



The Light We Seek (Together We Fall 2)

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Category: Romance, Fantasy, Science Fiction, Horror

Description: Now that I survived the initial storm, I find myself back where I once was: under the control of my dickish parents (if dickish even is a word).

Day by day, the world gets worse. Storms brew on the east coast, volcanos erupt on the west, and zombie-like creatures continue to attack the cities. Where does that leave me? Hopefully not dead...at least, not yet.

Circumstance finds me in route to Atlanta, one of the cities that has fallen, accompanied by seven guys that I swear are as insane as I am. Together, we will face the monsters that plague our country.

But monsters can take any form. We will come to realize that even the most beautiful of people can end up being the most deadliest of creatures. Are we capable of surviving the apocalypse or will we succumb to the darkness around us?

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Chapter 1

Addie

Isquinted my eyes against the blinding sun, lifting my hand to create a visor. The building my parents had led me to was small, smaller than even the lobby of the resort, with bushes lining the walls and the beginnings of a garden near the front entrance. A long trail dipped down a slope towards a pond. The translucent water glimmered like diamonds in the basking sunlight.

It might've been a beautiful sight if I had been in any other company.

Mother and Father tended to suck the joy out of things.

Smoothing down my black, pleated skirt, I followed my parents up the stone staircase. A woman, red-hair piled high into a bun, greeted us at the doorway. She exchanged a hug with my mom and kissed my father's prickly cheek.

I couldn't help but notice that her lips lingered a second longer than appropriate. I also couldn't help but notice that Dear Old Dad grabbed her ass.

Yup, that was my father for you. A cheating whore. At least he was classy about it (read as: my mother had been looking away at the time).

I pondered this new blackmailing material when the woman stepped up to me.

"Adelaide," she cooed with a stiff smile. The woman didn't like me just as much as I

didn't like her. Even though this was the fifth time I had met her, I had never bothered to learn her name. What was the point? "You have grown into a beautiful young woman. How old are you now?"

"Fifteen," I answered automatically but then winced when D.O.D gave me a penetrating glare. Apparently, I wasn't allowed to talk, even when asked a direct question. That also meant I wasn't allowed to think either.

You see, I had a little problem with my inner musings. As in, they became outer musings due to my good old friend "trauma". My therapists had told me that my need to speak my mind (literally) stemmed from my past, or more specifically, the death of my best friend, Ducky.

"It is turning out lovely, Rachel," Mommy Dearest exclaimed, extending her arms to encompass the entire lobby of the apartment complex. Rachel, the owner, grimaced at being addressed by the "other woman".

Oh boy. She was one of those. One of those women who thought D.O.D would leave his wife for her. I didn't have the heart to tell Rachel that Daddy had approximately twenty other side hoes, both men and women.

How could he even handle that many relationships? I could barely handle one - not that I had one, mind you, but if I did, I wouldn't be able to handle it.

My love life was seriously depressing.

"I can give you a tour of the upper levels," Rachel said, purposefully turning her back on my mother to talk to my dad. I noticed Mommy Dearest slyly checking out Rachel's ass.

Yup. Both parents enjoyed dabbling outside of their sacred marriage.

“What have you added?” Dad said. If he saw his wife’s blatant ogling, he chose to ignore it.

“Well, in the upper suites we put in new bathrooms, new flooring, and repainted the walls. I’m sure you’ll be quite pleased with how they turned out.”

Before D.O.D could respond, the front door opened, and a tall boy walked into the lobby.

The first thing I noticed was how huge he was. Seriously, he was easily a foot taller than my own five feet. His body seemed to be made entirely of muscle: broad shoulders, chiseled cheekbones, and mop of dark hair. Currently, he was scowling.

At me.

What the fuck did I do?

Without a word, he brushed past me, his leather-clad jacket cold against my bare arms.

“He lives on the second floor,” Rachel explained as we watched his retreating back. “He’s been emancipated for a couple months now.”

Conversation steered away from the angry boy to other matters. I didn’t think twice about him and his scowl...only once.

I mean, who wouldn’t think about a boy as attractive as him?

It would take me a month to discover that the stranger’s name was Calax.

* * *

Page 2

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My heart pounded erratically in my chest as I glanced out the window.

Despite being miles away from the Ragers, I couldn't help but feel as if we were being watched. My hands were clammy as they desperately gripped Calax's. Right now, I needed his comfort and support more than I needed to pretend to be brave.

"What the hell was that?" Calax asked, voice a breathy exhale. His arms tightened around me marginally as if he was terrified I would be taken from him again. Considering he spent the last few days believing I was dead, that fear was valid. "Have you heard anything from headquarters?" This was directed at the driver, an intimidating man with shoulder-length hair and tanned skin.

Fallon glanced at us through the rearview mirror.

"Nothing new," he said. "They're just as confused as we are."

"Headquarters? Does that have something to do with your school?" I knew that Calax and Fallon both went to a special boarding school, and the school had visited my parents' resort. It was actually how I met them; after a fire destroyed their dormitories, the students rented out rooms in my parents' resort. Through chance, I was introduced to Calax's "team", whatever the hell that meant. All I had been able to gather so far was that their school was not like any other school. They apparently took a heavy interest in orphans and foster care children (not at all shady). For the most part, I didn't bother asking.

They had their secrets; I had mine.

“Yes,” Fallon answered briskly. Though I had only known him a couple of hours, I had quickly realized that Fallon - or Sarge to the others - was a man of few words. He much preferred grunts and snorts to get his point across.

I couldn't say I blamed him. I would love to not have to interact with other humans.

Minus maybe Calax.

And possibly Ducky (Declan).

And the other members of Fallon's team.

Besides them? Nope. I already had to deal with Elena, their scorned ex-lover, and I really didn't want to invite any more people onto the “Adelaide talk to” train.

I mean, I had used to talk to Shannon, but...

My hands clenched into fists instinctively. I didn't want to think about Shannon the last time I saw her. Eyes red, veins darkened, a feral glint to her normally semi-kind expression. She had turned, there was no other word to describe it. The restaurant hostess had become something that no longer held a shred of humanity, just like the throng of people that had chased us out of the apartment complex. Something other.

A Rager.

That was the name Damn Brad had used to describe the virus-infected (or perhaps drug-induced) humans.

As you could probably tell, I didn't like Brad. He had tried to sacrifice me to the Ragers, and I really don't like being a sacrificial offering.

That had all happened when we had been trapped underground for a day or two after a tornado struck. Yup. You heard me right. Brad decided that I needed to be killed after only a few fucking hours.

And people said I was messed up.

The three of us were quiet as we drove back to Fallon's granny house. I didn't think there was anything we could say. How could we possibly begin to process everything that had happened? I much preferred my oblivious bubble than the crap-fest that was my reality.

"What the hell?" Calax mumbled, glaring out the window. We had arrived at Fallon's modest, two-story country house. In the driveway, which had been empty only hours before we had left, were three cars.

"Friends of yours?" I asked Fallon hopefully, though I already feared his answer.

With how little Fallon talked, I didn't think the bastard had friends.

"Rude," mumbled Fallon, parking the car behind a silver SUV.

I shrugged. He really shouldn't have expected anything else from me.

Unfortunately, I no longer had my wheelchair. That bad boy had been left behind when we were forced to flee from a group of Ragers. That meant, of course, that Calax had to carry me.

Normally I would've been fine with the physical connection, especially after he had just confessed his love to me, but I felt myself cringe when I met the keen eyes of my parents in the entryway.

It was odd seeing my parents in such a diminutive, cute house. They had always had a surplus of money, which meant that they were able to live in luxurious apartments and on tropical islands. The two of them almost looked uncomfortable as they leaned against the photo-framed wall.

“Addie,” D.O.D said stiffly. His nose was crinkled as if the house had a particularly pungent smell. “It’s time for you to go.”

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“She’s not going fucking anywhere with you,” Calax growled. He hugged me closer to his muscular body, arms trembling with tension.

“He’s right,” I said, attempting to appear more confident than I actually was. That was surprisingly difficult given that I was being held like a baby. “I’m not going with you.”

“You are seventeen. You don’t have a choice,” Daddy snapped, and I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Knowing him, he probably looked up that information before arriving. Heaven only knew that he hadn’t known my actual age before today.

He referred to me as his thirteen-year old daughter last week.

Last fucking week.

Mother ignored the conversation, as was usual with her. Her eyes were fixated on the boys glaring at her from the living room.

My friends were attractive, there was no way to get around that, but did my mom have to stare at them as if she was imagining them naked?

“I’m not going home with you,” I repeated to my dad stubbornly, crossing my arms over my chest. Or, at least, I attempted to. The wrapping and sling around my arm prohibited such movement.

“Do you think you have a fucking choice?”

The men my father came with, his security detail, all stared at me intently. Their hands inched towards the guns I knew were in their holsters. Right thigh. A few centimeters below the waist.

I would know because I had been shot by one of them before.

Not something I would recommend.

Uncrossing my arms and raising them in what I hoped was a placating gesture, I said, “Could we talk about this privately?”

“Fuck no!” That outburst came from Ryder, a flirty musician who I was just becoming friends with. I gave him a reassuring smile, grateful that he was protective of me but knowing I had to do this alone.

His face was grim as he met my stare.

“Drop me off in the kitchen, Callie,” I said, patting the big guy on the shoulder. “I need to have a word with my parents.”

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Chapter 2

Addie

Calax dropped me gently onto the kitchen chair. With a scowl aimed at my parents and a gentle kiss on my forehead, Calax reluctantly left the room.

And then there was the three of us.

Daddy remained standing, as was his usual intimidation technique. He always needed to be the tallest, most imposing, figure in the room. I suddenly wished that the chair was on the table just so I could be taller than the condescending bastard.

I figured that would've looked a little weird.

"You wanted to talk, so talk," Daddy said bluntly. A scowl marred his handsome face.

"I'm going to be eighteen in a couple of weeks," I began, folding my hands and placing them on my lap.

"And? Do you think that gives you the right to leave the family?"

Well yes, actually, but I figured that wouldn't go over well with D.O.D.

My birth giver considered me thoughtfully, his hand absently rubbing at the stubble on his chin. I didn't understand why he felt the need to do that. Did it really help his

thinking capabilities?

“You’re right,” he said at last, surprising the shit out of me. I was a lot of things to my father, but right was never one of them. Maybe he had turned into a Rager. Maybe the virus actually flipped your personality. That would make more sense than whatever the hell was currently happening.

I thought I would have to beg, cry, threaten. I thought I would get beaten down before I would be able to rise back up. Life, particularly the one my parents had given me, had taught me as much.

A sly smile touched Dad’s lips.

“We could always ask Nikolai for help.”

Just like that, the smile was wiped from my face. Something icy slithered down my spine. I had been fearful before when facing the Ragers, but this was something entirely different. Deeper.

I had never experienced such an intense fear before than I did at that moment.

“Leave Nik alone,” I whispered, stunned that they were even daring to bring him into this. Tears welled in my eyes, but I stubbornly held them in. “Please.”

When had “please” ever worked? Monsters didn’t listen to pleas; they used that desperation to their advantage.

Still, I was frantic enough to try anything.

“Please don’t.”

My entire life, my parents have owned me. There was no escaping them, no running away. I should've realized that the monsters would always come for me.

"If you don't want to help us..." D.O.D trailed off ominously. I knew exactly how he wanted to finish that sentence.

If you don't want to help us, Nikolai will.

And, just like that, they owned me again.

* * *

I couldn't meet any of the boys' eyes as Fallon helped me out of the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind us. My dad entered after, looking so damn smug that I had to resist the urge to punch him. In the nuts. With a sledgehammer. While throwing monkey shit at his head. While he was tied to a train track with me driving the train.

Now, where to buy a monkey...

"Are you okay?" Calax asked immediately when he caught sight of me. His gaze flickered from my face to my parents', and his expression darkened. I couldn't decide if it was because of my stricken expression or my father's content one. "No. No, damn it, no."

Before I could respond, Calax kicked at the wall. The plaster crumbled.

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“Calax,” I whispered, indicating for Fallon to put me on the couch. He complied, and Calax immediately sat beside me. I reached forward to cup his face with my hand. He was trembling beneath my steady fingers. In the last few days, I had seen him more distressed and panicked than I had ever seen him before. I knew that I was to blame for that change. “I have to leave with them.”

“No, baby, you don’t have to. You can stay with me.” His voice was a mere whisper. I leaned towards him, our foreheads touching, and could almost pretend that it was just the two of us. My curtain of hair provided a barrier between us and the outside world.

“Addie, we need to leave,” Daddy snapped, and I knew I was going to be punished for saying goodbye to Calax.

“Please stay,” Calax pleaded. Even as he spoke, I felt strong arms lift me up. It wasn’t my father, thank God, but one of his security members. Calax’s hand gripped my shirt-sleeve ineffectively before he was forced to let go. It was either that or risk hurting me more than I already was; my parents were never letting me go now that they had me, so Calax had to bend.

“Addie!” Calax lunged forward, but both Ryder and Ronan grabbed him and held him down. I was immensely grateful for them. I watched them whisper something to Calax, and, though Calax still stared after me with a distraught expression, he wasn’t fighting against the two boys anymore.

It was only as we were leaving, the security guard all but dropping me into the car, that I saw a face pressed against a window.

Ducky.

He had been my best friend when we were young, and I had thought him to be dead for years. Apparently, he was still alive. And his name was no longer Ducky, but Declan.

A member of Calax's team, Declan had been an asshole to me when we had initially re-met because he believed I had ditched him after he became deaf. I was still dealing with his abandonment, and he was still figuring out where, exactly, our friendship would head.

His eyes were dark as they watched the car pull out of the gravel driveway. If I didn't know Ducky as well as I did (or, at least, thought I did), I would've been terrified by the expression on his face.

* * *

Declan

I watched Addie until the car disappeared. I just barely resisted the urge to run downstairs and show her parents exactly what I thought of them.

Hands clenched into fists, I hurried down the staircase and into the living room where the other guys were convened.

I knew, from the frantic hand motions, that Calax was yelling at the others. I couldn't hear what was being said, but I imagined that it was similar to what I was currently feeling.

How could you have let this happen? What were we going to do?

I had only just gotten her back. I couldn't lose her again.

She had been my best friend, and she always would be. Despite the friendships I developed with the guys, my brothers, nothing could compare to what I felt for her.

She was the first woman I had ever loved, in a way that only a young teenager could.

Stepping around Tam, I planted myself in the center of the living room, waiting until I had everyone's attention. I didn't care that I was glaring at my closest friends. I didn't care that Tam actually shrunk away as if my eyes could physically penetrate his skull.

What I did care about, however, was the girl forced to go back to her abusive parents. Even if it wasn't Adelaide, even if it was a complete stranger, I would still fight for her.

The world needed more warriors.

I turned towards Sarge, our team leader, with narrowed eyes. He was currently holding Addie's black cat, Mof - My Only Friend. My girl was a bit dramatic.

"What's the plan?" I signed. I saw Sarge's chest rise and fall as he sighed.

That was universal Sarge language for he had no fucking clue.

I gritted my teeth together.

"We have to come up with a plan," I added, when it became apparent that Sarge wasn't going to respond. Somebody must've said something over my shoulder, for Sarge's eyes flickered there. He nodded at whatever the person said.

To me, he said, “We’ll get her back.”

Calax came to stand beside Sarge and clapped his shoulder.

“We protect our own.”

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Chapter 3

Addie

I stared at my true love with hungry eyes.

You know how people claim that someone, somewhere, held the other half of your soul? Well I found mine.

Hot, steamy, delicious.

Smiling contently, I took a sip of my coffee. The heat burned going down my throat, but it was worth it.

Coffee was life.

I stared up at the sinewy man, blinking my eyes innocently when he cocked his hip out. George Farman was two-hundred pounds of sass in an eighty-pound body.

“Are you even listening, or are you too busy orgasming?”

With a huff, I put my precious coffee cup down on my bedside table.

“Of course I’m listening.”

“Then what did I just say?”

“You asked me if I was listening or orgasming,” I replied innocently, and George rolled his eyes. Surprisingly, I didn’t hate the therapist my parents had hired for me. He was a sarcastic asshole, sure, but he wasn’t cruel. I actually enjoyed our sessions together, though I had yet to talk about anything of importance.

The last few weeks had consisted of cat videos, stories of my bladder, and relationship advice. George listened to it all with only the slighted snort of complaint.

I would call that a win.

“I heard that your new physical therapist is arriving today.” He nodded towards my leg, now free of the restrictive cast. Despite the doctor assuring me that my body had healed (at least as well as it could’ve), I found that I was unable to walk without help. Daddy had believed that it was my own stubbornness prohibiting such a movement, thus the need for a therapist.

That could be true. My depression had worsened considerably since I had left the guys. Though I still texted them everyday and visited them when my parents were away, I felt an unbearable loneliness that threatened to eat me alive. Depression was a fickle fucker.

It had been two and a half weeks since I was forcibly separated from the guys I was beginning to consider my only friends. My parents had moved us into a large villa, adjacent to the lake. My room itself, unchanged from when the previous owner had occupied it, had coral painted walls and light blue furniture. My bedspread was a tacky pink. It was this hideous bed that I was currently lying on, arms crossed stubbornly over my chest. So far, George had been smart enough not to ask me about my feelings. I might kill him if he did.

“So are we done now?” I asked, once again ignoring whatever he had been saying. George narrowed his pinprick brown eyes at me, so dark they were almost black.

“Yes,” he snapped at last, moving to his feet. “We’re done.”

Without another word, he stormed from my bedroom. That was pretty standard with him. I would say something to piss him off, and he would run out of the room with a few choice words.

It was a very healthy relationship.

Sighing, I turned towards my bedside table. It honestly held my entire life, for it was immensely difficult to move anywhere without the help of someone. My phone, coffee (heaven’s gift to mankind), and an assortment of chocolate that the guys had snuck through my window resided on there.

It was the phone I grabbed, scrolling through the messages with a tiny grin. I couldn’t help the instinctive schoolgirl giggles that erupted from me as I read through the thread.

Ryder: Kitten! Ronan Beijing mean.

Ryder: *being

Ryder: stupid spell check

Ronan: the ugly asshole locked me in a fucking cage

Ryder: He’s farting on my face until I pass out!

Ryder: it smells

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Tam: Do I even want to know?

Calax: u r children

Addie: Ryder, don't lock people in cages. It's not nice. And Ronan, don't fart in people's faces. And Calax, please learn proper English grammar, or I'll have to break up with you.

I smirked at my phone as a flurry of text messages came through.

Calax: I do apologize, my fair lady. I will work diligently to text the way you prefer, my beloved.

Ryder: so whipped.

Ronan: whipped

Calax: idiots

Calax: I meant to say, that those two were hooligans in desperate need of a life and a good, old-fashioned courting.

Ryder: courting? What the fuck?

Ronan: language brother. And he meant a lay. We need to get laid.

Ryder: ohhhhhh

Fallon: turn on the tv

I blinked at my phone, surprised at seeing the text message from the elusive, sullen group leader. Frowning, I grabbed the remote for my television.

I didn't even have to change the channel. I imagined this story was covered on every possible station.

Yellowstone National Park's volcano had erupted earlier this morning.

The sky in the surrounding areas had turned a dusty gray, soot and other materials thickening the air. The death count, according the news, had reached the thousands. There had been no warning, no alarm, just destruction. It was difficult to hear the news relay what had transpired. It was too surreal, like I was watching a commercial for a movie instead of a live broadcast. It was horrifying.

I had thought that the world was going back to normal. Scientists, according to the media, have been working tirelessly to find a cure for the Virus XHJKM. I had no idea what those letters stood for, but it sounded terrifying. They still had yet to discover what caused the virus and how it was transmitted.

It didn't transfer from a bite like it did in the movies.

Nerves fraying, I switched the TV off and settled back into bed. I didn't want to think about the molten lava on screen, turning black the further it slithered away from the mountainous base. I didn't want to think about Virus ABC or whatever the hell it was. Not dealing was my way of not feeling. I could bury the emotions inside me until they threatened to rise from the grave. No, what I wanted to think about were...the pillows. Why did a bed need so many pillows? Was it to smother someone in their sleep? Were they for pillow fights?

“Why are you thinking about pillows?” a familiar voice questioned. A moment later, a blond head peered into my room.

I squealed happily. If I could’ve, I would’ve run to him and given him a big hug. My excitement quickly turned into panic. Asher couldn’t be here; he couldn’t be in my home, where my parents could see him. They would destroy him as they had destroyed Ducky and tried destroying me.

“Asher, what are you doing here?”

The boy in question smiled brilliantly.

“I’m your new physical therapist.”

I blinked.

“Say what now?”

He looked exactly how I remembered him, though it had only been two days since I had last met up with him and the others for lunch. I was, admittedly, a bit dramatic when it came to them. His blond hair was tousled, framing an arresting face of high cheekbones and green eyes. He wore slacks and a button-down shirt, rolled up at the elbows.

Why did he have to be so mouthwateringly handsome?

Asher blushed, indicating that I had said that thought aloud. Typical.

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I wondered if I should've felt guilty for noticing Asher's good looks. After all, I was sort of, but not really, dating Calax. I didn't know what to call the two of us anyways. Was he my boyfriend? Friend? Lover? Enemies that occasionally kissed and confessed their love to one another?

Why was I so clueless about this "life" thing?

Shaking my head to clear the cobwebs, I turned my stare onto Asher.

"I thought you were a waiter?" That was how I had first met him, actually. He had been waiting on my table, much to my mother's pleasure, and had accidentally fallen. I, being the awesome friend that I was (though I didn't know him at the time), took the blame.

"I do a lot of things," he replied, flashing me an official looking ID. I imagined he stole it - or at least made one on a computer. There was no way that Asher, only a year or two older than me, could be a licensed physical therapist.

"I put my ad online," he continued, "with a picture and brief description. Your mother called me."

Of course. For eye-candy. I would not be surprised if she was lurking somewhere nearby, waiting to pounce. Please, for the love of all that's holy, have her be wearing clothes.

When Ryder came to the house - as the hired "electrician" - Mother had decided that it was appropriate to walk around in her birthday suit. I had never seen Ryder look

more scared than he did then. He had taken to hiding in my bedroom, pretending that it was a circuit in my wall that had caused the power outage (though how he managed to turn off the power in the first place was beyond my comprehension).

“You’re allowed to walk around naked anytime,” Ryder had flirted with a wink. I elbowed him in the stomach.

“So are we actually going to do physical therapy?” I asked Asher now, planting my feet on the carpet. I wobbled slightly, but Asher immediately helped steady me. Smiling gratefully, I attempted to amble around the bed. My leg dragged uselessly behind me.

“Let’s do some exercises,” Asher suggested. He instructed me to lie face down on my bed, legs dangling over the side. He began bending my leg, instructing me to push and pull against his grip.

“How has it been?” he asked, fingers tentative on my ankles. “Push against my hand.”

I did as he said, considering how to respond.

“The usual.”

“Anymore...” he trailed off. I knew what he wanted to ask me though: anymore beatings?

“No,” I answered truthfully. “They want me to heal, and that would be kind of difficult with another broken leg.” I tried for humor, but Asher didn’t laugh.

Geez. Tough crowd.

“You’re going to be eighteen soon,” he stated, and all I could do was nod. When it became apparent that I wasn’t going to speak, he pressed, “Why aren’t you getting out of here? Is it because of money? Do you need a place to stay? I know you might not feel comfortable staying with a bunch of guys, but Sarge would be more than happy to let you stay with us.”

I didn’t know what to say to him. How could I explain Nikolai? Until I knew he was safe, I had to remain quiet.

“It’s complicated,” I admitted with a shrug. Asher smiled sadly.

“It’s always complicated with you.”

Ignoring him because I didn’t know how to respond, I kicked my foot towards the television.

“Did you see the news?”

“About Yellowstone? Yeah, I was listening on the radio.”

“It’s absolutely awful,” I whispered. “I can’t even imagine. Did you know anyone in the area?”

“Thank God, no. But I think Fallon’s parents lived near there.”

“Are they okay?” I asked, sitting up in alarm. “Has he been in contact with them?”

Asher patted my thigh reassuringly. “They’re fine. I already asked Sarge, and he said that they called him an hour ago.”

I sagged back into the bed with relief. I may not have known Fallon that long, but he

had saved my life. Calax and I would've been attacked by Ragers if he hadn't warned us. He was still a grumpy bastard, but I believed he was warming up to me. After all, the last time I had seen him he gave me two full sentences and had only glared at me three times.

Progress, my friends.

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“What the fucking hell is this shit?” Ryder held up the offending material with an expression that bordered between a scowl and a grimace.

I rolled my eyes and swapped it from his hand.

“Don’t just dangle it for the whole world to see,” I hissed, throwing it back in the bag.

It had taken us two hours to find a shopping mall that was actually opened. Even then, only a handful of stores actually had their lights on.

Ronan and Ryder had insisted on taking me out shopping. Apparently, Ryder had a thing (*cough* fetish *cough*) for clothes, and Ronan was there for damage control.

“Somebody needs to rein my brother in,” he had told me. I had laughed, doubting that Ryder could be as bad as Ronan had claimed him to be.

I was right; he was worse.

“Who the fuck pays seventy dollars for a bra?” Ronan added, loudly enough to garner the attention of the two other shoppers in the small clothing store.

“Shush,” I hissed, maneuvering through the collection of clothes. I had insisted that the boys wait outside while I picked up some undergarments, but my suggestion only held weight for approximately twenty seconds until they got bored and followed me inside.

Now, they were providing commentary about every single fucking movement I made

and item I grabbed.

“It’s so tiny.” Ryder held up the offending thong yet again. “Does it even, like, cover stuff?”

“Of course it covers stuff, you noob!” Ronan snapped.

“But why would you pay so much for so little?” Ryder seemed to be struggling to wrap his head around this concept.

“Oh my god! Shut up!” I slapped both boys on the head, one after another. Nothing I did seemed to deter them. I wondered if they had made it their life mission to humiliate me.

“Maybe they accidentally put the wrong price tag on this...thing.” Ryder held the thong between his thumb and pinkie, an expression of distaste marring his handsome features.

Despite the fact that I had long ago moved away from that section and was now looking at pajamas, the boys wouldn’t let it go. It was almost as if they took the price of the underwear personally.

“Underwear is always that expensive,” I sighed.

“I can get like twenty pairs for this price,” Ronan said in horror. “This is so wrong.”

“You should see the price of our feminine products,” I muttered.

“The volcano eruption?” Ryder asked, aghast.

“The river of red?” Ronan added.

“Devil’s birthday?”

“Cranberry juice?”

“Enough!” I said, throwing my hands into the air in exasperation. There was only so much I could take from these boys before I lost my mind. “You guys can discuss my period. I’m going to the changing room.”

“Here! Try this on!” Ryder said before I could escape, tossing a pair of jeans into my arms. I put the items I had picked out for myself down on a display rack and grabbed the jeans Ryder wanted me so desperately to wear.

They looked as if they were made for a Barbie doll. Did people seriously wear jeans that small? I didn’t know if I should feel flattered or appalled.

Ronan, thankfully, came to my rescue. “Those won’t fit her, you idiot! Here, Addie, try these on.” He had been browsing the same collection of designer jeans Ryder had and found the same pair in a bigger size.

Ronan was officially my favorite...

Until I looked at the jeans in question.

They looked as if they could fit two of me, if not more. I gritted my teeth together, resisting the urge to curse both of the boys to hell and back.

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It was official. I hated them both and was denouncing this so-called friendship.

Shoving the jeans back at Ronan and Ryder - a scowl aimed particularly at Ronan for his unintentional implication - I stomped towards the dressing room.

Stupid guys. Stupid, sexy guys. Stupid flirtatious leprechauns.

Stupid-

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't see the girl until I plowed right into her. I squeaked, dropping my collection of clothes.

"Oh shit! I didn't see you there! I'm so sorry!" The girl quickly bent over to gather my fallen items.

"It's my fault," I said quickly. "I wasn't paying attention where I was going."

Handing me back my clothes, she flashed me a smile. I noticed immediately that she was beautiful, a type of ethereal beauty that made me look like a hobbit in comparison. Her long, black hair cascaded down around her like an onyx waterfall. She had the cheekbones I would die for and beautiful, vibrant green eyes. Standing next to her godliness, I felt small and ugly. My hands instinctively wrapped themselves around my waist.

It was a defense mechanism, something I hadn't done since I was younger. It allowed me to believe I could hold myself together. Though the gesture was physical, it provided me mental comfort.

“Again, so sorry,” the girl said brightly before sashaying away. My hands were sweaty, and I tried to inconspicuously rub them against my jeans.

Why would the guys ever be friends with me when there were girls like her around? She seemed nice enough. There were probably a thousand girls in this city alone that weren’t screwed up by their pasts. They were probably better, brighter, prettier than I could ever hope to be.

I allowed myself, for only a moment, to wallow in my self-pity. I felt as if the walls of the changing room were pressing in on me, burying me alive. The despondency inside of me was consuming, similar to how it felt before I befriended the team. It wanted me to suffocate.

It wanted me to die.

I tried to ignore the pulls of my own self-pity, but they were relentless. For just a moment, I would allow myself to succumb to the darkness.

Only for a moment.

Just for one moment...

Chapter 4

Addie

“What do you mean he didn’t show up?” D.O.D snapped into his phone, body vibrating with an almost elemental fury. This had been becoming more and more common, not just with my parents’ company. Stores and restaurants, especially those that were family-owned, had shut down due to a lack of workers. With the disease sweeping across the nation, the world, according to the news, more and more people preferred to stay huddled inside. The President had issued a statement last week addressing this problem. He had pleaded for the country to come together and carry on like we had before.

He seemed to have trouble understanding that nothing was like it was before.

Storms still ravaged the east coast, and the west coast was still dealing with the after effects of the volcano. Ragers ran rampant on the street, forced to be shot down by officers.

“Well, fire his sorry ass!” D.O.D snapped.

I shrank further down in my seat as his anger grew. With nowhere to go, no business to run, Daddy had taken up his second favorite activity: hurting me. I had just barely escaped his fit of rage unscathed last time.

Unfortunately, I had to finish this dinner before I could even think of escaping. I’m quite certain that death would occur to me if I didn’t.

Stirring my soup, I dared peek through my fringe of lashes at the other occupants. My parents had invited Mr. Julius and his son, Lorenzo. Enzo, as he liked to be called, was a handsome boy with naturally-tanned skin and a shock of dark hair.

Too bad he was a masochistic dick.

The only saving grace for this shit-fest dinner was the catering crew, aka the guys. How my parents failed to recognize that the same person was a physical therapist, a chef, and an IT programmer was beyond me. Considering my mom flashed each guy at least once, her obliviousness and stupidity was a blessing in disguise.

The guys had apparently decided to completely immerse themselves in my life. I couldn't say I minded. The darkness that had always seemed to consume me was receding into the crevices of my brain - not nearly as overwhelming as it once was.

I felt relief with their continual presence. Despite everything, they weren't giving up on me.

"So, Adelaide," Mr. Julius said stiffly once my dad ended his phone call. "I heard that you were a fan of the ballet. Maybe Enzo could take you sometime."

Two things.

First, I absolutely hated the ballet. They bored me and 99% of the time I would fall asleep. Secondly, I would rather sit through twenty hours of the ballet than go anywhere with Enzo.

Ryder, posing as a waiter, scooped potatoes onto Enzo's plate with more force than necessary. When he got to me, he was much more gentle, and he slipped something into my hands.

A note.

I smiled giddily, thinking of the other collection of napkins and papers he had given me this evening.

What a prick.

I'm bored.

Crinkle your noses so I know you're reading these.

Glancing from my left, where Mother sat, to my right, where Enzo was lounging, I unfolded the new note Ryder had given me.

Fallon accidentally set your kitchen on fire. Whoops.

Though I hadn't seen him, Ryder had told me that Fallon was acting as a chef. Asher was his helper. All of the boys tried to visit me at least once a week, minus Calax whose face was too recognizable. Of course, that pissed him off to no end. He hated not being able to see me constantly, not being able to protect me. I had put him on Mof duty, my tiny feline companion. Though he complained constantly, I knew the little furball was growing on him.

The boys had paraded around my house as cleaners, kitchen staff, computer experts, and more. It would've been almost comical if I hadn't been genuinely concerned over the idiocy of my parents.

I snorted as I read Ryder's note, ignoring the inquiring glance Enzo threw my way. Folding it up, I shoved it into my sock.

"How does that sound, Addie? You and Enzo at the ballet," D.O.D asked, sipping

daintily from his wine glass.

What it sounded like was torture, the slow and painful kind. Of course, I couldn't say so to my dad. It wasn't "appropriate" dinner conversation. Not the torture part, that was fine, but the me having an opinion part.

Instead, I said, "I'm pretty sure that the ballet had been canceled, Father."

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Along with everything else.

D.O.D glared at me but refused to acknowledge my insubordination. At least, not at that second.

Ryder reappeared again, filling drinks this time, and dropped another note into my lap. I waited until he exited back into the kitchen before opening it.

Have to go. Something came up. I'll miss you, Kitten.

I tried to smother my disappointment. I enjoyed Ryder's company, more than I cared to admit. He, Tam, and I were currently on level twenty-seven of some new video game. I had never played it before, but apparently, I was a natural. I enjoyed the nights Tam and Ryder would sneak through my window to play games with me.

Frowning into my soup, I tried to focus yet again on the conversation. D.O.D was bitching about his employees, and Mr. Julius was nodding his head enthusiastically as if my dad actually gave a damn about his opinion. Mother had her shirt unbuttoned, revealing a hint of lacy bra and cleavage, and I noticed Enzo's eyes glued to that exposed swatch of skin.

Same old. Same old.

After dinner, we convened inside the family room.

I always hated that crude term. There was nothing "family" about the room at all. With the black, leather sofas, and stark white walls, the place was devoid of any

trinkets or photographs. It was the type of room that you would see in a home interior magazine: pretty, but cold.

Shuffling to my usual seat - a leather recliner opposite of the couch - I frowned when I noticed Enzo walking in the same direction. There was a reason I picked this chair. It was away from everyone, away from any wandering hands or thighs pressed too close to mine. It was my sanctuary. I couldn't help but snort at the thought that something as mundane as a chair could provide me relief, yet it was the truth.

There was no escape in my house. I just had to learn to hide in plain sight.

So why the hell was Enzo sitting down beside me?

The seat was not necessarily small, but it definitely wasn't large enough to fit two people comfortably. His big ass thigh was half on top of mine, weight crushing. He casually threw his arm around my shoulders as if we were a couple instead of virtual strangers.

I shuddered instinctively. There was something off-putting about Enzo, something menacing. I had the irresistible urge to burrow myself into the ground and never return.

Who the fuck did he think he was?

For the first time in a while, I felt alone and utterly spent. The boys had left earlier, after dinner had finished. I had gotten used to the consistent laughter and jabs of the guys that this tensed, charged silence made goosebumps breakout on my flesh. I didn't want to be here, and I didn't want to act like I was okay with the physical contact Enzo was making with me.

What could I do? Did I dare push him away? Move to a different seat?

This was just another example of how trapped I actually was. The chains were invisible, but they were so impossibly heavy.

Conversation steered in the direction of “worthless employees” and “new locations”. I could barely concentrate on anything that was being said. No, all I could focus on was the pungent smell of sweat assaulting my senses and Enzo’s fingers playing with the tips of my hair idly.

“Addie, dear, why don’t you give Enzo a tour of the house?” my father asked suddenly. Tears sprang into my eyes.

I knew exactly why D.O.D wanted me to give a tour. I knew exactly what he expected of me.

Why was I so weak? Why couldn’t I just say no? Why couldn’t I leave?

Because of Nik, I thought. If I had to choose between me or him, I would choose him.

Every. Single. Time.

So I managed a forced smile and gestured towards the hallway.

If Enzo wanted a tour, a tour he shall get.

The man’s face was bright with expectation as I lead him down the small hallway, pointing out various rooms as we walked.

“This is a bedroom, but not just any bedroom. No, in 1965, a family was murdered in there. Blood splattered walls, missing heads, the whole shebang. And here we have bathroom number 2. A man hung his wife in that shower. He then drowned his baby.”

How to kill the mood? Talk about death.

Ryder had drilled this lesson into my mind.

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I was feeling quite proud of myself when we neared the backdoor. Though Enzo's face was set into a customary scowl, he hadn't made any inappropriate comments or attempted to grab me. I was mentally giving myself a pat on my back when his hand wrapped around my waist, pulling me against him.

Oh hell no.

His lips moved to my neck, brushing against my skin as he spoke.

"You're so beautiful. So perfect. You've been driving me crazy, girl. I know you feel the tension too."

What I felt was the irresistible urge to stab him in his tic-tac sized balls.

So I did just that. Barely processing what I was doing, I lifted my foot and slammed it into his nut sack. Did I feel guilty? No. I was a certified ball cruncher, at least according to Ronan and Ryder (I may have accidentally hit a Rager in the nuts with a pan).

Feeling slightly triumphant, especially when he keeled over in pain, I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

"Don't ever fucking touch me without my permission again. For that matter, don't ever touch another girl again." Releasing the pathetic creature, I smiled down at him malevolently. I felt...wicked, as if I had finally found my element and that element was kicking a guy in the balls. Did that make me a psychopath? Maybe.

“If you tell anyone about this, I will hunt you down and kill you.”

Groaning, he sputtered, “You wouldn’t.”

“No?” I feigned innocence, blinking my eyelids. “I have enough money to buy myself an alibi. And I am sick of putting up with filth like you.”

With that, I stormed towards my room.

My heart was beating erratically, threatening to break free from my chest. Had I really just done that? Had I really just said that?

Who was this girl, and what happened to the shy, timid Adelaide?

I couldn’t say that I minded the transformation. I was done being weak and fragile. I wasn’t glass that could shatter anymore.

I told myself that I was stronger, better. I told myself I could deal with the consequences of my actions.

I just hoped that wasn’t a lie.

* * *

Ryder

I parked my car a little way down the street, out of sight from my destination.

My hands were pale where they gripped the steering wheel - pale for me at least - and I could feel sweat beading my forehead.

I couldn't believe I was doing this.

Actually, I could believe it. It was time that I finally put an end to things.

Throwing my jacket on, I marched through the high weeds and decaying flowers. It was apparent that the owner had lacked in the grounds' up-keeping. The house itself, made up of chipped yellow paint and unwashed windows, stood perniciously in the darkness. It was a house that held bad memories; a house that would forever haunt my dreams.

I hadn't bothered to tell the others about my little trip. Ronan would shit bricks if he discovered where I was heading, and the rest would quite literally murder the person inside if I told them the reason why I was here in the first place.

I shoved my hands into my pocket, half to ward off the frigid chill and half to keep from strangling the home's occupant, and rang the doorbell with my elbow.

It only took a few moments for the door to open and for a familiar girl to stand in the entryway.

"Ryder!" she cooed, throwing her arms around me. I stiffened under her toxic touch but didn't dare pull away. No, it was smarter if I pretended to play nice, at least for the moment.

Elizabeth looked as if she had just woken up. Her black hair, like onyx stones, hung just past her waist. She wore a skimpy nightgown and a translucent robe that indicated she must've been sleeping...or pleasing someone. When her eyes feasted on me, she pushed her chest out and fluttered her eyelashes.

She was beautiful, I would give her that, but I much preferred brunettes.

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Shoving her aside, I strode into her living room. Fortunately, if she had a guest, he was occupied upstairs. I wasn't in the mood to vomit on my new shoes.

"Ryder," she said in what she thought was a sultry voice. I'm afraid she sounded as if she was pushing out a particularly large shit. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know why exactly I am fucking here," I snapped, unable to handle any more pretenses of nicety. She didn't deserve that.

Eyeing me with feigned innocence, she shrugged a shoulder, the strap of her nightgown sliding down with the movement. It gifted me with more skin than I ever wanted to see on her.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I got your message."

Smiling serenely, Liz folded her legs.

The bitch wasn't wearing underwear.

Ugh. And I was trying not to vomit.

"I swear to god, if you threaten her again--"

Liz cut me off with a lilting laugh.

“You’ll what? Tell me, Ryder, what would you do?” She clasped her hands together, the perfect image of a composed, calm woman. It was for that reason alone that the world failed to see the psychopath lurking beneath the exterior. She wore her mask effortlessly.

“I don’t want to play games anymore, Ryder Baby. I looked the other way when you fucked around with Tallia, Lacey, and Elena, but I’m afraid I can’t turn a blind eye towards this one. What makes this girl so special? Why do you go out of your way to see her so often?”

“Leave Adelaide the fuck alone,” I snapped before I could reign in my feelings. I paused, afraid that my outburst would reveal more to Liz than I had intended to. Instead, the crazy bitch merely laughed.

“Ryder, I accept your apology. Now come up to bed.” Without another word, she sashayed back towards her staircase. She might’ve thought she was being sexy, but I only had eyes for one girl now.

A girl I would never be allowed to have, but one girl all the same.

“Liz, we have never and will never be a couple. Stay the fuck away from me, and stay the fuck away from Addie.”

With that, I stormed from her house. It was a solid ten on my dramatic-exits scale.

Only when I was back in the car, did I replay the entirety of my conversation. Shit. Had I made things worse by talking to her? Should I have just stayed away? Should I have told someone?

I told myself that whatever happened next, I could handle it by myself. Never again would I drag my brothers into the shit-storm that was Liz.

Chapter 5

Addie

I pounded my fist into Ronan's bicep.

"You." Hit. "Stupid." Hit. "Cheater."

Ronan, not even wincing at my feeble attempts to murder him, fell over the bed in a fit of laughter. His ass hit the ground, and he sprawled out his body. Still, he didn't stop laughing.

"How the fuck is that even possible?" Ryder asked, still in shock. Ryder was attractive, there was no denying that. With his dark skin and darker hair, he was the epitome of male hotness. His muscular body had a few distinctive tattoos that ran up his neck.

Still blinking rapidly, he dropped his cards into his lap. The expression of disbelief on his face would've been comical if I wasn't so pissed off at Ronan. Stupid unicorn loving leprechaun...

The idiot burst into giggles. Actual freaking giggles like he was a little schoolboy. Why did he have to go and be so adorable when I was mad at him?

Scowling, I stared down at my own UNO cards.

Apparently, Ronan - the bastard hell-spawn - decided that it would be hilarious if he

cheated at UNO. How does one cheat, you question? Well it involves numerous Draw 4 cards hidden up your sleeve. People have gone to war over a lot less.

Would he still think it was funny when I murdered him and fed his body to the sharks?

“You wouldn’t be able to carry me to the sharks,” Ronan taunted, leaning back on his elbows. He glanced up at me with hooded eyes. “You’re a weakling.”

That was it. The final straw.

Smiling maliciously, I pulled out my phone. “I guess I’ll just have to call Fallon and tell him you cheated. Let’s see what he says.” I had realized early on that their team leader, Sarge, was able to instill fear into all of the boys. All I had to do was text Sarge that they were being mean to me, and then, voila, problem solved. He was a tactical weapon.

My weapon. My...Sarge? My threatening Sarge. My weapon threatening-

What the hell? I seriously needed to see a therapist. Well, I needed to actually talk to my therapist about my issues instead of my bowel movements. Not that my bowel movements weren’t an issue...

Stop. Thinking. Addie.

“What the hell, Kitten?” Ryder said, amused, and his smile only grew when Ronan blanched at the threat.

“Don’t even joke. Last time you tattled on us, Sarge made us run seven laps. Seven!”

I snorted. He deserved that. He and Ryder had convinced me that I had eaten Mof.

Granted, that hadn't been their intention, but the ending effect was still the same.

"I think that's enough games for awhile," Ryder said. He leaned back in the bed, and Ronan moved to lie down on my other side. I was still pissed at him, but I chose to be the bigger person and not push him over the edge. I suddenly found myself sandwiched between two very hot men.

Excuse me. Cold men. Not hot. Lukewarm at best.

"Pshh! I am a sex god. How you offend me," Ryder scoffed. "Lukewarm. Geez."

Ignoring him, as was my standard response when it came to these two men, I settled comfortably against my stuffed dog. Ryder had gotten it for me for my birthday.

Despite the boys' insistence that I have a big party and celebration, I chose to keep things small. After all, my birthday held nothing but bleak memories. Even after the miraculous revival of Ducky, I found that I couldn't get into the birthday cheer, so to speak. That didn't stop the guys from getting me presents.

I named the dog Doggy much to Ryder's chagrin. I didn't dare admit that the only reason I named him that was because I knew it pissed him off. Ryder and Ronan were quickly becoming my best friends. As best friends, it was my job to make sure they were safe, happy, and moderately pissed off at me. What type of friend would I be if I didn't annoy them at least half of the time?

"What movie do you feel like watching?" Ryder asked, sliding his arm beneath my shoulders. I took the hint and rested my head on his muscular bicep. Ronan immediately twisted further towards me, hand wrapping around my waist.

"Doesn't matter," I said through a yawn.

“Something with blood,” Ronan suggested, and I rolled my eyes.

“Okay, psychopath.”

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He immediately jabbed a finger into my stomach, damn well knowing that I was extremely ticklish there. Squealing like a demented pig, I thrashed in Ryder's arms. Ryder didn't release me, but he also didn't join in on the tickle fight (slaughter). He began to flip through channels.

My laughter died in my throat when a familiar city was mentioned.

"Wait!" I yelled, sitting upright. Both Ryder and Ronan froze, identical expressions of concern crossing their faces. I grabbed the remote from Ryder's hand and turned up the volume until it was almost earsplitting.

"...plans?" somebody, the news anchor more than likely, was asking. The camera zoomed in on another man, white hair pulled into a low pony and keen eyes zeroed in on the camera.

"We don't have any answers to what started this outbreak," the man, which the screen identified as Dr. Colvin, stated. "All we know is that the entire city has been evacuated after the virus began to spread."

"And what about the ones that hadn't been evacuated? The ones infected by the virus and the ones being attacked by the infected? Any word on them?" the anchor pressed. Dr. Colvin's lips went into a thin line.

"As of right now, that number is unspecified..."

"You have to have some answers," the news anchor said. "How many of those people are dead?"

The conversation continued like this for awhile. The news anchor would ask a question, and the doctor would immediately deflect. He didn't have to say the words; I could read between the lines easily enough.

From the government sanctioned evacuations, to the immense army presence on the border, it was startling apparent: Atlanta had fallen.

Atlanta, a city I had never visited but had heard numerous stories about.

A large city, home of some football team that I couldn't remember the name of.

The home of Nikolai.

My heart began hammering in my chest. Before I realized what I was doing, I had crawled from between Ryder and Ronan and was grabbing my backpack.

I needed clothes. And food. And water. And something to protect myself with. And-

"What are you doing?" Ronan asked in alarm. He came to stand up beside me. I barely processed his words.

I had to hope that Calax could continue looking after Mof until I could come home. Would he be mad? Would he-

"Addie!" Ryder snapped, his use of my real name breaking me out of whatever trance I was in. Still trembling, still feeling as if my heart was breaking, I grabbed his hands.

"I need to go to Atlanta. I need to go see that he's alright."

How could I have forgotten about him? What type of person was I? He should've been the first, the only person, that I thought of when the world went to hell. Heaven

knows that my parents wouldn't. They barely even remembered I was alive, let alone him. And, if for some reason they did bring him up, it was only as a means to make me do their bidding.

He was a ghost. Forgotten and hidden away.

But he was mine.

My person; my responsibility.

"Okay, calm down. Let's talk this out."

Tears, unbidden, formed in my eyes.

"I can't. I need to go. I need to leave right now."

Ronan and Ryder exchanged a long look that normally would've pissed me off, but now only proceeded to bring more tears to my eyes.

The way they understood each other...

Nikolai and I never had that. We never wanted to have that.

Why couldn't I be more like these two amazing brothers?

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Straightening his shoulders in what looked like resolve, Ryder turned from his brother to face me.

“Can we at least discuss this with Sarge? I promise you, if you want to leave, no one will stop you.”

It was impossible to doubt the sincerity in his voice. With a nod as my answer, I finished packing my bag, throwing Doggy in there for added comfort, and followed the boys out the door.

They could try all they want - they could plead and grovel and cry - but I would be going after Nik.

I would be going after my brother.

* * *

Sarge wasn't homewhen we arrived at his house, but Calax was.

The giant of a man immediately engulfed me in his arms. His dark brown hair was longer than I remembered it, and a light scruff was beginning to form around his lush lips. Normally I wasn't one to get all hot and bothered by facial hair, but with Calax, I had to make an exception. It could've been because I you-know-what him (that L-word that should never be said) or it could just be that my taste in men was expanding greatly. After all, I found all of Calax's team ridiculously attractive in different ways.

Resting my head against Calax's beating heart, I allowed myself to believe

everything was okay. I was okay, Nikolai was okay, and these boys I had come to count on were okay as well. Didn't I deserve this one win? Wasn't it about time I got a happily ever after instead of a kick in my nonexistent ballsack?

Glancing at the other two guys, Calax pulled me away from them and into the kitchen. I was too stunned to do anything but allow him to drag me along like a strung-up puppet.

"Callie, I need to talk to you."

Well that was what I tried to say, anyway, but the words never left my mouth because said mouth was suddenly preoccupied.

Calax's lips were bruising on mine, hard and demanding, just like the man himself. I melted in his arms as I kissed him back, his large hands holding me as if he never wanted to let me go.

He loved me. He had admitted it to me only weeks earlier and had made sure to remind me every chance he had. It wasn't just in words that he expressed his adoration towards me, but in his gestures and expressions. He would do anything for me, cross any ocean, face any hardship.

He loved me, and I lo...

Nope. Even though I felt it, I couldn't think the cursed word.

Smiling contently, I made a little mewling sound in the back of my throat. I could die like this, wrapped in Cal's embrace as he kissed me and kissed me and kissed me.

A gasp made both Calax and me spin around.

Declan stood in the kitchen door frame, hand white from where it gripped the handle. A thousand emotions flittered across his face. Sadness, hurt, anger, helplessness, and then, finally, jealousy.

Declan was jealous? Of what? I tried to meet his eyes with my own, but he purposefully looked at his feet. For some inexplicable reason, I felt guilty, as if I had been caught doing something I shouldn't have.

Why should I feel like this? Declan was my oldest friend, sure, but we had never been a couple.

Still, the pang in my heart refused to go away.

Motions brisk, Declan signed, "Sarge is here. Meeting in ten."

Without another word, he hurried from the kitchen. Calax's arms were still wrapped around me, and he peppered kisses across my cheekbones. I loved his kisses, loved being in his arms, but a wicked part of me craved another set of arms - or five or six.

I ignored that selfish voice and twisted in Calax's arms. Smiling, I planted a kiss to his lips.

"Let's go talk to Sarge. There are some things I need to say."

* * *

My announcement was met with silence.

I glanced from face to face trying to decipher each of their emotions. Asher, my sweet friend, looked anxious. Tam also wore a similar expression, though I was beginning to think that was his natural face. Ryder and Ronan exchanged long,

eloquent glances. Declan was glaring at the wall, and Fallon merely stared at me, unblinking. Only Calax looked unconcerned, almost relaxed, as he leaned back on the sofa. Normally I would've been cool with the whole supportive boyfriend thing, especially when his girlfriend was a vindictive psychopath, but now, it only made me nervous.

“Is there a particular reason why you wish to travel to Atlanta?” Fallon asked, almost conversationally. I would've thought that he was fine if I haven't seen his fingers tapping against the armrest of his chair. That seemed to hint at whatever emotion he wished to keep hidden.

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I pulled my lip through my teeth, surveying each face. Not even Declan or Calax knew about Nikolai. It wasn't that I was ashamed of him or anything, but fear was a fickle thing. He was something whispered about in the dead of night. Safe. Protected.

"Nikolai," I whispered at last. The boys blinked at me, various expressions crossing their faces. The general consensus seemed to be confusion.

"Who's Nikolai?" Asher asked gently. I swallowed, images of my brother flashing through my mind.

"He's my brother," I answered at last. "My younger brother." I pulled at the frayed edges of the couch as if I suddenly found it very interesting. "He's autistic." Taking a deep breath, I began to tell the story for the first time. "He was six when he was first diagnosed, and I was ten. Nik had always been a strange boy, but I always attributed it to shyness more than anything. He didn't talk often, and he always had headphones over his ears. He worked with a specialist named Nancy." I paused, watching my fingers unravel the bottom of the couch. Life was just as fragile; it was a thread, and one pull could completely destroy it.

"My parents were so embarrassed of him. I remembered that they would always keep him locked in his room whenever they had friends over. They eventually decided that he would be better somewhere else, with someone else. He went to live with Nancy and her family in Atlanta." I wiped at the tears escaping my eyes. "I would get to see him on holidays, and I would talk to him on the phone whenever I could, but it wasn't the same. We grew apart. But you guys have to understand that he's my little brother, and I would do anything for him. So I am going to Atlanta, and I am going to find my brother and bring him home."

The boys were silent yet again as they absorbed my story. Tam was biting on his fingernail, an indication that he was distressed with the story he had heard. I had the distinct feeling that Tam himself suffered from a mental illness, though he had never actually admitted it to me, and I didn't press. Every morning, if I were to arrive before the sun fully rose, I would catch Tam in the kitchen counting the cups in the cupboards. Every morning, he would count every cup. Every night, he would count every brick on the wall.

He didn't think I noticed; I would never tell him differently.

Fallon's expression was grave, no doubt thinking of the implications of my announcement. He must've seen the resolve on my face, the determination. There was no changing my mind on this issue.

"You look fucking comfortable," Ryder sneered to Calax. "How are you not freaking out?"

I had wondered that same question. Calax, out of all of them, was the most protective of me. I didn't know if it was because of our relationship, or the fact that he felt the need to atone for the years of suffering I had endured under his nose, not that I blamed him. Either way, his sudden impassiveness was startling.

In answer to Ryder's question, Calax shrugged.

"It doesn't matter to me. Whether she goes or not, I'm staying with her."

I blinked.

"What? You can't come with me! It could be dangerous!"

Reports were continually coming in. The death count had been steadily increasing;

the amount of infected had also increased.

“And you think I’m going to let you go alone?” Calax asked in disbelief. He snorted. “Please.”

“Callie...”

“No, baby girl. You don’t get to argue about this. We’ll go together, and we’ll get your brother back. I love you. I could never leave you alone.”

Ronan, who was sitting beside me, stiffened at something Calax said. I wondered if it was because he said we would go together, or if it was because Calax had admitted his love to me. I noticed that Declan’s eyes had narrowed on Calax’s face as well, hands clenched.

“You’ve given us a lot to think about,” Fallon said at last. He folded his hands in his lap, thought better of it, and rested them on the armrests. “Calax, are you sure of your decision?”

Calax nodded.

“And Addie? Are you sure about it?”

I nodded as well. It seemed as if we were doing the silent, brooding routine.

“Okay.” Fallon clapped his hands together, ignoring the protests from the other guys. “Calax, why don’t you and Addie grab some food. There’s some things we need to discuss as a team.”

I met Calax’s stare, but he looked just as baffled as I felt. What could they possibly be discussing? Were they going to stop me from going?

There would be a lot of asses getting kicked if that was the case.

Frowning, I rose from my seat and grabbed Calax's hand. I would use Calax as a shield if the need arose.

* * *

Declan

I watched Addie and Cal walk into the kitchen, fingers interlocked.

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Addie's announcement echoed in my mind. A brother? Why hadn't I heard of him before? She had told me everything, but she never mentioned Nik, the most important person in her life.

Did she not trust me? The realization made me feel sick to my stomach.

If Addie was going to Atlanta, I sure as hell was going with her. I had already lost her once; never again would I let her walk away from me.

My mind unwillingly flickered back towards the kiss I had witnessed between Cal and Addie. I should've been happy for them - Addie was my best friend, and Cal was practically my brother. Instead, it felt as if my heart was breaking free of my chest.

Jealousy. I wasn't familiar with the emotion, for it had never before applied to me. Even with the girls I occasionally shared with my team, I never felt jealous of who they spent their time with. They spent the night with Ryder? Good for them. Went out to dinner with Tam? Hopefully he paid.

Everything felt different with Addie. I felt too much for her, too deeply.

I couldn't help but imagine my own body in Calax's place. Her hands wrapped around my waist, her lips on mine, my fingers tangled in her hair.

Sarge's sudden movement captured my attention.

He was speaking to the group, continuing a discussion I must've missed in my wistful daydream. He turned towards me, as if he felt my eyes on him, and signed.

“What’s your vote?”

About what?

Sarge would be pissed at me if he discovered I zoned out during a meeting. My confusion must’ve been evident on my face, though, for his own features hardened.

“Do you want to go with Adelaide to Atlanta?”

Did he even have to ask me that? I didn’t even need to think about my answer.

“Hell yeah.”

Sarge nodded as if he already expected my answer. Knowing him, he probably did.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll all pack up and go with Addie to Atlanta.”

Wait, what?

Chapter 6

Addie

Despite my protests, all of the guys insisted on coming with me.

“It’ll be a mini vacation!” Ryder had said eagerly.

Ronan added, “Hopefully that means you’ll wear a bikini.”

I think those two would’ve blown a nut if I told them that I had never worn a bikini before in my life. I had too many scars, too many horrors that I preferred to keep hidden behind long sleeves. It had only been recently where I felt comfortable enough to walk out of my house in a tank top. The boys never judged me, and they never questioned the collection of scars on my wrists. They knew what they were from, and they helped me overcome it.

“You guys don’t have to come with me,” I said for the millionth time. We were in the living room of Sarge’s house, an assortment of suitcases loitering the small room. Mof, much to his displeasure, was in a small cage. I could hear his hissing from across the room.

The boys continued to talk over me, discussing transportation. Growling, I grabbed my own suitcase and walked out the door.

It took them a solid five seconds to realize what I was doing.

“Where are you going, Princess?” Ronan asked, sounding way too amused for the situation.

“I’m leaving. By myself.”

“No, you’re not,” Asher said. He, too, sounded like he was on the verge of laughter. That bastard was supposed to be on my side!

“I’m ignoring you,” I huffed.

Fallon’s house was in a small neighborhood, each house more stereotypical of a grandma’s house than the next. White picket fences, yellow siding, elaborate garden displays.

Yup. I would never not make fun of Fallon’s taste in bachelor pads.

“Are you just going to walk there?” Calax called.

I saluted him with my middle finger.

“Adelaide!” Fallon’s strident voice made me stagger to a stop. Frowning, I glanced at him over my shoulder. He must’ve been following me while the others stayed at the front door; I nearly ran into his stomach when I turned.

Stupid Fallon. Stupid Calax. Stupid everyone.

Scowling up at him, I crossed my arms over my chest.

“It’s not safe for you guys to go,” I said, low enough that the boys’ prying ears wouldn’t be able to hear.

“And it’s safe for you?” The question wasn’t said meanly, but as an observation.

“No,” I admitted. “But I don’t want anyone to risk themselves for me.”

He was silent for a moment, his handsome face deep in thought. “It’s your decision whether or not you wish to go, right?”

Nodding, I smiled gratefully.

“Exactly. My decision.”

“And is it not also their decision on whether or not they wish accompany you?”

His question threw me off balance. I opened my mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. Damn. Why did he have to go and add logic?

“But...” I floundered to come up with a legitimate excuse. “But did everybody agree?”

I didn’t want people to feel obligated to go because others on their team were. I had lived my entire life with a very vague perception of freewill, and I hated to think that I was depriving the boys of it.

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“They all agreed,” Fallon assured me. “They all want to go with you because they care about you.”

His voice was unexpectedly gentle. This development in character was new to me. Fallon had always been the gruff, unwavering leader. His display of tenderness was off-putting but not unwanted.

Blinking back tears, I took a step closer to him. His shoulder-length brown hair was down today, instead of in its usual ponytail. A loose strand curled around his eye, and I absently brushed it behind his ear.

“Thank you,” I said. His eyes were soft as they traced my features.

“You’re welcome.”

“Are we going to get going yet?” Ryder called from the front porch. “My suitcase is heavy!”

“That’s because he’s too shallow to allow the suitcase to touch the ground,” Asher said.

Ryder gasped in mock-outrage. “It’s designer!”

Rolling my eyes, I smirked up at Fallon.

“I call whatever car Ryder is not in. I don’t think I have the stomach for a five hour lecture on the importance of elegant luggage.”

Fallon shuddered. “He’s sometimes a very effective torture tool.”

* * *

Unfortunately, neither Fallon nor I got our wish.

We found ourselves in a large white van. The boys played rock-paper-scissors to determine seating arrangements. At first I thought they were arguing over who would get shotgun, but when Asher won with a whoop, he immediately crawled into the seat beside mine. Ronan had also won, and he took the seat on my other side.

Grumbling, Calax reluctantly took the front seat, and the other guys crowded in wherever they could fit. Tamson was under Mof duty. The cat seemed to have picked Tam as his favorite, only allowing the shy boy to pet him and carry him. Fallon declared that he, and only he, would drive.

“I don’t want a repeat of last time,” he had said, giving Ryder a pointed look. I never did figure out what happened, but, from the shudders of the other guys, I reasoned that it wasn’t pretty.

I was overcome with fatigue only a couple of minutes into the drive. Yawning, I rested my head on Asher’s shoulder.

“Comfy,” I murmured sleepily.

“Go ahead and sleep, sweetheart,” Asher said. “We have a long drive ahead of us.”

I was more than happy to oblige.

* * *

I opened my eyes to see that I was no longer in the car, but a field. The grass was a vibrant green, manicured down to perfection. The sky, a light blue with a yellow tang from the sun, smiled down at me. The sight was peaceful, serene, as if I had stepped into an entirely new world.

A new life.

Somewhere in the distance, children began to laugh. The sound made goosebumps erupt on my skin.

Pulling myself onto my elbows, I surveyed the scene before me.

I was underneath a single tree, the boughs protecting me from the punishing sun. Everywhere I looked, a rolling landscape greeted me. It seemed to go on and on forever, an endless carpet of green. Wiggling my bare toes - what the hell happened to my shoes? - I allowed myself to relax. Despite the strange location, I didn't feel threatened. If anything, I felt awfully calm, as if I was where I was meant to be.

"Hello?" I called, scrambling to my feet. It might've been a dumb idea to call out in this unfamiliar place - hello, I have watched enough horror movies with Asher - but the sudden silence was discerning. Weren't there children earlier? I could've sworn I heard laughter.

Wiping dirt from my pants, I turned in a circle, taking in everything. There was not a single soul besides me and the tree. That is, if trees even have souls. Who was I to judge their worthiness to have a soul? I wasn't the soul judge person thing-

Focus, Addie.

It was almost annoying that I couldn't stay on topic for more than five seconds before my brain wandered.

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I made one more circle, expecting to see the same empty grassland as before. Instead, I was moderately shocked when I saw a small girl standing a few feet in front of me.

Her back was towards me, but I could see that she had long brown hair and pale skin. She wore a simple white dress with a red bow around her waist.

Little girl appearing out of nowhere? Hell no.

Taking a step backwards, eyes still latched onto the demonic child, I tripped over a loose rock. That was why I don't multitask. One couldn't walk backwards and keep an eye on the creepy girl at the same time.

I tried to fall quietly, but my clumsy ass landed on the ground with a bang. I may or may not have also let out a string of unladylike curses.

Yup. Exactly the words a young girl needed to hear.

She turned towards me, head tilted to the side thoughtfully. Whatever I was about to say became caught in my throat when I caught sight of her young, elfin face.

Cupid-bow lips, small nose, large eyes framed by thick, dark lashes.

I was staring at myself. Albeit, a younger version of myself, but myself all the same.

Gaping, I ambled back to my feet.

“What the hell is going on?” I whispered to the younger me, taking in her sweet

expression. Had I, once, been that innocent? Had life made my features harder, my eyes colder? I longed to go back in time, before I was abused and forgotten by my family. I wished I had remain this girl.

This better version of myself.

She continued to smile, unaware or ignoring my growing panic. Tentatively, she ventured a step closer. Her smile began to contort with each movement.

Eyes flashing a garnet red, she bared her teeth at me. Black veins, almost like worms, began to crawl beneath her pasty skin.

I held my hands up in surrender.

“Please,” I whispered, a second before she pounced.

* * *

I wokeup in a cold sweat, heart pounding.

Sometime during my slumber, I must’ve sprawled ovetop of Ronan and Asher. My head was nestled on the latter’s chest, while my feet were on Ronan.

To my mortification, a small puddle of drool darkened Asher’s light shirt.

Whoops. Learned something new every day.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Asher said once he saw that I was awake. His hand tenderly brushed some of my sweat-soaked hair out of my face.

“It’s actually afternoon,” Ryder pointed out from somewhere behind me.

Yawning, I tried to recall my strange dream, but my brain turned to liquid the more I tried to concentrate. I could never remember my dreams once I woke up. Bits and pieces, maybe, but never the overall image. It was like a puzzle that was missing too many pieces to accurately figure out what it was supposed to depict.

Frowning, I stretched my sore muscles.

“How long have I been asleep?” I asked, blinking the last remains of sleep from my eyes.

“A couple hours, give or take,” Tam answered. He had released Mof from his cage and was absently stroking his silky, black fur. My heart warmed at the sight. “We haven’t moved an inch in the last fifteen minutes though.”

“And we probably won’t move any further for a while,” added Fallon gruffly. “It’s been this way since we’ve driven onto the main highway.”

I finally sat up to see what Fallon was referring to, and my jaw practically popped from its socket.

There were cars everywhere. Parked in every available crevice, the road was a collection of color. Now that I was paying attention - and no longer in my sleep-muddled daze - I could hear the beeping of horns and the chatter of people. It seemed as if the majority of drivers were outside of their cars, resting against the hoods and enjoying the last rays of sunlight before night fell.

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“Is there an accident up ahead?” I asked, leaning forward to get a better view out of the windshield. “Or construction?”

“No road signs for construction,” Fallon said. Then, almost as an afterthought, he muttered, “I should’ve expected this to happen during a panic.”

I nodded, fully accepting Fallon’s explanation. After all, it was what we were doing. I didn’t know these people’s stories, I didn’t know if they were running from a weather-ravaged home or a virus-infected city, or if they were trying to get to a loved one. I supposed it goes back to the fight or flight response active in all humans. The response, for these people, appeared to be flight. Were we any different, despite the fact that we were running towards danger and not away from it?

Casting another glance around, it became apparent that we were trapped.

A few of the other cars must’ve come to the same conclusion, for I saw them attempt to maneuver their vehicles onto the median dividing the lanes. How they expected to get past all the cars - and the people - was a mystery to me, but I applauded their efforts.

“Does this mean we get to play car games?” Ryder, my energetic puppy, asked eagerly.

“No!” Came the immediate response from the other guys. I didn’t have to look behind me to see that Ryder’s expression would have fallen, lip protruding in a pout like a now dejected puppy.

I really had to stop comparing Ryder to a dog.

Ronan and Asher, on either side of me, burst into laughter. Ryder reached over to pinch my arm.

“I am not a dog,” Ryder growled, and I couldn’t help but think he sounded like an angry dog just then. Of course, that sent me into another fit of giggles. Ronan and Asher began laughing again as well.

“You’re one to laugh, you stupid leprechaun and feminine man!”

Oh yeah. I may have accidentally, in my attempt to compliment Asher, referred to his features as feminine. It wasn’t my fault; he truly was a beautiful man, with his symmetric face and shock of blond hair. How I was supposed to know that it wasn’t “socially acceptable” to call a male feminine?

Ronan rightly deserved his title as a leprechaun. Even in the months that had gone by, he still maintained his green tipped hair.

A sexy leprechaun, but a leprechaun all the same.

“Maybe I’ll let you sing a song,” I cooed. When the guys groaned, I added, “Just one. I don’t feel like dying just yet.”

“It wouldn’t be you that they murdered, Kitten,” Ryder said, voice tinged with amusement. I rolled my eyes.

“Fine. I don’t want you to die just yet either. Give it a couple days.”

“How you flatter me,” Ryder said with a cheeky grin.

The sound of a propeller stopped me from retorting. Pushing past Asher, I pressed my face against the glass window.

There, up in the sky, was a helicopter. A U.S.A military helicopter. No, that wasn't right.

There wasn't just one, but two.

No three.

No ten.

I watched, transfixed, as the helicopters whirled by us.

Where were they going, and what could possibly require an entire army fleet?

Chapter 7

Addie

It happened just before nightfall.

The sun was low, not yet completely devoured by the horizon. Pale pink light filtered through the car windows.

Fallon was right; we hadn't moved an inch in the hours we have been here. Getting off the highway wasn't an option, so we were forced to sit in the car and partake in Ryder's ridiculous games.

At least I was having fun, though Calax looked as if he was seconds away from strangling the other man. For that, I wanted to strangle Calax.

I blamed it on the platonic tension I had talked to Ronan about when we had first met. Just the normal, non-sexual tension between seven brothers and one non-sister.

Like I totally didn't notice Asher's thigh pressed against mine, and I didn't pay attention to Ronan's hand lightly holding my own as he drew on my arm.

Nope. Not me.

Was I allowed to feel attracted to Calax, my almost-but-never-clarified boyfriend?
Was I allowed to feel it for his friends as well?

“When we stop for the night, I want you to start self-defense classes,” Fallon said suddenly, snapping me out of my less than sisterly thoughts. Cheeks burning, I tried to smooth my features into a careful mask. The last thing I wanted them to know was that I was thinking about the sexual tension reverberating through the car.

“Sexual tension?” Asher stuttered, and I stuck my tongue out at him.

“Hadn’t meant to say that aloud.”

“But it’s cute that you did,” Ronan said, still bent over my hand. I haven’t been able to see what he was drawing. Whenever I tried to peek, he would swat my head away with a reprimanding “no.”

Ignoring them, I turned my attention back towards Fallon. He met my gaze in the rearview mirror, eyes smoldering.

He really was a scary man. Attractive, yes, but there was something innately dangerous about the way he moved and talked. He was a man of few words, but, when he spoke, you knew that the only option was to listen and agree.

“What type of self-defense?” I asked. “I only know the fall-on-my-ass maneuver.”

Fallon rolled his eyes, his standard response to my quips, but I thought I saw a hint of a smile gracing his features. I wanted to pat myself on the back.

“Tam will teach you,” Fallon said simply, and the man in question blushed scarlet. Tam had once told me that he was an MMA fighter. I found it hard to believe that my sweet, shy Tamson was able to fight another human being, but I had seen his skills firsthand when he had fought a Rager to protect me.

Granted, he had lost, but it was the thought that counted.

“Have the phones started working yet?” Calax asked, effectively changing the subject from my soon-to-be ass kicking. It was something we had noticed almost immediately when we had begun our journey: none of our phones had a signal. At first, when I had tried calling Nik’s foster parents from Fallon’s house, I had assumed that I just had bad cell reception. This theory was quickly debunked when the rest of the boys began to complain as well.

It didn’t get better the further we drove; no, it was apparent that the connection was dead everywhere.

“Nope,” Ryder said, popping the P.

Declan made an annoyed sound in the back of his throat, and I threw him a small smile.

“Hey, lazy pants. Did you sleep good?”

He looked adorable post-nap. His hair was tousled, and the seatbelt he had been using as a pillow had indented itself onto his cheek. His tired eyes flickered from face to face before resting on the immobile traffic.

“Yeah,” I answered his unspoken question. “We’re still stopped in traffic. Haven’t moved an inch.”

“That’s not true!” Ryder protested halfheartedly. “We moved approximately two point eight inches a half hour ago.”

I chuckled softly at his weak attempt at a joke. The mood had grown increasingly somber as if we all realized we were living on borrowed time.

There were too many things we needed to do, too many people we wanted to save,

and we couldn't afford sitting around doing nothing. Everywhere I looked, people were indolently lying outside their vehicles. A couple groups had a grill going and were selling cooked meat for a decent price. Others had set up makeshift tents, and one even had a campfire blazing.

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“This is fucking ridiculous,” Calax said. “Isn’t there a way we can get off this fucking highway.”

“Freeway,” Fallon corrected absently. “And language.”

I snorted as Calax’s face turned red.

Tuning out the argument I knew was about to transpire, I peered over Asher’s head. We really were trapped, I realized dumbly. With our car squeezed into the middle lane, a separate lane on either side of us, there was no way we could escape.

Unless, of course, we ran over other people and their cars.

Even the cars on the far right were trapped by a steep decline that lead to a vociferous forest. Though some of the cars could easily break apart the railing, the drop itself had the capacity to be deadly.

On the other side of the freeway, across the median, were even more cars. An adjacent forest blocked any access to and from the cluttered road.

My eyes were locked on those trees - leaves beginning to form on their once barren branches and the remains of fallen snow melting at their bases - when I saw the figure. He moved stealthily from behind the throng of trees, face obscured by haunting shadows. As I watched, transfixed, another person exited the tree line, coming to stand beside the first. Their hands were gnarled by their sides, twisting and untwisting as if they were desperate for something to do with them. My heart hammered as even more people emerged, stalking towards the oblivious people both

inside and outside of their cars.

I told myself that there was no reason for me to panic. Logically, I knew that there was no rational reason for me to believe that these people were anything other than wandering travelers. Perhaps, like many others, they had gotten bored with sitting in their cars. Perhaps they had taken a walk, explored the woods, and abandoned their cars further down.

But there was something almost familiar in the way they walked; each movement was clunky, as if they were unfamiliar with walking or were forced to carry a heavy weight with them. Though I couldn't see any facial features, their heads whipped from side to side with an almost startling intensity. It was only as one of them stepped further from his hiding spot, coming to stand beside a silver sedan, that I knew I wasn't looking at a sane human.

I was staring at an army of Ragers.

"Guys," I whispered huskily, unable to tear my gaze away from the horrific sight before me. People were finally beginning to realize what was happening.

I saw flailing arms, heard blood-curdling screams, and watched the Ragers cut through the assembled people.

I didn't need to say anything else. All of the guys had their faces pressed against the glass windows, varying expressions of horror turning their faces pale.

"Holy shit," Calax said, mouth agape.

Before I even processed what was happening, each of the guys pulled out a gun.

A freaking gun.

My mind was incapable of focusing on anything at that moment, let alone the weapons held expertly in each of their hands.

“Ronan, stay with Addie,” Fallon said before sliding out of the driver’s seat. I was too stunned, at first, to say anything as he walked towards the fight instead of away.

Everybody else was screaming, lunging back towards their cars with a blistering speed. I heard many locks click into place. Some were attempting to escape their car prison, but that only results in smashed car fronts and bumpers.

“What the hell are you guys doing?” I yelled, watching the rest of the guys exit the vehicle.

“Take care of her,” Asher warned, ignoring me, and Ronan nodded seriously.

They aimed their gun at the nearest Rager, now across the median, and fired. A half dozen bullets spliced through the Rager’s body, but he continued to run. It was only when Fallon raised his gun and shot directly at his forehead, did the monster fall.

My mouth felt impossibly dry, and my stomach churned.

Before I could warn him, I vomited across Ronan’s shoes.

That was the second time I had thrown up on him.

“Who the hell are you guys?” I said, my mind reeling. It suddenly occurred to me that I didn’t know the guys I was traveling with. Not really. I knew Calax, or at least, I thought I did, and I knew of Declan. The rest? They were enigmas. What type of people carried guns around with them and knew how to shoot them so effortlessly? What type of people would run into the face of danger instead of screaming in the opposite direction?

I couldn't focus on the mysteries surrounding the boys, though, because my attention became stuck on a woman being mauled by a Rager. His long fingers dug into her neck as he swiped desperately, erratically. Blood and skin flew everywhere, darkening the white of a nearby car.

"Ronan," I cried, shaking his arm. He glanced from where he was pursuing the opposite window, body tensed and hand tight over his gun, before he turned in the direction I was pointing.

He let out a series of curses. Indecision crossed his face.

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“Go!” I screamed, shoving him towards the door. I knew the only reason he was considering waiting was to keep an eye on me. “I’ll be fine! Go!”

Stiffly, he thrust a pocket knife into my hand.

“You only use this if it’s an emergency. Don’t exit the damn car.”

Before I could protest that I wasn’t a child and that I wanted to help, Ronan had run towards the direction of the woman. I hoped he made it in time, but, by the grotesque positioning of her arm and blood-splattered face, I found that doubtful.

My heart was heavy, and I yearned to do something besides sit like a pathetic princess. I didn’t want to have to wait for the knights to return. I was stronger than that.

Or, at least, I wanted to be.

Despite my thoughts, I knew it would be idiotic to leave the confines of the car. I wasn’t capable of defending myself adequately enough to help in a fight. I would only get in the way, and the boys would get hurt trying to protect me.

Or worse, others would get hurt because the boys weren’t around to protect them.

I pressed my hands to my ears, trying to ignore the gunshots. It appeared as if other people had joined the fight. A few dozen men and women, some that I had noticed before as being our car neighbors, were also taking shots at the ferocious Ragers. Those that didn’t have guns were using any weapon they could create: a bat, pepper

spray, their own bodies.

My hand clenched around the knife. I was desperate to help, desperate to feel useful. I didn't want to remain hidden behind a shield anymore.

It took every ounce of my self-control to remain seated even as Ragers moved closer towards my car.

I couldn't see the guys anymore.

Even Ronan, who had only been a few cars away from me, had become lost in the fray. I prayed that they were alright.

Bodies were sprawled along the highway. Blood coated every available surface with a deep, garnet red. I couldn't tell how many of the fallen were Ragers and how many were innocent people. In death, they all looked the same.

Was it wrong that I was relieved that none of the fallen were the boys? Was it wrong that I rejoiced at an unfamiliar shock of red hair on a body that looked similar to Asher's?

From my other side, I heard a scream. I immediately turned towards the source, despite knowing what I was going to see.

The scream, though unfamiliar, were octaves higher than a normal person's. This theory was only reinforced when I saw a small boy pinned down beneath an immense Rager.

For a moment, fury blinded me. I could barely think straight, let alone see clearly through the red haze clouding my vision. All I could think about Nik.

Nik getting attacked. Nik being torn apart. Nik.

Before I realized what was happening, I was charging from the car, knife raised. Mof made an unhappy squeal from where he paced in his cage, and I paused briefly.

“I’ll be right back,” I promised the cat, though I knew the promise was intended for the others more than the diminutive creature. The boys were going to freak if they discovered I was gone.

But they had to understand. This was a child.

Even if he didn’t have a strong resemblance to my brother, I would help him anyway. There was nothing else I could do.

Up close, I saw that the Rager was a female. Or had been. The verdict was still out on that one.

Her brown hair was falling out in clumps, black veins twitching beneath the surface. Her red eyes, as red as the blood covering her face, were fixated on her prey. It didn’t seem to matter that the person she was holding down was a little boy. It didn’t matter that he was pleading with her, tears coating his chubby cheeks.

And it didn’t matter that he cried her name, voice anguished.

“Mamma! Mamma, stop! Please!”

I faltered.

This woman was his mother?

But there was nothing resembling recognition in her feral gaze. No, his mother was

gone, and in her place was a monster.

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I grabbed the woman by the hair, pulling her off of her sobbing son. I ignored the boy's pleas not to hurt his mother as I pushed the Rager onto the ground.

I knew that it was an opportune time to stab my knife into her head. I knew that I should've slashed her neck.

I knew all this, but I also knew that I could never do it. How could I possibly live with myself knowing that I killed this woman? A mother?

I was still holding onto hope, through frail, that a cure would be found. When the world was finally saved, I wanted to be able to live with myself and the actions I did when it was hell. I wanted us to be a race worthy of being saved.

I extended a hand towards the prone kid, still a sniveling mess on the ground. The boy merely began to cry harder, and I let out a grunt of annoyance.

"Come on! We need to get out of here!"

The boy blinked rapidly and hesitantly began lifting his hand towards mine.

Something hard hit me in the back of the head, and I tasted blood. Spinning so fast I no doubt got whiplash, I met the snarling face of the mother Rager.

"Tommy, don't listen to this stranger. Come with Mommy." Even her voice was distorted, a low growl that was more animal than human.

"Yeah, I don't think that's the best idea, Tommy," I muttered. I leveled my knife at

her chest, but I was utterly inept at using it. In only a matter of a seconds, she was behind me, hand gripping my hair in a tight fist.

I winced at the pain, scrambling to free myself from her prying fingers. I let out a slight scream as her hold deepened, tilting my head back in a way that made my neck crack.

I desperately propelled my body backwards. I hoped that it would catch her off guard. It seemed to work, for she released me with a grunt. I swiped at her stomach with my knife for good measure, nausea threatening to take me down when blood welled.

Please don't make me hurt you. Please don't make me hurt you.

Unfortunately, I must not have been saying those thoughts aloud because the Rager lunged again. I squeaked, swinging my knife yet again in what I hoped was a threatening manner.

If I was being honest with myself, I probably looked more amusing than threatening.

“Come on! Let's go!” The little boy, Tommy apparently, was tugging at my arm. I turned towards him, stunned, and the Rager took my momentary lapse in concentration to pounce on me. My head cracked as it hit the concrete, and I felt something metallic in my mouth. Blood. My blood.

In my fall, I must've dropped my knife. I was alone, with a Rager on top of me, and no way to defend myself. I'm sure this would be a lesson of what NOT to do in Tamson's self-defense class.

“You stupid bitch,” the Rager purred, echoing my own sentiment. She leaned down, breath caressing my neck. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Maybe, just maybe, my death would be painless. Maybe, just maybe, I finally atoned for all of my sins.

There was a sudden gurgling sound, and my eyelids flew open.

The woman was still on top of me, but her eyes were unfocused. Distant. Her mouth was open, blood dripping down her pale chin.

And it was then that I noticed the knife protruding from her head, the copper handle familiar.

It was the knife Ronan had left me. But how did it end up in her head?

That question was soon answered when I saw Tommy, trembling like a leaf, pulling the knife out from where it was lodged in her skull.

She fell.

The darkness around us seemed to consume the continuous onslaught of screams.

Chapter 8

Addie

What words could you possibly say to comfort a little boy that was forced to kill his own mother?

What could anyone possibly do to make this very wrong situation right?

Tommy's hands were trembling; the knife clattered, slick with blood.

"I killed her," he muttered. "I killed her. I killed her."

He held his shaking hands out in front of him as if he didn't recognize them. As if they belonged to someone entirely different, someone capable of stabbing his mother in the head. My heart ached for this boy, for the innocence that was so brutally taken from him.

I knew, without a shadow of doubt, that he would never be able to forget this day. This wasn't merely an obstacle that he could grow from. No, this was something much darker.

Angrier.

"Tommy - your name is Tommy, right?" I asked, scrambling to my feet. My head hurt furiously, and blood burned my eyes. I swiped the red, thick liquid away in annoyance.

“I killed her,” Tommy repeated numbly. Only his lips moved. His eyes stared vacantly at the fallen body of his mother. His hands were still held out in front of him.

“Tommy, we have to go.” I leaned down to pick up the knife he had dropped. I tried my hardest not to look at the blood smearing the shiny blade. I told myself that if I didn’t see it, it wasn’t real. I repeated this mantra until the words became meaningless. Even I - the Queen of Shitty Childhoods - knew that this was something neither of us could ever come back from. I just had to hope that Tommy was strong enough, stronger than I had ever been, to face the storm raging on ahead.

“Tommy.” Without waiting for him to respond, I grabbed his hand and began walking in the direction of the car. I stopped in mid-stride when I saw the Ragers surrounding the van’s tinted windows.

“Shit,” I cursed, immediately changing direction. There were bodies everywhere, and gunfire ricocheted through the air. I much preferred the gunfire over the screams.

It allowed me to pretend that we, humanity, were winning.

“I killed her,” Tommy muttered shakily.

I didn’t know what to say or how to comfort him. I had never been the greatest with children, especially ones that had gone through so much tragedy. In a sense, I could relate to Tommy on an almost spiritual level. I didn’t know if that connection made it harder to talk to him or easier.

Sidestepping a snarling Rager, I tightened my grip on Tommy’s hand. We had reached the edge of the road, towards the decline that was only separated from us by a metal fence expanding the length of the highway. Behind us, the Ragers tore apart people as if they were nothing more than discarded dolls.

Vaguely, my mind brought up an image of my childhood doll, smartly named Dolly. Dad had destroyed her, ripping her arm clean from her body.

These people, these humans, reminded me of her.

My stomach twisted as I scanned the sea of dead bodies. There were still people fighting, but the growing darkness made it hard to discern who was friend and who was foe. I didn't see any of the guys, and I tried not to panic.

They were resourceful and obviously skilled in weaponry. I had to believe that they would be safe.

For my own sanity.

“Okay, Tommy, we’re gonna have to jump.”

He didn't even glance my way, his face a pale sheet.

I read in a psychology book that it helped if you repeatedly used your patient's name. Apparently, it allowed the person to feel a sense of security and familiarity. Or some bullshit along those lines.

I really hoped it was working now.

“Tommy,” I said again, squeezing his fingers. His wide, terrified eyes landed on my face as he turned towards me. I hated the anguish in his expression. When he spoke, his words were almost mechanical.

“Yes. Jump. Yes.”

Pleased with the response, I released his hand. He immediately let out a cry at the loss

of contact.

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“It’s okay. I’ll be just a moment,” I soothed him. Putting my hand to my forehead, I used my blood as a makeshift paint.

Demented? Yes.

Effective? Also yes.

Quickly, aware of the Ragers fighting behind me, I drew a picture on the railing. It took only a few seconds, shorter than what it would’ve been to spell out my name.

“Are you ready?” I asked Tommy as soon as I finished. I held out my hand, the non-bloody one, and he immediately engulfed it in his own.

I had no time to think about the people I was leaving behind, or the lives lost. No, I would lose my mind if I were to focus on such a depressing detail. I had to get Tommy to safety, first and foremost. He saved my life - at the expense of his own - and it was time to return the favor.

Would I be willing to hurt someone I loved to help a complete stranger? Was this young boy twice the person I could ever be?

I didn’t know the answer to either of those questions.

Holding my breath, I stepped off the ledge.

And down we fell.

Let me make something perfectly clear to you. Never, and I mean never, is it a smart idea to throw yourself off a bridge.

It hurts like a bitch, especially when you tumble down the side of a hill.

Loose pebbles and sharp rocks jabbed themselves into my side as I fell. My head, still roaring from the blunt force the Rager had inflicted, whacked itself against a jutting tree stump.

Sometime during my tumble, I must've let go of Tommy's hand. The boy was no longer beside me.

I was relieved when I heard his cry of pain. At least he was alive.

For now.

When I finally stopped falling, I was a panting, broken mess on the forest floor. A few painfully sharp twigs jutted from my arm, and I ripped them out with a small growl.

Why did this shit always have to happen to me?

"Tommy!" I cried hoarsely, though I doubted my voice carried over the screams from above.

It wasn't like in the movies. I didn't just fall and transport myself into an entirely different reality, free of monsters. It didn't all of a sudden become deadly quiet, the silence broken apart by the intermittent song of crickets.

Nope, I still heard every scream, every snarl, every gunshot. I still saw the blood coating my fingers, cascading down my cheekbones like teardrops.

The silhouettes of Ragers captured my attention from their perch high above.

Had I really fallen that far down?

Of course, I realized that question wasn't necessarily important, but it was all I could think about. I refused to think about the boys I had left behind or the creatures that could be lurking in my new resting place.

"Are you okay?" a timid voice asked. Tommy. He dropped to his knees beside me.

"I'm fine. How about you?"

He looked okay, at least on the outside. I knew, mentally, that the wounds inflicted could be fatal.

"I'm fine. There's a house up ahead." He pointed towards a particularly dense thicket of trees. I wondered what he had seen during his tumble that led him to believe that because I saw jack shit.

"You sure?" I asked.

"Of course I'm damn sure!" Tommy snapped, and I blinked at the little boy.

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Choosing not to comment on his language - he deserved to curse up a storm after all - I allowed him to help me to my feet.

The world momentarily began to spin as I struggled to maintain my footing. Once I was positive that I would be able to stand without puking or falling over, I nodded for Tommy to lead the way.

I couldn't help but glance over my shoulder, just once, at the highway. Flames of fire licked the sky, though I wasn't sure if it was coming from the cars or an-out-of-control campfire. The further we walked, the quieter the screams got until I could almost imagine they were a figment of my imagination.

Almost, but not quite.

I could still feel the blood on my hands. A real, tangible liquid.

I could still hear the screams, though faded, in the distance.

My stomach churned angrily.

I couldn't handle this world anymore - the injustice, the senseless violence, and the feeling that, somehow, I could've stopped it all.

I wondered if Tommy blamed me for his mother's death. Heaven knew I blamed myself. This little boy had chosen me over a woman he loved. How could he stand holding my hand? Where was the resentment? The hatred?

We stopped in front of a modest house with peeling paint and torn shutters. The floorboards of the front deck creaked beneath our combined weight.

Hands trembling, both in fear and anticipation, I knocked on the door.

Silence greeted me.

Feeling desperate, I raked my knuckles against it again.

And again.

And again.

I didn't dare scream in fear that Ragers were lurking nearby. Was there anybody home?

Were they merely asleep, unable to hear my persistent knocking? Were they ignoring us?

I refused to think that they were dead, though a tiny voice in my head warned me that we might not be coming home to live bodies.

All I knew for certain was that we couldn't be out here any longer than necessary.

"Stay behind me," I ordered Tommy, turning the knob of the door. It opened easily.

The house was dark. After an ineffectual swipe at the light switch, I realized that the power was out.

My phone battery was nearly dead, but I flicked on that light anyway. Immediately, the room was suffused in a yellowish glow.

The light was so small that it did little to distinguish the shadows. Something, anything, could be lurking in this darkness.

One hand holding my phone, the other my knife, I ventured cautiously further.

I didn't like this feeling, not at all. I had always been afraid of the dark, even when I became older. There was no rational explanation for this feeling - I knew that there were no such thing as monsters - but the fear paralyzed me all the same.

I checked the living room first, a thorough sweep that included crouching on the floor to look under the couch. The kitchen and dining room were also clear of any Ragers or dead bodies.

Tommy continued to hold the back of my shirt like a lifeline.

"Stay here," I whispered, putting a foot on the bottom step.

"Alone?" Tommy asked, voice trembling. "In the dark?"

"There's nothing down here," I assured him. "I'm going to check upstairs too."

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Because knowing my luck they'll be hundreds of Ragers wearing "Kill Adelaide" tee-shirts. When had anything ever been this easy for me? Because escaping an army of Ragers and jumping off a highway were most definitely easy.

I tried to put as much warmth into my smile as I could muster. I'm afraid the ended effect made me appear more constipated than anything else.

After one last glance at Tommy, I moved towards the staircase.

Please don't let there be anything up there. Please don't let there be anything up there.

I really didn't want to be one of those too-stupid-to-live heroines I had always seen and laughed at in horror movies. I mean seriously, what made the final girl so deserving of life? Was it because she was pure and a virgin? Because she was nice? Scoff.

The nice girls never win in real life.

My hand was white where it gripped the stair rail, but I was pretty proud of myself when I didn't pass out. I quite literally, and shamelessly, was shitting my pants as I climbed further into the darkness. I hated the dark. Hated it.

The beam of my phone's light did very little to help me conquer this fear. If anything, the added glow only created more shadow monsters, more places they could hide.

Now a stupid person would say into the darkness, "Hello? Anyone there?"

A smart person, like me and deserving of life, would instead trip over a toy truck and fall onto her ass.

Yup. Totally final girl material right here.

The first two rooms were devoid of any dead bodies or nasty zombies. My body practically sagged in relief by the time I got to the last room.

A child's nursery.

From the painted walls and collection of dolls, I figured that the room was made for a baby girl. I prayed that the family had gotten away - that the little girl wasn't the food in her mother's stomach.

Vomit threatened to escape me at the thought, but I pressed it down.

A single picture was on the dresser of the room, the gilded frame immediately illuminating in my thin shaft of light. Despite knowing I was wasting precious phone battery, I picked up the picture and trailed a finger over the happy family. A mom, a dad, and two kids. An older boy, about five, and a baby girl. They were all smiling at the camera, even the infant.

Why couldn't I be that happy?

Have I ever, in all my years of existence, ever been that happy?

I was just setting the picture down when something outside caught my attention. The blinds were open, revealing a gray backdrop steadily turning darker as the sun fell. My eyes narrowed at the figure ducking behind a tree.

A Rager?

My heart was hammering, brain turning to liquid, as I stared penetratingly at the unknown figure. The unknown variable.

Who was he, and what did he want? Was he friend or foe?

But the figure never showed his face (or her, I wouldn't discriminate), and I wondered if I had imagined it.

Maybe I really was losing my mind.

With a shaky breath, I walked back down the staircase. Tommy was where I had left him at the foot of the stairs. I could hear the sobs emitting from his body.

"It's safe upstairs," I said, deciding not to mention the person I may have or may have not seen outside. There was no use worrying Tommy more than necessary.

Absently, I shone the flashlight into Tommy's tear-stained face. It was then that I noticed something that I hadn't seen earlier.

I had assumed he was a young boy, maybe eight or nine, but on closer inspection, he looked older. The baby fat contorting his features took off a few years.

"How old are you?" I asked, and then mentally winced.

His mom just died, and you're asking him his age? Good going, Addie.

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“It’s fine,” Tommy said. Though his eyes still looked dazed, I was pleased to discover his voice was more coherent than earlier. “I’m thirteen.” Before I could respond, he continued, “And Addie’s a pretty name.”

I reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze. We remained like that for a few moments, each lost in our own thoughts. It was Tommy who broke the silence first, voice pensive and lower lip trembling.

“I really killed her, didn’t I?”

I didn’t think he wanted me to answer, so I instead said, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he said bitterly. “That wasn’t my mother. No, my mom died the second that worm entered her.”

I was about to comment on his way of handling things, surprisingly bravely, when something he said stuck with me.

“A worm?”

Tommy nodded absently. “Yeah. Just before she...changed, I saw something crawl into her skin. It looked like a little worm. A little black worm.”

Chapter 9

Calax

The first time I met Addie, I thought she was a pretentious, stuck-up rich girl. How could I think anything different? Her hair hung in perfect ringlets down her back, and she wore a headband in her hair. A fucking headband. Combined with her pleated skirt and white blouse, she was the exact replica of every schoolgirl fantasy I ever had.

Of course, I didn't think anything of the beautiful girl with the plush, red lips and alabaster skin. Not only was she the daughter of some rich fuck, but she had an air of imperiousness that could only be achieved by a sense of entitlement.

Looking back, I realized that so called "entitlement" was fear and this unrealistic pressure to be perfect.

It was only after the second time I met her that I couldn't get her out of my mind.

I had been riding home with the girl of the day - some chick with the name of a stone. Emerald, maybe? Ruby? It had been my day with her. Ryder had taken her the night before, and Tam had her before that. I remember positively nothing about that girl. Hair color? No clue.

Race? No freaking idea.

Yet, I remember every single detail about Addie. There had been a streak of dirt on

her left cheek, right under her eye. Her hair had been in a ponytail that day, loose strands cascading around her perfect face.

The girl I was with - let's call her Diamond - hopped off my bike with a sway to her hips. Normally, I would've been entranced, or at least as much as I could be knowing that this girl had screwed my best friends only hours earlier. Not that it bothered me, necessarily, but I never looked at these women as anything other than a meaningless fuck.

I only wished they felt the same.

My attention, however, wasn't on my "date" but on the girl who was kneeling over a plot of dirt. As I watched, transfixed, she wiped sweat from her forehead and pursed her thick lips.

"What the hell is she doing?" Emerald - shit Diamond - asked in disbelief. The girl, whose name I hadn't learned at the time, turned towards us with a smile. Seemingly undeterred by Diamond's scowl, she waved.

"Well, hiya. I'm planting a motherfucking garden."

There were so many things wrong with that sentence...and so many things right with it.

Addie turned back towards her rather depressing "garden", mumbling something about sexy bikers under her breath.

And yes, I may have smiled smugly and puffed out my chest. I was a conceited bastard.

"Come on, pookie," Jasmine cooed. "Let's go to your room."

I absently waved her away.

“You’re planting a garden?” I asked Addie in disbelief. “You okay up there?” I pointed to my forehead to emphasize what I meant.

She snorted.

“Are you okay down there?” she countered, staring pointedly at my manhood. And dammit if I didn’t get a little turned on by her teasing.

“So why the hell are you planting a garden at an apartment complex you don’t live at?”

Because I definitely would’ve remembered her if she had moved in.

“Because my parents are little shits who don’t think that this apartment is pretty enough.” She made a face. “When they’re not happy, I’m not happy.”

Almost instinctively, I took a step closer to her. Ruby was not happy.

“I thought we were going upstairs,” she sneered. I gave her an annoyed look. Had she always been this irritating?

“You go ahead,” I said. I didn’t bother to add that I would meet her there - I had the distinct feeling I would want her gone after all this was over. “Or you could call Ronan and have him pick you up.”

Her face immediately perked up. I didn’t bother to tell her that Ronan was currently on a date with another girl. With Ronan, the more the merrier.

“So your parents are tough, huh?” I asked, turning back to Addie. I was such a

fucking idiot back then. How could I have not see what she was enduring?

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But she hid everything so well. When she turned towards me, flashing me a singularly beautiful smile, I didn't detect anything besides the normal annoyance one would feel towards her parents.

“Are any parents not tough?”

I chuckled.

“Wouldn't know. I never had parents.”

I had a deadbeat dad in between stints of foster parents. Never someone to kiss my knees when I fell or hold my hand or tell me that monsters didn't hide in the dark.

No, they just proved to me that monsters lurk in the fucking daylight.

“Lucky bastard,” she responded, and I thought that she was being a tad bit dramatic. She had a life that others would kill for. Beauty queen. Rich. Parents. What more could she want?

But there was something familiar in her eyes, something that called to me in a way no other girl ever had before. I would almost call it haunting, as if she had seen too much for her young age. Those were eyes that held thousands of secrets.

And I stupidly wanted to learn each one.

“Well, do you need any help planting your dumbass garden?” I asked, smirking when she glared at me.

Yes, I was an asshole, but so was she.

“It’s a smartass garden, by the way, and no. I don’t want your pity help.”

“Pity help?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

She groaned, putting her head into her hands in a movement that indicated her exasperation. That led to more dirt being smeared across her face. Somehow, that only heightened her ethereal beauty.

“I’m good at reading people,” she said at last, voice muffled from her hands. “You think I’m a nutcase.”

Kind of.

“What else can you tell about me?” I asked, genuinely curious. For some undefinable reason, her answer mattered to me. I wanted her to like me.

Hell if I knew why I wanted to make a good impression on this crazy girl.

“Well,” she began, tilting her head to the side thoughtfully. “You were planning on fucking that girl.” She nodded her head towards where Diamond - Ember? - was arguing on the phone. No doubt Ronan had refused to pick her up. He never liked being with the same girl twice in the same week.

He was a bastard like that.

My mind was fixated on her use of the word “fucking.” I’d be lying if I said it didn’t do something funny to me.

“Well, that’s enough gardening for today,” she said, standing up and wiping her

hands against her jeans. “I need to start heading home before it gets dark.”

“Wait? Did you walk here?”

I didn’t know where she lived, but I knew this apartment complex was in the middle of fucking nowhere.

She shrugged nonchalantly.

“No biggie. I needed the exercise.”

At that, I raised both my eyebrows. With some girls, I could tell they were putting themselves down in order to get attention and compliments, but I only heard sincerity in Addie’s voice. That struck me as...wrong.

She was as thin as a twig, almost unhealthily so.

“What’s your name, doll?” I asked, realizing that I hadn’t asked her. Damn. I really was a bastard.

Instead of answering, she smiled. The smile was both sultry and devious, as if she had perfected wicked seduction in the mirror.

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And yes, I said wicked seduction.

As I watched, mesmerized like a lovesick fool, she walked away. I couldn't look away as her lithe figure retreated down the street.

Who the hell was that girl, and where had she been all my life?

Emerald came up to me, bitching about Ronan, but I barely processed her words. I couldn't stop thinking about the strange girl planting a garden in an apartment complex she didn't even live in.

She hadn't left my mind since.

* * *

Nothing could compare to the panic I felt when I arrived back at the van to discover Adelaide was missing.

There were no possible words to describe the way I felt - the tightening of my chest, the sudden difficulty I had breathing, the haze coating my vision. My hands clenched and unclenched at my sides as I stared at the blood smeared white exterior of our vehicle. There must've been a battle here - the ground was covered in bodies.

Tam, who had arrived before me nursing a bruised rib, was holding Mof. The damn kitten had not stopped crying, as if he knew...as if he knew something had happened to his owner.

I didn't know whether or not I wanted to scream or cry. I had been feeling pretty good about myself, as I was able to take out at least a dozen of Ragers.

Eliminate the threat. Protect what was mine.

The mantra, to some, might sound masochistic, but I can assure you that is the furthest from the truth. Addie owned me, heart, body, and mind.

I didn't want to think about a world where she was no longer in it. I had thought it before, after she had been taken from the collapsed resort, and it had completely destroyed me. This - knowing how she felt about me even though she couldn't say it - was ten times worse.

I finally knew what it was like to be truly loved by a girl like Addie. By anyone, really. I had never been loved before.

"Where the fuck is she?" Ryder demanded, eyes wild. He looked as if he was getting ready to tear the world apart.

It was then that I realized something that was so bluntly obvious. How had I not noticed it before?

He was in love with her.

I couldn't focus on that, however. Not with Addie missing and possibly-

I couldn't even think that word. She couldn't be dead. I would be able to tell.

Declan, pacing, had rounded on Ronan. His hands were a flurry of undefinable movements. I was too tired, too dead, to read what he was signing so dogmatically.

Ronan blanched, face paling.

“You were supposed to be fucking watching her!” Ryder exploded, storming towards his brother. Before Sarge could intervene, Ryder’s fist connected with Ronan’s face. Bones cracked, and Ronan tumbled over the gruesome body of one of the fallen. I couldn’t decide if it had been a zombie or a human.

At least it wasn’t Addie.

Ronan allowed Ryder to pummel his face, not bothering to raise a hand to defend himself. He looked lost and forlorn, a mere shadow of the cocky bastard I knew and occasionally loved like a brother.

An idiotic brother, but a brother all the same.

“Enough!” Sarge screamed, grabbing Ryder by his shirt. “I said enough! This isn’t going to help anything!”

“You fucking left her alone! You had one fucking job to do! One!” Ryder lunged for Ronan again, but both Asher and Sarge held him back. Sarge looked, as always, cool and stoic, but I saw him continually clenching and unclenching his jaw. He was worried about Addie too, and I tried not to think about the reasons why. “You better hope we fucking find her! You better fucking hope!”

Ronan was staring at his brother, and I watched as realization slowly dawned on his face. He apparently hadn’t been aware of the extent of his brother’s feelings either. I saw his expression morph, surprise giving way to unreadability.

Ronan’s eyes flickered to something over Ryder’s shoulder, and his expression froze.

“We have to start looking for her. If she’s alive, she couldn’t have gone far,” Sarge

was saying.

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“She’s fucking alive,” I snapped. The alternative was too horrible to think about.

“Guys,” whispered Ronan, face tightening.

“Where could she have gone?” Asher questioned. He glanced at the bodies, and I knew he was searching them for any signs of her familiar dark curls. He wouldn’t find her down there; I was sure of it. My baby was a fighter.

“Guys,” repeated Ronan.

“You better make sure her damn cat is alive,” Ryder continued, either oblivious to his brother or choosing to ignore him. I was beginning to believe it was the latter. “When she gets back, she’ll skin your nut sack if something happened to him.”

“The cat is fine,” Tam said dizzily. He grimaced in pain and grabbed at his stomach. The crazy son of a bitch decided to fight a Rager by hand after his gun ran out of ammo. It was a miracle that he was still alive.

“Guys!” Ronan’s voice broke through our conversation sharply, a contrast to his normally indolent tone. Sarge’s eyes narrowed on his face. He hated being interrupted, especially by his subordinates.

But Ronan wasn’t paying our group leader any mind. No, his trembling finger was pointing towards the edge of the highway where a metal gate separated a low forest from the highway.

“I painted that on her hand,” he mumbled. I turned to see what had captured his

attention.

Across the silver railing, painted in a bright, cranberry red, was a haphazardly drawn crown. A single “A” rested above the design.

Only one person would be stupid enough - or smart enough - to draw a design instead of writing her name. Why the hell did she feel the need to be so secretive?

Addie.

Baby, hold on. We’re coming for you.

Chapter 10

Addie

The food in the fridge was spoiled.

Pulling the door open, I made a face as the pungent smell of moldy cheeses and meats assaulted my senses.

“That smells like shit,” Tommy said from behind me where he was going through a cabinet. My phone, staying at a solid 5% the last hour or so, was resting on the table, light facing up. I watched as Tommy held a can to the light, made a face, and then put it back.

“I hate cheese broccoli soup,” he muttered. I snorted.

“Is it the cheese part you don’t like or the broccoli?”

He gave me a look that said he seriously questioned my intelligence.

“Besides,” Tommy continued, pulling out cans and pasta boxes at random. “The soup requires milk.”

The only milk around was a chunky, off-white mess that I had immediately thrown outside. It smelt something awful, putting even Mr. Cheese to shame.

“Touché,” I said, turning back towards the fridge. I hoped that there would be at least

one redeemable food item, but my search was futile. The only eatable or drinkable item I found in the fridge was a gallon of water that Tommy and I had both used to clean ourselves off. We probably should've saved the water for drinking, but both of us felt sick with the blood coating our skin. No, I would rather dehydrate myself than live another moment with flesh under my fingernails and blood smeared over my cheekbones.

“Yes!” Tommy suddenly yelled, voice triumphant. I turned towards him in surprise, only to see him lovingly holding a box of chocolate pop-tarts. He stroked the box. “Come to papa you nasty thing.”

“Talking dirty to food, I see?” I kept my voice light, attempting humor. In the last hour or so, color had steadily returned to Tommy’s cheeks, and his eyes no longer looked so despondent. There was still fear in his eyes, still self-hatred, but it didn’t seem to consume him any longer. I knew that he needed a chance to grieve, but I also knew that now was not the right time.

He was brave, I had to give him that. Stronger than me.

“Don’t diss my true love,” Tommy retorted.

“Are just pop-tarts your lover, or is it food in general?” I teased.

A door opening and closing cut off whatever Tommy was going to say.

In a blistering speed that surprised even myself, I ran towards my light and flicked it off. Darkness immediately descended.

Tommy let out a shaky breath, and his hand grappled to find mine. I took it, giving it a squeeze.

I tried to control my breathing as the footsteps came closer. The last thing I needed was a panic attack.

But I freaking hated the darkness. Hated it.

Instinctively, my hand curled around the knife in my waistband. If I had to, I would stab a motherfucker. Or kick him in the balls.

I was pretty good at that too.

The footsteps were coming closer, pounding against the linoleum tiles of the kitchen. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end...

And then the footsteps retreated. I heard the front door opening and closing, and then I heard nothing.

Tommy's hand was a vise in mine.

I heard him suck in a breath as if to say something, but I gave his hand a moderately painful pinch.

Not yet, the eloquent gesture said. Wait.

"Who the hell was that?" Tommy asked, after we stood silently in the kitchen for fifteen minutes. His tiny voice wobbled over the words.

"I don't know." I fumbled with my phone, flicking back on the light. The kitchen was yet again bathed in a pale, yellow light.

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Nothing seemed to be missing. The food remained where we had left it.

Was it a Rager? The owner of the house?

But why would someone walk into a dark room without doing anything? Granted, I had often walked into a room, forgot what I was doing, and left, but I had thought that society was smarter than me.

My terror spiked at the normality of the kitchen. Nothing, and I mean nothing, was different. Had the person wanted something to eat? Had it been someone who had escaped from the highway?

I strained my ears to hear if they were still in the house. Maybe they needed a place to sleep for the night. After all, this was the only house we could find in the dense thicket of trees.

The amount of questions I had were staggering. Even more staggering was the lack of answers.

Moving nimbly, I pushed back the curtain.

There was only a sliver of moon tonight and a handful of stars - not enough natural lighting to see clearly. I watched the forest, muscles coiled, but saw no movement.

Whoever had came must've gone.

"We should get some sleep," I said to Tommy.

Tommy nodded, though he still looked as if he wanted to piss his pants.

Same kid. Same.

We found some spare blankets in a linen closet and settled down on the couch and chair. It would've felt odd to sleep in someone else's bed. I knew Tommy agreed with my sentiment.

I placed my head gingerly on the pillow, angling my phone towards my hand.

The design Ronan had drawn was beautiful: an elaborate crown that looked surprisingly realistic. Though it was made in pen, each jewel seemed to pop as if they were actually implanted into my skin. I wasn't surprised that Ronan was an artist. After all, his brother was a talented musician. It would only make sense for him to be good at art as well.

I stared at it, illuminated by the thin shaft of light, before my phone died.

I whimpered as the house was completely plunged into darkness.

* * *

I woke up to a light shining in my face. Squinting, I glanced from side to side. It was still dark outside, and Tommy, in the chair beside me, was snoring softly.

There were two figures leaning over top of him, each one holding a gun.

Before I could scream, strong arms grabbed me around the waist. I buckled, cussing, when a familiar voice broke through my panic.

"Oh my god, baby! I thought we told you to stay in the fucking car!"

I went limp in his arms. His familiar, comforting arms.

“Callie?” I whispered softly, and then I was kissing him. Or he was kissing me, though I’m not sure that there was a difference. We became nothing more than a flurry of gasps and tongues and clashing lips.

“Princess, is that really you?” Ronan asked softly.

“Of course not,” Calax scoffed breathlessly, pulling his lips away from mine. “I’m just kissing a random stranger.”

Ronan pushed Calax aside, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me onto his lap. His body shook with silent sobs, and I felt his lips touch my hair. The contact made me shiver.

“Are you guys all okay?” I could see seven distinct silhouettes in the darkness, but I still wanted the reassurance.

“We’re all fine, sweetheart,” Asher said.

I turned in Ronan’s lap, tracing his indecipherable features with my fingers.

“And the woman?”

I remembered the person he had been trying to save. Her body had looked so broken, nearly unrecognizable as a human.

My fingers touched Ronan’s lips as they turned down simultaneously with the slight shake of his head.

No. She hadn’t made it.

I tried not to feel too upset by that verdict. After all, I didn’t know that woman. I told myself that I shouldn’t cry over the death of a complete stranger.

Despite this, tears welled in my eyes.

A soft meowing grabbed my attention, and I turned towards where Mof was curled up in Tam’s arms.

“My baby!” I cooed, and Tam set the squirming cat into my own arms. I was immediately assaulted with sandpaper-like kisses.

“Who the fuck are you guys?” A tiny voice screamed. “And why the fuck are you aiming guns at me?”

Tommy bolted upright in the chair, his blanket falling off his body. His tired eyes went from me to them and then back to me. He raised an eyebrow, slightly sardonically. He must’ve noticed the position I was in: sprawled on Ronan’s lap, with

Calax's arm still wrapped possessively around my waist, and Mof happily licking my face to death.

"Friends of yours?" he asked, amusement evident in his voice.

"Guys, this is Tommy. Tommy, these are my friends."

Tommy blinked, grabbed his blanket, and closed his eyes yet again.

"Save the introductions for tomorrow. I'm fucking tired."

Without another word, he began to snore again. The two men holding the guns - Fallon and Ryder, I realized - slowly lowered them with identical puzzled expressions.

"Who the hell is he?" Fallon asked.

Ryder added, "Whatthe hell is he?"

* * *

After assuring myself that they were alright, I set out to find medical supplies for Tamson. He had been the most injured, though he promised me that he would live. I was beginning to realize that Tam thought that I was a tad bit dramatic. Just a tad, like Shakespeare level.

I had spotted a first aid kit under the sink in the upstairs bathroom, and I pulled that out now. Calax had let me borrow his phone for a flashlight.

I was scrambling to my feet when I spotted the figure in the mirror behind me. I nearly screamed, spinning around so fast I was afraid my head would fall off.

“Ryder, you scared the crap out of me,” I hissed.

He didn’t respond for a moment, expression drawn. His eyes wouldn’t meet mine, despite my repeated attempt at eye-contact. He stared at his unlaced shoes, the burgundy shower curtain, the dirt his shoes tracked in.

Everything besides me.

His lashes flickered against his prominent cheekbones.

“Ryder, are you okay?” I asked tentatively. Still, Ryder didn’t answer. His hand continually tapped out an unfamiliar rhythm against his jean-clad legs. Before I could ask him again, he glanced up, eyes wild with an undefinable emotion.

“I’m really glad you’re okay,” he said at last. I offered him a small smile.

“I’m glad you’re okay too.”

He looked as if he was going to say more - I wanted him to say more - before he glanced back down at the floor. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides.

Without another word, he left the bathroom. Escaped from the bathroom would be a better description. He ran as if he wanted to be anywhere else but there with me.

I tried not to feel hurt.

Grabbing the red box I had unintentionally dropped, I headed back towards where I had left Tam. Unlike me, he had no such qualms about sleeping on someone else's bed. He said that all the bed needed was a fresh pair of sheets, which we found in the closet.

“How is this any different from a hotel?” he had asked me with a gentle smile, and I couldn't help but smile back. Everything about Tam was gentle and kind. His smile, though rare, was contagious.

When I arrived back at the room, he was lying in the bed with his shirt off. Fallon was there as well, but I barely processed him.

Skin. So much skin.

I wouldn't have thought that Tam would be so muscular, though I shouldn't have been surprised since I knew he did MMA. It was a glorious sight of chiseled abs and dark gold hair, trailing down his toned stomach-

“Did you get the stuff?” Fallon asked, breaking me out of my not-so-sisterly thoughts. I blinked like an imbecile.

To be honest, I would not be surprised if my jaw was popped open and drool was coming from my mouth.

Fallon smirked, as if he knew exactly where my thoughts had headed, before

grabbing the first aid kit from my hands.

Tam looked up at me, blushed, and then attempted to hide himself underneath a blanket.

The boy didn't have to hide. He was perfection in human form.

Tam's face turned even redder, and Fallon coughed to cover up his laugh.

Shit.

Wincing, I perched myself on the edge of Tam's bed. "Sorry. I hadn't meant to say that aloud."

"It's okay," he muttered, ducking his head. That only made me feel worse. The last thing I ever wanted to do was embarrass my sweet friend.

"Seriously, Tam, I'll try to control my perverted mind."

At that, a tentative smile touched his lips.

"You'll probably need training to undertake such a hard goal," he teased, and I gently shoved his shoulder, being careful not to hurt him further.

"Asshole," I said, smiling. Tam offered me a smile back.

And Fallon? He was watching both of us with a contemplative, if not slightly thoughtful, expression. Shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts, he began bandaging Tam up.

"You picked a creepy as hell house to stay at tonight," Fallon said at last, voice gruff.

“Why is that?” I asked, though my mind immediately conjured up a whole list of reasons.

Creepy abandoned nursery? Check.

Stereotypical broken picture frame? Double check.

Absconded house in general? Triple check.

“Was that blood on the wall in the living room?” Fallon continued. “Or red paint? What type of creepy fucker lived here? That’s what I want to know.”

“Blood?” I asked, raising my eyebrow. I must’ve heard him wrong.

“Didn’t you see the blood on the wall when you arrived?” Tam asked. “We all noticed it right away.”

Even before he had finished speaking, I was shaking my head.

“No, you must be mistaken. There was most definitely no blood when I came here.”

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Fallon froze, hand hovering over the first aid box. His eyes were trained on my face.

“Are you sure?” His tone frightened me; he almost sounded...well scared.

And Fallon was never scared.

“I’m positive,” I said at last, confused by the urgency in Fallon’s normally apathetic expression. He exchanged an unreadable glance with Tam.

“We need to leave,” he said at last, putting the bandages back into the box. Turning towards me, he said, “Tell the boys to grab everything they can. All the food, any water bottles, and put them in the duffle bags we found. We have to walk until we can find a car that isn’t stuck in traffic.”

“But...”

“Don’t argue with me, Adelaide,” he said, sounding extremely young just then. Tired, almost. It suddenly occurred to me that Fallon wasn’t that much older than I was. He always seemed older, but that was because of the responsibility he assumed. The weight of the world seemed to press down on his shoulders, aging him in a way I couldn’t even begin to understand.

“Okay,” I agreed softly, biting my tongue to avoid the thousands of questions I wanted to ask.

It only took me a minute to find the rest of the boys - all convened in a spare bedroom. When I discussed what Fallon had said, they nodded once without any

argument.

I couldn't help but think over Fallon's strange behavior. The blood. What blood had he been talking about? I immediately thought about the person who had entered the house before I had went to bed. Had he done something?

I discovered the answer to that question the second I stepped into the living room. Across the peach walls, in bright red, someone had written a message.

A message that hadn't been there earlier.

I'M COMING FOR YOU.

Chapter 11

Addie

“It was probably just a prank, right? It had to be just a prank.”

No matter how many times I repeated it, the boys refused to agree with me. They were uncharacteristically tense as we trudged down the stretch of road. We had chosen - well, Fallon had chosen - not to take the highway back. Between the army flying overhead and the Ragers, we unanimously agreed to take the back roads.

It was eerie, to say the least. We had been walking for over an hour, and we had yet to see another human being or vehicle. The houses were all dark, the driveways were empty, and the only sounds were the animals scurrying through the bushes.

“A prank?” Tommy snorted in disbelief. “Yes, because it’s completely normal and fucking hilarious to sneak into a house - that they didn’t even know was fucking occupied - and write an ominous warning with blood. Ha. Ha. Ha.”

“You’re a sarcastic smartass, aren’t you?” I asked innocently, and Tommy glared.

“Fuck off.”

“Language!” Fallon scolded, and Tommy rolled his eyes. He was less than impressed by my friends, and he made sure to bring that little fact up every other minute.

Sidling up to me, he leaned forward to whisper, “I still vote we leave the assholes.

We can easily survive without them. So they're big and have guns? We're badasses."

He made a point to "whisper" loud enough for the others to hear. Ronan made a face, and Calax rolled his eyes. I noticed that Ryder didn't make any comment, which seemed entirely unlike him. That would've been a perfect opportunity for him to talk about his "big gun" if you know what I mean.

Choosing to ignore his odd behavior for now - I would address it when we were alone - I said, "Anyway, it's not like anyone had hurt me. If they wanted to murder me, they had the perfect opportunity, right? So it was just a prank."

Tommy huffed out his chest.

"I probably scared him off."

Ronan gave Tommy a less than impressed once-over.

"Sure you did, kid."

Before Tommy could retort, Fallon cut in.

"It's better to be safe than sorry."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah," I said, waving my hand dismissively. "Save the fortune cookie crap for later, and let's find a car. The sooner we find a car, the sooner we can get to Atlanta."

I hadn't allowed myself to think about Nik since we left. To be fair, I haven't had a lot of time. The last few days had been a hectic whirlwind that have left me struggling to breathe. I was drowning, pushed under by consistent waves. When I managed to find a pocket of fresh air, all I could think about was my brother.

I missed him something furiously. My chest tightened at the mere thought of him. Was he still with Nancy? Was he alone? Did he miss me as well? It may have been selfish to think the latter, but I couldn't ignore the doubt nagging me. What if, when I got there, he didn't want to go with me?

I wouldn't be able to handle his rejection. That would completely destroy me.

I knew for a fact he wasn't dead. No, I had a spidery sixth sense when it came to my brother, and I most definitely would be able to tell if something bad had happened to him.

I had to hold onto hope, though feeble, that my brother would be alive and well.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Asher asked, coming to stand beside me. He had a backpack over his shoulders and a duffle bag slung over his arm. I had offered to carry more than the one backpack they gave me, but the guys insisted that it wasn't necessary.

Their macho act didn't fool me.

"My thoughts are worth at least a dollar," I joked. "Though you guys have been getting them for free recently."

He smiled good-naturedly. "It's not my fault you like to speak your mind."

"Involuntarily speak my mind. There's a difference."

Asher lightly hit my shoulder with his own.

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“No, seriously. What’s up? You look down.”

I took a deep breath. “Just thinking of my brother,” I admitted at last. “I miss him.”

Asher was silent for a second, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Asher could never make me feel uncomfortable or uneasy; it just wasn’t in his nature. He was as bright as sunlight, despite the cliché of such a statement. Even in my darkest of times, I knew that he would be around to brighten it.

God, I was such a cheese ball.

Seriously, that stuff was hallmark card worthy.

“What is he like?” Asher asked, and I appreciated the fact that he didn’t use the past-tense “was”.

I smiled as I thought of sweet Nik. “Smarter than me, for sure. He always saw the world as a thousand shades of gray, instead of black and white. I always joked with him that he was the better half of me.” I didn’t bother to add that, half the time, the joke went over his head and he would take my statement literally. “He loves his music,” I continued. “All kinds. You will always find him sitting somewhere with these big, red headphones covering his ears.”

My smile grew the more I pictured it - the more I pictured him. I couldn’t even express how much I had missed him. Talking to Asher helped relieve the ache his absence had left in my heart.

“Your brother sounds like a good kid,” Asher said, squeezing my hand. I smiled up at him.

“The best.”

It was then that I realized how close we had gotten. Asher was significantly taller than me, not a hard feat considering my petite frame, and all he had to do was lean down a few inches and his lips would be touching my skin.

I didn’t know why that thought both terrified and excited me. Half of me wanted him to kiss me, while the other half warned me that I was treading in too deep water. One wrong move, and I would be pulled under. I would drown.

Why did that suddenly sound so appealing?

Before I could properly analyze my strange, conflicting thoughts, Ronan had turned on his heel and was stomping back towards us. His face was red with fury.

“What’s your problem?” I asked, stunned by his sudden change in behavior.

“My problem,” Ronan hissed, “is the little bastard threatening to neuter me!” He pointed an accusatory finger at Tommy who was in conversation with Fallon. Fallon’s face was set into a scowl, but I couldn’t tell if that was his normal resting bitch face or an expression Tommy had brought out of him.

“That kid is halfway in love with you already,” Asher admitted, and I snorted.

“If anything, I should be the one in love with him.” At the boys’ incredulous expressions, I lowered my voice to a whisper. “He saved my life. His mom had turned into a Rager, and he killed her to stop her from attacking me.”

The boys seemed stunned at this proclamation. Asher blinked furiously.

“He killed...his mom?” He seemed to have trouble wrapping his head around the concept. I squeezed our still conjoined hands.

“To save me. A stranger in need of help.” I glanced back at Tommy - his reddish hair wildly disheveled and a long scar distorting his chubby cheeks in a jagged, raised line. I hadn’t noticed the scar being that prominent last night, but I knew it wouldn’t go away with time. He now had a physical scar to accompany the mental one. “I’m just waiting for him to break down. He hasn’t had a chance yet.”

And that break down would happen. Of that, I was certain. Tommy wasn’t impassive, and he wasn’t made of steel. What he had done was emotionally damaging; it was a wonder he could even talk or walk at all.

So no, I wasn’t going to complain about his treatment of the guys. If insulting them helped ease the guilt and pain he felt over losing his mother, then I would support him until we could find a more healthy way for him to cope.

“Well damn,” Ronan said. “I guess I can’t hate the little shit anymore.”

“Speaking of little shits,” I broached tentatively. “What’s going on with Ryder?”

The boy in question had a continually dazed look to him, as if he was seeing something that wasn’t there. He had insisted on carrying Mof’s cage; I had caught him, time to time, absently mumbling to the cat. Had he lost his mind? Or had something happened during the fight?

In response to my question, Ronan shrugged, though I thought I saw a flicker of unease cross his features. It was there and gone before I could question it.

“He probably just needs to get laid,” he answered at last.

That was more than likely true. From what I gathered, Ryder was most popular with the ladies. Being as handsome as he was, as well as the lead singer for a band, meant that he had no problem getting and keeping any woman he desired.

“What about one of you guys?” I asked, before I could think it through clearly.

“Could he do the dirty with one of you?”

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Asher looked as if he was on the brink of laughter; Ronan just looked sick.

“Unfortunately, sweetheart, none of us swing that way if you know what I mean.”

“I really don’t.”

“We’re all straight,” Asher cut in, sounding amused at Ronan’s flustered answer.

“We all like girls.”

“I mean,” Ronan continued, shaking himself out of whatever funk my question had put him in. “My brother and I would sometimes make a girl a sandwich if she is into that sort of thing.”

I couldn’t help but think how thoughtful they were for doing that. I would imagine that one would get hungry after continuous sex, though I struggled to understand how the topic of food fit in with my question.

“What type of sandwich?” I asked. I wasn’t really curious, but what was the appropriate response to your guy friend talking about post-sex food? A question seemed the obvious choice.

Both Asher and Ronan were staring at me with matching indecipherable expressions. Was that hunger I saw in their gazes?

Lust?

What the ever-living hell?

“We usually prefer white meat,” Ronan said. I had never heard him use that voice before - it was sultry, almost like Ryder’s singing voice, and it did very strange things to me. Very strange and bad things that I no doubt shouldn’t feel for Calax’s best friend.

“And,” Ronan continued. “Dark bread. A little burnt.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t that be disgusting?”

I knew there were people who liked their toast burnt, but I personally found it gross. And what type of white meat was he referring to? Chicken?

At my comment, the lust cleared from Ronan’s eyes.

“Disgusting?”

“I mean, I guess that it depends on the girl,” I continued. “I personally would like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

Asher’s eyebrows crinkled adorably.

“Peanut butter and-” As if something suddenly occurred to him, Asher blushed a bright crimson. “You think we’re actually talking about sandwiches, don’t you?”

Ronan also seemed to have come to the same realization as Asher had, for he too began to blush. I had never, in all the weeks I have known him, seen Ronan blush.

Before I could question their strange behavior, Asher released my hand and hurried to the front of the group. The back of his neck was on fire.

“What’s his problem?” I asked, worried that I would have to speak privately to Asher

as well as Ryder.

Ronan cleared his throat, uncomfortable of the direction this conversation had headed. I really could not understand him.

He was the one who had brought up sandwiches. Was I just missing something? Why would the talk of sandwiches cause Ronan to look at me with such lust and wanting and-

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

I squeaked. “What the hell, Ronan?”

My outburst was loud enough to garner the attention of the rest of our party. Even Ryder had stopped his sulking to stare at us with bemusement.

“You should’ve said you made her into a sandwich, not that you made her a sandwich!”

Now it was my face that was blushing furiously.

“What the hell is she going on about?” Tommy asked curiously. Asher, who was closest to him, shook his head viciously.

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“Don’t ask. Please, for the love of all that is holy, don't ever ask.”

* * *

It was Fallon who killed the next Rager.

It had come up behind us, its footsteps masked despite the collection of twigs and pebbles snapping beneath our own feet.

I had been in the back, singing softly under my breath, when rough hands had grabbed me. I screamed.

The boys turned.

And then the Rager had fallen. In his head - I could discern by his features that it was, indeed, a male - was a gaping hole. Black blood oozed from the wound, staining my hands. I scrambled backwards.

Fallon stood before me; the gun was held steadily in his hand.

Since we don’t know how the disease - virus, parasite, worm, whatever the hell it was - was transmitted, the boys insisted that I wiped all the goo from my skin. They averted their eyes respectfully as I eagerly stripped off my leggings and jacket, the cold air keen on my sensitive bare skin.

I used water from our pack to scrub my skin raw. I wanted to rid the blood staining me, coating me, consuming me.

It had only been minutes. Mere minutes for a life to be lost. Fallon had not hesitated to shoot him in the head.

Would he, if I were to turn, not hesitate to shoot me as well?

Chapter 12

Addie

Outside of an old farmhouse, we found a large silver van that would fit all of us comfortably. Despite the obvious age, the house was in relatively good condition with a fresh coat of paint and neatly trimmed hedges.

“Wait at the end of the driveway,” Fallon instructed. “I’ll talk to the owner about buying the car from him.”

The boys all agreed immediately, even Tommy. It seemed as if my young friend had fully accepted Fallon as the leader.

I held up my hand like a schoolchild waiting to get called upon. Fallon let out an exasperated groan.

“Yes, Adelaide?”

“Don’t you think I should go with you?” I asked. “I mean, you’re a scary motherfucker, and I’m a sweet, innocent girl.”

Calax, beside me, snorted at the adjectives I used to describe myself. He could take his snort and shove it up his ass.

Fallon opened his mouth, to no doubt protest, but I cut him off with a wave of my hand.

“Don’t argue with me. You’ll scare the crap out of them before we can even ask about the car. Besides, you know the saying: two is better than one.”

Once again, Fallon rolled his eyes at my cheesy quote. I wanted to hit him. My reasoning was sound, and he was just being overprotective. I would be the first to admit that the whole Alpha male thing was attractive, but it was also immensely annoying. I couldn’t even pee without someone in hearing distance. Freaking pee. Do you know how awkward it is to have your sort-of boyfriend listening to you tinkle?

“Where did your mind go?” Fallon asked, now sounding amused.

“I was thinking about pee,” I said before I could stop myself.

Cue seven simultaneous groans. Only Tommy, my new best friend, didn’t stare at me like an imbecile.

“Fine,” Fallon said, changing the subject from bodily fluids. “You can come.”

I let out an excited whoop complete with a handclap and a little jig. And these boys think I’m childish? Grown ass mature woman right here.

Skipping up the long driveway, I admired the carefully planted tulips creating an aperture towards the door. The sloping roof was held up by two white pillars, and the wooden porch was wrapped around the entire building.

Fallon gave me a pointed look as I jumped up the small staircase.

Don’t do or say anything stupid.

In response, I stuck my tongue out at him. He who had so little faith in me rang the doorbell, and the two of us waited impatiently. The first thing I heard was the

shuffling of footsteps, and then I saw the front curtain being pulled back slightly. I barely caught a glimpse of a blue eye before the curtain fell back into the place.

In agonizing slowness, the locks of the door snapped open.

I found myself staring down the barrel of a shotgun.

Well...shit. That wasn't what I was expecting.

The man behind the shotgun was old, probably in his mid-sixties if I had to guess. His white hair was receding at the top showcasing his bald, shiny head. His face was covered in wrinkles, but his blue eyes were surprisingly sharp as they locked onto my face.

"What do you want?" he asked. I noticed that he didn't release the deadbolt. How many locks did this man have on his door?

It was Fallon that spoke, his voice placating, despite the question being directed at me.

"We just want to talk."

"Get the hell off my property," the man hissed.

I would've responded, I would've tried to appease the tension, but there was a fucking gun pressed to my forehead. Not really conversation material.

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I could hear the guys shuffling closer behind us, still out of view from the man's penetrating eyes, but Fallon held up a fist to stop them in mid-stride. I imagined that Calax would be glowering. He really didn't like people holding guns to my head.

Not that I could blame him. I wasn't the biggest fan either.

"Are you one of them?" he continued. His voice was scratchy, as if it had been used continually. Or, and this seemed the more likely scenario, as if he had screamed it dry. Why my mind went to that I would never know, but there was something almost haunting in Mr. Shotgun's face. He looked...fearful. Somehow, that vulnerability cracking through demoted him from scary to somewhat approachable.

"Please sir," I said, trying to control the waver in my voice. "We're not one of those creatures. We just wanted to buy your van off of you. Our own car got stuck on the highway a few miles back."

He did not lower the weapon, but his finger moved from where it was poised over the trigger. Small reliefs.

"What do you have to offer?" he asked stiffly, and I nodded for Fallon to continue the conversation.

"How much money do you want?" he asked in his no-nonsense voice. The old man actually laughed at that. Cackled would be a better description. I eyed the man like he had lost his mind. It would be just our luck for us to ask a psychopathic serial killer for help.

Laughter still evident in his voice, he said, “I don’t want your fucking money. What supplies do you have? Any food? Medicine?”

I blinked. No money?

It suddenly occurred to me that the world was changing rapidly. What else had changed in the last few days?

No, I suppose the more accurate question was what else would change?

The thought sent pinpricks of terror down my spine. If we changed the way we behaved, changed the societal norms for humanity, then we were screwed. People would do anything if they became desperate, including acts they once had deemed atrocious.

Putting those demented thoughts to the back of my mind, I listened attentively as Fallon spoke.

“No medicine,” he said easily, though I knew that was a lie. We had raided the house we had previously been at, taking two first aid kits and all the pill bottles we could find. It never made sense to me in movies for the main characters to only grab the specific medicine they needed. What about in the future? I was determined for our group not to fall into the stereotypical horror-movie roles. If that meant grab all the medicine, then we would grab all the fucking medicine.

“But,” Fallon continued, “we have a bag full of food.”

That was also a lie. We had at least six bags full.

Fallon nodded his head towards me, and I obediently slipped off my backpack and opened it for the man to see. It was the lightest pack of the bunch, only consisting of

twenty or so cans and half as many water bottles.

As the man surveyed the contents of my bag, I couldn't help but compare this exchange to that of a drugmovie I had seen.

“Do you have all the money?”

“Yeah, man. I have the money. Now where's my drugs?”

Okay, so they may not have spoken like that, but you get the idea.

After a moment of indecision, the man nodded stiffly.

“Fine,” he said at last. “It's not like I'm going to use that vehicle. But I want the backpack as well.”

“Deal,” Fallon responded immediately, taking it from my hands and zipping it back up. He handed it to the man who, in exchange, handed us a set of keys.

“The tank is almost completely full. I haven't driven the thing since I heard about the attacks.” The man was silent for a second. His keen eyes seemed to slice through my skin, seeing something that I had yet to fully understand. I wondered yet again how he had gotten such a haunted look in his eyes. “I would recommend getting somewhere safe as soon as you can,” he said. “These roads are not safe, especially at night.”

“At night?” Fallon asked. The old man's words sounded like a horror movie cliché, but I knew there was more to it than an ominous warning.

“The Monsters are active during the day, sure, but it's at night when things really hit the fan.”

“What do you mean?” Fallon echoed my own thoughts. His fingers absently twirled the key around and around. I noticed, somewhat dizzily, that he had numerous rings adorning his fingers. I wondered why I had never noticed them before.

The man hesitated yet again at Fallon’s innocent question.

“There are many types of monsters,” he settled on. “Just make sure you’re inside when the sun goes down.”

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With those parting words, he slammed the door into our stunned faces.

* * *

It was as we were walking back to the car, sun scathing down on us, that I felt the eyes on the back of my neck.

There was no logical reason for me to feel like somebody was watching me, yet my entire body clenched in terror. My breathing became stilted, and the whole world seemed to tilt on its axis.

Someone, somewhere, was watching me. Of that, I was almost sure of.

“Are you okay?” Tam asked softly. He glanced wearily over my shoulder as if he was looking for the unseen threat.

I scoffed at how ridiculous I was behaving. Between the message at the previous house and the old man’s words, I was becoming paranoid. I knew there was no one watching me, I knew that, but my heart still hammered inside my chest like a sledgehammer.

“Yeah,” I answered Tam with a smile that I hoped looked genuine. “Just tired.”

“We’ve been walking for a while,” Tam said in understanding. I flashed him a small smile in appreciation.

“Yeah.”

We loaded up the van, me sitting in between Declan and Tamson. Tommy refused to release Mof to me, so the cat was bundled in his arms a row behind me. I heard the cat's purr of contentment.

The boys immediately began joking with one another, talking about plans for the journey, and wondering if we should get a hotel for the night. I listened half-heartedly, but I couldn't quite shake the feeling that someone was outside the van.

Watching me.

Always watching me.

* * *

Declan

There were only five cars on the backroads the first twenty or so miles. I counted.

What else was there to do?

Sure, the others around me were partaking in conversation, but, with their faces turned away from me, I had trouble reading their lips. I tried not to let it bother me.

Normally, I didn't allow my deafness to hinder my ability to live life. It was a burden, yes, but one that I was easily able to jump over. I had dealt with it for years.

So why did it suddenly make me feel as if I was less than a man?

The answer came to me quickly when the sleeping beauty beside me put her head on my shoulder. She muttered something indistinct before twisting slightly in her seat, eyelashes casting shadows on her perfect cheekbones. My arm automatically came out to hold her to me, and I couldn't help but notice how good she felt in my arms.

How right. It was almost as if she was made to be here with me.

That wasn't necessarily a surprise. Even when I was younger, I knew we were soulmates. I just didn't expect the feelings to return so suddenly and so staggeringly after all of those years apart. I didn't blame her for what had happened. I had never blamed her, even after years of distancing myself from her. Those years had been torture, but I had been under the impression that she wanted nothing to do with me. I knew that I was wrong for believing the lie so quickly - when had Addie ever left me any reason to doubt her? - but her hurtful words echoed throughout my head, continuous stabs to the heart.

Sarge parked the van in front of a motel.

It appeared as if I had missed out on the plan. No surprise.

Seeing my befuddled look, Sarge quickly signed, "We're going to stop for the night."

I nodded, though I didn't agree. I wanted to get to Atlanta as soon as possible.

Addie had her reasons for going, and I had mine.

Though I couldn't admit my reasons to anyone. Not yet.

Sarge brought Asher, who was sitting in the passenger seat, inside to reserve us rooms. After about thirty minutes, they returned with matching perplexed expressions.