, pressing a gentle kiss on my personal monster. Bishop has become ruthless with age. When we were young, he was bad, but now he’s lethal. He

took the gavel with savagery and made every single one fear his footsteps, but with me? Well... with me, he only pretends to kill me and usually only when his dick is inside me. "I love you."

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He brings his thumb to my cheek. “I love you too, baby.” We both fall back into the cool lake and Bishop grabs me from the backs of my thighs to pull me onto his back as we start swimming back to shore.

“No! No!” Nate is still complaining.

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Pretty Prince, and pass her her clothes.” We hit the sand and I giggle into Bishop’s back, the wall of muscle that’s acting as my shield.

Nate turns his back to us, shaking his head. “Nope. Not doing this. Y’all are getting worse with old age.”

“I’m thirty-nine, fuckwit.” Bishop shakes the water out of his hair.

Tillie walks over, scooping up my clothes while rolling her eyes. “Stop trying to act like you, one, haven’t seen her body, and two, haven’t tried to fuck her body.”

I dip out from behind Bishop and snatch the clothes from Tillie, doing them up in record time. “Thanks, T. Are the rest here yet?”

“Nope.” Tillie hands me a glass of gin and tonic as I squeeze the excess water out of my hair. “They’re parking their cars. I think Spyder is actually trying to drive through with his big fuck off”—she waves her hands in the air—“whatever pickup it is he has.”

I take a sip of my drink, but goose bumps rise on my flesh and shivers rack through my body. Just as I’m about to complain about how cold I am, warmth covers my back

when Bishop lays his suit jacket over me before he and Nate make their way to the bonfire we've set up. There are little log chairs surrounding the fire pit, with cheese platters, enough champagne and alcohol to last us all night, and a sound dock.

"You think they're going to behave tonight?" Tillie asks, falling down onto one of the seats.

I chuckle into my glass. "Absolutely not. Priest tried calling me earlier, before texting me to ask if he can take the Bugatti to the track."

"Ahhh." Tillie's eyes fly between Bishop and me as more laughter and voices filter through the forest. "You said no, right? Like I feel like Bishop 'The Ice King' Hayes will absolutely execute his name and rip on Priest."

"I don't know." I shrug, peering up at Bishop. "I think they're both a little more similar than either of them likes to admit."

"Except they're not. You and I both know he's more—" I glare at her and she throws her hands up in defeat. "Okay, girl, shit. Didn't he fuck all that tension out of you just then?"

We both stare at each other for a moment before bursting out laughing. Tillie still hasn't outgrown her pink hair, only now it's more of a rose gold. Her skin is soft and supple like it was when we were younger, and she continuously blames the fact she only eats vegan.

I beg to differ. I mean, no offense to her, but I like my meat raw.

We both turn when Brantley and Saint come through the clearing, with Tate and Spyder and Abel and Kinley, his wife. It took him a while to find anyone after Bailey, but eventually (and I mean like, five years), he found Kinley when he started his own

practice. Kinley is a cosmetic surgeon, and Abel a general practitioner. Having them both is handy because unlike Tillie, I rely on certain injections to maintain my youthful look. I don't go over the top, but I smooth out the ones that I feel personally victimized by.

Saint is just naturally beautiful with that young spark, and Tate is with me.

Brantley grabs a drink and passes one to Saint before she comes to sit near us girls.

"What did we miss? Nate is complaining about something he walked in on and is blaming Tillie for always wanting to be early." Saint pops the lid off her pre-mixer, taking a small swig. Her hair is cropped short around her shoulders now, which only makes her smile seem wider.

Tillie sighs, kicking off her shoes and folding her legs beneath her butt. "He's so dramatic."

"True," Tate adds, sipping on her gin while sitting beside Tillie. "But honestly, you two are animals."

"Oh, and you all ain't?" I glare at them all with a small smirk on my mouth.

They all wave me off in their own ways as the sound dock turns on and music drifts through the forest.

"I can't believe the twins and War are eighteen." I keep my eyes on the sky with my drink cupped in my hands.

"I know." Tillie sighs. "You know he's not as bad as Priest when it comes to overprotective brotherliness, but sometimes I wonder if River is going to ever have a girlfriend."

Tate snuffles and I turn to face them all with lazy eyes. The night is quiet, with no wind, and the boys are all talking on the other side of the fire. So much warmth fills my heart when I think of us all and what we've gone through over the years. We're more than a family, so much more than a family. Our kids are all best friends—I wouldn't say family because I don't know if Tillie and Bishop know it yet—and definitely not Priest, but there's some serious tension between War and Halen. The kind that only a mother can see.

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I smirk around the knowledge of knowing something that Bishop doesn't—for once. I'll have to get rid of all the weapons in the house when both he and Priest find out, though we all know Priest doesn't need a weapon. Scrappy child.

The boys have drifted closer to us, Nate carrying the platter in his hands as he makes his way to me. Leaning down, he kisses me on top of my head. "Motherfucker."

I flip him off and he laughs, placing the board down in front of me. Nate hasn't aged at all, it's like. Well, no, that's a lie. He has, but it's not in an obvious way. It's like his pretty features are just too dominant. His brown hair is shaved on the sides, showcasing all of his scalp tattoos, but he leaves the top a little longer—same, same. I think the only wrinkles he has are the smile lines from his deep dimples.

Shit. Maybe I do need to do this vegan business. Well, we can start with meat-free Mondays.

Bishop comes beside me, with Brantley beside him.

Brantley nods at me, pulling his hoodie over his head. "Heard that this one tried to give us an early show."

Now, Brantley, on the other hand, I feel like has grown tougher. Colder. Darker. Much like Bishop, in a way. They've both allowed this world to harden them, that much is obvious. Whether Nate has or hasn't, we never really know, since he's so good at hiding behind a façade.

"It was not that bad." I roll my eyes, watching Tate lean up to kiss Spyder as Abel

brings Kinley over with their fingers intertwined.

Kinley smiles at me, nodding. “Congratulations on the twins, you two.” She looks between Tillie and me. “You all survived eighteen years.”

I nudge my arm at Tillie, smiling at Kinley. “Barely, but I think it’s only just begun.”

Tillie groans again, sinking into her chair. “It has.”

Bishop kisses the side of my neck as the music changes to “Oops” by Lost Kings and Ty Dolla Sign. A massive throwback that reminds me of the time I ran from Bishop after finding out I was pregnant.

I lean into Bishop, laughing when Tillie tells us about something War did to his sister River. Our family.

Our unit.

The Elite fucking Kings.

I came as The Silver Swan, grew into a Broken Puppet, learned from Tacet a Mortuis, suffered through Malum, watched the Devil find his Saint, and finally rebuilt our Ruined Castle. Together we did this, our family. We are one fucked-up family, but this world? Well...

This world was all fun and games right up until the ending came.

This is not the end but see you later...